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WHAT ARE STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF  
DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN A FOURTH GRADE INCLUSIVE  
CLASSROOM?

by  
Kellilyn E. Casey

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Science in Collaborative Teaching Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
July 3, 2008

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor

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## ABSTRACT

Kellilyn E. Casey

### WHAT ARE STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN A FOURTH GRADE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM?

Spring 2008

Dr. David Hespe

Master of Science in Collaborative Teaching

This qualitative teacher research study investigated the question: what are students' and teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in a fourth grade inclusive classroom? Data was collected in the forms of open-ended student interviews, open-ended teacher interviews, and through frequent entries in a teacher research journal. The study concluded that student opinions varied on an individual basis, but that most students liked it when their teachers used differentiated practices and would like it if they used even more. It also found that teachers held a high opinion of differentiated instruction and used it frequently as a means to meet the requirements of special education students' Individualized Education Plans and to meet the needs of the remaining and extremely diverse learners in their class. Implications for teaching and learning are discussed.

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## CHAPTER I Introduction

As children, most of us are told that we are special and unique. Our parents, and of course, all of our favorite childhood television characters, constantly remind us that we are one of a kind. From these young ages we are told that we can be whatever we want to be, we are encouraged to reach for the stars, and we are raised to believe in the beauty of the American dream, even though we may not know it. We teach our children to embrace what they like and who they are, that is, until they go to school.

Students arrive on the first day of kindergarten with all of these beliefs and dreams tucked secretly and invisibly inside their hearts. They come in like snowflakes, each one as beautifully different as the next. They each have a distinctive look, and set of personal experiences that make them completely unique. Then what do many teachers do? We destroy that individuality and diversity for the sake of creating a homogenous classroom environment where we expect all students to learn the same way and at similar rates. We “teach to the middle” and force students to conform in order to succeed. Essentially, we melt our beautiful snowflakes into one big puddle. We, albeit sometimes unintentionally, reinforce the idea that mediocrity is acceptable and preferable to the individuality that we once extolled and treasured.

Why do we do this? Almost all available research in education supports and proclaims the value and importance of differentiated instruction to meet the individual needs of students, actively engage students in their own learning, and to encourage

students to challenge themselves. We are taught to adapt our teaching strategies to suit different learning styles, diverse needs, and various ability levels so that we enable all students to be challenged and achieve success. Why then, do most teachers not embrace differentiated instruction and alter their classroom climates to allow those snowflakes to thrive rather than perish.

### Purpose Statement

This thesis will first identify and review the common methods of differentiated instruction outlined in research and then show how teachers use those methods to meet the needs of diverse learners in a fourth grade inclusion class. The purpose of this teacher research study will be to develop a more comprehensive understanding of both teacher and student perspectives on differentiated instruction.

### Statement of Research Problem and Question

Every classroom contains a heterogeneous mix of students with diverse learning needs and abilities. How do teachers meet the needs of these diverse learners in a fourth grade inclusion class through differentiated instruction and how do they really feel about it?

### Story of the Question

In every education course I took in college, there were a few terms that I was certain to hear every semester. Terms like reflection, assessment, standards, and objectives were all drilled into my mind continuously and relentlessly. They became

essential components of my “teacher vocabulary.” Another term that I was guaranteed to hear every semester was differentiated instruction. I heard the words so often that I would have assumed that the use of differentiated instruction was commonplace, common sense, and crucial in most classrooms. But, while my professors always preached about the value of differentiated instruction, I have yet to see true and effective differentiation in any of my field experiences.

I have to admit that I had a rather romantic view of differentiated instruction; I thought of it as a tool that would enable me to reach all of my students and to keep them actively engaged in their own learning. Not seeing it in action was both disheartening and frustrating to me. These feelings led me to beg the question, if differentiated instruction is such a magnificent and democratic concept, then why is it not consistently put into practice?

In informal conversations with some of my cooperating teachers, I have made reference to differentiated instruction and have found a variety of different responses. Some teachers feel that it is too much work and entirely too time consuming to teach to so many different ability levels while some others simply have no idea how to differentiate their instruction because they have taught the same way for as long as they can remember and have had no formal differentiation training. I have even heard teachers mention that differentiated instruction is something that only special education teachers should have to do.

One teacher took me by surprise when she told me that she didn’t differentiate much in her classroom because she felt that it was an unfair practice. She believed that students couldn’t possibly understand the need for it and would see being given more



difficult work as a punishment and that being given slightly easier or less work would be seen as a reward for students to slack off. She reasoned that the predicted student response to differentiated instruction was not worth the risk of implementing it, which of course astounded me!

### Thesis Organization

This chapter served as an introduction to the topic of differentiated instruction including its definition and relevance to modern day education. Chapter two of this thesis will present a substantive review of literature pertaining to the thesis topic. Chapter three will thoroughly describe the methods used to collect data. Chapter four will discuss the findings of the study. Chapter five will demonstrate the conclusions that I was able to draw from the collected data.

## CHAPTER II Review of Literature

### Overview of the Chapter

This study focuses on teacher and student perspectives on differentiated instruction. Therefore this chapter will summarize and review literature related to topic of differentiated instruction.

### What Is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated instruction can be defined in many ways. At its most fundamental level, it is the way in which teachers to respond to the differences that exist among learners in their classrooms. The most notable researcher in the field of differentiated instruction is Carol Ann Tomlinson. She describes differentiated instruction as:

A way of thinking about teaching and learning that advocates beginning where individuals are rather than with a prescribed plan of action, which ignores student readiness, interest, and learning profile... it is a way of thinking that challenges how educators typically envision assessment, teaching, learning, classroom roles, use of time, and curriculum (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 108).

Carol Ann Tomlinson further describes differentiated instruction as, “a process where educators vary learning activities, content demands, and modes of assessment to meet the needs and support the growth of each child (Edwards, 2006, p. 582).”

Differentiated instruction is often confused with individualized instruction and personalized instruction; however it is neither of these. While differentiated instruction does focus on the strengths and weaknesses of students within a classroom, it does not involve specifically altering instruction and assessment to meet each and every student's individual needs. Tomlinson writes that, differentiated instruction “can show us how to teach the same standard to a range of learners by employing a variety of teaching and learning modes (Edwards, 2006, p. 586).”

Differentiation changes the teacher's role from classroom commander to facilitator of learning. The teacher's main role, rather than imparting knowledge that only she has access to, becomes helping students engage in and be responsible for their own learning.

#### Characteristics of the Differentiated Classroom

Carol Ann Tomlinson specifically outlines the characteristics of differentiated classrooms in many of her writings. They are classrooms that blend student-centered lessons, whole-class group and individual instruction. There teachers set clear learning goals and maintain high expectations for all students. She describes differentiated classrooms as places where, “teachers engage student in instruction through different learning modalities,” and where, “teachers are diagnosticians prescribing the best possible instruction for each student (Halloway, 2000, p. 2).”

Differentiated classrooms are caring environments where students competes more against themselves than their classmates. The concepts of individual growth and personal best are central to the success of differentiated classrooms. Teachers that practice

differentiated instruction provide specific ways for each individual to learn and they use classroom time flexibly (Edwards, 2006).

One of the most vital characteristics of the differentiated classroom is that instruction is driven by assessment. Teachers plan their lessons based on what their students already do and do not know. More than anything, differentiated instruction is a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to teaching. Teachers practicing differentiated instruction plan to address the diverse needs of learners in advance, rather than planning one lesson for everyone and then adjusting it when it does not work for everyone (Mitchell & Hobson, 2005).

#### Ways to Differentiate Instruction

There are literally hundreds of ways for teachers to differentiate instruction. Teachers can differentiate curricular elements like content, process, or products based on one or more characteristics of students including readiness, interests, and/or learning profiles. They can also differentiate based on things like students' interests, students' readiness, and students' learning profiles.

Instruction can be differentiated by content. Content is what the student needs to learn. In order to effectively differentiate instruction by content, teachers often vary the types of materials that students work with. Examples of content differentiation include: using reading materials at varying readability levels, books on tape, note taking organizers, supplementary textbooks, and highlighted texts, using both auditory and visual components when presenting material, using reading buddies, and meeting with small-groups to re-teach material to students that are struggling or to teach extensions of

material for more advanced students (George, 2005). Teachers differentiating instruction by content must take into consideration a continuum of difficulty which is based on the students' readiness levels.

Instruction can be differentiated by process. Processes are activities in which the student engages in order to make sense of or master the content. Differentiating instruction according to process can be achieved through the use of open-ended tasks that have more than one way of tackling the problem and more than one correct response. Differentiation by process involves students working on multiple activities at the same time individually or in small groups. Examples of process differentiation include: using graphic organizers, tiered activities, providing interest centers, developing personal agendas, using manipulatives, and providing extra time.

Instruction can be differentiated according to products. This approach allows student to choose how they wish to demonstrate their learning. In this case, it is essential for teachers to specifically outline what is expected for each product option by including information about how the product will be graded. There are countless examples of ways that final products/assessments can be differentiated. The only limits that surround differentiation by product are the teacher's time constraints and their imagination.

Differentiation based on products is where student choice comes into play. More often than not, teachers that differentiate based on products give students a choice in the way their knowledge will be assessed. This is probably the most time consuming method of differentiation, because it requires teachers to make rubrics or other grading guides for each individual product.

Teachers may differentiate based on student readiness by giving high-achieving students more difficult assignments and giving struggling students easier or more basic work. Paul S. George writes that the purpose of differentiated instruction is so ensure that, “all students experience challenge, success, and satisfaction (2005, p. 183).” Students constantly struggling with work that is too difficult become frustrated and discouraged, while students that repeatedly receive work that is too easy are not sufficiently challenged and become lazy. Differentiation based on student readiness is essential to keep all students engaged in their work.

Teachers that differentiate instruction based on student interests, often see increases in student motivation. When teachers give students the opportunity to choose which books to read or which assignment they would rather do, students tend to be more motivated and engaged in their work. The aspect of choice creates real life connections to curriculum and allows students to see the relevancy of concepts. Sternberg and Zhang (2002, p. 250) found that permitting students to choose their own reading material helped to create a positive attitude toward reading through “a strong sense of personal involvement with the textual material.” Other strategies for differentiating based on student interest include expert groups; author studies; individual learning goals; working alone or in groups; and allowing students choices in where to sit, in which order to complete tasks, roles in cooperative learning, and different content for writing prompts (Tomlinson, 2001).

Differentiation based on student learning profile basically means that teachers take into account the varying rates at which the students in their class learn. Teachers must understand the need for students to work at their own pace. Some students will

always take longer than others to complete assignments and some will always be the first person finished. Students that always finish their work in a timely manner should be given alternative assignments to complete, however, Tomlinson strongly emphasizes that these students need alternative activities, not activities in addition to the regular curriculum, because faster learners may feel that they are being punished.

### Prevalence of Differentiated Instruction in American Schools

A majority of post-baccalaureate studies have shown that teachers tend to teach the way they were taught, not by their college professors, but by the teachers that they ‘have worked with in their various field placements (Edwards, 2006). Renick found that, regardless of how much university preparation regular educators received in differentiated instruction, their preparation was typically ‘washed out’ by their student teaching experiences (Halloway, 2000).”

A study conducted by McGarvey found that fewer than half of teachers made provisions for a wider range of student abilities (Halloway, 2000). This statistic can be directly linked to another study which found that only 40% of teachers that they had received training in differentiated instruction through university courses and/or workshops (Edwards, 2006). Tomlinson found that most pre-service teachers have had only one course that focused on exceptional children or diverse learners and that those courses dealt with the diverse learning characteristics of those students, but neglected effective methods of teaching (Halloway, 2000). In a survey of randomly selected third and fourth grade teachers in public schools, “61 percent indicated that they had no training in meeting the needs of high-achieving students in heterogeneous classrooms

(Reis, 1998, p. 74).” On the brighter side, one study confirmed that, when properly trained in differentiation and the techniques associated with it, 90 percent of classroom teachers were able to do so (Reis, 1998).”

### Problems with the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction

A 2001 exit survey showed that teacher candidates felt they needed much more intensive preparation to be able to work effectively with diverse learners (Edwards, 2006). There is a large number of school where a lack of administrative support, appropriate planning time, problems with teacher education programs, reaching students at extremes, and a lack of materials are all obstacles standing in the way of effective differentiation.

Sadly, those teachers that are educated in the field of differentiated instruction don't necessarily end up putting it into practice because, "once in their own classrooms the undertow for new teachers to 'teach to the middle' is profound, both because of the complexity of teaching and because of peer pressure to conform to 'the way we do schools here (Halloway, 2006, p. 82).” Those teachers are also met with resistance to change from already practicing teachers; essentially their new methods become new challenges for them (Edwards, 2006).



## CHAPTER III Methodology

This chapter will discuss how this research project was conducted and how it answers the question: What are Student and Teachers Perspectives on Differentiated Instruction in a Fourth Grade Inclusive Classroom? More specifically, this chapter will include in-depth descriptions of all data collection approaches and detailed descriptions of both the setting in which the study was conducted and the participants.

### Participants and Study Setting

This study was conducted at a small public elementary school located in southern New Jersey. The town in which this study was conducted houses six schools including one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools. The population of the town at the time this study was conducted was 18,557 people. This district is somewhat racially diverse with 71% Caucasian students, 13.5% black students, 11.5% Hispanic students, 3.6% Asian students, and 0.5% American Indian students. There are a total of 1,751 students and 123 teachers in the district with a 14 to one student to teacher ratio. The median household income is \$49,530 and the median housing value is \$113,200.

The school that this study was conducted in houses kindergarten through sixth grades. There is one class per grade level and a total of 139 students and nine teachers in the building. At this school, 34% of the student population qualify for free or reduced lunch.

The study was specifically conducted in the school's fourth grade inclusion class consisting of 15 students. There is one main teacher in the classroom all day, there is a part-time co-teacher that is in the classroom all afternoon, and there is a special education teacher that provides in support for special needs students twice a day. Of the 15 students, four were Black, three were Hispanic, and eight were Caucasian.

This class also held a wide variety of differing ability levels. In this inclusive classroom, five of the 15 students were classified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Two students were classified as being emotionally disturbed/disabled, one as student was classified as being multiply disabled but specifically has Asperger's syndrome, another student was classified as being other health impaired with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and one student was classified as having a specific learning disability that affected her cognitive processing capabilities.

In this classroom, I was considered a student teacher. Though my duties as defined by my university were to take over the planning and implementation of lessons for a period of time, I often found myself taking on the role of the co-teacher or in-class support teacher due to my background in special education. This experience allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the duties that accompany the roles of the classroom teacher, the part-time co-teacher, and the in-class support teacher as well as develop a greater knowledge of the nature of the disabilities of the students I was working with.

## General Methodology

The general methodology of this study is qualitative teacher research. Teacher research is essentially an organized and methodical way for teachers to investigate different aspects of their classrooms and schools. Teachers plan and collect information in a structured manner. They record and analyze events that happen in their own learning communities. This type of research is often intended to help teachers better understand and improve upon of their own teaching experiences and techniques. The nature of qualitative teacher research results in the implementation of methods that are often considered subjective. According to Carr and Phillips (2006), qualitative research should involve multiple viewpoints, perspectives, contain contextual details, be systematic, maintain clear biases and positions, and be reflective. Teacher research can be used to evaluate and analyze many aspects of education. In this study, qualitative teacher research was used to discover student and teacher perspectives on differentiated instruction.

#### Explanation of the Study

The first steps in this study were to first inspect the classroom environment. I did this when I first entered the classroom. I took note of many things including: the arrangement of students' seats, the types of student work displayed around the room, and the presence of learning chorales or other types of areas where students could go to work alone or in small groups. These things would be indicative of whether or not the teacher initiates any kind of group work and the types of assignments that he plans for his students to complete.

I then examined the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) of the special needs students in the class. With five of the fifteen students in the class being classified, it was important for me to know the nature of their disabilities for my own personal knowledge as the student teacher in the classroom and because the nature of those disabilities are relevant to this thesis. I was specifically looking to see the list of accepted and required accommodations and modifications listed in the students' IEPs.

Lastly, I observed the classroom teachers' instructional practices for a period of two to three weeks. At this stage, I was attempting to determine the teachers' primary methods of instruction and to see if they differentiated instruction based on what was included in the IEPs that I read over in the previous stage.

After determining the primary instruction methods used by the teachers, I sent home letters to parents and legal guardians asking permission for their children to participate in this research study. After receiving only a few permission slips back after the first week, I sent home additional permission slips in case the original forms were lost or misplaced. Despite having sent home multiple copies of permission slips, only seven of the 15 students were granted permission to participate. All five of the special education students were given slips to take home and only two of them were able to participate. The other three all returned their permission slips with parent signatures noting that they did not grant permission for their children to be a part of my research. It is my belief that many of the parents of students with special needs in the class were hypersensitive about their children taking part in this research. Two more students returned their permission slips with parents noting they did not want their children interviewed leaving three students that did not return the permission slips at all.

The seven students that were given permission to participate did so in the form of open-ended interviews. I also asked the teachers involved with this class to grant me permission to interview them and use the products of those interviews in my study. All three teachers agreed to this. I felt that having the teachers' perspective of differentiated instruction would allow me to compare and contrast them with the data I gathered from the students and would give me more insight about how the two perspectives are connected. I used the information garnered from these interviews to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants perspectives, feelings, and attitudes toward differentiated instruction including their similarities and differences.

This study was conducted over a period of four weeks during the Spring 2008 semester. Over the course of that time period, I set aside about a half hour two to three times a week to complete interviews. I recorded information in my teacher research journal as needed during that time as well.

#### Data Sources

To complete this study, I used several data sources. The first data source used was a teacher research journal completed by me. In this journal I recorded any observations that would be relevant to this study including events that took place in the classroom, methods of instruction used by teachers, student attitudes, student interests, student progress, and my own personal thoughts and reflections pertaining to these topics.

Other data sources I used were both teacher and student interviews. These interviews were conducted on a one to one basis. The questions asked during these interviews were determined ahead of time, but were open-ended so that more probing

questions could be asked as well. The purpose of the student interviews was to determine what students' feelings toward differentiated instruction were. The questions that students were prompted to answer are as follows. Do you like school? Why/Why not? What is your favorite subject? Do you like to read? What is your favorite thing about school? What do you dislike most about school? Do you think your teacher cares about what you like? Does your teacher give you choices about how you complete your work? Would you like it if your teacher gave you more choices in your assignments? Do you think your teacher gives you too much work or not enough? Does your teacher give you work that is too easy or too hard? Do you think that what you are learning in school is important in the real world? Do you like working by yourself, with a partner, or in small groups better? Are you different from your classmates in any way? Do you think your teacher accepts those differences? Do you know what your learning style is? I will also leave time for any additional follow up questions.

The purpose of the teacher interviews were to determine how much training teachers have in the realm of differentiated instruction, how comfortable they are with it, and their general feelings about the topic. The questions posed in the teacher interviews are as follows. Do you feel you do an inadequate, adequate, or more than adequate amount of differentiated instruction in your classroom? Have you ever had a college course in differentiated instruction? Have you ever had any kind of professional development instruction in differentiated instruction? If you had the option would you want to learn more about differentiated instruction? Do you feel that differentiated instruction is practical? Necessary? Fair? Do you feel that your administrative staff is

supportive of your differentiation efforts? I will again leave time for any additional follow up questions.

#### Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected, I will use a qualitative method. I will first review all of the collected data from the open-ended student and teacher interviews and look for similarities and differences in both student and teacher responses to each interview question. After this, I will review the material recorded in my teacher research journal from observations I conducted and note any relevant information pertaining to differentiated instruction.

I will keep all data collected from this study including collection instruments as well as my teacher research journal in a locked file cabinet for three years after this research study is completed at which point it will be shredded and destroyed. Student and teacher names will not be indicated on any collection instrument or in my teacher research journal. To maintain the confidentiality of all participants, I will refer to students and teachers throughout this thesis by a randomly assigned number instead of by their given names.

## CHAPTER IV Findings

This chapter will present an analysis of data and their findings in response to the following research question: What are Student and Teachers Perspectives on Differentiated Instruction in a Fourth Grade Inclusive Classroom? The section will be broken down into two major parts. The first, will present the findings of the study and will summarize all the data collected.

### Study Findings

I will present the data gathered from this study as follows. I will break both student and teacher interviews down question by question and further divide each subsection by student response. I will present the relevant information gathered from my teacher research journal in narrative form.

### Student Interview Data

The open-ended student interviews were conducted on an individual basis in the teachers' room of the school. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes depending on the length of student answers. They were conducted over a one week time span with one student being interviewed per day during the second full week of March 2008.

*Question One: Do you like school?*

Student One – sometimes, but not all the time.



Student Two – yes.

Student Three – yes.

Student Four – sure, when its fun.

Student Five – sometimes.

Student Six – no.

Student Seven – yes.

*Question Two: Why/Why not?*

Student One – well, I don't like all the work I have to do and I don't like it when I get in trouble. But, I like being able to see my friends and I like it when I do good on tests. I really like it when my teacher lets me draw and do fun stuff like that.

Student Two – because I really like being able to play with my friends at recess and during gym class. Its really fun.

Student Three – because I like learning new things and getting to see my teachers and friends everyday.

Student Four – I don't like doing homework and I don't like it when my teacher gets mad. I like going to my special classes like music and art.

Student Five – I like when we do stuff I like in class, but I don't like doing math and spelling and things that are hard.

Student Six –because its boring.

Student Seven – I like it because I get to learn cool stuff.

*Question Three: What is your favorite subject?*

Student One – art.

Student Two – gym.

Student Three – science because we do lots of fun activities.

Student Four – music because I get to sing and dance.

Student Five – science.

Student Six – math.

Student Seven – science.

*Question Four: Do you like to read?*

Student One – sometimes, but only when I get to pick the books I want to read. Some books are really hard and it takes me a really long time.

Student Two – yes, especially books about *High School Musical* and *Hannah Montana*.

Student Three – yes.

Student Four – it depends on the book.

Student Five – I don't really like reading the stories out of our *Trophies* book because they are boring. I like reading my *Nick Magazine* and some other books like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.

Student Six – no.

Student Seven – yeah.

*Question Five: What is your favorite thing about school?*

Student One – I like to play with my friends at recess.

Student Two – recess. My friends and I like to pretend to be the characters from *High School Musical* and we sing the songs and dance. It's so much fun.

Student Three – my favorite thing is that I get to learn how all kinds of things work during science.

Student Four – playing games at recess.

Student Five – I like getting to see my friends everyday.

Student Six – (extremely long pause) getting to go home at the end of the day.

Student Seven – I really like when my teacher lets me play on the computer because I don't have one at home.

*Question Six: What do you dislike most about school?*

Student One – I hate when my teacher makes me write things. I don't like when kids make fun of me. I really don't like homework and when I have to move my name to yellow or red. I really don't like going to OT either.

Student Two – homework and art because I'm really not good at it.

Student Three – I don't like when we have to have Sunrise instead of gym.

Student Four – having to walk to and from school everyday, especially when its really cold or really hot.

Student Five – DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) time. Its boring and makes me tired.

Student Six – I hate that I have to show up.

Student Seven – I don't like it when I get in trouble for things that aren't my fault.

*Question Seven: Do you think your teacher cares about what you like?*

Student One – no, he makes me do a lot of work even when its really hard.

Student Two – not all the time. But he does let me pick what books I want to read for WEB (Wonderfully Exciting Books) and DEAR time.

Student Three – no, not really.

Student Four – sometimes.

Student Five – no, because he still makes me learn about things that I don't really care about.

Student Six – no.

Student Seven – I don't know, I guess.

*Question Eight: Does your teacher give you choices about how you complete your work?*

Student One – he lets us pick our own books for book reports, DEAR, and WEB.

Student Two – not really, but he does let us pick the books we read.

Student Three – no.

Student Four – sometimes.

Student Five – no.

Student Six – no.

Student Seven – no.

*Question Nine: Would you like it if your teacher gave you more choices in your assignments?*

Student One – yeah, that would be nice.

Student Two – yes.

Student Three – yes.

Student Four – yeah, that would be awesome.

Student Five – yes.

Student Six – I don't think it would matter.

Student Seven – yeah.

*Question Ten: Do you think your teacher gives you too much work or not enough?*

Student One – too much, like when we have to write things I don't understand why we have to keep rewriting things.

Student Two – I think he gives enough. But, sometimes he gives us too much spelling.

Student Three – Not enough, I get done my homework really fast.

Student Four – enough, not too much, but I wouldn't want to do any more.

Student Five – not enough.

Student Six – way too much.

Student Seven – it depends. Somedays we have a lot and others we don't.

*Question Eleven: Does your teacher give you work that is too easy or too hard?*

Student One – too hard. Math is really hard and I don't like it.

Student Two – too easy most of the time, but sometimes math is hard.

Student Three – too easy.

Student Four – too easy.

Student Five – too easy.

Student Six – too hard.

Student Seven – too easy.

*Question Twelve: Do you think that what you are learning in school is important in the real world?*

Student One – some things are like math and reading, but I don't think other things are that important.

Student Two – yes. People need to use math everyday like when they're going to the store, they need to know how things work and that's what we learn in science, and they need to know how to be healthy.

Student Three – yeah. Everyone needs to know math and how to read.

Student Four – some things are important and some things aren't really important. Like knowing how to read is important but social studies isn't really.

Student Five – yes.

Student Six – no.

Student Seven – yeah.

*Question Thirteen: Do you like working by yourself, with a partner, or in small groups better?*

Student One – with a partner. But, it depends on who it is. I like working with (names three students), but I don't like working with (names some five students).

Student Two – in a group as long as its with my friends.

Student Three – by myself because then I can do everything my own way.

Student Four – with a partner. But only if they are a good partner and they help with the work and don't fight with me.

Student Five – I like working with a partner.

Student Six – alone.

Student Seven – partner.

*Question Fourteen: Are you different from your classmates in any way?*

Student One – yes. Some things are really hard for me to do like writing. I need breaks from working sometimes and I get upset a lot. My teacher gives me less work and sometimes people write things for me because it takes me a long time.

Student Two – I am the oldest person in our class.

Student Three – yeah. I'm the only person that goes to TAG (Talented and Gifted).

Student Four – I don't think so.

Student Five – yes. I’m new to this school. I moved from Florida earlier this year.

Student Six – yeah, I’m weirder.

Student Seven – I have a dirt bike.

*Question Fifteen: Do you think your teacher accepts those differences?*

Student One – yes, but he still makes things really hard sometimes so I don’t think he cares.

Student Two – I guess so.

Student Three – yes, he lets me help other students if I’ve already done something in TAG.

Student Four – (student didn’t think he was different in any way – see above)

Student Five – yeah, he introduced me to the class, gave me a buddy, and he didn’t give me grades during the first marking period I was here because I wasn’t here that long. That made me feel good.

Student Six – no.

Student Seven – I don’t think it matters.

*Question Sixteen: Do you know what your learning style is?*

Student One – no.

Student Two – no.

Student Three – no.

Student Four – no.

Student Five – no.

Student Six –no.

Student Seven – no.

## Teacher Interview Data

These open-ended teacher interviews were conducted on an individual basis in the classroom after the school day had ended. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted during the third week in March 2008.

*Question One: Do you feel you do an inadequate, adequate, or more than adequate amount of differentiated instruction in your classroom?*

Teacher One – adequate. There are a lot of students with special needs in this class. Meeting all of their needs 100% of the time would be close to impossible. I'm forced to do a great deal of differentiation because of their vastly different ability levels.

Teacher Two – I think I do an adequate job differentiating. I try to conduct lessons that appeal to a wide variety of learning styles and that are engaging for students. But, its difficult sometimes.

Teacher Three – my job is to differentiate instruction and modify assignments for the classified students in the class. I would say I do a more than adequate amount of it.

*Question Two: Have you ever had a college course in differentiated instruction?*

Teacher One – not directly, but there were courses that mentioned methods of differentiated instruction. I've never had a whole course in it while I was in college. But, that was a long time ago.

Teacher Two – yes I did, but it was only one course geared toward teaching diverse groups of students.

Teacher Three – yes, I had several that I was required to take as part of my special ed degree.

*Question Three: Have you ever had any kind of professional development instruction in differentiated instruction?*



Teacher One – yes. Our district has at least one topic a year that they really emphasize during in-services. A few years ago it was differentiated instruction.

Teacher Two – yes. We have had several in-service workshops on it over the years.

Teacher Three – yes. This district had a few training sessions that pertained to differentiated instruction last year during in-service days.

*Question Four: If you had the option would you want to learn more about differentiated instruction?*

Teacher One – yes. It seems like every year there are more and more students with special needs in my class. I would like to have a better idea of how to work with them effectively.

Teacher Two – yes. I think its one of those things that you can never know enough about.

Teacher Three – yes. Knowing more about it would definitely make me better at my job.

*Question Five: Do you feel that differentiated instruction is practical?*

Teacher One – in many ways, yes. I think that reducing work loads for students that have difficulty makes things easier for everyone, that creating lessons that are good for all types of learners is smart, and that giving students options is sometimes a great way to get kids involved. But, I also think that sometimes you have to do it the old fashioned way.

Teacher Two – yes. While it is a lot of work for me as a teacher to plan differentiated lesson and activities, I think students really benefit from them.

Teacher Three – yes. In many cases in this class, differentiation is required by law even more than it is practical.

*Question Six: Necessary?*

Teacher One – in this class, absolutely! Some of these students would not be able to keep up with the workload or the increasing academic requirements without differentiation.

Teacher Two – in some cases. But, I don't think that it is necessary for all subjects all of the time.

Teacher Three – yes.

*Question Seven: Fair?*

Teacher One – sometimes. It depends on the individual student and the assignment.

Sometimes I think students get off easy. However, more often than not I think that differentiation is a fair practice.

Teacher Two – I think that differentiation makes learning fair.

Teacher Three – I have to go back to the quote that “fair doesn't always mean equal.”

*Question Eight: Do you feel that your administrative staff is supportive of your differentiation efforts?*

Teacher One – to be completely honest, I don't know that they necessarily have any idea whether I differentiate instruction in my classroom or not. But, they do encourage us to use differentiated instruction as much as possible. They just don't check up to see if we're actually doing it.

Teacher Two – yes, simply because they have provided us with in-services on the subject.

Teacher Three – the district is supportive of differentiated instruction. They could do more to encourage teachers to actually implement it in their classrooms though.

Relevant Teacher Research Journal Data

Entering this fourth grade classroom, I was amazed at the vastly different ability levels of its students. For example, one student in the class reads at a primer level while one read at a sixth grade reading level. As a whole, this class was lower functioning than other fourth grade classes that I had observed previously due to the high number of special education students. While I didn't get to see much differentiated instruction in action in my field placements prior to this, I saw an abundance of it in this setting. At least three students received modified assignments every day in nearly every subject.

The classroom teacher in this setting did use flexible grouping at times, but not on any consistent basis. Often, these groups would have to be broken up and students would have to work independently because the class has many problems working cooperatively. Some students have social anxiety issues that make it difficult for them to be effective group members and some students lack the responsibility or maturity to be good group members unless the teacher assigns a specific role to each student. The groups that students worked in would have to be determined by the teacher in advance to assure that certain students would not be grouped together, therefore grouping options were limited.

Students are frequently given the opportunity to work with a partner on assignments. However, there are many partnerships that simply do not work. Certain students have been prohibited from working with one another, while some pairs may only work with one another. When instructed to work in pairs there are always at least three to four students that choose to work alone either because they would rather work independently or because the only people they want to be partners with are already partnered with someone else.

This class is very understanding and even forgiving of each others' differences. They tend to ignore outburst from problem students as if they weren't even going on. When a student has an outburst or a breakdown, students more often than not continue on with their work. This is a practice that has been taught by example by the teacher who does not give unnecessary attention to problem behaviors in the classroom. There is a full-time in class aide that can and will often address problem behaviors in a rather inconspicuous manner while learning and teaching continues. The in-class support teacher in this room does a great job of being a help to anyone in the class, not just the special education students, which prohibits those students from feeling singled out.

I was shocked that most of the students didn't complain about how other students got fewer problems or less work to do. I only heard a student say that something was unfair once in the six week period that this research was conducted. That was when one student complained that another student was able to use their notes on a test, a condition of their IEP, and they were not permitted to do so as well.

It is important to note that student one is classified under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as being multiply disabled. More specifically, the student has been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. This student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) lists many accommodations and modifications that he is entitled too, including. extended time on assignments and assessments, reduced writing tasks, reduced number of problems on math assignments, reduced number of spelling words per week, reduced number of questions of social studies and science assessments, the use of a scribe for standardized testing, student can requests breaks from work when needed, counseling once per week, and occupational therapy once per week.

Student six is also classified under IDEA as being emotionally disturbed/disabled. This student's IEP entitles them to many of the same accommodations as student number one, including a reduced workload in all subject areas, counseling once per week, and extended time on assignments and assessments. However, this student's IEP also contains a behavior modification plan due to his frequent defiant behavior. This student has many problems coping with situations that he perceives to be socially embarrassing. These situations include being called on in class, having to get up in front of the class, getting help from the in-class support teacher, and being spoken to by the teacher in any way including being told when his behavior is inappropriate. There was a situation with this student earlier in the semester where the student wrote a written response to a picture prompt that was about how school is like a prison for him and how being there is torturous for him. This student also wanted no part in the student interview that was administered and expressed that he was mad at his mother for "signing that stupid form." His answers to the open-ended interview reflect his disgust for anything to do with school and his ongoing defiant behavior.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

This qualitative teacher research study was designed to evaluate the perspectives teachers and students have toward differentiated instruction in an inclusive fourth grade classroom. This chapter will present the significance of collected data, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. All limitations considered, this study did answer its research question: what are students' and teachers' perspectives of differentiated instruction in a fourth grade inclusive classroom? It found that student opinions varied on an individual basis, but that most students liked it when their teachers used differentiated practices and would like it if they used even more. It also found that teachers held a high opinion of differentiated instruction and used it frequently as a means to meet the requirements of special education students' Individualized Education Plans and to meet the needs of the remaining and extremely diverse learners in their class.

#### Analysis of Findings

The student responses to question one were somewhat predictable. Only one student said that they didn't like school, while three of the remaining six said that they only liked it some of the time. The student that responded that he did not like school and one of the students that responded that he only liked school some of the time are the two students with IEPs mentioned above.

Question two was intended to see what reasons student had for either liking or disliking school. Three of the seven students cited social reasons for liking school like recess or getting to spend time with their friends. One student said that they liked school when they “do good on tests” and when their teacher lets them draw in class. This student functions with modified assignments on a daily basis. His response shows that even though his assignments are modified he still feels the same sense of accomplishment when he does well. His response also demonstrates that his teacher is aware of the student’s interest in art, his favorite subject and his response to question three.

In response to question three, student answers varied because it was a question based on personal interest and preference. Three students however, replied that science was their favorite subject. This is most likely due to the fact that their classroom teacher incorporates many hands-on activities and visual aids into their science lessons.

Most responses to question four, revolved around student interest. Four of the seven students implied that their interest in reading is dependent on their interest in the subject of the book. This demonstrates how student interest can affect motivation.

Four of the seven students surveyed gave social reasons in response to question five. They enjoy playing and spending time with friends. One student mentioned that they enjoy coming to school because they get to learn.

Students responded with a variety of answers to question six. Two students stated that they don’t like doing things that are difficult for them. This speaks to the frustration students feel when they find work to be difficult. Two students gave examples of things that they had no interest in. For example, student three mentioned that he didn’t like having Sunrise instead of gym. Sunrise is the family health unit that the school requires

students to participate in once a week for eight weeks. Another student mentioned that he disliked DEAR time because it bored him. This student was one of the students that mentioned that he liked to read only some of the time again showing how interest can affect motivation and enjoyment.

All but two students replied that they didn't think their teacher cared about what they liked. One of those two students didn't really seem to know. Obviously, the students are aware that there are certain things that their teacher is required to teach them regardless of their interest in the subject. The students did not seem to be aware that the teacher tried to plan activities that were engaging for them.

Four of the seven students answered that their teacher did not give them choices about how to complete their work. Two students noted that the classroom teacher lets them choose the books they read nightly for WEB (Wonderfully Exciting Books) and DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) time. The teacher also lets them choose their own books for book reports.

All but one student responded that they would like to have more choices in how to complete their assignments. The one student that didn't agree stated that they didn't think it would matter. It is important to mention that this student is the student that was angry that they had to participate in the interview in the first place.

Two students replied that their teacher gives them too much work and they happen to be the two students with IEPs that participated in the study. Two students replied that they think they get enough work and two more stated that there was not enough. One of the students that replied that they didn't get enough work is the one student in the class that is pulled out for the TAG program. The last student said that the



amount of work changes and therefore, their opinion of whether the amount of work they receive changes accordingly.

Five out of the seven students said that the work their teacher gives them to complete is too easy. The remaining two replied that the work was too hard and those were again the two students with IEPs. The responses to this question coupled with the previous question are indicative of how the two students with special needs still constantly feel overwhelmed with both the amount and difficulty of their work, while the remaining students don't. The classroom teacher does not seem to have found a happy medium where all students are experiencing both challenge and success through the implementation of differentiated instruction.

Three students feel that what they are learning in school is important in the real world. Two felt that some things were important and others weren't. Making curriculum relevant to the real world is not a direct method of differentiated instruction, however making connections to the world students live in outside of school is vital to increasing student motivation and student interest.

Four of the seven students said that they would rather work with a partner if they were given the choice, but two were quick to mention that they would only choose that option if they could work with a good partner. Two students would choose to work independently and only one student would choose to work in a small group. The teachers do a wonderful job of trying to ensure that students get to work with partners, in small groups, and independently on a consistent basis.

Student responses to question fourteen were interesting. As I mentioned multiple times before, two of this study's participants have special needs and have

accommodations and modifications listed in their IEPs and one of the study's participants is in the school's Talented and Gifted Program. Two of those three students responded to this question with reasons that made them exceptional that were academic in orientation. They identified themselves in the same way that I identified them in this study. The third student, the other special education student that participated in this study, simply said that he was "weirder" than the other students in the class, but did not specify how even when asked. All of the students responded with reasons that had nothing to do with academic achievement like student seven's response, "I have a dirt bike."

Question fifteen was intended to see how students felt about their differences. The two students that cited academic reasons in the previous interview question said that they felt that their classroom teacher did respect their differences. The student in the TAG program stated that his teacher lets him help his fellow students if he is finished early. Student one said that while his teacher understands his differences only part of the time.

None of the students knew what their learning style is and therefore could not answer question sixteen. Even when I explained what a learning style was, the students still could not tell me how they learn best. Later in the semester I administered learning style inventories to the entire class to identify their learning style so that the teachers working with this class could use them to their advantage.

In question one of the teacher interviews, two of the teachers felt that they do an adequate amount of differentiated instruction. The third teacher felt that they did an above average amount of differentiation in the classroom due to the fact that she is the in-class support teacher and that is her job. The first two teachers also allude to the fact that

differentiation requires teachers to put forth a little extra effort and that sometimes it is taxing.

Two of the three teachers responded yes to question two. The first teacher stated that he never had a college course in differentiated instruction. This is most likely due to the fact that this teacher is significantly older than the other teachers and has been teaching for 34 years at which time there wasn't a strong emphasis on it.

All three teachers responded yes to question three and four. The district in which this study was conducted has had many in-services dedicated to this topic, but the teachers all stated that they would like to learn more about it because they feel it would make them better teachers.

The teachers all stated that they thought differentiated instruction was indeed practical, but teacher one added that sometimes doing things the "old fashioned way" was still best. Teacher two also noted that differentiated instruction was more work and teacher three said that in some cases, differentiated instruction is required by law so the practicality of it isn't necessarily an issue. All three teachers also felt that differentiated instruction is necessary, but teacher two noted that its not always necessary for all subjects all the time. The answers to question seven were split. Two teachers stated that differentiated instruction is most definitely fair, while teacher one stated that he feels that it is fair in most instances because sometimes students aren't challenged as much as they should be.

Only one of the teachers felt that the school's administration was supportive of their efforts to differentiate for no other reason than the fact that they provided them with professional development sessions that focused on the topic. The two other teachers

noted that the administration encourages them to use differentiated instruction in their classrooms, but do little to see that they actually do use it. They lead the horses to water, but do not force them to drink.

### Significance of Data

The student responses showed many interesting ideas about student perspectives on differentiated instruction. First and foremost, the responses of the two students with Individual Education Plans had answers that were, in most cases, very different from the other students that were interviewed indicating that there is not just a difference in the way that teachers and students view differentiated instruction, but that there are differences in the way that students view differentiated instruction.

The student interviews also reinforced the already well known fact that student interest and the likelihood of student success are instrumental in the attitudes students have toward different subjects and in school itself. Therefore, we can deduce that differentiating instruction for struggling students has the potential to increase student motivation and will, to some extent, decrease student frustration.

Other than the one instance mentioned in the section that presented data from my teacher research journal, I never encountered a student that complained about the fairness or unfairness of the differentiated instruction practices that were taking place in the classroom. Students were accepting of each others' differences.

The teachers in this classroom were incredibly understanding and saw differentiated instruction as a powerful weapon in their teaching arsenal. Without differentiated instruction, certain students would not be able to function in this class.

One teacher's responses were consistently different from the other two teachers. This teacher has been teaching for 34 years and hasn't taken a college course in the field of education in the last decade. This teacher began in the days before No Child Left Behind, before standards based assessment became the norm, and even before the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was passed in 1975. The teacher's responses indicated a feeling that sometimes the old ways of teaching were better. In the classroom, this teacher did the least amount of differentiating of the three teachers. The other two teachers have an overwhelming knowledge about differentiated instruction and despite all of the research I have done into the subject, they still managed to teach me a few things.

All of the teachers indicated that differentiated instruction was more work for them, but that it was worth the extra effort. Although most expressed that it wasn't practical or necessary 100 percent of the time.

While differentiating instruction may have been more work for these teachers, the benefits of implementing differentiated methods in this case were unquestionable. The results of this study imply that the same benefits would be seen in similar classrooms as well and that through differentiated instruction, teachers can meet a very wide range of learning needs, learning styles, student interests, and student ability levels.

#### Limitations

One of the biggest limitations of this study was that only seven of the 15 students were permitted to participate in the interviewing process. Restricting this study to one fourth grade classroom could also be seen as a limitation. In a fourth grade classroom

with fewer classified students or in a fourth grade classroom with a more narrow range of abilities, the results might have been very different especially from the teachers' points of view.

When I decided my student interview questions ahead of time, I made the choice to not ask direct questions about how students felt about other students getting less work or getting "special treatment" for two reasons. First, I didn't want to point it out to students that might not be aware of it. Second, I wanted to see how aware they were of the differentiated instruction that was going on around them. This ultimately hurt my research in the long run because I probably could have learned a great deal and gained more insight into the students' perspectives had I asked those questions.

Another limitation of this study is that it was based on this one classroom. From observing other classrooms in the school, I can tell you that this classroom was unique. It would have been interesting to see what the other teachers and students in the building had to offer this study.

Due to the fact that one third of the class is classified under IDEA, the three teachers' perspectives are somewhat tainted by the fact that in those five cases they are required by law to use differentiated practices. Their opinion has little to do with why they implement it. What does matter is that they have a positive view of it because it is extremely necessary in their class. A limitation of this research study is that it wasn't conducted in a class where the law was not an factor of influence.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

If future research were to be conducted in this area, it would be best if the following studies would include a larger population of students and teachers from several districts. Interview questions should also be reconsidered and should be more direct to the topic of differentiated instruction. It would also help to have a one to five rating scale for students and teachers to respond to questions rather than the researchers taking narrative data in order to make it easier to record information and create legible data charts.

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APPENDIX A  
Parent Consent Letter

Dear Parents/Guardians:

My name is Kellilyn Casey and as most of you are aware I am a student teacher in Mr. Post's fourth grade class. I am also a graduate student at Rowan University where I am working to obtain my Master's of Science Degree in Collaborative Teaching. Over the course of the semester, I will be conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. David Hesse as part of my master's thesis concerning teacher and student perspectives on differentiated instruction. I am requesting permission for your child's participation in this research study

Differentiated instruction at its most fundamental level is the way teachers respond to the differences that exist among learners in their classrooms. Students and teachers will both contribute to my study through interviews and group discussions. These conversations will be recorded by me in written form in my teacher research journal. In order to preserve confidentiality, I will assign each student a number and will refer to them only by that number in my writing.

Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will have no effect on your child's standing in his/her class. At the conclusion of the study, the results will be available to any interested parents. If you have any questions, concerns, or comments about my research or the methods that will be used to collect data please don't hesitate to contact me at [caseyk23@students.rowan.edu](mailto:caseyk23@students.rowan.edu) or my advisor at [Hesse@rowan.edu](mailto:Hesse@rowan.edu). If you wish to contact me by phone, please call the main number for Garfield Elementary School, (856) 962-5705. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to both a fun and rewarding teaching experience working with your children.

Sincerely,  
Kellilyn Casey

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\_\_\_\_ I grant permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_ I **do not** grant permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this study.

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Parent/Guardian Signature (Date)

APPENDIX B  
Teacher Consent Letter

## Research Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research study entitled "Student and Teacher Perspectives on Differentiated Instruction," which is being conducted by Kellilyn Casey a Rowan University graduate student under the supervision of Dr. David Hespe of the Education Department.

The purpose of this study is to identify what teacher and student attitudes toward and perspectives of differentiated instruction are. Data in this study will be collected through interviews with both teachers and students.

I understand that all of my personal information and all of my responses will be kept confidential. I agree that any information obtained from this study may be used in any way thought best for publication or education provided that I am in no way identified and my name is not used.

I understand that there are no physical or psychological risks involved in this study, and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without penalty. I understand that my participation does not imply employment with the state of New Jersey, Rowan University, the principal investigator, or any other project facilitator.

If I have any questions or problems concerning my participation in this study I may contact Kellilyn Casey at (856) 534-0886 or via email at [caseyk23@students.rowan.edu](mailto:caseyk23@students.rowan.edu) or I may contact Dr. Hespe at ????? or via email at [Hespe@rowan.edu](mailto:Hespe@rowan.edu).

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Signature of Participant (Date)

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Signature of Investigator (Date)

APPENDIX C  
Student Interview Questions

## **Open-Ended Student Interview Questionnaire**

Do you like school?

Why/Why not?

What is your favorite subject?

Do you like to read?

What is your favorite thing about school?

What do you dislike most about school?

Do you think your teacher cares about what you like?

Does your teacher give you choices about how you complete your work?

Would you like it if your teacher gave you more choices in your assignments?

Do you think your teacher gives you too much work or not enough?

Does your teacher give you work that is too easy or too hard?

Do you think that what you are learning in school is important in the real world?

Do you like working by yourself, with a partner, or in small groups better?

Are you different from your classmates in any way?

Do you think your teacher accepts those differences?

Do you know what your learning style is?

Additional questions and answers:



APPENDIX D  
Teacher Interview Questions

## **Open-Ended Teacher Interview Questionnaire**

Do you feel you do an inadequate, adequate, or more than adequate amount of differentiated instruction in your classroom?

Have you ever had a college course in differentiated instruction?

Have you ever had any kind of professional development instruction in differentiated instruction?

If you had the option would you want to learn more about differentiated instruction?

Do you feel that differentiated instruction is practical?

- Necessary?

- Fair?

Do you feel that your administrative staff is supportive of your differentiation efforts?

Additional questions and answers:

