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## Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction with Grade 3 Students in a School District in Central Georgia

Letasha Pope

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**Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction with Grade 3  
Students in a School District in Central Georgia**

by

Letasha Pope

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Leadership  
(Curriculum)

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction (DI), teachers' perceptions, promotional requirement,  
Georgia Milestones Assessment, General Education Teacher

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends who supported me on this journey. I am extremely grateful for all you have done for me during this process. Without your love and understanding, this would not have been possible.

To my mom, Fannie Mae Hand, who watched over me in heaven, you always told me that I can do anything if I set my mind to it. You were an inspiration to me from the first day I decided to become an educator and you always told me to get my education because that is one thing that cannot be taken from me. You were a strong and hard working mother. I miss you dearly but I know you are incredibly proud of me.

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not be where I am today without your love, guidance, and support throughout my life. You always encouraged me to be strong and reach for the stars. You taught me that anything is possible and I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I miss you both so much but know that you are always with me in spirit and in my heart.

Finally, I would like to thank the school district and the participants in this study. I know that you are very busy and I truly appreciate you giving me some of your time and energy. I definitely could not have completed this process without you. I am truly grateful for each of you!

## **Abstract**

It is a promotional requirement for grade 3 students to pass the Reading Georgia Milestones Assessment. Teachers are also expected to implement Differentiated Instruction (DI) with their students. The problem addressed in the study was to examine third grade teachers' perceived effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction with students who must pass the Reading Georgia Milestones Assessment. The purpose of this bounded, case study was to describe teachers' perceptions of implementing DI with grade 3 students in a school district located in central Georgia. The research paradigm that was used in this study was qualitative. This study included semi structured interviews of 10 third grade, general education teachers and document analysis. A thematic analysis of the data collected was performed and provided insight into the participants' perceptions of the implementation of DI with third grade students.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

### **Background of the Problem**

According to the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), only 42 percent of Georgia public school children are reading proficiently by the end of third grade (Percy, 2019). While 42% proficiency may not seem significant, however, it is an improvement over the 37% recorded in 2015 and lower scores prior to that (Percy, 2019). This level of proficiency is particularly an issue in third grade because the third-grade reading marker is such an important indicator of all that comes later in students' academic careers (Percy, 2019). According to Ga DOE (2019), third grade is the first-grade level that uses reading performance on the Georgia Milestones Assessment to determine students' promotion to the next grade level.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Georgia Department of Education's 2018-2019 Georgia Milestones report indicates that 42 percent of third-grade students read below grade level and the state average. Furthermore, "By the end of third grade," says Mindy Binderman, Executive Director of the Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students, which is a nonprofit concerned with early learning, "if children are not reading at grade level, they are less likely to be successful in school, less likely to graduate on time, more likely to engage in risky behavior" (Percy, 2019, p. 47).

Despite multiple interventions, students continue to perform poorly, creating a significant barrier to the success of elementary students (Chandler, 2018). Passing the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment is a promotional requirement for third graders in Georgia. Although many factors may contribute to this problem, a teacher's implementation, and perception of differentiated instruction (DI), - defined as educators adjusting their classroom instruction to meet the needs of each of their students – has an impact on students' performance

and outcome on reading assessments (Tomlinson, 2021). According to Tomlinson (2021), “when teachers differentiate content, process, products, or the learning environment, ongoing assessment and flexible grouping make this a successful approach to instruction and significantly impact student achievement” (p. 17).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is defined as a method or approach to teaching and learning for students with differing learning abilities in the same classroom setting (Tomlinson, 2008). DI intends to increase each student's growth and individual success by meeting them where they are, rather than expecting students to change themselves for the curriculum (Tomlinson, 2008). Furthermore, the basic idea of differentiated instruction is that teachers need to take into consideration “not only the subject they teach, but the learners as well” (Wolfolk, 2019, p. 11). The implementation of DI in the classroom derives from learner diversity because all learners do not perform at the same rate, or with the same learning strategies, with the same behavior or interests, so teachers should plan and adjust their instruction to promote each child’s individual development and learning (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). In addition, DI requires the teacher to be familiar with the curriculum as well as the learners’ characteristics: based on this new approach of the reading curriculum, the fact that teaching styles should match learning styles; teachers should be familiar with their students’ learning styles and work to organize the class to suit their individual needs (Marsh, 2004). Therefore, a unique way to learn is what students need; our one-size-fits-all delivery system, which states that everyone learns the same thing at the same time no matter what their individual needs, is failing them (Sarason, 1990).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore third grade teachers’ perceptions and their perceived effectiveness of DI; furthermore, the current study addressed a gap in literature

related to the implementation of DI and the promotional requirement for third graders to pass the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. A continuous improvement or another purpose for this study is for classroom teachers to be more competent in determining the best instructional practices and effective strategies to implement in their classrooms to improve students' reading performance and achievement.

### **Research Questions**

The overall aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of elementary school reading teachers regarding the implementation of the DI framework. The study was guided by two main research questions:

RQ1: What are third grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the implementation of DI with their students?

RQ2: What are third grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing DI to increase reading achievement and prepare students for the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment?

### **Conceptual Framework**

In the present study, the researcher focused the instructional practices and perceptions of DI from third grade teachers in a school district located in Central Georgia. The conceptual framework of this study was based on Vygotsky's (1930) Zone of Proximal Development Theory (ZPD) is a concept that was first introduced by a Russian Psychologist Lev Vygotsky; it states that there is a gap between what a learner has mastered and what they could master with support and assistance (Vinney, 2019). In addition, the conceptual framework was based on Tomlinson's theory of Differentiated Instruction (2008) in which she states that in differentiated classrooms, teachers begin where students are, and they accept and build upon the thought that learners differ

in important ways. Teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction through different learning techniques, by appealing to differing interests, and by using various rates of instruction along with different degrees of complexity (Tomlinson, 2003).

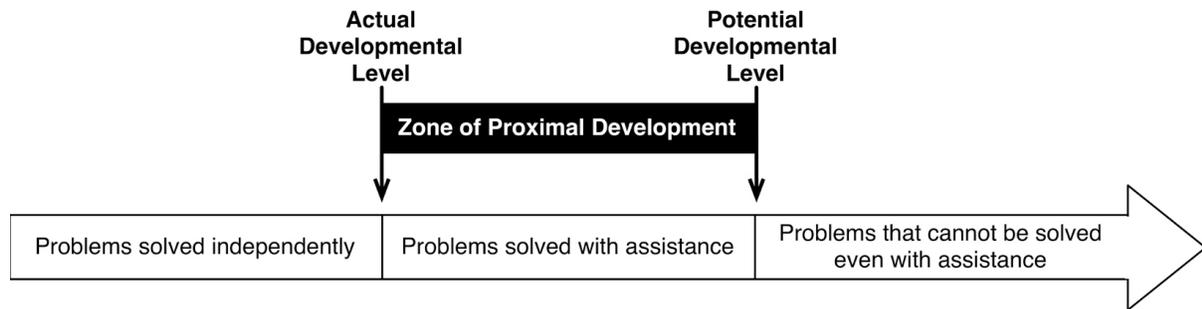
Another theory contributing to this framework includes Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligence (1983). Gardner's Theory (1983) states that individuals have multiple intelligences that work together; these intelligences include linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligence. Another approach contributing to this framework is The Constructivist Learning Theory. This theory states that learners construct knowledge based on a reflection of their prior experiences, knowledge, or schema (Dewey, 1933/1998, Bruner, 1990, & Piaget, 1972).

### ***Zone of Proximal Development***

The ZPD Theory focuses on the relationship between instruction and level of development (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD theory suggests that when an assigned task is too difficult for students, they become frustrated, and learning does not happen. Furthermore, when the material is too easy for students, the brain is not challenged, and learning does not occur; this degree of difficulty occurs in the zone of proximal development (Jamarillo, 1996). Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) states that the ZPD is the difference between the child's ability to be independent problem solvers and the potential that a child may obtain under the guidance of a teacher; he describes this as the distance between a student's authentic development and possible development (Jamarillo, 1996).

**Figure 1**

*Zone of Proximal Development*



ZPD includes all the skills a child can perform only with their teacher's help, and learning awakens numerous developmental processes that can only develop when the child is engaging with people in its environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) encouraged teachers to teach slightly above their students' development by scaffolding students' learning (Rupley et al., 2009). Therefore, for the child to learn new skills, the teacher must provide students with support at a level beyond independent learning but within their ZPD (Bruner, 1981; Vygotsky 1978, 2012).

Bruner introduced the term *scaffolding* in an educational sense in the 1970s. According to Bruner (1970), it refers to the “interactional instructional relationship between adults and learners that enables a child or novice to solve a problem [...] beyond his unassisted efforts” (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p. 90). Scaffolding is the strategy the teacher implements to facilitate students learning new concepts. The goal of scaffolding is student autonomy which is realized through individualized support from a teacher and involves learning accountability steadily transferring from the teacher to the student (Van de Pol, Volman & Beishuizen, 2010). Each scaffold is linked to the individual according to personal needs. In scaffolding, the task does not change; however, the level of support provided to the learner does. As competence increases and concepts are developed, the learner gradually takes more responsibility for the

task. The scaffolds are withdrawn over time until they are no longer needed, thus taking the students from where they are to where they need to be (Bruner, 1983).

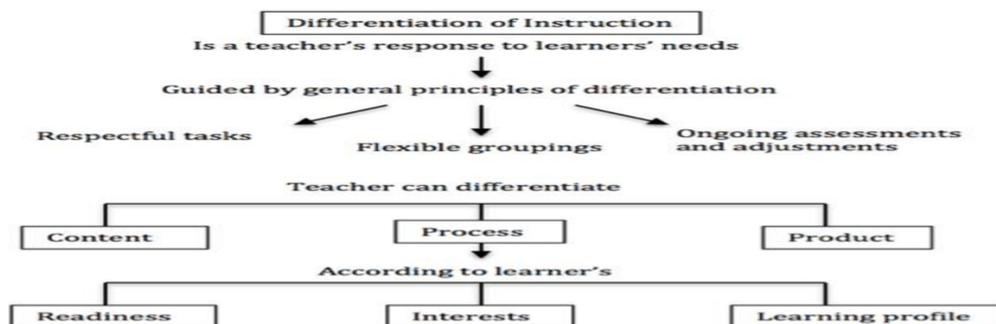
***Differentiated Instruction***

The conceptual framework of this study is also based on Carol Ann Tomlinson's Concept of Differentiated Instruction (DI). Students learn and process information differently (Tomlinson, 2003). Tomlinson (2006) also stated that DI assists teachers in providing effective instruction to help all students attain reading achievement. Differentiation requires teachers to design their instruction to meet individual needs (Tomlinson, 2003). For all students to experience academic success, educators must accommodate individual differences (Tomlinson, 2003).

The theory of differentiated instruction meets the needs of all learners (Tomlinson et al., 2008). When implemented correctly, DI is rooted in well-constructed educational theory and research (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2012). Tomlinson's research emphasized a philosophy of learning where students gain knowledge and then use these newly acquired skills to build more knowledge. In relation to classroom teachers, Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) suggested that the teacher must attend to four elements which are the students, classroom, content, and instruction. If any one of these elements is neglected, then the quality of learning will be lessened (Tomlinson et. al., 2006).

**Figure 2**

*Model of Differentiated Instruction*



Differentiation consists of instructional strategies including tiered assignments, responsive teaching, collaborative learning, interest centers, investigations, and targeted instruction (Tomlinson, 2003). In addition, teachers' effective use of differentiation is a way that to close the achievement gap (Tomlinson et al., 2008). Children do not come to school in cookie cutter fashion; they are a reflection of their home lives, communities, and cultures (Washington State School Directors' Association (WSSDA), 2002). Schools need to address the individuality of each child, celebrate their backgrounds, gifts, and contributions, while providing individual instruction, time, and attention each student needs to be successful; this will improve student achievement and close the achievement gap. (WSSDA, 2002).

The research on effective differentiated instruction in reading calls for teachers to plan relevant tasks for each student, heterogenous grouping, and continuous assessment. Teachers differentiate according to students' various readiness levels, interests, and individual learning styles (Tomlinson, 2005). According to Tomlinson (2003), reading instruction at the elementary level should include phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Moreover, Tomlinson's research on effective reading instruction calls for teacher planning above what is in the textbook and teacher guides. Teachers need to create and implement a plan for what students must know, comprehend, and do (Duke et al., 2011).

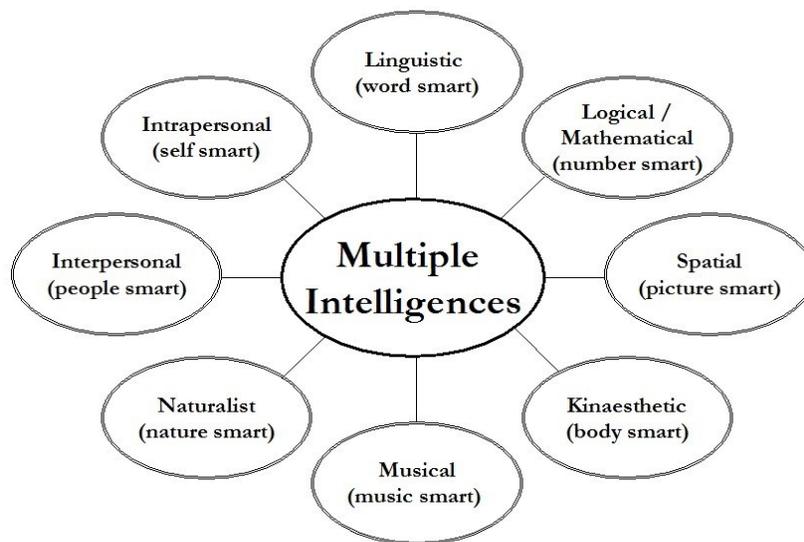
### ***Multiple Intelligences***

A teacher may implement the theory of multiple intelligences (MI) when differentiating their instruction. The theory was developed by Howard Gardner in the 1980s and states that each person has several distinct intelligences which correspond with a particular part of the brain (Armstrong, 2018). Gardner (1983) initially identified categories of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. After

more research, Gardner added naturalistic intelligence to his theory and continues to research existential intelligence (Gardner et al., 1989). According to Gardner (1991), implementation of the MI theory supports teachers in differentiating learning tasks to meet each of the various intelligences in their classroom. This means students will have targeted learning experiences resulting in higher levels of academic achievement (Gardner, 1991). For the current study, the expected outcome is when teachers implement this theory during the implementation of DI, they will see growth in their third-grade students' performance on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment.

**Figure 3**

*Multiple Intelligences*



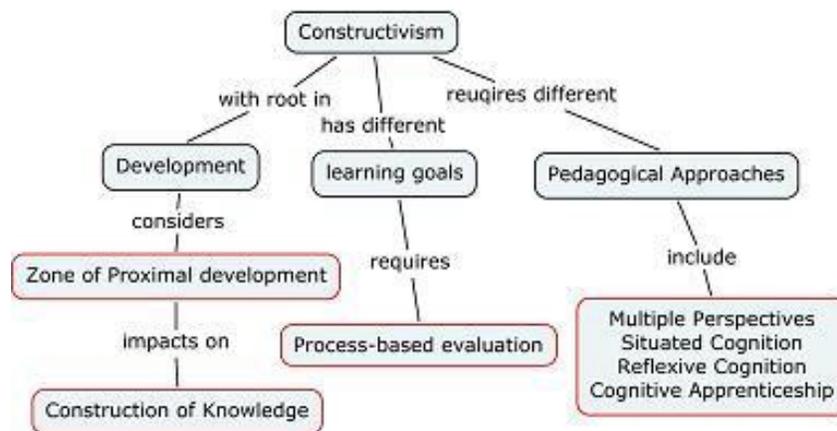
***Constructivist Learning Theory***

Differentiated instruction is supported by constructivist theorists Dewey and Piaget; the Constructivist Learning Theory is the foundation of DI (Levy, 2008). Dewey and Piaget explained learning as one making inferences of right and wrong through firsthand experiences (Ultanir, 2012). Piaget suggested that individuals are unable to understand and use knowledge provided to them, instead they must construct their own knowledge based on their experiences

(Powell & Kalina, 2009). For students to be successful in the classroom, differentiated instruction must first be based on the student’s previous knowledge, to learn a meaningful lesson that will produce academic success. In addition, Meyer (2009) explained that the basic belief of constructivism starts with assuming knowledge belongs to each individual and varies depending on that person. The absence of differentiated instruction in many classrooms hinders success for students who do not learn the same way as their peers (Tomlinson, 2009). For this study, teachers’ perceptions and experiences with DI while providing opportunities for students to construct their understanding of a concept through individual experiences, based on the Constructivist Theory, could impact students’ performance on the Georgia Milestones Assessment by increasing test scores and helping low achieving students experience success.

**Figure 4**

*Constructivist Learning Theory*



**Methodology Overview**

Since the focus of this qualitative case study was to describe teachers’ perceptions and perceived effectiveness of the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in third grade classrooms, qualitative action research was a good fit (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore,

qualitative research seeks to determine meaning and understanding about processes (Creswell, 2007). When conducting interviews, while remaining objective, the researcher sought the perspectives and experiences of the participants as it relates to DI. Furthermore, during these interviews, the researcher asked open-ended questions. The words and responses to the questions posed during the interviews were the data collected and analyzed.

The researcher chose to conduct a qualitative study, examining the perceptions of third grade reading teachers, who implement DI in their classrooms, employed in a school district located in Central Georgia. The qualitative research method was selected because the researcher wanted to capture teachers' perceptions and experiences with DI and how it could have an impact on students' reading performance.

Data was collected concerning teachers' perceptions regarding the impact of implementing DI during reading classroom instruction. The data was analyzed by coding, and themes were generated qualitatively in an interpretative phenomenological analysis.

A purposive sampling of third grade reading teachers at elementary schools in a school district in Central Georgia was used for the research. This technique was chosen because it uses specific criteria to select those participants and to give insight into the phenomenon being examined (Creswell, 2007). For this study, full time, third grade teachers are defined as teachers who provide classroom instruction to students in general education classrooms in grade 3 using the Georgia Standards of Excellence for ELA during the 2020-2021 school year in Georgia. Teachers who participated in this study have received training in implementing DI with their students. The researcher requested permission from the school district to conduct the study with third-grade teachers within the school district and teach in various schools throughout the county.

To select a random sampling of teachers, the schools were selected based on the type of school setting including rural, inner city, or suburban, within the central Georgia school district.

After receiving approval from the Columbus State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the school district, the researcher contacted the principals and provided them with a description of the study. Principals who agreed to have their third-grade teachers participate in this study informed their teachers that the researcher would contact them. Then, the researcher reached out to the teachers to gain consent to set up individual interviews. The third-grade teachers interested in participating were provided with a consent form and were asked to sign and return it to the researcher. The researcher and participants set up a date and time for the interview session, after school hours.

The type of research paradigm that the researcher followed was qualitative since this type of research seeks to determine meaning and understanding about processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When conducting interviews, the researcher, while remaining objective, also sought the perspective and individual experiences of the participants as it relates to DI. The interviews were recorded and transcribed so that the interviewees' responses were captured more accurately. Furthermore, during these interviews, the researcher asked open ended questions and the responses to the questions posed during the interviews were the data collected and the researcher used content analysis to determine codes or themes. The themes derived from the interview informed the researcher of teachers' perceptions of implementing differentiation. The researcher used a semi-structured interview approach; this allowed the participants to provide a detailed explanation of their responses about their perceptions of implementing differentiated instruction in their classrooms. In addition, semi-structured interviews were selected because they are open and allowed the interviewer to discuss innovative ideas during the interview, based on the

responses provided by the participant; this form of inquiry allowed the researcher to collect valuable, in-depth data for the study (Sutton & Austin, 2015). These semi-structured interviews included teachers who have had direct experience in implementing DI in third grade classrooms as well as received some form of training in DI.

In this study, triangulation and member checks helped to establish credibility and contribute to trustworthiness. The responses from the interviews were transcribed and coded by hand. Codes were developed to determine related themes derived from the participants' responses. The transcriptions from the interviews were returned to the participants for member-checking to establish validity and verify the accuracy of the transcription. Document analysis was conducted with a lesson plan, Teaching Experience Questionnaire, and the Self-Assessment Checklist submitted and completed by the participants. The documents were analyzed to assist in answering the study's research questions regarding implementation of DI.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

### ***Limitations of Study***

Limitations are aspects that a researcher cannot control in a study (Miles, 2017). The current study was limited by teachers' perceptions of the implementation of DI with only students in third grade. Another limitation is that the participants may not be transparent or truthful in their responses to the interview questions because they may fear that confidentiality will not be maintained. The implementation of DI was also limited because of the knowledge of the participant when using this instructional framework. Furthermore, another limitation was the participants' ability or skills in effectively implementing DI. Also, participants' knowledge of the researcher previously serving as a teacher and Academic Coach within the school district of the current study may not feel comfortable answering questions honestly and the responses of those

participants may be skewed because they may choose to provide favorable responses to the researcher because of the connection with the school district. The current study could also be limited because of the participants' understanding of DI based on the DI training they received.

### ***Delimitations of Study***

Delimitations of a study are controlled by the researcher and are boundaries of the study (Miles, 2019). The research in this current study was delimited because it only focused on one school district in central Georgia which implements DI. Additionally, the current study only focused on DI implementation in third grade. These parameters were set due to the researcher's experience in teaching third grade and the promotional requirement for third graders to pass the Georgia Milestones Assessment. Another delimitation is that only full-time, regular education third grade teachers were eligible to participate in this study. Other teachers in other grade levels and other fields such as the Early Intervention Program (EIP) and the Program for Exceptional Children (PEC) also known as the Special Education Department (SPED) were not eligible to participate in this study; the rationale behind this is because regular education teachers were targeted for this study on the basis that they teach students who are at various reading levels and DI is implemented to meet those students where they are performing in reading. Additionally, participants who taught another grade level, taught a different subject area, or taught in a different school district, were not selected to participate. Also, teachers teaching at private, or charter schools, were not included in this study.

Another delimitation is that since there are more than 20 elementary schools in the district under study, the researcher chose to only work with a sample of the various types of schools in the school district (i.e., urban, suburban, rural, inner city); this was a delimitation because not all schools were selected to participate in the current study. The researcher was also

familiar with DI and the evaluation process in which teachers are evaluated based on their implementation of DI, Teacher Keys Evaluation System (TKES). In addition, the researcher was also previously a professor in a teacher preparation program at a higher education institution in which teacher candidates were taught how to implement DI in their future classrooms and in their current student teaching placements.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Differentiated Instruction (DI)*: a framework for teaching that involves providing all students, within their diverse classroom of learners, a range of different avenues for understanding information (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

*Georgia Department of Education (GA DOE)*: department that monitors public education throughout the state of Georgia, ensuring that education regulations are followed and that state and federal money are appropriately allocated to local school systems (GADOE, 2021).

*Teacher Perceptions*: teachers' thoughts about their professional activities and their students, which are shaped by their background knowledge and prior experiences and influence their professional behavior.

*Third Grade Promotional Requirement*: no third-grade students will be promoted to the fourth grade if the student does not earn grade level achievement on the state-adopted, standardized assessment in reading (GADOE, 2021).

*Third Grade General Education Teacher*: a teacher who provides reading instruction to students in third grade, using the Georgia Standards of Excellence for ELA.

*Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS)*: a comprehensive, summative assessment program for students in grades 3 through 12 that is designed to provide information about their achievement and their readiness for their next grade level; it measures how well

students have learned the knowledge and skills outlined in the state-adopted content standards in English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies (GADOE, 2021).

*No Child Left Behind Act (2001):* authorizes several federal education programs administered by the states. The focus of the No Child Left Behind Act is to close student achievement gaps by providing all children with a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education (United States Department of Education).

*A Blueprint for Reform (2010):* a blueprint, released by the Obama Administration, for revising the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which would ask states to use college and career ready standards and reward schools for demonstrating significant gains in student achievement (United States Department of Education).

*National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*, also known as *the Nation's Report Card*: a congressionally mandated project of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that collects comprehensive achievement data on what American students know and can do.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study will benefit third-grade students who are impacted by teachers' perceptions and implementation of differentiated instruction in their classes. Furthermore, this study supported classroom teachers in identifying effective reading instructional practices to implement in their classrooms of diverse learners and meet the needs of each student, while preparing them to be successful on the Georgia Milestones ELA Assessment, which is a promotional requirement for third grade, as well as enhance their students' overall performance in reading. This study also sought to determine if third grade teachers' perceptions of DI

influence their instructional practices and their students' reading performance and achievement in third grade and on the Georgia Milestones ELA Assessment.

### **Summary**

There has been a shift from classroom instruction using traditional reading instructional methods to differentiating instruction to meet the needs of the various readers in today's classrooms (Given, 2012). Understanding reading teachers' perceptions about the implementation of DI is paramount because their perceptions influence their decision-making and their instructional practices when implementing DI with their third-grade students (Given, 2012). Third grade was the selected grade level because it is a promotional requirement for these students to pass the Georgia Milestones Assessment reading section by earning a score of at or above a third-grade level. The researcher used the qualitative descriptive research approach to investigate the perceptions of third grade reading teachers, regarding their implementation of DI and to determine how these perceptions impact student performance and achievement on the Milestones Assessment.

## **Chapter II: Review of the Literature**

This chapter summarizes the current and relevant literature on teaching reading and the effectiveness of using differentiated reading instruction to improve the reading comprehension skills of third-grade students. This chapter also discusses how reading has been traditionally taught, and the Georgia Reading Milestones Assessment is a promotional requirement for students in grade 3. The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section, Historical Perspective of Teaching Reading, provides an understanding of how reading was traditionally taught. The second section, Differentiated Instruction Framework, provides a background perspective of what DI is and its purpose in reading instruction. The third section, Georgia Milestones Assessment for Third Grade Reading, provides an overview of the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment and its use as a promotional requirement for third graders in Georgia. Teachers' Perceptions of DI provides a perspective for understanding the value of teachers' perceptions of DI and its impact on reading instruction, performance, and achievement.

### **Importance of Teaching Reading**

Reading is the foundation for learning and research states that students who are not reading proficiently, by the end of third grade, are much more likely to experience poor academic outcomes (Snow et al., 1998). Therefore, it is paramount that children learn to read well early in school and continue to build on those reading skills throughout the remainder of their academic career (National Reading Panel, 2000). In 2000, after examining a wide body of research on researched based teaching strategies and the effectiveness of different approaches to reading instruction, the National Reading Panel published a report on the best practices for teaching young children to read which included the need to differentiate instruction to enhance students' reading skills.

## **Historical Perspective of Teaching Reading**

For almost a century, researchers have argued over the question of how students learn and should be taught to read. Most of the disagreement has focused on the beginning of the reading process when young children are first starting to figure out how to decipher words on a page (Schwartz et al., 2019). However, there is more to reading than seeing a word on a page and saying it aloud and there is more to teaching reading than just teaching phonics. Reading requires children to make meaning out of print and comprehend what they are reading (Schwartz & Sparks, 2019). In addition, they need deep background and vocabulary knowledge to understand the words they read (Schwartz & Sparks, 2019). Eventually, they need to recognize most words automatically and read connected text fluently, attending to grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure.

Historically, students in the United States, for many years, have been taught reading using a basal reading series. These basal readers contain a teacher's manual to guide teachers through each lesson, student books that contain stories with predetermined vocabulary, workbooks with practice activities for skills being taught, and tests on the skills encountered during the story (Morrison, 2016). According to Morrison (2016), basal readers typically reflect a phonics approach by explicitly teaching letter/sound correspondence and rules for phonics.

Basal readers consist of a grade-leveled series of textbooks that an educational publisher produced; they focus on teaching reading using a code-emphasis approach or a meaning-emphasis approach (Morin, 2022). A code emphasis approach relies heavily on phonemic awareness and decoding and word attack skills. In addition, these types of series will often have spelling programs, flashcards, and sentence strips to go with them (Morin, 2020). In contrast, a meaning-emphasis program usually stresses the concept of "reading for understanding," and the

accompanying workbooks have questions about the stories that were read, lessons on vocabulary, and lessons in which students must write about what they have read (Morin, 2022).

Some advantages of using basal readers are that the components of these readers are systematic and follow a sequence, the levels progress through readers' ability levels smoothly and consistently, and teachers are provided with all the tools they need to assess student's knowledge and progress and guidance on how to teach and extend the lessons (Morin, 2022). However, according to research, many teachers did not see the value in this reading approach. They felt it caused teaching to become less effective because it was limited to students performing on grade level and was not beneficial to those students who were performing above grade level (needed enrichment) or those performing below grade level (needed remediation) (Morin, 2022).

### **New Approach to Teaching Reading**

Available research reveals that students learn to read in different ways and there are many different learning styles, abilities, and interests regarding students' reading abilities (Tomlinson et. al, 2009). Therefore, instruction must be designed to cater to today's classrooms' various needs and abilities. Today's teachers contend with the essential challenge of reaching out effectively to students with a variety of learning readiness, personal interests, culturally shaped ways of seeing and speaking of the world, and their experiences in that world (Tomlinson, 2001). Though today's teachers work with single classes with students of the same age, these children have an array of needs (Tomlinson, 2002). Thus, teachers question how they divide their time and resources to effectively maximize their students' learning experience and make a powerful impact on their students' reading performance and achievement.

Since reading is the basis for all content areas, today's teachers must implement an instructional framework based on the premise that all students learn differently. Furthermore, instruction should vary and be adapted to address the needs of diverse learners in their classroom. Implementing differentiation strategies applied to reading can help students learn a range of skills, including phonics, comprehension, fluency, word prediction, and story prediction (Access Center, 2004).

To effectively prepare students for reading achievement, teachers must incorporate a variety of strategies and incorporate a process that will enhance their students' learning and reading performance by matching student characteristics to instruction and assessment (Access Center, 2004). Differentiated instruction is critical as it allows all students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing entry points, learning tasks, and outcomes that are tailored to each students' needs; they must also incorporate a variety of strategies that promote reading proficiency (Hall, 2002).

### **Differentiated Instruction Framework**

In classrooms today, learners differ culturally or linguistically and in their background knowledge, cognitive abilities, and learning styles. To address the needs of diverse learners, many school districts are implementing differentiated instruction (DI).

Differentiated instruction is defined as:

"a process to approach teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class. The intent is to maximize each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is...rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum" (Hall, 2002, p. 19).

According to Tomlinson (2003), who is considered an expert and the main authority in this field, differentiation means giving students multiple options for taking in information. Tomlinson (2003) also states that "differentiated instruction is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that advocates beginning where individuals are" (p.108). Students should not receive the same instruction because there is no "one size fits all" approach to teaching. Tomlinson (2015) also stated that differentiation is not a specific formula or a methodology; instead, it is a philosophical viewpoint. It is the belief and perceptions of educators that regardless of the individual differences, every student can learn and reach their potential (Tomlinson, 2001).

According to the DI model, to increase learning, a responsive teacher will modify and alter instruction to fit each student; in turn, that will allow students to gain access to ideas and skills in different ways that make sense to them (Tomlinson, 2015). As a result, students will demonstrate those ideas and skills in their learning environment. To be more specific, teachers can adjust and differentiate instruction by content (subject matter), process (strategies used to deliver the lesson), product (how learners demonstrate their learning), and learning environment (the physical arrangement of the classroom), based on individual differences of students (Tomlinson, 2015). In addition, one or more of these elements can be adapted during a lesson based on the students' readiness, interest, or learning styles (Tomlinson, 2015).

Teachers can differentiate their instruction by content, process, or product for students (Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiation of content refers to a change in the material being learned by a student (Access Center, 2004). Differentiation of process refers to how students access material; for example, one student may explore a learning center, while another student retrieves information from the web (Access Center, 2004). In contrast, product differentiation refers to

how a student shows what they learned (Tomlinson, 2001). For example, to demonstrate understanding of a reading concept, one student may create a book while another creates a chart or model.

Furthermore, when teachers differentiate, they respond to a student's readiness, interest, or learning profile (Tomlinson, 2001). According to Tomlinson (2006), readiness refers to the student's skill level and background knowledge. Interest refers to topics the student may decide to explore, or that will motivate them; this can include interests relevant to the content area and outside the student's interests (Access Center, 2004). According to Tomlinson (2003), a teacher may differentiate based on any one or a combination of the following factors: student's learning profile includes learning style (i.e., a visual, auditory, tactile, or kinesthetic learner), grouping preferences (i.e., individual, small group, or large group), and environmental preferences (i.e., lots of space or a quiet area to work).

Teachers implement different instructional strategies based on the assessed needs of their students (Heacox, 2002). According to Heacox (2002) throughout a unit of study, teachers should assess students regularly. The assessment can be formal, a data-driven method of measuring student performance, and usually includes well-defined grading parameters. But assessment during differentiation is often informal and can include taking anecdotal notes on student progress, examining students' work, or asking the student questions about his or her understanding of the topic; the results of the assessment could then be used to drive further instruction (Access Center, 2004).

According to Tomlinson and Strickland (2005), DI implementation looks different for each student and each assignment. Before beginning instruction, teachers should use diagnostic assessments to determine each student's readiness level; these assessments can be a

pre-assessment or questioning to determine students' background knowledge (Moon, 2005). Teachers must also determine student interest. This can be done by providing Interest Inventories or even including students in the planning process. In addition, teachers can ask students to tell them what specific interests they have in a particular topic, and they can then attempt to incorporate these interests into their lessons (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2012). Finally, teachers should identify student learning styles and their environmental preferences. Learning styles can be determined by using Learning Style Inventories; teachers can also get information about student learning styles by asking students how they learn best and observing their students' activities (Marsh, 1992). According to Tomlinson (2003), identifying environmental preferences includes determining whether students work best in large or small groups and the environmental factors that might contribute to or inhibit student learning. For example, a student might need to be free from distraction or have extra lighting while he or she works.

Other individuals also have contributed to explaining what differentiated instruction is and how teachers should implement DI in their classrooms. According to Westwood (2016), DI is also about considering the significant learning differences among students and using that knowledge to adapt the way the learning activities are presented. DI is an approach that encourages teachers to respond to relevant differences among individual students (Westwood, 2017). It is used along with effective evidence-based teaching methods to improve academic achievement. However, these methods must be implemented with fidelity to ensure that all students understand the taught information and skills (Westwood, 2016). However, to develop their implementation of DI with fidelity, teachers must be provided with intensive, meaning more time, discussion, and modeling of effective intervention strategies, professional development that will strengthen their teaching efficacy, or competency, in implementing DI.

Franklin Bobbit (1918) is a curricularist who believed that lessons should be planned and organized depending on the needs of the students (Pinar et al., 2008). Bobbit defined curriculum as "the entire range of experience, both undirected and directed, concerned in unfolding the abilities of the individual" (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 24). When implementing DI, teachers must base their instruction on the individual needs of the children as well as consider students' "out-of-school" experiences to assess their prior knowledge or schema about a topic (Pinar et al., 2008). In DI, teachers implement ongoing assessments to assess each student's abilities, learning styles, and interests. Students' interests are influenced by their experiences (Tomlinson, 2001). To determine what students are interested in, it is important for teachers to understand how students' experiences play a role in their development. Therefore, Franklin Bobbit's beliefs in education, concerning meeting the needs of all students and including their experiences, are included in the implementation of DI.

Another curricularist, William Kilpatrick (1918), believed that the purpose of education is child development, growth, and social relationships. Kilpatrick also introduced small group interaction and The Project Method in which the teacher and students plan together (Pinar et al., 2008, p. 114). It is also called the child-centered curriculum. Kilpatrick perceived the curriculum as educational experiences that are guided by classroom instruction, but the child formulates their own learning (Kilpatrick, 1918). In DI, teachers meet with students in small groups, which are formed based on the students' individual needs. DI is also considered child-centered because the teacher serves as the facilitator or guide, and the students have ownership or responsibility for their learning. Kilpatrick's Project Method also correlates with DI in that the teacher and students plan together based on the needs of the students. Therefore, William Kilpatrick's beliefs in education are integrated into implementing differentiation in classrooms.

According to research presented at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement in January 2011, no other factor contributed to the change in student's achievement further than the intervention of DI. Other research shows that addressing students' differences and interests "enhances their motivation to learn and encourages them to remain committed and stay positive" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 52). However, ignoring their fundamental differences "may result in some students losing motivation, falling behind, and failing to succeed academically" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 108).

Teachers are also evaluated and provided feedback about their implementation of DI in the Teacher Knowledge Effectiveness System (TKES) from the Georgia Department of Education. The standards which teachers are evaluated are Standard 2-Instructional Planning, which states, "The teacher plans using state and local school district curriculum and standards, effective strategies, resources and data to address the differentiated needs of all students" and Standard 4-Differentiated Instruction, which states "The teacher challenges and supports each student's learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences" (GADOE, 2018). The role of school administrators is to evaluate the teachers using TKES, the teachers' role is to accept and apply the feedback they are given, and students' roles are to participate in the differentiated instruction occurring in their classroom actively (GADOE, 2018).

### ***Purpose of Differentiated Instruction***

According to research, in today's reading classrooms, students do not learn to read the same, so teachers cannot continue to provide instruction for a "one size fits all" classroom (Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018). Some diverse learners differ culturally or linguistically, and in their background knowledge, cognitive abilities, and learning styles; all these factors must be

considered when teaching reading. When reading teachers use a more personalized approach to learning they are addressing their students' various learning styles, abilities, and interests (Tomlinson et al., 2009). However, teachers often struggle with providing all students with learning activities that work best to address their diverse needs (Stephen et al., 2013). To address the needs of diverse learners, many schools are implementing differentiated instruction (Tomlinson et al., 2009).

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is an instructional strategy that can address the challenges of meeting the diverse needs of students. Differentiation requires teachers to design their instruction to meet individual needs (Tomlinson, 2003). Furthermore, differentiation means giving students multiple options for taking in information (Tomlinson, 2003). Tomlinson (2003) also states that “differentiated instruction is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that advocates beginning where individuals are” and students should not receive the same instruction because there is no approach to teaching that fits all students (p. 108). Also, when implementing DI, teachers must start by finding out as much as they can about each student’s interests, cultural background, experiences, and background knowledge. For all students to experience academic success, effective educators demonstrate an understanding of accommodating individual differences and have an appreciation for their students' cultural diversity and experiences (Tomlinson, 2003).

Students in today’s schools are becoming more academically diverse, and teachers must adapt and adjust their instruction to meet these changes. Students who are struggling to learn because of their different learning styles, abilities, and disabilities, as well as their background and cultural experiences, and differences, must be provided with remediation strategies. Also, there is a need to ensure challenge and enrichment for advanced learners “when accountability

pressures focus on basic competencies, and a growing economic gap exists between segments of the student population” (Tomlinson et al., 2008). Research indicates that students thrive in classrooms that address their learning differences (Tomlinson, 2001). Furthermore, looking at additional indicators such as student discipline, attendance, and standardized test scores confirms that school is not working for too many students (Tomlinson et al., 2008). However, DI can respond to the different learning needs students bring to school every day. Teachers are encouraged to be mindful of and responsive to their students’ diverse learning needs and differentiate or change their instructional practices to improve student learning and outcomes in their reading classrooms.

Differentiation instructional strategies can be designed to help students learn a range of skills, including phonics, comprehension, fluency, word prediction, and story prediction (Dixon et al., 2014). Teachers can differentiate their reading instruction for students with various learning styles, interests, and abilities include providing tiered assignments which are designed to instruct students on essential skills that are provided at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness; the curricular content and objectives are the same, but the process or product vary according to the student's level of readiness (Tomlinson, 2005). Another method is compacting, which is adjusting instruction to account for students’ prior mastery of learning objectives (Boelens et al, 2018).

Teachers can also have students involved in interest centers or groups. Interest centers (usually used with younger students) and interest groups (usually used with older students) are designed so that learning experiences are directed toward a specific learner’s interest; when allowing students to choose a topic, it can be motivating to them (Boelens et al., 2018). Students

can also benefit from working with Flexible Groups in which they work as part of many diverse groups depending on the task or content.

Teachers will sometimes place students in groups based on their readiness; other times, they are placed based on interest or learning profile (Access Center, 2004). Groups can either be assigned by the teacher or chosen by the students. Students can be assigned purposefully to a group or assigned randomly. This strategy allows students to work with various peers and keeps them from being labeled as struggling or advanced (Access Center, 2004).

Another differentiation strategy used during reading is learning contracts which begin with an agreement between the teacher and the student. The teacher provides the skills expected to be learned by the student and the assignment's requirements, while the student identifies methods for completing the activities (Intervention Central, 2013). This strategy targets students' learning styles, allows them to work at a pace appropriate for them, supports students in working independently, learns planning skills, and eliminates the unnecessary practice of skills (Greenwood & McCabe, 2008).

Another effective differentiation strategy to implement during reading is a choice board. Choice boards are organizers that contain a variety of activities; this strategy allows students to choose one or multiple activities to complete as they learn a skill or develop a product (Tucker, 2021). Choice boards can also be created to choose options that focus on several different skills.

Implementing various differentiation strategies when teaching reading helps teachers provide various instructional strategies to their diverse group of learners. Providing differentiated reading instruction according to the needs of students is beneficial to learners and provides reading teachers with a range of effective strategies to support students in becoming proficient readers. Differentiated instruction involves providing all students within their diverse classroom

setting a variety of methods for understanding current information and supports all students' learning regardless of differences in their ability (Boelens et al., 2018).

### ***Further Research on Differentiated Instruction***

Researchers at the National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum (2008) defined differentiated instruction as a process of approaching teaching and learning for all students of various abilities in the same classroom setting. The goal is to “maximize each student's growth and success by meeting each student where they are . . . rather than expecting students to fit themselves into the curriculum” (Hall, 2002, p.36). However, some believe that research on differentiated instruction is limited as a particular practice; however, solid research does justify that many practices provide the foundation of differentiation (Tomlinson et al., 2008). These practices include using effective classroom management procedures; promoting student engagement and motivation; assessing student readiness; responding to learning styles; grouping students for instruction; and teaching to the student's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the distance between what a learner can demonstrate without the support and what the learner can do with assistance. (Tomlinson & Allan, 2002; Ellis & Worthington, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978).

A growing body of research reports positive results for implementing differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms (Rock et al., 2008). For example, in a three-year study conducted in Canada, scholars researched the effects and application of differentiated instruction in K–12 classrooms (Rock et al., 2008). Scholars discovered that differentiated instruction consistently demonstrated positive results across many targeted groups. Compared with the general student population, students with various learning disabilities received more benefits

from differentiated and intensive support, especially when the differentiation was delivered with specific instruction during small groups. (McQuarrie, McRae, ; Stack-Cutler, 2008).

Tieso (2005) studied 31 math teachers and 645 students and discovered that DI effectively challenges higher achieving students in heterogeneous classrooms. In this study, pre-assessments were given prior to a three-week unit on statistics and probability, indicating that students with higher ability levels yielded more prior knowledge at the start of the unit. Students who were taught using a DI curriculum that supplemented the textbook curriculum and placed in various groups according to their performance level showed higher achievement on the posttest than did higher-performing students who were taught using the textbook curriculum combined with whole-group instruction. Tieso (2005) concluded that revising and differentiating the curriculum while creating purposeful, flexible grouping could significantly improve students' mathematics achievement, particularly gifted students. Lawrence-Brown (2004) confirmed that DI could benefit students with a wide range of abilities—from gifted to those with learning disabilities—to receive an appropriate education in inclusive classrooms. Guided by Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm's (2000) basic, Three-Level Planning Pyramid and Tomlinson and Kalbfleisch's (1998) work on differentiated classrooms, Lawrence-Brown explained how a teacher could address some students' Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals by adapting the classroom curriculum to include manipulatives, visual aids, charts, audiotapes, and explicit expectations, while also offering an enriched curriculum to gifted students.

Baumgartner, Lipowski, and Rush (2003) examined a reading program designed to improve reading achievement among elementary and middle school students using differentiated instructional strategies, including flexible grouping, student choice of learning tasks, self-selected time for reading, and access to diverse types of texts. In all three of the classrooms in the

study, the targeted students improved their decoding, phonemic, and comprehension skills. Students' attitudes about reading and their abilities also improved.

### **Georgia Milestones Assessment**

Public schools in Georgia use standardized testing to measure students' academic achievement after each school year. For grades 3-8, these tests are administered towards the end of the school year, typically in April or early May; each school district selects a local testing window within the state-designated time to administer the end-of-grade measures (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021). This educational assessment tool is the Georgia Milestones Assessment. The Georgia Milestones Assessment System was designed to provide information about how well students are mastering the state-adopted content standards in the core content areas of English language arts (reading, grammar, and writing), mathematics, science, and social studies (GADOE, 2021). Furthermore, the Georgia Milestones Assessment is designed to provide students with essential information about their achievement and readiness for their next levels of learning, such as the next grade, the next course, or the next endeavor (college or career) (GADOE, 2021). All stakeholders, parents, the public, policymakers, and local school districts and boards of education can use the results to assess and measure the quality of educational opportunities provided throughout the state of Georgia (GADOE, 2021).

The Georgia Milestones is administered primarily on the computer and includes technology-enhanced items in all grades and courses; it also includes an open-ended or constructed response, items in English language arts in all grades and courses, and a writing component at every grade level and course within the English language arts assessment (GADOE, 2021). In addition, a reported Lexile score is provided, and it is based on the English

language arts assessment in all grades and courses; test takers are also provided an estimated norm-referenced performance ranges for all grades and courses (GADOE, 2021).

### ***Promotional Requirement for Third Graders in Georgia***

To encourage local schools and districts to take this milestone assessment seriously, several states, including Georgia, have enacted legislation that requires students who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade to be retained (National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), 2019). In compliance with the Georgia Promotion, Placement, and Retention law (O.C.G.A. §§ 20-2-282 through 20-2-285) and State Board of Education Rule (160-4-2-.11), no students who are in grade 3 will be promoted to the fourth grade if the student does not earn an At/Above Grade Level score on the state-adopted assessment in reading and meet the promotion standards and criteria established by the local board of education for the school that the student attends, however, students who do not reach the required score will have the opportunity to retest (GADOE, 2021).

The percentage of third graders reading on grade level is a key factor because research indicates that third graders who have subpar reading skills are more likely to remain behind when they reach high school and are far more likely than their peers to drop out (GADOE, 2021). Research has shown that students who are not reading proficiently at the end of third grade are four times more likely not to complete high school (Hernandez, 2011). Furthermore, according to Hernandez (2011), the levels of reading proficiency for third graders are linked to specific long-term outcomes: 23 percent of below-basic readers fail to finish high school, compared to 9 percent of basic-scoring readers and 4 percent of proficient readers.

Among the key measures of future success that many observers look for is the performance in reading and writing in third grade. Furthermore, in 2019, 73% of third graders

read at grade level. However, in 2021, it was less than 62% (GADOE, 2021). There is some skill erosion occurring; the third graders of 2019 were fifth graders in 2021, and only 68% of them were reading on grade level in 2021 (GADOE, 2021).

Reading proficiently by the end of third grade has become a significant milestone in a student's educational trajectory because it marks when the focus is placed on reading instead of *learning to read* (National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), 2019). Furthermore, proficiency in reading by the end of third grade is a crucial marker in a child's educational development (Kids Count Data Center, 2019). In the early years, learning to read was a critical component of education, but beginning in fourth grade, children use reading to learn other subjects, and therefore, mastery of reading becomes a critical component in their ability to keep up academically (Kids Count Data Center, 2019). Also, according to the Kids Count Data Center (2019), children who are promoted to fourth grade without reading proficiently are more likely to drop out of high school, which, in turn, reduces their earning potential and chances for success. In 2015, approximately 2 out of 3 fourth graders failed to score proficient in reading (NCSL, 2021). Furthermore, the percentages of non-proficient readers are even higher when looking at specific racial/ethnic groups: 82 percent of African American fourth graders were reading below proficiency, along with 79 and 78 percent of Latino and American Indian students, respectively.

The third-grade year is considered a pivotal point in a child's educational career, as a critical shift in learning occurs; this grade level is where basic reading skills are established and can start being utilized for more abstract learning (Workman, 2014). According to Workman (2014), if children do not have proficient reading skills by third grade, their ability to progress through school and meet grade-level expectations diminishes significantly because these students are at a much higher risk of dropping out, which often leads to increased rates of unemployment

and more risk of participation in the criminal justice and welfare systems. Research shows that children who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times less likely to graduate high school on time (Workman, 2014). Furthermore, 63% of students who did not graduate from high school on time were not reading proficiently in third grade (Workman, 2014). Therefore, third graders' achievement on the Georgia Milestones Assessment has been identified as a promotional requirement to be prepared to graduate from high school and be successful in their careers.

### ***Background***

More than three decades ago, research began to suggest that children with low third-grade reading test scores were less likely to graduate from high school than children with higher reading scores (Hernandez, 2021). Third grade is an important pivoting point in a child's education because it is the time when many students shift from learning to read and begin reading to learn. Interventions for struggling readers after third grade are seldom as effective as those in the early years.

Recognizing the importance of early reading skills, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has, from the beginning, required states to test reading skills annually for all students beginning in third grade and to report these results for children by poverty status and race-ethnicity, as well as for English Language Learners and children with disabilities (Hernandez, 2021). This act asserted "President Bush's unequivocal commitment to ensuring that every child can read by the end of third grade." (NCLB, 2001). More recently, in March 2010, the Obama Administration released its blueprint for revising the NCLB Act, known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), calling for "Putting Reading First" by significantly increasing the federal investment in scientifically based early reading instruction (NCLB, 2001).

Accomplishing that goal will mean ensuring that millions more students graduate from high

school.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the “The Nation’s Report Card,” in 2009 that only 33 percent of fourth graders read at a “proficient” level, while the remaining 67 percent do not, and instead read at the “basic” level (34 percent), or below the basic level (33 percent). Fourth-grade students performing at the Proficient level should be able to integrate and interpret texts and apply their understanding of the text to draw conclusions and make evaluations (NAEP, 2009). Thus, two-thirds of students did not finish third grade with these essential reading skills and are reading below grade level. This report presents the first-ever analysis of high school graduation rates separately for children with reading test scores that correspond to the proficiency levels set by NAEP, with additional results for children reading below the proficient level, at either the basic or below the basic level of reading test scores.

Research has revealed that unintended consequences of retention can include increased costs for school districts (national average of \$10,700 per retained student). Additionally, retention can negatively impact students' long-term achievement (i.e., high school graduation rates). Instead, researchers have argued for policymakers not to approach third grade reading as a retention-promotion dichotomy but more comprehensively by focusing on early identification and support well before third grade.

## **Teachers’ Perceptions of DI**

### ***Impact on Reading Students’ Performance and Achievement***

A large body of literature is already investigating teachers’ experiences and qualifications that affect the implementation of DI (Dixon et al., 2014). However, there is minimal research on how teachers’ perceptions of DI impact student performance on standardized testing. Some of

the studies revealed that is no significant difference between teachers' perception based on their experience (Suprayogi et al., 2017), while there were studies that showed that experienced teachers are familiar with a wider range of educational practices and thus, they think more positively about their instructional approaches and practices (Liu et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there is no correlation between teacher experiences and perceptions of DI and the impact on student performance on end-of-year assessments in a particular grade level such as grade 3 and on norm-based assessments that measure student achievement.

In addition, as it relates to the adoption of DI, much research is available on the role of teacher variables such as their overall perception of DI (Dixon et al., 2014; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012), teachers' qualifications and DI implementation (Suprayogi et al., 2017), and teachers' experience and instructional practices (Suprayogi et al., 2017). More specifically, in Burkett's (2013) study, 11 highly qualified participants who had been teaching for over five years were asked about how they felt about using DI in their classroom. An analysis of the participants' responses determined that these qualified and experienced teachers had positive perceptions about the strategies and believed that DI is essential for teaching and learning.

In addition, Sheehan (2011) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study with K-5 elementary teachers; these highly qualified participants, who have at least eight years of experience in teaching, portrayed positive perceptions about implementing DI in their instruction. In addition to these qualitative studies, Davis (2013) conducted a quantitative survey that indicated results of faculty teachers who were certified, had a minimum of a bachelor's degree and had the experience of 5 or more years, ranking their beliefs about DI as highly positive.

In another research study of differentiated reading instructional strategies conducted by Affholder (2003) it was concluded that teachers who used these strategies more intensively showed improved reading comprehension skills and experienced more significant student growth. In addition, this study revealed that students of teachers who employed higher levels of differentiated reading instruction experienced an increase in self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-confidence in their reading comprehension abilities (Affholder, 2003). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of DI may be influenced by their level of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-confidence in implementing DI in their classrooms (Affholder, 2003).

In another recent study based on the mixed paradigm of research, Merawi (2018) investigated primary school teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction. Aligned with these findings, the author discovered that teachers who obtained in-service training had better perceptions than those who did not obtain training on differentiated instruction. However, it was found that no significant difference was discovered based on teaching experience and teachers' perception of differentiated instruction. Explaining these inconsistent results, Moosa and Shareefa (2019) argued that, regardless of the number of years in teaching, teachers simply might not have had enough experience using differentiated instruction appropriately in their teaching. However, they have been teaching for many years, thus not influencing their perception. Therefore, more robust investigations are required to confirm and consolidate the above findings due to these incongruities. In addition, it is imperative to explore the impact of teachers' perceptions of DI on standardized tests, particularly the Georgia Milestones, in grade 3 reading classrooms.

## Summary

Many studies have been conducted on current and relevant literature on teaching reading and using differentiated instruction to improve students' reading comprehension skills. However, the correlation between teachers' perceptions of DI and the impact on the achievement of third-grade students on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment is an area that needs to be further researched. This research is necessary because third-grade students must pass the Georgia Milestones Assessment in reading to be promoted to the fourth grade. Therefore, it is critical to review how reading has been taught historically and the innovative approach known as differentiated instruction.

There is also a need for a perspective for understanding the value of teachers' perceptions of DI because teachers' beliefs of DI influence their instructional practices and actions, which will impact their classroom instruction (Williams & Burden, 1997). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions are critical in educational (action) research when there is a change in pedagogical practices as referenced in the traditional research and implementing DI in reading instruction. The purpose of this study is to address a gap in research that examines teachers' perceptions of DI and student performance on the Third Grade Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment and to provide a better understanding of the correlation between an individual's beliefs, their actions, and instructional practices as it relates to students' reading performance and achievement.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe teachers' perceptions and perceived effectiveness of the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in third grade classrooms in a central Georgia school district. Although literature already exists about addressing the implementation of DI in classrooms across all grade levels, K-12, and subject areas, there is no literature specifically addressing the perceptions of teachers who are implementing DI in third grade classrooms. The current study added to the body of knowledge in that it addressed gaps in the literature regarding teachers' perceptions of implementing DI in a critical grade level in which students must pass the reading section of the Georgia Milestones Assessment to be promoted to the fourth grade. This study has the potential to impact teachers' instructional practices and student performance and achievement on the Georgia Milestones Assessment. The participants' insights of their experiences regarding the effectiveness and the implementation of DI in third grade were elicited to give perspective to implementing this framework for students who must take, and must pass, the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment as a promotional requirement. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used to determine the emergent themes related to teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the implementation of the DI framework for students in third grade classrooms in a central Georgia school district.

#### **Research Questions**

According to George Mason University (2022), research questions support writers to focus their research by offering a path through the research and writing process. Furthermore, research questions contribute to the development of a study while providing a plan of action for identifying and refining of the research instruments (Gay et al., 2012). The following research questions provided guidance for the study:

1. What are third grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the implementation of DI with their students?
2. What are third grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing DI to increase reading achievement and prepare students for the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment?

### **Research Design**

The researcher used a qualitative case study design because the objective of this study was to explore third grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the implementation of DI in their classrooms. Creswell (1994) defined qualitative research as "...an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (Creswell, 1994, pp. 1-2). In addition, qualitative research is "an emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world" (Yılmaz, 2013, p. 312).

Yin (2018) defined case studies as being detailed intensive analyses of a phenomenon in a bounded context. Furthermore, a bounded case study is the existence of an issue or concern around which there are boundaries. Moreover, the researcher used interviews and document analyses, which are qualitative data collection sources (Faryadi, 2019). Interviews helped the researcher capture teachers' experiences with open ended inquiry while providing participants an opportunity to describe their experiences in their own words (Gay et al, 2012). This approach also allowed the researcher to capture teachers' experiences, emotions, and motivations with open-ended inquiry using open-ended interviews.

The research design for this study was a bounded case study. More specifically, this study fitted the qualities of a case study because the researcher had no control over the implementation of DI or the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the implementation (Yin, 2018). Additionally, the data derived from the interviews provided an understanding of the feelings, thoughts, and beliefs of the participants' experiences as well as an understanding through participants' accounts which were collected by the interviews because case studies address a real-world experience or phenomenon (Gay & Airasian, 2012). The phenomenon investigated was DI implementation within a real-world context which is the fact that third grade students must pass the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment to be promoted to the fourth grade, which qualified this research as a case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Furthermore, this study was considered "bounded" in that it was conducted within a single school district in central Georgia and only included grade 3 teachers as participants. Also, the teachers' perceptions only addressed the effectiveness of their experiences with DI implementation in third grade classrooms. In addition, the period for this study, during students' third grade level experience, is a contemporary event that fits into the characteristics of a bounded case study (Yin, 2018). The boundaries of this study included the following parameters: elementary schools in a central Georgia school district and a sample of grade 3 teachers who implement DI with students who are in the third grade. The goal of the researcher is to determine teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of DI in their third-grade classrooms.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was in a school district in central Georgia. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), the population of this county is 156,762. Of this population, 25%, which is 39,191 of the residents of this county, are categorized as below the poverty level in

terms of socioeconomic status. The median annual household income for this county is \$41,317. The racial demographics are the following: 54.3% African American; 39.3% Caucasian; 6.4% Other.

According to U.S. News (2022), the focus school district in this study contains 34 schools and 21,373 students (about the seating capacity of Madison Square Garden) enrolled in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. The district's minority enrollment is 90%. Also, 73.7% of students are economically disadvantaged. Moreover, all 34 schools receive Title 1 funding which means that the entire district receives free breakfast and lunch through a grant because of the county's socioeconomic status (GADOE, 2020). Again, there are 34 schools; the breakdown is as follows: 21 elementary schools, 7 middle schools and 6 high schools (GADOE, 2020). The student body at the schools served by this public school district is 12.1% White, 77.7% Black, 1.3% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.8% Hispanic/Latino, 0.1% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (U.S. News, 2022). In addition, 2.9% of students are two or more races, and 0% have not specified their race or ethnicity and 2.7% of students are English language learners; also, 49% of students are female, and 51% of students are male (U.S. News, 2022).

Additionally, out of the 21,373 students (about the seating capacity of Madison Square Garden) enrolled in grades kindergarten through twelfth grades, there are about 9,956 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade (Public School Review, 2022). This study only included elementary schools and specifically third grade students, of which there are 1,726 (Public School Review, 2022). The school district's graduation rate for 2021 was 80.67%, which is an increase from an overall district graduation rate of 51.30 in 2011 (Public School Review, 2022). Moreover, 50.9% of high school graduates are considered college and career ready (Governor's

Office of Student Achievement (GOSA), 2021). The district was given a grade of 69.5, a letter grade of D as rated by GOSA (2021).

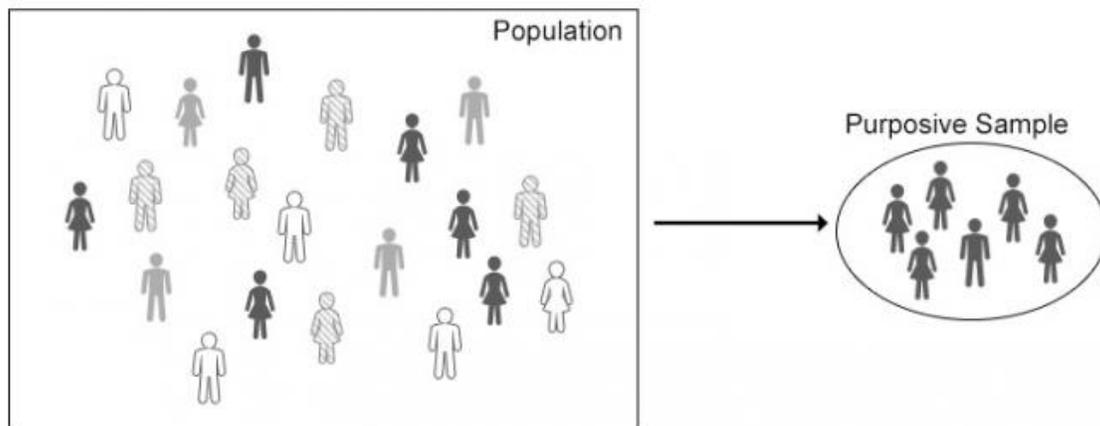
### **Sample**

The participants for this study were grade 3 general education teachers whose instruction during the 2021-2022 school year. For this study, general education teachers are defined as teachers who differentiate their classroom instruction to meet the needs of all students who perform at varying levels (Pro Care Therapy, 2022). General education is also the curriculum designed for all children who are expected to meet state standards as measured by the Georgia Milestones Assessment (Webster, 2019).

A purposeful, also known as purposive, sampling of grade 3 general education teachers who provided reading instruction was used in this study. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this case study because this type of sampling is aimed at gaining insights on teachers' perceptions of the implementation and effectiveness of DI implementation (Patton, 2002). The participants for this study provided instruction within an elementary school in a general education, third grade classroom setting. These teachers shared their experiences with implementing traditional and past reading programs and with DI implementation. Participants in this study have received training in implementing DI. The criteria for choosing the teachers for the sample was because the researcher was aware of the participants' knowledge of DI and their experience with teaching grade 3 (Gay, et. al 2012).

**Figure 5**

*Purposive Sampling*



Moreover, purposeful sampling is used in this qualitative research study to provide information from individuals and their experiences which address the purpose of the study, which in this case is implementation of DI (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Patton, 2002).

Patton (1990, 2002), who is frequently cited as an authority on purposeful sampling states that:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of vital importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling.

(Patton, 2002, p. 230).

Furthermore, the research questions in this study require sampling to develop the distinct perceptions from the teachers because they have direct knowledge and experience with the professional development and implementation procedures of DI (Creswell, 2007). Also, the teachers in this study teach within elementary schools in the same public school district. The teachers also experienced DI training during professional learning sessions provided by the school district.

Furthermore, according to Creswell (2007), purposeful sampling includes specific forms of data collected, which fits this study because the researcher conducted interviews and collected documents pertaining to the teachers' implementation of DI. Patton (2002) states there are no rules regarding the number in the sample, the size of the sample is dependent on the data needed to maximize the information. A sample of teachers in grade 3 was used in this case study to acquire data saturation (Gay et. al, 2012; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The sample size was obtained based on the number of willing participants who teach grade 3 in this school district.

The teachers were chosen from three diverse types of elementary schools in the district where the study takes place; the schools were schools in urban, rural, and suburban areas. In addition, the schools were selected based on their performance on the Georgia Milestones Assessment during the 2020-2021 school year, consisting of those who were higher, average, and lower performing. The researcher obtained this data from the Governors' Office of Student Achievement. Data saturation is the point of qualitative research when data collection is very unlikely to produce additional data or added information (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal of this study was to acquire various perceptions of implementing DI and its effectiveness from the purposeful sampling of third-grade teachers who participated in this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher works as an academic coach in a school district located in Central Georgia but will interview teachers from a different school district for this study. The researcher decided to use another school district because the researcher's school district contains only one elementary school whereas the participating district has 21 elementary schools. The larger number of participating elementary schools will allow the researcher to recruit from a larger

participant pool. The research also decided to recruit participants from a different district so that the participant's responses would not be influenced by the researcher's role as an academic coach within their district.

The researcher has been an educator for 22 years. Fifteen of those years were served in the school district where the study takes place; during that time, the researcher taught grades 2, 3, 4, and 5 and served as an Instructional (Literacy) Coach. The researcher is an African American female with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from the University of Georgia and a Master of Arts degree in Elementary Education. Also, the researcher earned an Educational Specialist degree in Instructional Leadership from Nova Southeastern University. She also has Teacher Support Specialist (TSS) and Reading Specialist endorsements for her teaching certificate. For the past 4 years, the researcher was an Assistant Professor of Elementary and Special Education at Fort Valley State University in the College of Education and Professional Studies, Educator Preparation Program. The researcher currently serves as an Academic Coach for grades Pre-K through 5, in another Central Georgia School District, located near the school district in which the current study is being conducted. The researcher serves on the Administrative Team and as a Testing Coordinator at her school. In this study, the qualitative researcher will be the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher's current and past role as an Academic Coach and Elementary Teacher who has experience and knowledge of differentiating instruction as well as previously being a third-grade teacher; this provides commonality allows the researcher to experience a sense of collegiality with the participants which made it possible for inquiry regarding teachers' perceptions. The researcher also participated in training for DI in the same school district as the participants of this study.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the role of the researcher can change back and forth from insider to outsider in qualitative research. Furthermore, the researcher can also have the role of an outsider, which means they are not a part of the group participating in this study (Unluer, 2012). Since the researcher is no longer affiliated with the school district in this study, their role is etic, or from an outside view which makes the researcher's role more of an objective view (Punch, 1998). The researcher serves in a leadership position within her school; however, she may be unaware of perceptions of the participants as it relates to their schools and school district. The researcher has and continues to attend training sessions for implementing DI, for instructional coaches and administrators. So, she was privy to information that teachers do not receive. Her current role as a Testing Coordinator for her school provides the research with access to student performance data. Moreover, in order to control the potential to influence the collection of empirical data because of the unique characteristics of the researcher, she conducted the interviews (Pezalla et al., 2015).

### **Researcher as an Instrument**

In this qualitative study, the role of the researcher was as an instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This human instrument collected data by conducting interviews, while remaining objective, and then conducted a theoretical analysis of the research through a detailed and investigative order and measurement of findings (Faryadi, 2019). In addition, the qualitative researcher must carry out an in-depth examination of the phenomenon they are studying over a period (Gay & Ariasan, 2012). Because the researcher had worked in the school district where the study was conducted, there was a sense of familiarity with the school system's operations and organization, and this provided easier access to the study participants. Therefore, the researcher could more easily access the participants for interviews. Furthermore, the

participants were not teachers at any of the researcher's former schools but did teach in the same grade level, third grade, as the researcher had previously taught. Also, the researcher participated in training sessions provided by the school district for the implementation process of DI.

According to Creswell (2007), biases, personal values, and assumptions must be identified in qualitative research; this will ensure validity of this study. Furthermore, the qualitative researcher needs to describe relevant aspects of self, including any biases and assumptions, any expectations, and experiences to qualify their ability to conduct the research (Greenbank, 2003). Therefore, given the researcher's prior experiences with the school district and DI and having previously taught third grade, she must exclude any biases that can impact her qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to accurately access the thoughts and feelings of the participants in a study (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Furthermore, the researcher must remove any bias from the study and assure the credibility of the results (Birt et al., 2016). The researcher will use member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation which is a technique for exploring the credibility of results; data or results will be returned to the participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). Respondent validation was used to ensure that the phenomena being studied was accurate; to accomplish this, the researcher had participants comment and provide feedback on their interview transcript and final themes to assure that they accurately reflected the study (Noble & Smith, 2015).

## **Participants**

The participants for this study included third-grade, general education teachers, in one central Georgia school district. In addition, the courses taught by the participants are aligned with the Georgia Standards of Excellence for English Language Arts (ELA), which includes

reading, grammar, and writing skills. First, the researcher determined the school district's policy and protocol for conducting research. The researcher then emailed the district's Research and Evaluation team, from her Columbus State University email address, to describe the proposed study and request school district approval of the study. The researcher also completed an online Research Request Form, located on the school district's website, indicating which schools and grade levels would be the focus of this study. After the researcher completed and submitted the request and the Research and Evaluation Department of that school district approved the study (see Appendix A), the researcher contacted the principals of the selected schools for approval/denial of the study at their school (see Appendix C). Once their approval was granted, the principals provided the researcher with the names of the 3rd grade teachers who agreed to be interviewed. In addition, the researcher requested approval to begin the interviews and to collect the participants' documents from the Columbus State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the researcher received approval from the IRB (see Appendix B), the researcher then emailed the participants, to request their participation, inform them of the purpose and goal of the study, inform them of the timeframe of the study, request permission for submission of their documents, demographic questions/data regarding their teaching and DI implementation experience (see Appendix E), lesson plans (see Appendix G) and Self-Assessment Checklist (see Appendix H), and scheduled a virtual interview (see Appendix D); virtual interviews were scheduled in 30-45 minute intervals and at the availability of teachers. Then, the participants received a Zoom invitation from the researcher. The researcher also informed the participants of the confidentiality and assured them of their anonymity in this study as well as had them sign and return an Informed Consent form, which was attached to the Request to Educators letter, stating that they were willing participants in this study, were aware of the purpose of the study,

and would willingly provide their requested documents for this study which will be a copy of their lesson plan and their Self-Assessment Checklist (see Appendix H).

Since purposive sampling was used in this study, the participants answered a brief questionnaire about their years of teaching experience and their experiences and training with the implementation of DI (see Appendix E). This was valuable information to obtain because it could impact their DI implementation practices and perceptions of DI. The researcher also emailed the participants, two weeks after the initial request, to remind them of their upcoming interview and submission of the requested documents. A follow up/reminder email followed one day prior to the interview.

In selecting participants for this study, the researcher used sampling techniques aligned with qualitative methods (Gentles et al., 2015). A purposive sampling of third grade, general education, reading teachers was used in this study (Gay et al., 2012; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Some of the participants taught at the same elementary school and some were at various locations. The study was conducted in the same school district whose third-grade teachers were implementing DI in their general education, reading classrooms.

### **Instrumentation**

Yin (2018) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident...[and] relies on multiple sources of evidence” (p. 13). Therefore, data for this study was collected using more than one source (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collection forms used for this qualitative study were interviews and document analysis.

## *Interviews*

Interviews are used to explore the views, experiences, beliefs, and motivations of individual participants (Gill et al., 2008). Moreover, Gay et al. (2012) state interviews are purposeful interactions in which one person obtains information from another. There are three types of research interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured.

Structured interviews consist of questionnaires that are verbally administered, include a list of predetermined questions, and have little or no variation and with no opportunity for follow-up questions to responses that could warrant further explanation or discussion (George, 2022). Furthermore, they are quick and easy to administer and may be of particular use if clarification of certain questions is required; however, they only allow for limited participant responses and are of little use if more depth is required (George, 2022).

However, unstructured interviews do not reflect any preconceived theories or ideas and are performed with little or no organization; this type of interview may simply start with an opening question and will then progress based upon the initial response (George, 2022). Unstructured interviews can be very time-consuming and can be difficult to manage and to participate in because there are no predetermined interview questions which provide little guidance on what to talk about (George, 2022).

According to George (2022), semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge to pursue an idea or response in more detail; this interview format provides participants with some guidance on what to talk about. George (2022) states that the flexibility of semi-structured interviews, particularly in comparison to structured interviews, allows for the

discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the researcher.

According to Gay et al (2012), the level of formality and structure determines the type of interview used for a study (Gay et. al, 2012). Although there are three types of interviews, semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate and will be the source of data collection for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This form of interview was selected based on the researcher developing a protocol and questions before the interviews (Creswell, 2009). The researcher will also use an interview guide to ensure the open-ended questions are aligned with and answer the research questions of the study and to keep the interview accurate (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Interview questions will be created by the researcher and these questions will focus on grade 3 teachers' perceptions of the implementation of DI and their perceptions of the effectiveness of the implementation of DI on student achievement on the GMAS. Additionally, questions were included to describe their teaching experiences, their experiences when using DI to provide instruction to their students and grade 3 teachers' perceptions of student achievement on the Reading section of the GMAS from using DI with their third-grade students.

For this study, one-on-one interviews were conducted. For convenience and availability for the participants, the interviews were conducted via Zoom; conducting online interviews is favorable because the participants and researcher are not confined to any one geographical location (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher provided the participants with the meeting link after receiving the names of the willing participants from the school principal. Lobe et al. (2020) presented several protocols for conducting online interviews such as ensuring that the interviewer and the interviewee are informed regarding using the online platform, making sure the environment is quiet as well as protects the confidentiality of the interviewee, and the

importance of setting up protocols for both interviewer and interviewee. However, there are two weaknesses to conducting online interviews which are experiencing issues with technology and a potential breach in the anonymity of participants. The semi-structured interview lasted 30-45 minutes. Also, the interviews were recorded using a handheld device to support the researcher in transcribing the process, the questions, and the participants' responses.

Participants were asked to provide the researcher with their educational level and the field in which degrees were attained. Then they were asked to identify the number of years of teaching experience (altogether and third grade, specifically) and the number of years teaching using the traditional teaching approach and the DI Model to teach reading, for the researcher to get an in-depth understanding of the teachers' perceptions of and their experiences with using DI. Participants were asked to identify the number and types of professional development sessions/training they have attended for DI and their perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing DI as it relates to student performance and achievement on the GMAS.

To collect data and gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of third grade teachers in implementing DI in third grade classrooms, the researcher used an Interview Protocol (see Appendix F) for the study including an explanation and the purpose of the study, teacher consent and rights during the interviews, and the interview questions (see Appendix F) and a Teacher Experience Questionnaire (see Appendix E). These tools were used to determine if there is an overlying theme of teachers' perceptions of implementing DI in their classrooms.

### ***Document Analysis***

Gross (2018) defines document analysis as a form of qualitative research that uses a systematic approach to analyze documentary evidence and answer specific research questions.

Furthermore, Bowen (2009) states that document analysis is a systematic procedure for evaluating and reviewing printed and electronic documents to obtain an understanding and develop knowledge. According to Patton (2002), records, documents, and artifacts can give a rich source of information that cannot be observed in any other manner (Patton, 2002).

For this study, the second type of instrumentation used was document analysis. Participants submitted lesson plans, which were analyzed using a rubric (see Appendix G) and the Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist (see Appendix H), was the documentary evidence collected and analyzed for this study. These documents served as a secondary source of data collection. The documents analyzed in this study were related to teachers' implementation and instructional practices when implementing DI and served to answer the research question regarding teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing DI to prepare their third-grade students for the GMAS.

### **Data Collection**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the effectiveness of the implementation of DI for elementary students in grade 3, in central Georgia elementary schools participating in this study. Qualitative research was chosen for this study because it was appropriate for understanding how grade 3 teachers interpret their experiences with the implementation of DI and how they perceive the effectiveness of this framework (Patton, 2002). A case study methodology was used because this study examined a phenomenon that occurred over a specific period, which will be during their students' third grade level experience in the 2021-2022 school year (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, a case study research design was fitting for this study because it was appropriate for explaining the context and degree to which a program has been implemented (Gay et. al, 2012). A purposeful

sample of grade 3 elementary teachers, in a central Georgia school district, was used for this study. Purposeful sampling was used to choose the participants because the researcher selected individuals and schools for the study that can purposefully, based on their experiences with DI, provide an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All teachers who participated in this study teach third grade, are expected to differentiate their classroom instruction, and have received some level of training in DI implementation. Also, these teachers gave ELA instruction to third-grade students during the 2020-2022 school year. Interviews and document analysis occurred simultaneously after approvals were received from the same central Georgia District in which the study was conducted and after approval from the Columbus State University IRB committee. Participants chosen to participate in the study were scheduled for interviews after signing an informed consent. The informed consent was sent electronically using DocuSign. Separate interviews were scheduled and the times for the interviews were scheduled during the week and in the evening, after the teachers' regularly scheduled work hours. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, a cloud-based video conferencing platform that can be used for video conferencing meetings; the participants were informed that their interviews would be recorded. Moreover, participants were asked to participate in the interviews at a remote location, away from their school building to maintain confidentiality. Furthermore, even though the participants signed an informed consent form before the interview, the document was reviewed with each participant, prior to beginning each interview session. After each interview, the recorded responses from the participant were transcribed by the researcher. Transcribing the interview involved transferring the recorded interview data into typed text (Christensen & Johnson, 2014). In addition, the date, subject discussed, and the pseudonym for the participant was recorded on the transcript (Gay et. al,

2012). For additional security purposes, the transcribed data is being kept in a locked cabinet in a secure location, at the home of the researcher. To ensure accuracy and to add validity to the data collected, the transcripts were copied and returned to the participant via email for member checking (Creswell & Miller; Merriam, 1998). Document analysis occurred after all approvals have been obtained. The documents to be analyzed were the interview transcripts, the Teacher Experiences Questionnaire (see Appendix E), the participants' lesson plans, and the Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist (see Appendix J) (GADOE, 2019). Having at least three data sources created triangulation and reduced bias by using secondary data collection sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Table 1 includes the data collection sources aligned to each research question.

**Table 1**

*Data Sources & Research Questions Alignment*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>
1. What are third grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the implementation of DI with their students?	Interviews Document Analysis
2. What are third grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing DI to increase reading achievement and prepare students for the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment?	Interviews

**Data Analysis**

According to Gay et. al., (2012), data analysis is defined as the process of summarizing data; this leads to the disaggregation of the study's findings. During this qualitative study, data analysis of the interviews and document analysis will occur simultaneously (Christensen & Johnson, 2014). An undetermined number of third grade teachers will be interviewed for this study. The data collected from interviews will be moved from transcribed responses to thematic analysis, which is the identification of themes in data (Christensen & Johnson, 2014). Thematic analysis (TA) was first developed by Gerald Holton, a physicist and historian of science, in the 1970s. (Merton, 1975). However, in 2006, Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a "systematic"

and “sophisticated” (Howitt & Cramer, 2008, p. 341) approach to TA, which has subsequently been extensively used for analyzing qualitative data. Furthermore, TA can be used in research when the study’s purpose is to find out about people’s perceptions, knowledge, and experiences from a set of qualitative data. As it pertains to TA in this study, the raw data from the interview transcripts will be analyzed by the researcher, conducting an initial analysis of the transcript and using the structural coding method, which occurs when topics or themes of text are categorized and a list of codes, or themes, are developed (Saldana, 2013). The analysis of data for this study will be inductive because common categories and themes will be developed as the researcher reviews and analyzes the data from the interviews and documents (Creswell, 2009).

The researcher in this study followed the six steps of TA: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, review of initial themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report (Braun & Clark, 2012; Caulfield, 2020; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). According to Caulfield (2020), familiarization is defined as the process of getting to know the data collected. To assure accuracy during the interview transcription, the researcher will record the interviews. Also, the researcher will read the transcripts and will review them in comparison to the recorded interview sessions (Braun & Clark, 2012; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Since familiarization is not a formal process, the researcher also annotated the transcripts with notes and statements that stand out from the reading (Braun & Clark, 2012). This process, also known as coding, is the foundation of data analysis (Braun & Clark, 2012). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined coding as the process of making notations on forms of data that provides the researcher with relevant data to answer the study’s research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The aim of coding the interview and documents is to organize the data in a meaningful and systematic way so that congruent themes can be identified (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

During the third step of TA, searching for themes, the qualitative researcher will be constructing meaning by identifying patterns and themes that emerge (Gay et. al, 2012). Those themes will be reviewed for meaningful and accurate representations of the data (Caulfield, 2020). After confirming the list of appropriate themes, the researcher will define the themes (Braun & Clark, 2012; Caulfield, 2020). In this step of TA, the researcher will state what is distinctive about each theme (Braun & Clark, 2012). The researcher will define and name the themes by determining what the theme is saying, asking if any sub themes can be developed, and identifying how and if the themes are related or overarching (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The decisive step is to produce a report based on the TA process's findings; in this step, the researcher will provide sufficient evidence of each theme using vivid examples from the data (Caulfield, 2019). According to Caulfield (2019), this report usually addresses each theme in turn and the researcher describes how often the themes occur and what they mean, including examples from the data as evidence. Finally, the last step explains the main takeaways and shows how the analysis has answered each research question (Caulfield, 2019). Furthermore, the researcher will include direct quotations in the findings to support the validity of the themes (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). In addition, the researcher will report on the number of occurrences for the codes under each theme using a frequency table. Including a count can verify that all codes are given equal emphasis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used pseudonyms to replace the actual names of participants to protect the participants from any negative consequences from the information that they share in the interviews (Gay et. al, 2012).

## **Summary**

To respond to the research questions, the researcher used a qualitative research approach to determine third grade, general education teachers' perceptions of implementing DI in their

classes and their perceptions of the effectiveness of the DI particularly as it relates to students' performance and achievement on the Reading Georgia Milestones Assessment. The targeted population was teachers at various schools within a school district in Central Georgia. Once the study was approved by the School District and the IRB at CSU, the researcher met with teachers to introduce the study, obtained participation consent, and collected teaching experience information. The researcher used purposive sampling to identify the participants and then conducted semi-structured interviews through a virtual platform, Zoom, after school hours and on a day that was mutually convenient. The interviews were recorded, transcribed by the researcher, and sent to the participants for member checking. The researcher analyzed the data collected from the participants during the interview to determine themes, develop codes, and summarize the findings. This data was organized into tables and synthesized to determine third grade, general education teachers' perceptions of implementing DI in their reading classrooms.

## **Chapter IV: Results**

This qualitative case study aimed to explore third-grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of implementing DI and DI's effectiveness in improving their students' reading performance and achievement on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment in a school district in Central Georgia. The qualitative approach was the best fit for exploring teachers' experiences with and perceptions of DI to better understand the research problem. This research had a bounded case study design because of the time and setting for this study. This chapter details the study's process of exploring third-grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the impact of DI. It includes the research questions, research design, participant profiles, data analysis, document analysis findings, and concludes with a summary.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: What are third-grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the implementation of DI with their students?

RQ2: What are third-grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of DI in impacting student achievement and in preparing students for the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative case study design was used to obtain extensive and thorough descriptions of the participants' experiences with and perceptions of DI (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Creswell (1994, pp.1-2), qualitative research is "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting. The bounded case study design provided the opportunity to capture the participants' perceptions of DI and its impact on third-grade students' reading achievement and performance on the Georgia Milestones Reading

Assessment. The bounded case study was appropriate because this study only included 10 third-grade teachers in diverse types of school settings in a school district in Central Georgia. This study is also bounded because it occurred during students' third-grade level experience only, which is a contemporary event that fits into the characteristics of a bounded case study (Yin, 2018). According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research explores phenomena with limited existing knowledge. Since there is currently limited research on third-grade teachers' perceptions of DI and its impact on student performance and achievement on the Georgia Milestones Assessment, the qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study.

This study obtained approval from Columbus State University's IRB (see Appendix B) and the school district's Research Request Committee. Recruitment occurred after receiving all the approvals. The participants in this qualitative research case study were third-grade teachers working in various elementary school settings within the school district in the 2022–2023 school year and teaching for two or more years. Purposeful sampling provided an in-depth understanding of third-grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of DI as they worked with students who must pass the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. After receiving approval from the school district to conduct the study (see Appendix B), school principals requested consent to conduct the study (see Appendix C) at their perspective school and for their approval to contact their third-grade teachers. The potential participants received a Request for Educator Participant in this Doctoral Study Recruitment Letter (see Appendix D), the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix E), a Teaching Experience Questionnaire (see Appendix E), and a Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist for TKES Standard 4: Differentiated Instruction (see Appendix H). Participants were also asked to submit one of their lesson plans which included DI. The researcher reviewed the submitted plan and used a Differentiated Instruction Lesson Plan

Rubric (see Appendix G) to evaluate the participants' DI instructional practices. The participants read, completed, and submitted the questionnaire, self-assessment checklist, and informed consent. The informed consent form detailed the following pertinent areas related to participation: purpose, procedures, risks or discomforts, potential benefits, costs and compensation, confidentiality, and withdrawal.

Data collection came from individual interviews with the 10 participants and document analysis of the lesson plan, questionnaire, and self-assessment checklist. Interviews provide in-depth information about participants' experiences and viewpoints on a particular topic (Turner, 2010). According to Turner (2010), interviews are paired with other data collection forms to provide the researcher with a well-rounded information collection for document analyses. The interviews addressed both research questions, and the document analysis addressed RQ1.

The interviews occurred after school and outside of school hours. All interviews occurred virtually and, at times, selected by the participants. The interviews were also recorded on Zoom, and Otter.ai was the transcription application used to audio-record and transcribe the interviews. This data is kept secure on the researcher's computer, which requires the researcher's password for access, and is also kept locked in the researcher's home office. Third-grade general education teachers participated in the interviews. General Education Teachers have a homeroom class and must be able to teach the designated content areas to the entire class and provide differentiated instruction to students at all levels, including students with special needs. After the interviews, participants received the interview transcript and had to complete member checking. Member checking occurred before data analysis so the participants could confirm the accuracy of the data (Billups, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Each document was analyzed with open coding. Open coding is the first level of coding. In open coding, the researcher identifies distinct concepts and themes for categorization. "The first step [open coding] aims to express data and phenomena in concepts. Units of meaning classify expressions (single words, short sequences of words) to attach annotations and "concepts" (Flick, 2009, p. 307). "Open coding is a first cycle, open-ended approach to coding the data" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 148). This analysis began by reviewing the data by thoroughly reading the interview transcripts. During this process, keywords within the transcripts were highlighted using an assortment of colors to create a list of codes. Highlighting was done in a Microsoft Word document, and a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to document the codes and align the participant's responses with each code.

Additional codes were identified, and comments were documented in the margins within the transcripts. Focused coding occurred to narrow the categories identified during open coding. According to Saldaña (2021), focus coding, the second cycle analytic technique, involves categorizing the codes into groups based on what looks similar. Hand coding, color-coding by hand with highlighters, occurred to analyze data and identify themes for coding. All documents were coded, using a code book, and aligned with categories from the focused coding. The interviews and document analysis showed the study's credibility through triangulation, which supported the confirmation of the results (Billups, 2021).

## **Participants**

The participants teach third grade at various school settings (suburban, urban, and rural) throughout the school district participating in this study. Each participant received a recruitment email which included the Columbus State University's informed consent form to read, sign and submit to denote their interest in participating in this study. The study had three participation

requirements: at least 2 years of teaching experience, currently a third-grade general education teacher at an elementary school in this district, and prior training in implementing DI. To maintain confidentiality, each participant received a unique study identifier. Table 2 includes the participants' identifiers, demographics, number of years teaching, highest degree level and their current school setting. Twelve teachers submitted the informed consent form to express their interest in the study, but only 10 participated in the interviews, 8 females and 2 males. Two potential participants did not have at least 2 years of teaching experience and were not allowed to participate.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics and Teaching Experience*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b># Years Teaching</b>	<b>Highest Degree Earned</b>	<b>School Setting</b>
Michelle	Female	W	7	M.Ed.	Rural
Jessica	Female	W	22	M.Ed.	Suburban
John	Male	B	13	M.Ed.	Urban
Monica	Female	B	17	Ed.S.	Rural
Susan	Female	W	26	Ed.D.	Rural
Carol	Female	B	2	B.A.	Urban
Beth	Female	W	9	B.A.	Suburban
Lisa	Female	B	15	Ed.S.	Urban
Jennifer	Female	W	21	M.Ed.	Suburban
James	Male	W	9	B.A.	Rural

Third grade general education teachers who signed the informed consent form and submitted a convenient day and time for their interview received an email notifying them of their confirmed date and time and a calendar invite to join the Zoom interview session, which occurred after and outside of work hours. Before the interviews, the participants reviewed the study's process for protecting their identities and privacy. The participants were told they would receive pseudonyms in the study, which would be recorded (with their permission) and could ask to stop the recording and withdraw from it at any time. The recordings are secured on the

researcher's computer and a password, which is only known by the researcher, is required to access this data.

The participants' years of teaching varied but all had 2 or more years of teaching experience. In addition, all participants currently teach third grade in a general education classroom setting, have received some type of training for DI implementation, are expected to differentiate instruction, and are evaluated on DI, by their administrators, with the Georgia TKES evaluation tool, Standard 4: Differentiated Instruction. All participants also teach in a variety of school settings within the school district of this study.

### **Participants' Profiles**

#### ***Michelle***

Michelle has taught at the same school in the school district in this study, which is in a rural area, since 2016. She is certified to teach Elementary Education for grades PreK-5<sup>th</sup>. However, she has only taught third grade for all 7 years. Third grade is departmentalized, which means that each teacher only teaches a particular content area to the entire grade level and Michelle only teaches English Language Arts/Reading to her third-grade students. She is the grade-level chairperson, and she meets weekly to collaboratively plan with her team members and other ELA/Reading teachers in her building. As required by her school, Michelle has also participated in professional learning opportunities on how to effectively implement DI.

#### ***Jessica***

Jessica is an educator who has taught for 22 years. Her first 10 years teaching were in a school district in North Georgia. She has taught in the school district of this study for the past 12 years. She has been at her current school setting, which is in a suburban area, for the last 5 years of her career. Throughout her teaching career, she has taught first, second, and third grades. At

her current school, third grade is self-contained which means that each teacher teaches all the content areas (reading, math, social studies, and science) to the same group of students, all day. Jessica received initial training for DI in her previous school district in North Georgia, but she also participates in professional learning sessions in her current school district.

### ***John***

John teaches at an urban school. He has taught for 13 years, all in his current school district and at schools in urban areas. Since all students do not learn the same, John provides a variety of learning activities to meet each of his students' needs. John teaches all content areas to his third-grade students, and he prefers small group instruction rather than whole group.

### ***Monica***

Monica worked in a corporate setting for 6 years and entered the teaching profession later in life, through a teacher alternative preparation program. She has taught grades first and third for 17 years. She currently teaches third grade in an inclusion class model, which means her class includes General Education and Special Education students. Ten of her students are in general education and four of them are in special education. Monica has a co-teacher who comes in to instruct with her each day of the week during reading and math.

### ***Susan***

Susan has been an educator for 26 years. She came from a family of educators, which is how she gained her passion for becoming a teacher. Susan began her teaching career as a substitute teacher and then a paraprofessional. She served in those roles for the first 5 years of her career. She has worked in the same school district throughout her career, and she pursued her master and Education Doctorate Degrees during her tenure. Susan is currently a third-grade teacher at the same school that her mother taught.

### ***Carol***

Carol began her teaching career fresh out of college. She has taught for 2 years at the same school in the same school district. Carol only has experience teaching third grade. Her DI lessons include hands on activities and technology integration. Her peers constantly seek innovative ideas from Carol on how to use technology during DI. She plans to pursue her master's degree in educational technology but plans to continue being an elementary teacher for the remainder of her career.

### ***Beth***

Beth taught at a private school before transitioning to public schools 3 years ago. She has been an elementary teacher for 9 years. She was initially hired at her current school to teach fifth grade, but for the last 6 years, she has taught second, third, and fourth grades. Beth currently teaches third in a departmentalized classroom model in which she teaches ELA/Reading.

### ***Lisa***

Lisa has been teaching for 15 years. She started her career in a school district in South Georgia and 7 years ago she relocated to the Central Georgia school district in this study. She has dual certification in Elementary Education and Special Education. Lisa currently teaches reading and loves to teach writing. In her former school district, the reading focus was Balanced Literacy (BL) which is an instructional approach that includes a balance between teacher-led reading and writing small group instruction and independent learning, which are key components of DI (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

### ***Jennifer***

Jennifer followed in her mother's footsteps and became a teacher 21 years ago. She began her career as a Paraprofessional in another state. She became a certified educator 12 years

ago. She earned her master's degree in Elementary Education seven years ago and is currently pursuing her Specialist Degree. She has taught 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for the past 5 years at an elementary school in a suburban school setting.

### ***James***

Teaching is a second career for James. He began his career in the military. When he retired from his duties in that field, he decided to become a teacher. He has been teaching 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for the past nine years in the same school and school district. James received DI training during his teacher certification courses. His school district also provides DI training to all new teachers. James is also currently pursuing his master's degree in Elementary Education.

### **Findings and Data Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to describe teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the effectiveness of the implementation of DI for elementary students in grade 3 in a school district in central Georgia. A gap in research exists because there have been no other studies examining teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of DI implementation in third grade. Grade 3 was chosen because passing the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment is a promotional requirement for this grade level. Triangulation occurred in this study by using semi-structured interviews and document analysis, which consisted of reviewing and using a rubric (see Appendix G) to score a lesson plan. According to Patton (1999), triangulation of data is important because it helps to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. Triangulation also tests the validity through the convergence of information from various sources (Patton, 1999).

The study was guided by two research questions:

RQ1: What are third grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the implementation of DI with their students?

RQ2: What are third grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing DI to increase reading achievement and prepare students for the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment?

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and used document analysis to gain insights of teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the effectiveness of DI implementation with third grade students. Each interview question was aligned to the research questions for this study. The interviews consisted of 12 open-ended questions. Table 3 shows this alignment:

**Table 3***Alignment of Interview Questions to Research Questions*

<b>Question No.</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Research Questions</b>
1	How would you describe your teaching experience? How many years have you been teaching? In the district of this study? Third grade?	RQ1
2	Tell me what you know about differentiated instruction?	RQ1
3	Tell me about your professional development and training for implementing DI in your classroom.	RQ1
4	Can you give specific examples of how you implement DI in your classroom?	RQ1
5	What are your perceptions of your preparedness to properly implement DI?	
6	What do you think are the pros (benefits) and cons (disadvantages) implementing differentiated instruction in classrooms? Explain.	
7	How do you view teaching in a traditional (whole group) classroom setting vs. using the differentiated instruction approach?	
8	What are your perceptions of the impact of DI on third-grade students' performance and academic achievement in reading?	RQ2
9	What indicators led you to believe that DI has an impact on third-graders' reading achievement?	RQ2
10	What are your perceptions of the impact of implementing DI on third-grade students' performance and academic achievement on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment? What suggestions or observations could you provide regarding the implementation of differentiated instruction in elementary classrooms in other districts?	RQ2
11	(a) If you could select an instructional framework to use in your third-grade classroom, would you select DI? Why or why not? (b) What advice would you give new third-grade teachers in implementing DI? Is there anything else regarding your participation in DI that you would like to share?	RQ1
12	Do you have any other insights that would clarify teacher perceptions about the effectiveness of the implementation of the DI framework for students in grade three, in Georgia elementary schools?	RQ1, RQ2

The interviews were transcribed and recorded via Zoom, transcribed by Otter.ai, and were downloaded to the researcher's personal computer for review. The audio files were downloaded to the researcher's personal computer and stored on Google Drive. After reviewing the interviews transcriptions, completed by Otter.ai, they were returned to the participants in

separate emails for member checking. This process was necessary to ensure that each participant's responses were captured accurately, each research question was addressed. The data were coded manually, and themes were developed based on participant responses.

Open coding occurred simultaneously during the phases of data collection. Focused coding is a second cycle analysis method (Saldaña, 2021) for reevaluating the codes identified through open coding. The purpose of focused coding is to derive the most pertinent categories from the data. The data was analyzed for codes, themes, and subthemes. The themes were organized, according to the research questions, in an understandable format for educational leaders to review and use to better understand teachers' perceptions of DI to enhance instructional practices, which, in turn, will improve student performance and achievement in reading and on the Georgia Milestones Assessment. Table 4 presents the codes, subthemes, and themes identified during open and focused coding.

**Table 4***Data Analysis Coding for Individual Interviews with Subthemes and Themes*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Subthemes (categories)</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Adjust instruction, ability levels, learning styles, meet students where they are, interest, content/process/product, assessments, strategies and interventions, learning styles, enrichment, small groups, scaffolding, deficits	individual needs, instructional practices, ability & interest levels, assessments	Teacher Knowledge of DI
Training from district & school, small groups, initial, TKES Standard 4, self-evaluation, ongoing/formative assessments, peer observation, PLCs (Professional Learning Communities), role of Instructional Coach, implement with fidelity	District/school level, peer observations, resources, PLCs	Professional Development and Training with DI
Assessments, benchmark/diagnostic data, interest inventory, small groups, TKES, planning, strategies, grade level, resources, guided/leveled readers, content/process/product, learning styles, meet GA Standards of Excellence (GSE), close learning gaps	Instructional strategies, planning, training, resources, small groups	Teacher Experience with DI
Teacher accountability, closing learning gaps, scaffolding, increase in performance, building on fundamental skills, building excitement about reading	Learning gaps, standards mastery, stamina, comprehension, fundamental skills, fidelity	Perceived effectiveness of DI on reading achievement
Implement with fidelity, building stamina, reading comprehension skills, reading levels, lack of differentiation on GMAS, building confidence level	Stamina, reading comprehension, close gaps, differentiated test, fidelity	Perceived effectiveness of DI on GMAS

***Research Question 1: What are third grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the implementation of DI with their students?***

This study sought insight into how third grade teachers describe their experiences with and perceptions of implementing DI. To access their prior knowledge about DI, the participants responded to a request to define DI. Following this, all participants discussed DI professional development and training they received, and provided specific examples of how they implement

DI in their classrooms. Participants were also asked to discuss the pros and cons of DI implementation and their perspective of teaching in a traditional (whole group) classroom setting vs. using the Differentiated Instruction Approach. The four themes derived from RQ1 appear in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Themes Related to DI Implementation*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
1. Teacher Knowledge	14
2. Teacher Experiences	11
3. Pros and Cons of DI	11
4. Professional Development and Training with DI	10

**Theme 1: Teacher Knowledge.** The participants referenced teacher knowledge of DI the most throughout the data collection. The categories with the highest frequencies were meeting individual needs (20), instructional practices (13), and assessments (11). The participants perceived teacher knowledge as teachers knowing what will best help a student to grow in understanding and skill. All the participants agreed that DI provided them with opportunities to support students in their learning and meeting them where they are in their ability levels. The participants' perceptions of DI differed, but they all perceived the goal of DI was to address learning gaps and to improve students' learning by implementing strategies to meet the needs of each student. The participants expressed that their goal was to increase student outcomes by implementing the DI strategies they had learned in their DI trainings. The participants also believed that their knowledge of implementing DI and consistently putting it into practice with fidelity would be most beneficial to their students' learning. Table 6 shows the categories that comprise Theme 1.

**Table 6**

*Categories Related to Teachers' Knowledge of DI*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Meeting individual needs	20
Instructional practices	13
Assessments	11
Ability level	9
Interest level	6

Many participants gave a personalized definition of DI. For example, Michelle stated,

"Teachers use DI to meet the individual and varying needs of all learners. Since we know that all students learn differently, we must be knowledgeable of how to adjust our instruction to meet their needs. We meet them where they are and implement different strategies to increase their performance level".

James said, "Differentiated Instruction is meeting the students where they are and giving them the necessary instructional practices and strategies to make sure that they're on grade level and they're able to comprehend and meet the goals they set for themselves." According to Jessica, there are diverse ways to differentiate instruction.

She said,

"Teachers differentiate their instructional practices based upon students' ability and interest level. We use our assessment data to track their learning and monitor their progress. This data informs us if our students are performing below, on, or above third grade level. We also use Interest Inventories to determine what students like and what type of learners they are; some students are kinesthetic learners which means they learn best with hands on activities, other students are visual learners, and some are auditory learners. Our knowledge of differentiated instructional strategies and scaffolding our students' learning will help them improve academically."

Beth defined DI as meeting students where they are and implementing the appropriate instructional practices and strategies to support them in increasing reading proficiency and helping them to reach their reading goals.

Participants consistently reported that teachers must be knowledgeable of specific strategies and techniques to provide DI to their students. They discussed the training they received to effectively implement DI, which also increases their knowledge of DI. According to Lisa, she received initial training when she first started teaching and her school district and school provide ongoing Professional Learning sessions on DI implementation. Beth said one of her training courses was beneficial because it focused on reading strategies to address her students' deficits in their reading comprehension skills. This training taught them how to use leveled texts during teacher led small group instruction; these level texts are chosen based on students' reading performance or the grade level of their reading performance. Lisa said, "This will benefit our students greatly by meeting them where they are in reading and building them up to a third-grade reading level. This will support our students on the Milestones test because the reading passages on this assessment will be on third grade level."

**Theme 2: Teacher Experiences.** Teacher Experiences emerged 63 times in the data. The leading four categories were instructional strategies (15), resources (12), training (10), and small groups (5). Table 7 presents the six categories in this theme by frequency.

**Table 7**

*Categories Related to Teacher Experiences*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Instructional strategies	15
Planning	12
Grade level	10
Ongoing/peer learning	9
Resources	7
Small group	5
Training	5

The participants described several common categories related to teacher experiences. They believed their experiences with DI implementation helped them grow and become more effective in their instructional practices with DI. Carol said,

When I first started implementing DI, it was overwhelming because I had so many students with different learning styles and ability levels but with time and experience as well as trial and error, it got better. Once I learned a routine and what works for my students, it took a load off me.

Susan said,

I can differentiate my instruction during small groups. I form those small groups based on the data I get from our diagnostic and benchmark assessments. The activities within those small groups are based on my students' learning deficits, or I give challenging activities for them. It takes a lot of time to prepare for each group, but I believe that having students grouped according to their needs will help them become better readers.

According to John, his experiences with differentiation have made him a better teacher, and he can see how this approach is benefiting his students. Also, he believes it takes time to plan and prepare for DI but the more experience you have with implementation, the better you become.

John also said that having the opportunity to observe his peers implementing DI was beneficial to him because he learned some new strategies that he could try with his third-grade students.

Michelle also discussed the importance of implementing DI with fidelity. She said, "the only way DI will benefit our students is if we put in time for planning and use the resources that are already provided for us". Most curriculums provide resources and strategies to use for DI. According to Monica, her school uses the I-Ready reading curriculum. She said, "I-Ready provides us with additional resources for students performing below, on, and above grade level". She went on to say that this curriculum also provides resources for students who are performing 1 or more grades below third grade.

**Theme 3: Pros and Cons of DI.** The pros and cons of DI were discussed during the interviews. The benefits and challenges of DI implementation appeared 51 times in the data, and the six categories in this theme emerged based on participants' responses. Table 8 presents the categories related to peer observations and feedback.

**Table 8**

*Categories Related to Pros and Cons of DI*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Time consuming	15
Teaching with fidelity	12
Students below grade level	9
Lesson planning	6
Student engagement	5
Small group instruction	4

The most frequent reference in the data related to DI being too time consuming. The participants felt that for DI to be implemented with fidelity, teachers had to be thorough when planning their lessons. Monica shared that it takes her several hours to plan for differentiation.

She stated, "Since I have so many different ability levels in my classroom, it takes a long time to find resources and strategies to use to address all of my students' needs."

Beth said, "You definitely have to be prepared and have the materials you need prior to starting your small groups." She continued to say, "Planning for whole group instruction is easier and takes less time than small groups because you only have to plan for grade level material and not a lot of different levels." Lisa said, "I have to prepare folders for each small group and put materials that are on the level that group of students is on." She added that she must stay late after school every day to prepare for the differentiated lessons in advance.

The study's next, most frequent reference related to pros and cons of DI was informal, teaching DI with fidelity (12). Participants shared that for DI to be effective, it must be taught with fidelity. Beth shared that some teachers "put on a dog and pony show when their principals come in to evaluate them". Since teachers are scored for their implementation of DI on the TKES Evaluation Tool, they want to receive a high score based on what their administrators see when they are in their classroom. Beth said, "Some teachers do not use DI with their students until someone is watching them."

According to Carol, teaching with fidelity means teachers consistently providing best instructional practices to their students based on what they need. She said, "It doesn't matter if they are reading two grade levels below or three grade levels above, they still need DI to meet their deficits or to challenge those higher performing students." Carol also said, "I meet my students where they are. I'm building on their ability levels and what they know. I'm also looking at pedagogy to make sure that I'm giving them the right academic strategies to use based on what their individual needs are."

Some participants also added that a con for DI is that the GMAS is a standardized test in which students are expected to perform on grade level; it is not differentiated based on the needs or abilities of students. Their third-grade students are not given the opportunity to test on their level, but the expectation is for them to master the third grade Georgia Standards of Excellence. Jessica said, "It would cost a lot of money to design the GMAS based on each individual student's ability level. It is more cost effective to provide all third-grade students with a test that is on one particular grade level." Michelle stated, "When we differentiate, we teach our students based on their ability levels and interests all school year long and then we place a test in front of them that only covers third grade information."

However, a benefit to implementing DI is that student engagement levels are higher than when they are participating in whole group instruction, which is information on their grade level. Students tend to shut down if the material is too difficult or too easy for them. With DI, they are more engaged because the activities are on their ability level. John said, "When we are teaching above their heads or on a level lower than theirs, they either get bored because it is too simple, or they get frustrated because they do not understand."

During the interviews, the participants were transparent and openly discussed the benefits and challenges of DI. Their responses were based on their experiences with and knowledge of DI implementation. They also provided insight into what works about DI and some challenges they have faced, and other teachers may face with DI.

**Theme 4: Professional Development and Training with DI.** Professional Development and Training with DI appeared in the data 40 times. Table 9 presents the theme's four categories based on frequency.

**Table 9**

*Categories Related to Professional Development and Training with DI*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
District/school level training	15
Ongoing training	12
PLC's	7
Evaluations and Observations	6

The participants described the types of professional development and training they have received to implement DI. The top two categories were district/school level training (15) and ongoing training (12). Teachers discussed how the training they received has prepared them to differentiate instruction. According to the participants, the training they received has provided them with a variety of instructional strategies and best practices for DI. The two remaining categories were PLC's (7) and small group instruction (6).

The participants discussed the school district and school level training provided by their school district and school. Carol stated, "I have had training from my school district on implementing DI and small group instruction. It is important and needed for student success".

Susan said,

My school district sent me to a conference last year presented by GaDOE and one of the sessions was focused on creating centers for DI. In that session, we were able to do some activities and take them back to our kids to use in our classrooms. It was a great session because we also had an opportunity to talk with other educators about strategies they have used in their classroom, to differentiate instruction. The opportunity to share DI strategies with other educators was extremely beneficial for me and helped me to improve my instruction. I got so many great ideas and strategies for differentiating my

instruction from them. It also helped me to reflect on how I implement DI in my class and how I can face the challenges I have had.

John shared, "My principal invited in a Professional Learning Specialist from an Educational Service Agency located in central Georgia to present on DI. The facilitator thoroughly explained what DI is, how to use it with fidelity, and how to use our data to inform our DI practices. It was a great session and I learned a lot about DI."

Monica discussed how her Instructional Coach in her school has weekly professional learning sessions with each grade level; these sessions are ongoing throughout the school year. She also said that several of the sessions have focused on DI, and they also get an opportunity to visit other teachers' classrooms, within their building, to observe DI in their class and to provide feedback to their peers. Monica feels these visits are beneficial to both her and her fellow teachers because they get to see what others are doing and provide/receive feedback from them regarding DI implementation.

Jennifer shared that her administrators evaluate her DI instructional practices by using the Teacher Keys Effective System (TKES). This evaluation tool was created by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE, 2016). Standard 4 of this evaluation tool is DI (see Appendix G). According to GaDOE, teachers are evaluated on whether "the teacher challenges and supports each student's learning by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences." (2016). In addition to rating teachers' implementation of DI, principals provide their teachers with feedback on what they did well and some areas for improvement. Jennifer feels that this process is beneficial to her because she is given feedback on ways to improve her craft as an educator and "implementing DI better" will help her students

improve and be successful. She stated that "some teachers hate being observed" but she looks at it as being an additional tool to help her grow as a teacher.

James said that the training he has received reminded him of why it is important to "personalize the learning and meet the needs of each learner." He has also learned about the importance of giving ongoing assessments to monitor the progress of each student and to use the data he collects to create individualized lessons.

***Research Question 2: What are third grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of DI in impacting reading achievement and preparing students for the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment?***

RQ2 of this study sought insight into how third grade teachers perceive the effectiveness of DI in increasing students' reading achievement and preparing students for the Georgia Milestones Assessment. Two themes emerged from the data to address the perceived effectiveness of DI in these third-grade classrooms in the school district of this study. The themes derived from RQ2 and the frequency of each appear in Table 10.

**Table 10**  
*Themes Related to Perceived Effectiveness of DI*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Reading Achievement	15
GMAS	12

**Theme 5: Reading Achievement.** The participants referenced the effectiveness of DI on reading achievement 27 times. Based on the data derived from the interviews, 80% of participants believed that DI has a positive impact on achievement (see Chart 1). They also discussed how reading achievement is influenced by teaching comprehension skills, building students' reading stamina, and grade level reading standards mastery. Gaining a better

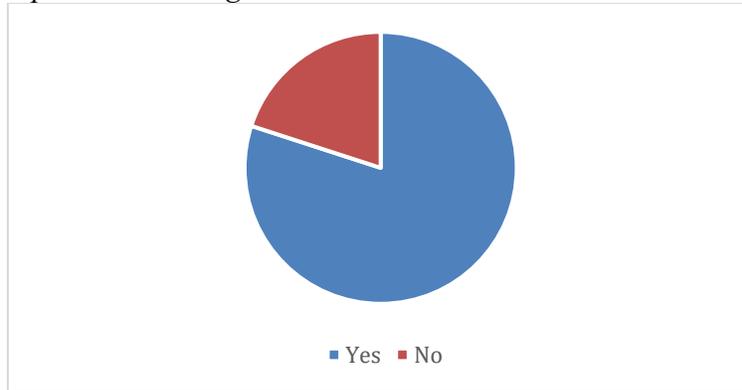
understanding of what the participants perceived as the impact of DI on reading achievement consisted of asking the following questions:

**Interview Question #8:** What are your perceptions of the impact of DI on third grade students' performance and achievement in reading?

**Interview Question #9:** What indicators led you to believe that DI has an impact on 3<sup>rd</sup> graders' reading achievement?

**Figure 6**

*Perceptions of the Impact on Reading Achievement*



The four categories with frequencies for theme five are presented in Table 11.

**Table 11**

*Categories Related to DI Impact on Reading Achievement*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Comprehension skills	16
Building stamina	13
Mastering reading standards	12
Closing learning gaps	10
Fundamental skills	5

The categories with the highest frequency were comprehension skills (16), building stamina (13), and mastering reading standards (12). The participants discussed how DI supports students in increasing their reading comprehension skills by meeting them where they are and

providing them with individualized instruction while providing strategies to move them towards where they need to be. Nicole said, "I think that DI impacts student learning because all my students are working on third grade level reading content and standards, but I am giving them reading passages that are on their ability level." My goal is to scaffold their learning and build them up to third grade level standards because that is what they will have on the Milestones test." Jessica stated, "Differentiating my reading instruction in reading was challenging at first, but after working with them and watching them grow to get to their levels, they became more confident in reaching third grade level." I believe the confidence gained through DI will increase my students' reading level."

John said he feels that his students are making progress towards meeting their reading grade level goal. He stated, "I am using DI to build my students' reading stamina. The passages on this test are very long and by starting my students off with shorter passages and gradually increasing the length of them will make them more comfortable with the longer passages on the actual test." James responded, "I do believe that DI has an impact on students' reading achievement. DI increases my students' comprehension skills and those basic skills they will need to be successful in the next grade level."

However, some participants do not believe that DI significantly impacts reading achievement. Beth said,

We are constantly meeting students where they are, and we are not helping those students who are extremely low because that is so far from where they are supposed to be. I feel like we are not really setting them up to succeed at the level they are supposed to be at because they are so used to us just meeting them at their level and they get stuck at that low level. They are supposed to be performing at third grade reading level, but I feel that

meeting them where they are hinders them from where they are supposed to be. So, I do not believe that DI is making an impact on those students who are so far behind that it is hard for them to catch up. I also do not see my low-performing students making the gains they need to be proficient in reading at third grade level.

Carol said that not all teachers implement DI with fidelity. So, students are not experiencing gains in reading because some teachers are not effectively providing remediation for those struggling readers and enrichment for those higher performing students. Carol also feels that some teachers are just using DI when someone comes in to evaluate their differentiated instructional practices. She said that some teachers will put on a "dog and pony show" for their administrators and when they leave, they are not providing those individualized lessons to meet the needs of their students. Carol stated, "Our students will not experience any gains in reading if teachers are not giving them what they need to be successful." She said, "The only way DI will impact students' reading achievement and close those learning gaps is if teachers are doing it consistently and the correct way."

**Theme 6: GMAS.** Participant's perceptions of the impact of DI on the GMAS appeared in the data 29 times. Table 12 presents the theme's four categories based on frequency.

**Table 12**

*Categories Related to DI Impact on GMAS*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Differentiated test	11
Reading comprehension	8
Building stamina	7
Implementation with fidelity	3

The top three categories were differentiated test (11), reading comprehension (10), and building stamina. The study participants expressed their appreciation for feedback, but it was not always consistent or immediate. The participants discussed how the implementation of DI could

benefit their students on the GMAS. Monica stated, "I think that DI allows students to close learning gaps in achievement during the school year and will also show growth on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment."

Susan said,

Since this will be third grade students' first time taking the Georgia Milestones, it is important for them to know what to expect on the test and understand the rigor of the test. So, I think that DI will impact them in having the stamina to read the extended passages on the test and get used to the format of the test. When implementing DI, teachers provide students with shorter passages that correlate with their reading level and gradually increase the length of the passage and when it is time for them to take the milestones their reading stamina has increased, and they should be more confident in their reading.

Carol said, "My goal for my students is to use the strategies I showed them in my differentiated small groups. Hopefully, if they use some of those strategies on the milestones, they will do well on the test." James shared that DI allows him to bring his students, who are performing below grade level up to third grade level. He also said that DI addresses the learning deficits that his students have and supports them with the foundational reading skills they may be lacking. James continued by saying, "DI helps me reach my students where they are and prepares them for third grade standards mastery. I do believe that DI works and what I teach in class will help them on the Milestones test."

The participants also shared that for DI to make an impact on the GMAS, teachers must implement it effectively and with fidelity in their classrooms. According to GaDOE (2016, p.1), teachers who effectively implement DI in their classrooms "know and

understand their students as individuals in terms of their abilities, achievement, learning styles, and needs and give greater emphasis to individualization in their teaching." To implement DI with fidelity also includes "careful monitoring and assessment of student progress, as well as proper management of activities and behavior in the classroom" (GaDOE, 2016). Beth shared that effective teachers must "meet students where they are but teach the standards and be consistent in your teaching practices."

The participants also shared that they are concerned because teachers differentiate instruction in their classrooms according to their students' ability levels and interests, but the GMAS is on third grade level and is not differentiated. Monica said, "We are differentiating so much in the classroom, but the milestones are not differentiated. I believe it isn't differentiated because it is more cost effective to give the test on one grade level instead of their individual performance or ability levels."

### **Document Analysis Findings**

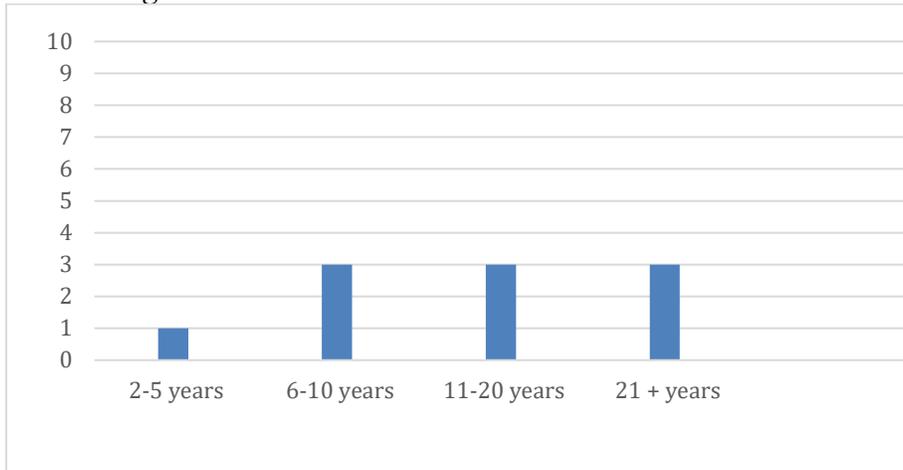
Document analysis occurred to answer the research question on third grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the implementation of DI with their students. Analyzing the documents submitted by the participants provided insight into third grade teachers' perceptions of DI. The document analysis included the Teaching Experience Questionnaire, Self - Assessment Checklist for DI, and one lesson plan.

The Teaching Experience Questionnaire (see Appendix E) was analyzed by reviewing the participants' responses about their experiences and the data was displayed based on their range of years teaching (see Figure 2), range of years teaching in the district of this study (see Figure 3), number of years teaching third grade reading (see Figure 4), and their experiences with DI

training (see Figure 5). Also, the range of years that participants had experience administering the GMAS was between two and seven.

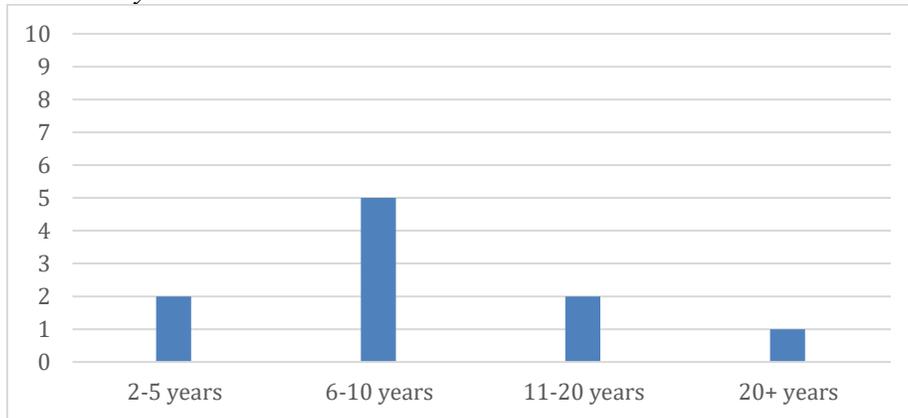
**Figure 7**

*Range of Years Teaching*



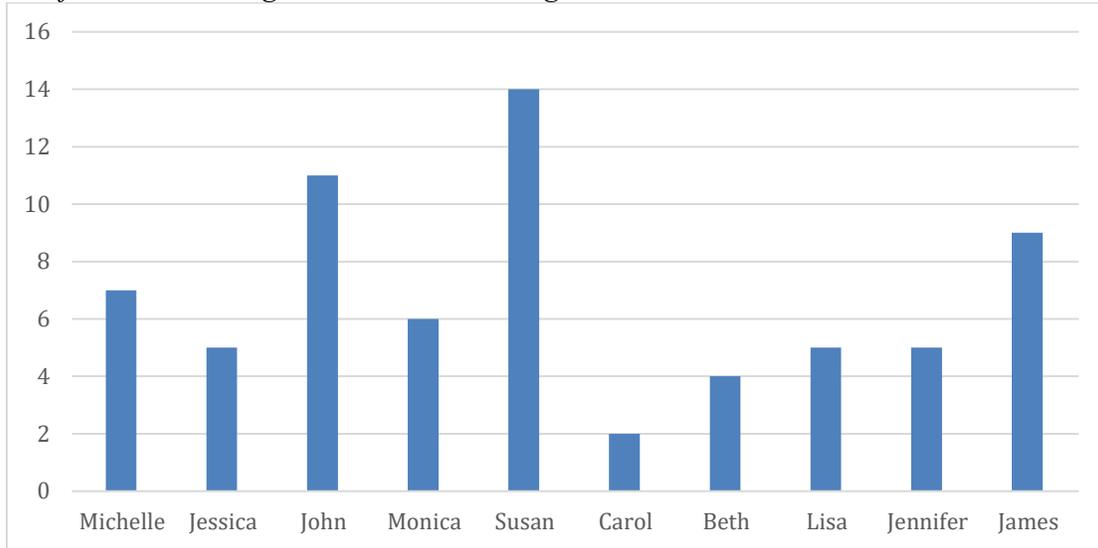
**Figure 8**

*Range of Years in Study District*



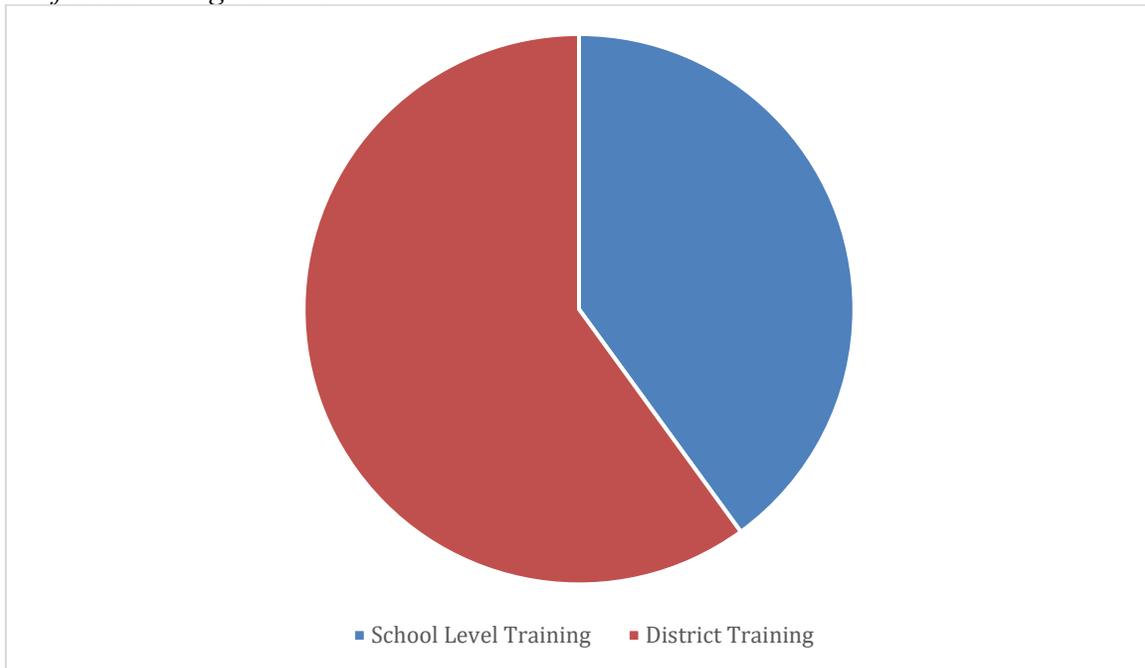
**Figure 9**

*Number of Years Teaching Third Grade Reading*



**Figure 10**

*Types of DI Training Received*

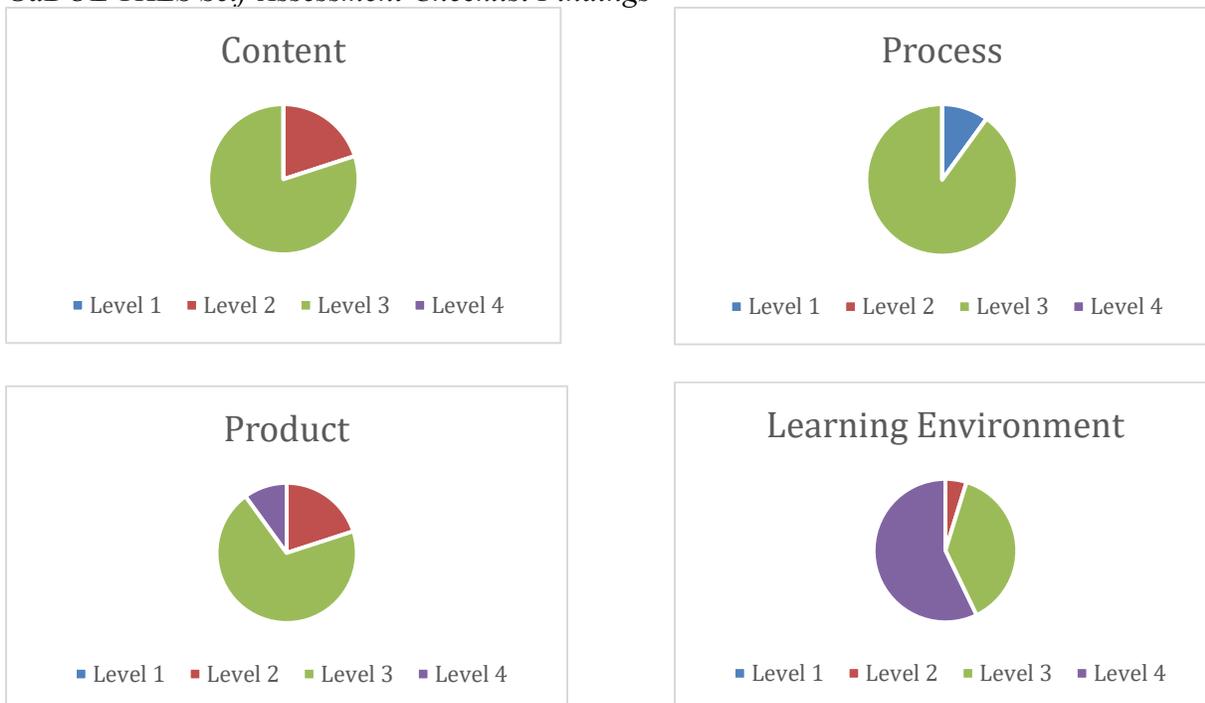


Teachers used the GaDOE TKES Self-Assessment Checklist (2016) to assess their own performance for Standard 4: Differentiated Instruction (see Appendix H).

The data shows that 80 % of the participants rated themselves a Level III for Differentiated Content. The remaining 20% of participants rated themselves a Level II and shared that this section was an area of improvement for them. For the Differentiating Process, 90% rated themselves as Level III and the remaining 10% was Level 1. This participant felt like he needed to increase his mental base of examples and enrichment ideas to provide personalized scaffold. In the area of Differentiating Product, 10% scored themselves a Level 4, 70% were Level 3, and 20% were level 2. Then participants self-assessed their Learning Environment. Most of the participants (80%) had a Level 3 rating, 10% rated themselves at Level 4, and 10% scored a Level 2. These findings indicate that teachers could identify their strengths and weaknesses in DI implementation. This checklist provides insightful data for how teachers reflect and view their instructional practices for DI. Chart 7 shows the data for these findings.

**Figure 11**

*GaDOE TKES Self-Assessment Checklist Findings*



Document Analysis also occurred when teachers submitted one of their lesson plans. A Differentiated Lesson Plan Rubric, developed by I-Rubric, was used to evaluate, and score the lesson plan and differentiated instruction included in their lesson planning (see Appendix G). The categories that the lesson plan was evaluated on were Evidence of Differentiation, Learning Plan/Activities, Organization, and Assessment and the 3 possible ratings were: Exceeds Expectations, Adequate, and Needs Revision.

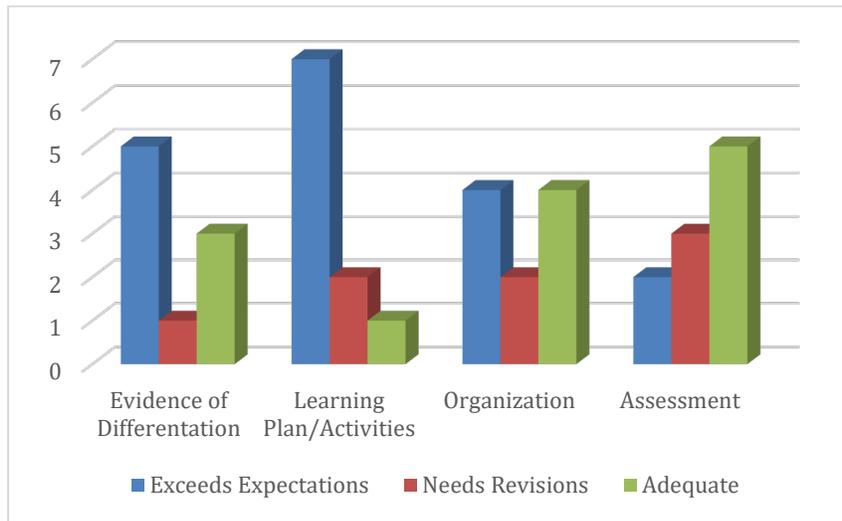
Participants were rated in the Evidence of Differentiation section based on their inclusion of various forms of differentiation based on the knowledge of their students' academic readiness, differentiated leveled or tiered activities, and corresponding activities that support the full range of learners in their classroom. In the Learning Plan/Activities category, participants were evaluated according to the variety of learning activities within the lesson and if those activities A varied way will engage and accommodate the differing interests, styles, and abilities of all their learners. In the Organization section of the rubric, teachers were evaluated on the lesson plan including a wide range of assessments to support differentiation and making ongoing adjustments to match students' learning needs, and including opportunities for students

Participants were rated in the Evidence of Differentiation section based on their inclusion of various forms of differentiation based on the knowledge of their students' academic readiness, differentiated leveled or tiered activities, and corresponding activities that support the full range of learners in their classroom. In the Learning Plan/Activities category, participants were evaluated according to the variety of learning activities within the lesson and if those activities are varied in a manner that will engage and accommodate the differing interests, styles, and abilities of all their learners. In the Organization section of the rubric, teachers were evaluated on the lesson plan including a wide range of assessments to support differentiation and making

ongoing adjustments to match students' learning needs and including opportunities for students to self-assess their own learning. After receiving and scoring the lesson plans, the data was analyzed using a Differentiated Lesson Plan Rubric (see Appendix H). Chart 8 presents the data for these findings.

**Figure 12**

*DI Lesson Plan Rubric Data*



**Major Findings**

RQ1 focused on third grade teachers' descriptions of their experiences with and perceptions of DI implementation. The themes for RQ1 were teacher knowledge, teacher experiences, pros and cons of DI, and Professional Development and Training with DI. The theme of teacher knowledge showed that the teachers felt that for them to effectively implement DI, they must know how it should be used to meet the needs of each of their students. The category with the greatest frequency related to teacher knowledge was meeting individual needs (20). Teachers shared that knowledge of each student's needs and strategies to provide differentiation is beneficial to students having a positive outcome in their reading achievement

and on the GMAS. The other categories were instructional practices (13), assessments (11), ability level (9), and interest level (6).

The participants described DI as meeting students on their individual ability level and using research-based instructional practices and strategies to support them and build them up to third grade reading level. Teachers also discussed using data from their diagnostic and formative assessments to determine where their students are. Furthermore, these assessments inform teachers of their students' ability level and help them to identify learning gaps that exist in their classrooms. The participants also discussed the types of training they received for DI implementation. Ninety percent described their training as being provided in house, during Professional Learning sessions, by their Academic Coach or their administrators invited an outside consultant from an educational service agency. Sixty percent shared that they were trained by their school district; these trainings were facilitated by instructional leaders within their district such as District Coaches or Content Area Specialists. There was an overlap in data because 50% of the participants received both types of training.

The participants shared that these trainings provide them with increased knowledge of differentiated instructional strategies to use with their diverse group of learners and supports them in implementing DI with fidelity. Teachers felt these training courses equipped them with knowledge and the tools they need to improve students' reading abilities and to increase student achievement.

In addition to discussing their training for DI, participants also discussed their experiences with DI within their classrooms. Beth stated, "I learned to improve my instructional practices in differentiating instruction through trial and error. If a strategy I used did not work for my students, I find another strategy to use. To me, it is all about getting better to benefit my

kids." Jessica said she frequently asks her Academic Coach to observe her small groups and provide her with feedback on how the activities went and suggestions for improvement. James said, "One time my principal came in to evaluate me for DI on TKES, she scored me low." I was upset at first but after I talked with her, she told me what I needed to do better, and I used her feedback. The next time she came in, I scored higher than the last visit." Carol said, "My experiences with DI have been positive. I can see growth in my students and some gaps in learning have been closed. why I believe that DI does work."

Participants also completed a Teaching Experience Questionnaire to give insight into their teaching experiences. Teachers responded to questions about how many years they have taught, grade levels, years in the study district, years teaching third grade, years teaching reading, type of training received for DI, and many times they have administered the GMAS. The data revealed that 90% of the participants have taught more than 6 years and 10% have taught 2-5 years. They also showed that 50% of the teachers have taught in the district of this study for 6-10 years and 10% (1 participant) has taught in this district for over 20 years. As far as the number of years teaching third grade reading, Susan has the greatest number of years (14) and Carol has the least number of years (2). Again, 90% received DI training from their school and 60% were trained by their school district.

Teachers also had to complete a Self-Assessment Checklist for their DI Implementation. The participants had to assess themselves on the implementation of DI according to content, process, product, and learning environment. There were four levels included; they were levels 1-4 with 4 as exceeding and 1 as the lowest level. For Content, Process, and Product, most participants rated themselves as Level 3. However, for learning environment most participants rated themselves as Level 4. This data was important in viewing how teachers perceived their

experiences and teaching practices with the implementation of DI. The participants also submitted a lesson plan. That plan was evaluated using an I-Ready Rubric (see Appendix G).

RQ2 focused on teachers' perceptions of DI's effectiveness in impacting student achievement in reading and preparing students for the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. Most participants perceived DI as effective in supporting their students with their reading deficits. According to Baumgartner et., al. (2003), the reading skills of elementary students who participated in a reading program that included DI improved in comparison to the reading skills of students who did not receive DI. John said that by using DI he can meet his students where they are based on their ability levels and help them master third-grade standards. He also discussed how some of his students were on 1<sup>st</sup> grade level at the beginning of the year but as he has monitored their progress throughout the year, many of them are now performing closer to third grade level so he is hopeful they will be successful on the GMAS. Monica shared how her students' confidence level in their reading abilities have increased and she attributes this to DI. The impact of DI on students' reading achievement emerged 15 times in the data. The categories that emerged based on the impact of DI on student achievement were comprehension skills (16), building stamina (13), mastering reading standards (12), closing learning gaps (10), and fundamental skills (5). Many of the participants shared that using DI to teach comprehension skills was important in improving students' reading achievement. Lisa said, "I scaffold my students' reading instruction. If their reading comprehension skills are 2 grade levels below, I choose reading passages on that level and I gradually increase the length of the passage and the level of questioning on the passages. My goal in doing that is to build my students' stamina to read and comprehend passages that are written on third grade level." Susan believed that the reading passages that students will encounter on the GMAS are "somewhat lengthy" and if those

passages are too much for them to handle, then they will become frustrated and shut down. She said that is why differentiating her instruction and providing her students with strategies to support them in reading comprehension will improve her students' outcomes on the GMAS. Carol said, "In order to close the learning gaps of my students, I must give them instruction that will meet them where they build upon those foundational skills that have to be in place before moving them to the level of mastering third grade standards."

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the participants' perceptions of DI implementation in grade 3 and its impact on reading achievement and the GMAS in a school district in central Georgia. The findings emerged from the data triangulation of individual interviews, document analysis of a DI Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist, and document analysis of a lesson plan. Themes emerged from the data analysis, organized by research questions, and were displayed in frequency tables.

## **Chapter V: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore third grade teachers' perceptions of and their perceived effectiveness of DI. According to Tomlinson (2000), differentiation means tailoring instruction to meet the individual needs of students. Teachers differentiate instruction through content, process, products, or by the learning environment by using ongoing assessments and flexible grouping (Tomlinson, 2000).

Chapter I discussed the definition of DI, the background of the problem, the statement of the problem, the purpose of this study, the research questions, and the Conceptual Framework. Also, an overview of the methodology, the limitations and delimitations, and the significance of the study was presented in Chapter I. There is a gap in the research on how DI impacts students' reading achievement in third grade. This grade level was selected as the focus for this study because students must pass the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment to be promoted to the next grade level. Although limited literature has focused on third grade teachers' experiences with and perceived effectiveness of DI, many scholars have studied DI implementation. DI's effectiveness in impacting third grade students' reading achievement on the GMAS has received little empirical attention. However, there is much empirical literature on the impact of DI on student achievement in grade levels other than third grade.

Chapter II provided an overview of DI and its purpose and implementation in districts and schools for students' reading achievement. This chapter included two domains. The first domain focused on the importance of and the historical perspective and novel approach to teaching reading. This domain also discussed the framework and further research on DI as well as an overview of the Georgia Milestones Assessment and its role as the reading section being a promotional requirement for third grade students. The second domain addressed teachers'

perceptions of DI and the impact of DI on students' reading achievement and achievement on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. The chapter also presented literature on the implementation and impact of DI in classrooms, schools, and school districts across the nation.

Chapter III presented the methodology used in this qualitative, bounded case study. The chapter included the research design, setting, role of the researcher, researcher as an instrument, participants, and data collection and analysis. This chapter also addressed the data and document analysis procedures. The study included a purposive sample of 10 third grade teachers from a school district in central Georgia. The instruments included individual interviews and document analysis of a Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist of the participants DI teaching practices, and one lesson plan.

Chapter IV presented the research questions and themes. Open and focused coding occurred to code and analyze each data source. This chapter also provided an overview of each of the 10 participants in this study and presented the findings of their interviews with frequency tables and data charts, and participants' responses to the interview questions. RQ1 focused on the participants' experiences with and perceptions of their experiences with and perceptions of DI on third grade students' reading achievement and on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. RQ 1 focused on teachers' knowledge, professional development and training, and experiences with DI. The themes that addressed this research question were Teacher Knowledge of DI, Teachers' Professional Development and Training with DI, Teacher Experiences with DI, and the Pros and Cons of DI. RQ2 focused on teachers' perceptions of DI's effectiveness and impact on third grade students' reading achievement and performance on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. The themes that addressed this research question were Perceived Effectiveness of DI on Reading Achievement, and Perceived Effectiveness of DI. The themes emerged from the

data of this study, which focused on teachers' DI experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of DI.

### **Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings**

Data analysis consisted of triangulating the data from three sources: individual interviews and document analysis of a teacher self-assessment of their DI implementation practices, and a lesson plan created and submitted by each participant. Data collection occurred from 10 current third grade teachers who met the criteria of a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience and employment at an elementary school in a school district in central Georgia during the 2022-2023 academic year. The interviews included 12 questions pertaining to teachers' experiences with and perceptions of DI. Otter.ai was the real-time transcription program used to record and transcribe audio from interviews. The research questions were aligned with the Interview Questions.

Document analysis occurred with a Teacher Self-Assessment of their DI teaching practices and an evaluation, using a rubric, of their DI implementation, based on a submitted lesson. After open coding occurred for each data source, focused coding involved narrowing down the categories developed to better understand how the teachers perceived DI. Six themes emerged regarding how the participants their experiences with and perceptions of the impact of DI on third grade students' reading achievement and on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment from the following research questions:

RQ1: What are third grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the implementation of DI with their students?

RQ2: What are third grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing DI to increase reading achievement and prepare students for the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment.

## **Implications of the Study**

The purpose of DI is to give students choice and flexibility in how they learn and helps teachers personalize learning to meet the various needs of all the diverse learners and learning styles and ability levels in their classroom (Tomlinson, 2001). The significance of this study was to increase awareness of third grade teachers' perceptions of the impact of DI on students' reading achievement and on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. This study included the experiences of current third grade teachers in a central Georgia school district. The participants' insights and experiences with DI contributed to the limited research on how DI contributes to third grade students' achievement in reading and on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. There are three recommendations for school administrators to consider making DI more effective for third grade students' reading achievement and performance on the GMAS.

The third-grade teachers in this study reflected on their experiences with DI and the GMAS. There is a need to understand teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the impact of DI because their beliefs influence their DI instructional practices and will impact their classroom instruction and their students' outcomes on the GMAS. Therefore, administrators can gain a better understanding of the correlation of their teachers' perceptions and beliefs about DI and their actions and teaching practices, as it relates to third grade students' reading achievement and performance on the GMAS and its alignment with the district and school goals.

Implications in this study included the need to solicit teachers' insight on DI and to reflect on their DI practices. School leaders could use this study's findings to better understand how teachers' perceptions of DI impact their instructional practices and their students' outcomes on the GMAS. Teachers, administrators, and politicians in Georgia could find the study useful

because third grade students in Georgia are required to pass the GMAS in reading and the implementation of DI impacts the pass rate for students, schools, and school districts. This study could provide district and state authorities with an understanding of DI and its significance in third grade students' performance and achievement. The findings could indicate how to provide effective training on DI implementation that could increase students' performance outcomes on the GMAS and increase the pass rate of third grade students in this district. Finally, teachers could benefit from this study's findings on the role of DI implementation in impacting student achievement in reading and on the GMAS.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The study focused on third grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of DI at a school district in central Georgia. Purposive sampling occurred to select participants who had a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience and currently taught third grade in a school district in central Georgia. A limitation of the current study is only using the teachers' perceptions of DI with third grade students. Additional limitations are:

- The lack of participants' transparency and honesty in their interview responses because of their fear of confidentiality being maintained.
- Teachers' personal bias could have been a limitation in the interviews.
- Participants' personal bias could have been limited when they assessed their own DI teaching practices and from the lesson plan they chose to submit for evaluation.
- Fewer years of teaching and using DI could be a limitation.
- Another limitation could be the participants' ability and skills in effectively implementing DI.

- A limitation was the type and level of training participants received for DI implementation.
- A limitation was the lack of diversity among teachers.
- Another limitation could be the selected school's administrators approving the study to be conducted at their school.

The study was delimited to third grade, general education teachers, who were currently employed, full time, at the public schools participating in this research. It was also delimited to teachers who have been in education for at least 2 years. Additional delimitations were:

- The research in this study was delimited because it only focused on one school district in central Georgia.
- Another delimitation was that the focus was only on the impact of DI and the reading achievement of third grade students.
- Since there were over 20 schools in this district, the researcher decided not to open the study to all the schools but selected 9 schools that were in a variety of school settings within the school district.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

DI is beneficial for closing learning gaps and impacting students' reading achievement, if implemented effectively. Although research has focused on DI implementation, few studies have addressed third grade, general education teachers' perceptions of how DI impacts students' reading achievement and their performance on the GMAS. Future studies could focus on the following:

- This study included a purposeful sample of teachers in schools in a school district in central Georgia. Similar studies in other school districts in various parts of Georgia, such

as south or north Georgia, could contribute to the knowledge base and provide insight into teachers' perceptions of DI and its impact on reading achievement.

- Teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the effectiveness of DI in impacting student achievement in private and charter schools remains understudied. A similar study in these types of schools contributes to the research.
- Future scholars could extend their study to include resource/support teachers, such as the Program for Exceptional Students (PEC), gifted, art, physical education, music, and second language. Future studies with these support groups could provide insight into how teachers view DI implementation in their areas of instruction.
- Scholars could conduct this study in districts with varying demographics across the state.
- Researchers could repeat this study in the same district in 5 years to see if teachers' perceptions have changed.
- Future research could be done on third grade students' outcomes on the GMAS. The pass rate on the third grade GMAS could be used to determine the effectiveness of DI.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

- Understanding what it means and what it looks like to implement DI with fidelity remains misinterpreted among educators. There is a disconnect between understanding and putting DI into practice as intended. District leaders and all school staff should receive ongoing and yearly professional development for effective implementation of DI.
- School administrators should provide teachers with opportunities to visit other classrooms to observe various strategies for implementing DI. This will expand their knowledge and they can place any additional DI teaching practices in their DI tool kit. As

administrators provide teachers with feedback about their use of DI, teachers could also provide their peers with feedback on their DI implementation.

- Teachers should have days to meet with their peers to analyze the data they receive from students' formative, diagnosis, and benchmark assessments. During these meetings, they should also share DI strategies they use and have worked for their students.

### **Dissemination**

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore how third grade teachers at a school district in central Georgia perceived their experiences with and perceptions of the effectiveness of DI in impacting reading achievement and preparing their students to take the Georgia Milestones reading assessment. This study addressed a gap in literature related to the implementation of DI and the promotional requirement for third grade students to pass the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. This research also bridged the gap in the literature on DI by giving teachers a voice to describe their experiences and perceived effectiveness of DI. This study has the potential to positively impact teachers' DI instructional practices and student achievement on the GMAS. Educational leaders could use this study's results to make decisions about the type of professional development opportunities teachers need to effectively implement DI. A final copy of the findings will be provided to the school district's Department of Research, Evaluation, Assessment, and Accountability. The study will also be available in the Columbus State University's library, and I intend to publish this study in peer-reviewed journals.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore how third grade teachers in schools in a central Georgia school district described their experiences and perceived the DI's impact on reading achievement and on the GMAS. This study also gave the participants the

opportunity to reflect on their teaching practices during the use of DI. In Georgia, teachers expected to differentiate their instruction and are evaluated on their DI implementation with the TKES evaluation tool. Effective implementation of DI is based on the training and professional development that teachers have received and their experiences with implementing DI in their classroom. This study had two research questions focused on teachers' perceptions of DI and its impact on reading achievement in the classroom and on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment. The findings provided insight into how teachers perceive and implement DI and how teachers can better support their students' reading efforts by implementing DI with their third-grade students. This is beneficial to the school district because teachers' implementation of DI could yield more positive outcomes on students' performance on the GMAS and could increase the rate of third grade students who meet the promotional requirement of passing the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment.

This study has implications and recommendations for school leaders and teachers to improve implementation of DI. The findings showed that many teachers valued sharing their experiences with and perceptions of DI. This study gave them a chance to reflect on their teaching practices to improve them, close learning gaps, and support their students in passing the milestones.

This study showed the value and importance of teachers' perceptions of DI and its impact on students' achievement. When implemented effectively, DI contributes to student achievement and teacher effectiveness. The study showed that the participants valued DI and felt that when implemented with fidelity, students will experience growth in their reading abilities.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The participants shared their perceptions of DI based on their experiences. The participants discussed their DI instructional practices. The Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist gave teachers any opportunity to reflect on their instructional practices and provided valuable data that aligned with the participants' interview responses. Evaluation of the lesson plan was beneficial in identifying the strategies and activities that teachers use for differentiation.

Most of the participants perceived DI as beneficial to their students' reading abilities and for preparing them for the GMAS. Some teachers discussed the importance of implementing DI with fidelity. They felt that when DI is implemented effectively, it positively impacts students. This research suggests that DI is a way to positively impact reading achievement for third grade students and impacts student achievement on the GMAS.

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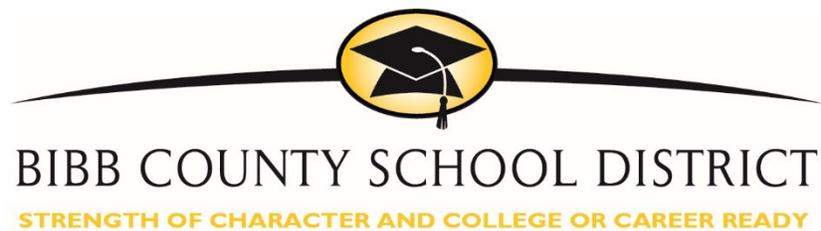
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## Appendices

*Appendix A*

**Approval to Conduct Study**



January 3, 2023

Dear Mrs. Letasha Pope,

The Research Review Committee recently met to review your request for research. Based on the information you submitted, we have ***approved*** your request. We have reached out to the schools you expressed interest in, and **all have agreed to participate except Union Elementary and Vineville Elementary. Please do not include these schools in your research.** Please note that approval by the district signifies that the requestor has been cleared to contact schools to invite school administrators/teachers/students/parents to participate in the research study. The researcher must make it clear to the individuals selected for the study that their participation is voluntary. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact my Administrative Assistant, Lakisha Coon at 478-765-8600.

Dara Foy

Director

Research, Evaluation, Assessment, and Accountability

*Appendix B*

**Columbus State IRB Approval**

Institutional Review Board  
Columbus State University

Date: 2/8/2023

Protocol Number: 23-026

Protocol Title: Teachers' Perceptions of Implementing Differentiated Instruction with  
Grade 3 Students in a Central Georgia Public School District

Principal Investigator: Letasha Pope

Co-Principal Investigator: Jennifer Lovelace

Dear Letasha Pope:

The Columbus State University Institutional Review Board or representative(s) has reviewed your research proposal identified above. It has been determined that the project is classified as exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations and has been approved. You may begin your research project immediately.

Please note any changes to the protocol must be submitted, using a Project Modification form, to the IRB before implementing the change(s). Any adverse events, unexpected problems, and/or incidents that involve risks to participants and/or others must be reported to the Institutional Review Board at [irb@columbusstate.edu](mailto:irb@columbusstate.edu) or (706) 507-8634.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact the IRB.

Sincerely,

Sammy Kanso, Graduate Assistant

*Appendix C*

**Request to School Principals for Consent to Conduct Study**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ (School Principal),

I am Letasha Pope, a doctoral student in the Department of Teacher Education, Leadership and Counseling at Columbus State University. My supervising faculty is Dr. Jennifer Lovelace. I will be conducting a qualitative research study about grade 3 teachers' perceptions of implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI).

The following research questions will be used to guide this research:

What are third grade teachers' experiences with and perceptions of the implementation of DI with their students?

What are third grade teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing DI to increase reading achievement and prepare students for the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment?

Columbus State University will ensure that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulation guidelines.

I am requesting permission to email general grade 3 educators at your school and conduct semi-structured interviews, virtual and after school hours. I am also requesting these teachers provide a copy of a Reading lesson plan, a Teaching Experience Questionnaire, and a Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist of their instructional practices in the implementation of DI. Teachers selected to participate in this study should have knowledge, training, and experience in implementing DI. Teachers who meet the criteria will be invited to participate via email. A mutually agreed upon date and time will be scheduled to conduct separate virtual interviews; each interview will last 30-45 minutes during September and October. I will transcribe the interviews and teachers will participate in member checking by reviewing the transcript and interview notes for accuracy.

The researcher will ensure:

1. Participants will have access to the interview protocol and informed consent form prior to the interview and will be made aware of the right to withdraw permission to participate in the study at any point.
2. Identifying information about the district will be kept confidential and personal information will be omitted from the dissertation. Teachers' names will not be disclosed as a pseudonym will be used to prevent any identifying factors.

3. Information will be used exclusively for the purpose of completing the dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education which is submitted to the faculty of Columbus State University
4. Students will not be used as participants in the current study.

If you are willing to allow me to conduct my study at your school, please reply to me via email. Also, please tell me if you have any questions about this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Letasha Pope  
Doctoral Student, Columbus State University  
Academic Coach  
Twiggs County School District  
Jeffersonville, Georgia 31701

*Appendix D*

**Request for Educator Participation in Doctoral Study**

Dear Educator,

I am a Doctoral Student at Columbus State University in the Department of Teacher Education, Leadership and Counseling. I am examining teachers' perceptions of the implementation and the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction (DI) for elementary students in grade 3 at a Central Georgia School District.

To collect data for this study, I will conduct virtual, individual interview sessions. These interviews will occur after school hours and on a secure platform, Zoom, which is not affiliated with the school network. Each interview will last about 30-45 minutes and include questions to explore teachers' perceptions of the implementation and effectiveness of DI.

Participation in these interviews is completely voluntary and all participant responses will be coded and kept confidential. The interviews will be recorded using a digital device and all questions and responses will be transcribed. I will also ask that you submit one of a Reading lesson plan, a Teaching Experience Questionnaire, and a Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

The findings of this study will provide the elementary education field insights on the impact of the implementation and teachers' perceptions of DI on student performance on the Georgia Milestones ELA Assessment and reading for third grade students. If you decide to participate in this study, please complete the Informed Consent Form found in the link below. My deadline for conducting interviews will be Monday, October 3, 2022. If you agree to participate, please let me know a convenient date and time.

If you have any concerns or questions about this process, please contact me at (478)342-2152. Once I receive your signed Consent Form and interview availability date, I will contact you to schedule your virtual interview and to inform you on the process for submitting your lesson plan, Teaching Experience Questionnaire, and Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist. Thank you in advance for your participation in this research study!

Sincerely,

Letasha Pope  
Doctoral Student, Columbus State University  
Academic Coach  
Twiggs County School District  
Jeffersonville, Georgia

*Appendix E*

**Teaching Experience Questionnaire**

1. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
2. What grades/positions have you taught/held?
3. How many years have you been teaching in this school district?
4. How many years have you taught 3rd grade?
5. How many years have you taught reading? What are your teaching experiences with reading?
6. When and what type of professional development did you receive for implementing Differentiated Instruction?
7. How many times/years have you administered the Third Grade Georgia Milestones Assessment?

*Appendix F*

**Interview Protocol for Study**

**Script Prior to Interview:**

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the interview portion of this study. As previously mentioned, this study seeks to describe teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of the implementation of Differentiated Instruction for students in grades 3, in elementary schools in Central Georgia, particularly the Bibb County School District. Our interview today will last 30-45 minutes, and I will be asking you about your years of experience in education, your years working in the district involved in this study, your years teaching grade 3, and your experiences implementing Differentiated Instruction, particularly during reading instruction. Then, we will review the Informed Consent Form you signed prior to the interview indicating whether I have your permission to audio record our conversation; if not, I will also take notes during the interview. Also, you can let me know if at any point, you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said confidential. So, before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? If you have any additional questions at any point in this study, feel free to ask them at any time. I will now begin asking the interview questions:

## Interview Questions

Question No.	Interview Questions
1	How would you describe your teaching experience? How many years have you been teaching? In the district of this study? Third grade?
2	Tell me what you know about Differentiated Instruction.
3	Tell me about your professional development and training for implementing DI in your classroom.
4	Can you give specific examples of how you implement DI in your classroom?
5	What are your perceptions of your preparedness to properly implement DI?
6	What do you think are the pros (benefits) and cons (disadvantages) implementing Differentiated Instruction in classrooms? Explain.
7	How do you view teaching in a traditional (whole group) classroom setting vs. using the Differentiated Instruction Approach?

8	What are your perceptions of the impact of DI on third grade students' performance and academic achievement in reading?
9	What indicators led you to believe that DI has an impact on 3rd graders' reading achievement?
10	What are your perceptions of the impact of implementing DI on third grade students' performance and academic achievement on the Georgia Milestones Reading Assessment?
11	<p>What suggestions or observations could you provide regarding the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in elementary classrooms in other districts?</p> <p>(a) If you had the opportunity to select an instructional framework to use in your third-grade classroom, would you select DI? Why or why not?</p> <p>(b) What advice would you give new 3rd grade teachers in implementing DI? Is there anything else regarding your participation in DI that you would like to share?</p>
12	Do you have any other insights that would clarify teacher perceptions about the effectiveness of the implementation of the DI framework for students, in grade 3, in Georgia elementary schools?

## Appendix G

### *Differentiated Instruction Lesson Plan Rubric*

Differentiated Lesson Plan Teacher: Lesson:			
	Exceeds Expectations (N/A)	Adequate (N/A)	Needs Revision (N/A)
Evidence of Differentiation	<p style="text-align: center;">Exceeds Expectations</p> <p>The lesson has various forms of differentiation based on knowledge of students' academic readiness, includes differentiated leveled or tiered activities, and corresponding activities that support the full range of learners.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Adequate</p> <p>The lesson has some forms of differentiation based on students' academic readiness that support most of the learners.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Needs Revision</p> <p>The lesson does not have various forms of differentiation based on students' academic readiness and does not support full range of learners.</p>
Learning Plan/Activities	<p style="text-align: center;">Exceeds Expectations</p> <p>There are a variety of learning activities throughout the lesson. Activities are varied in a manner that will engage and accommodate the differing interests, styles, and abilities of all learners.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Adequate</p> <p>Learning activities have a moderate level of diversity throughout the lesson. Activities are varied in a manner that will engage and accommodate the differing interests, styles, and abilities of some learners.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Needs Revision</p> <p>Learning activities are limited in scope throughout the lesson. In turn, this hinders the ability for differentiating material, engaging all learners, and making appropriate accommodations for students.</p>
Organization	<p style="text-align: center;">Exceeds Expectations</p> <p>The lesson plan is extremely organized and is written in a way that can be easily followed. Includes all the essential elements of a lesson plan sequence.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Adequate</p> <p>The lesson is somewhat organized and is somewhat easy to follow. Includes most of the essential elements of a lesson plan sequence.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Needs Revision</p> <p>The lesson is disorganized and not easy to follow. Little to no essential elements of a lesson plan are included.</p>
Assessment	<p style="text-align: center;">Exceeds Expectations</p> <p>The lesson plan uses a wide range of assessments to support differentiation and makes ongoing adjustments to match students' learning needs. Includes opportunities for students to self-assess their own learning.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Adequate</p> <p>The lesson plan uses a few assessments to support differentiation and makes minimal adjustments to match students' learning needs. Includes opportunities for students to self-assess their own learning.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Needs Revision</p> <p>The lesson plan no assessments that support differentiation and makes no adjustments to match students' learning needs. Does not include opportunities for students to self-assess their own learning.</p>



Appendix H

**Georgia Department of Education  
Teacher Keys Effectiveness System**

<b>Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist</b>					
<b>Performance Standard 4: Differentiated Instruction</b>					
<b>Quality</b>		<b>Level IV</b>	<b>Level III</b>	<b>Level II</b>	<b>Level I</b>
<b>Differentiating Content</b>	Increase the breadth of learning materials to enhance student learning motivation.				
	Offer students choice regarding the complexity (depth) of content they want to start with so that they can experience academic success.				
	Offer multiple modes of learning for students to be exposed to the target content through their learning-style preferences (such as reading, listening, or doing).				
	Re-teach an idea or skill in small groups of struggling learners.				
	Extend and enrich the thinking or skills of advanced learners.				
<b>Differentiating Process</b>	Vary instructional strategies and activities for students.				
	Vary types of assignment to assess student learning.				
	Routinely combine instructional techniques that involve individual, small-group, and whole-class instruction.				
	Monitor and pace instruction based on the individual needs of students.				
	Draw on a mental database of examples, metaphors, and enrichment ideas to provide personalized scaffold.				
	Offer optimal amount of support/intervention and structure learning tasks to ensure the learning demand is appropriately challenging.				
<b>Differentiating Product</b>	Provide students with choices regarding the method to express required learning, such as presentation, portfolios, or formal tests.				
	Use rubrics that match and extend students' varied ability levels.				
	Encourage students to produce their own product assignment.				
	Allow students to work alone or in small groups on projects.				
<b>Learning Environment</b>	Create an environment in which student differences in ability, cultural background, academic needs and interest are respected and treated as assets.				
	Know and understand students as individuals in terms of ability, achievement, learning styles, and needs.				