# THE ROLE OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

By

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Abstract: This qualitative case study explored how an alternative education high school in an upper-class suburban town supported the needs of at-risk students. Using Differentiated Instruction as the theoretical lens, this study contemplates how a teacher and principal used various methods of instruction to meet student needs. Finding suggest that teachers who offer different avenues for students to complete assignments and assessments create a pathway for graduation.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Education standards and student achievement have been a high priority in the United States since formal education started in Boston, Massachusetts in 1635 (Sass, 2021). In recent years, even greater attention has been given to education areas such as curriculum, policy, and standards. Education is a fundamental right in the United States. Educational leaders, state legislators, and government leaders have promoted and enacted enhanced accountability policies to support students' successes and to enhance the performance of the United States in an increasingly competitive global market (Gomez-Velez, 2013).

Despite efforts to help diminish dropout rates, students below the age of 23 who have not received a high school diploma, continue to be a problem at the forefront of policy making decisions (Cabus & White, 2016). Most recently, reform policies such as No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] of 2002, 2002) and Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Pub. L. No. 114-95 § 114 Stat. 1177 (2015-2016) have created guidelines for students' successes with the aim of closing the achievement gap between America's highest and lowest performing students (Zhao, 2009). These policies help keep schools accountable and provide a way to monitor and measure students' successes.

Although policy and education standards have been adopted and put into place, America falls short in promoting success for all students, which leads to lower graduation completion rates in high school (Nitardy et al., 2015). Among the lowest performing are students who live in high poverty conditions, students who speak English as a Second Language, and those who suffer from trauma. Huang et al., (2011) found that in the last ten years, at least a third of students with disadvantaged backgrounds do not complete high school. Nearly 37% of high school student dropouts came from low socioeconomic families who had parents that were unemployed for at least a year or parents that live on government assistance (Huang et al., 2011). Callahan (2013) reported that English as a Second Language (ESL) students drop out at a rate twice as high as their English-speaking peers.

Statistics indicate that many students, especially those of low socioeconomic background, students of color, and ESL students still underperform when compared to their peers (Nitardy et al., 2015). Cabus and Witte (2016) explained that the population of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds largely consist of students who belong to an ethnic minority or who are migrants. A large percentage of these students are male and at a higher risk for dropping out. Additionally, new challenges emerge because the demographics and culture of the United States keeps changing, and educators must strive to implement policy mandates in ways that meet the needs of the changing population (D'Azevedo, 2015).

Educational leaders, focused on the gap in performance between groups of students, have offered a possible solution. This solution is to provide additional resources for struggling, at-risk students. Addressing the needs of at-risk students, Newsome (2005) explained that creating an alternative atmosphere for these students can help them experience academic success by strengthening areas such as interpersonal skills, motivation,

engagement, and study habits. He stressed the importance of maintaining high educational standards for each student, while also helping students learn coping strategies for life. If these basic educational needs are met, then students have a better chance of graduating (Newsome, 2005).

## Problem Statement

Alternative education settings can foster performance, perseverance, and competence for students who struggle in the classroom (Fretz, 2015). Providing these students with alternative sources of education, such as differentiated instruction, that focus on fulfilling individual needs could potentially help them complete high school (Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012).

However, despite growing efforts to provide accessible and equitable education to all students, research indicates that the efforts to meet the needs of at-risk students through alternative settings are successful in some instances but not successful in others (Nitadary et al., 2015). One reason that these alternative program settings are not successful may be that these programs do not fully address the individual needs of students. Student performance is influenced by a variety of factors; available resources, classroom sizes, family and peer relationships, and poverty (Chen, 2019). Therefore, each of these factors must be considered when individualizing student instruction (Wisner & Starzec, 2016; Wood & May-Wilson, 2012).

Students who have difficulty in a traditional high school setting have academic and social needs. These needs require alternative methods that can help them earn credit for grade level work. An alternative approach such as differentiated instruction could provide an individualized curriculum and instruction that is aligned with students' needs whether it be

academic, social, or contextual. Carol Tomlinson (2003) asserted that daily delivery of curriculum could enhance a student's ability to learn. She further regarded teaching as a belief in the uniqueness of an individual student, and she explained that when taught properly all students can gain tools needed that can be used to "reshape and transform the world" (p. 91). Evidence suggests that educators in alternative settings have the flexibility to consider factors that influence student learning and to implement individualized instruction strategies to meet the needs of students. However, little is known about how specific differentiated instruction strategies actually meet the needs of at-risk students in alternative education settings to promote their success.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perspectives of students, an instructor, and an administrator who are stakeholders in an alternative educational setting, Northeast Academy, that implements differentiated instruction strategies to gain an understanding of how this academy meets the needs of at-risk students. This academy's goal is to specifically address the needs of at-risk students through a "whole child" approach, considering all factors that may influence student success. Tomlinson's (2014) Differentiated Instruction Theory provides the lens through which to view stakeholder perceptions. Differentiated Instruction provides multiple learning opportunities and ways for students to gain information presented to them in the classroom. Teachers learn observation techniques that help identify students that are struggling and then provides them with tools to help those students learn differently (Tomlinson, 2014).

## Research Questions

1. How do stakeholders describe their role in meeting the needs of at-risk students at the Northeast Academy?
    a. What are student perceptions regarding how Northeast Academy has, or has not, met their needs?
    b. What are teacher perceptions regarding how they have altered instruction to meet the needs of at-risk students?
    c. What are administrator perceptions regarding how Northeast Academy has met the needs of at-risk students?
2. How does Tomlinson and Allan's (2000) Differentiated Instruction Theory help explain how Northeast Academy meets the unique needs of at-risk students?
3. What other realities exist regarding how this center is meeting the needs of at-risk students?

## Epistemological Perspective

The epistemological perspective used to frame this study is constructivism. Crotty (1998) defined constructivism as meaningful knowledge gained by "human practice" (p. 42) and the interactions with others in a social context. Constructivism considers the personal experience that each person has in the world and suggests that all people's views should be looked at and respected by others (Crotty, 1998). Creswell (2014) stated, "Social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (p. 8). He described that a person develops a point of view subjectively from his or her experiences with certain objects or things.

## Theoretical Framework

Differentiated Instruction Theory, which is a combination of theory and practice, provided the framework for this study and helped to evaluate the findings. Differentiated Instruction Theory, developed by Carol Tomlinson and Susan Allan and utilized in instruction for many years, is used to support this research (Irby et al., 2013). Tomlinson has researched differentiated instruction for years and has completed over 700 presentations and keynote speeches to schools all over the United States (Bell, 2017). Bell (2017) discussed how Tomlinson believed, "Differentiation really means trying to make sure that teaching and learning work for the full range of students, which really should be our goals as teachers" (p. 1). When teachers learn that students are all wired differently, they can determine how to reach them effectively (Tomlinson, 2014).

Differentiated Instruction Theory has three main categories that can be broken down into key elements to help guide a teacher to help learners. The three broad categories are respectful tasks, flexible grouping, and ongoing assessment and adjustment (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). This theory can be found in teaching from Confucius, Judaism, and Islam, and is used in several countries, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, and Ireland (Irby et al., 2013). Differentiated Instruction Theory provides a model that helps instructors develop effective classroom practices to help meet student needs. Tomlinson and Allan (2000) developed the following key elements teachers use in the classroom that shape the framework of Differentiated Instruction Theory:

- content
- process
- product

Each of the key elements mentioned are discussed further in Chapter II.

The basis of this theory relies on a teacher addressing all three elements and how a student interacts with the elements, so learning is not diminished in the classroom. Differentiation starts when a teacher reaches out to a student in a way to identify a need because he or she recognizes there is a difference from other students' needs (Irby et al., 2013). Dweck (2003) stated, "The great teachers believe in the growth of the intellect and talent, and they are fascinated with the process of learning" (p. 194). A teacher must be able to identify with students and learn how to determine students' needs in order to create a successful learning atmosphere.

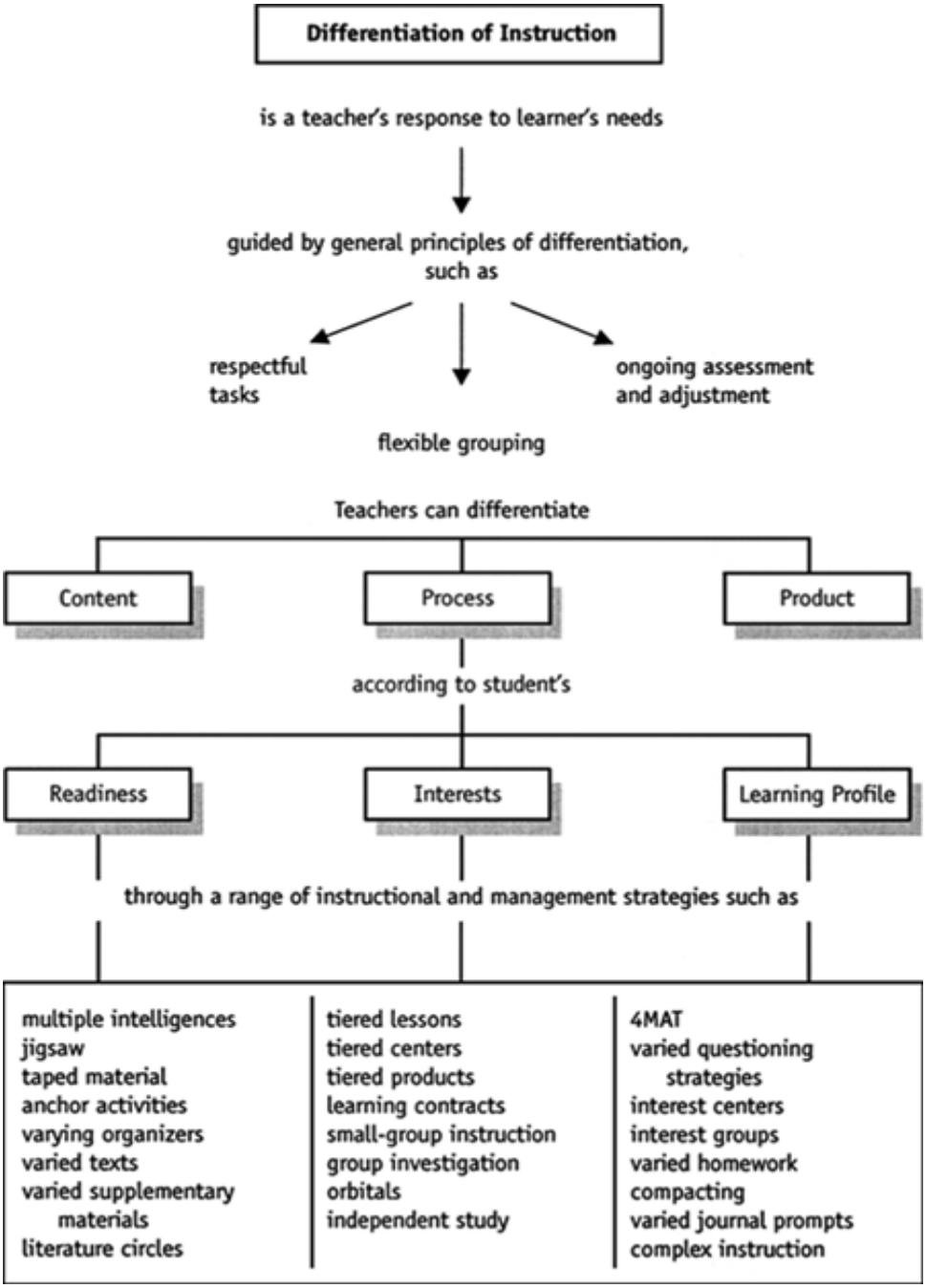


*Figure 1.* A flowchart of the elements of differentiated instruction. Adapted from "Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms" by C. A. Tomlinson and S.D. Allan, 2000, *Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms*, 3. Copyright 2000 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

## Procedures

This study used intrinsic qualitative case study methods. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a case study looks at a topic comprehensively and examines a system that does not have clear boundaries. Because boundaries may not be clear, as in quantitative data, a case study allows the researcher to explore conceptual conditions as they pertain to a case. Stake (1995) suggested using an intrinsic case study when a researcher has an authentic interest in the case and has an intent to better understand what is occurring. The study conducted was a case study of at-risk students utilizing an alternative education setting. The specific area of interest was the establishment of an alternative education academy at a facility that was not on a traditional high school campus.

I collected data from the alternative education academy's administrator, instructor, and students. I conducted interviews, completed and collect data that helped determine if students' needs were being met via differentiated instruction. This helped to provide a rich descriptive picture of how the academy operates and what they provide for students. Purposeful sampling was utilized to help find common themes that emerged from the data collected. I conducted interviews with the academy's administrator, an instructor, and students. I also completed classroom observations to see firsthand how the instructor interacted with the students. I then inquired about the academy's availability and how students were invited to enroll at the campus. I observed both the accessibility and ease of enrollment of the academy. Merriam and Tisdell (2014) suggested a constant comparative method of data analysis which was appropriate for case study research. They explained that a researcher should analyze the data while it is being collected not at a separate time. The reason for this practice was to find the themes that "cut across" the data that was gathered

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2014). After all data was collected, I transcribed the interviews and carefully studied what I gained from the interviews, observations, and documents and found common themes.

### Change of Research Location

While I was conducting this study, the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the world. I had my site picked out and ready to go when the director of the site decided it was too big a risk to have me on campus and in the classrooms. I researched other alternative education schools in my area and was allowed to conduct my study at a new location.

## Potential Significance of Study

The potential significance of the study was to conduct theory-based research on ways to meet the needs of students and potentially help discover a way to close the achievement gap in the United States. One reason I chose to study this topic was because I had a student in my classroom who was a part of the Northeast Academy. The academy was her last hope, she claimed, to get the credits she needed to complete high school and graduate. Also, I have visited with the director of the program, and he has shared countless success stories with me, and I want to see first-hand if the Northeast Academy is truly meeting student needs.

### Research

At-risk students and placement in an alternative education setting has become a topic widely studied in several countries. More research needs to be conducted to help find ways of early detection to combat dropout rates in high schools. Also, students need to feel welcome and safe at school, and differentiated instruction gives students an opportunity to do both (Irby et al., 2013).

## Theory

This study was built upon the Differentiation Instruction Theory by researching what was being done in a classroom to meet individual students' needs (Irby et al., 2013). Learning how to identify at-risk students may help teachers approach learning styles with an open mind and discover opportunities to help students find new ways to engage in their studies. Tomlinson (2017) advised teachers should first determine the types of learners found in the classroom. A teacher must identify the advanced students versus the struggling students before a teaching plan can be developed to reach all types of learners.

Tomlinson reinforced the need for expectations to be the same for both groups of students. At-risk students should have the same lessons that provide rigor, encouragement, support, and impactful remediation (Tomlinson, 2017). "Don't dilute the meaningfulness of the work. A steady diet of remediation has seldom made students more than remedial" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 513). Teachers must understand that learning is fluid, and once they can understand how the students learn in their classroom, they can make needed adjustments. Not all students learn at the same pace for every subject, some learn at a quicker pace and others learn at a slower pace. Teachers need to understand differentiated instruction and the materials they use to present information, and then they need to adjust the instructional delivery for all students.

Differentiated Instruction Theory can be used in any type of classroom from traditional classroom settings to alternative education classroom settings (Tomlinson, 2014). This paper focuses on the ways differentiated instruction is used in an alternative classroom setting. The teacher has had the same educational background as traditional educators, but her students are categorized as at-risk students. The students, at the academy, have already

been determined to be at-risk, so they need a more one on one tailored instruction. Differentiated instruction provides this type of learning; it creates several avenues or multiple options of learning products to engage students on their level (Tomlinson, 2017).

### Practice

This study may provide answers and ways for teachers to approach their curriculum to reach students they were not reaching before. All students have a preferred way of learning, but teachers need to know how to identify keys to help the student figure out what works best for him or her, and to find students' strengths and weaknesses (Irby et al., 2013). If at-risk students' needs can be identified early, then perhaps teachers can create paths for successful outcomes. Administrators can aid classroom teachers by helping them understand differentiated instruction and how to apply the theory in the classroom to help all students whether they are advanced or at-risk.

## Definition of Terms

### Alternative Education Setting

An educational setting where learning activities are outside the normal K-12 curriculum traditional building. These programs can be found in home schooling, general educational development programs, gifted and talented programs, or charter schools depending on the audience, structure, and service that is needed (Porowski et al., 2014).

### At-risk student

Students who face circumstances that give them higher probability of failing academics or not completing high school (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013). Most of the risk factors are innate in nature except for students with diagnosed

learning disabilities. Also, an at-risk student is someone who is at risk of not completing high school because of life circumstances. Tomlinson described the "at-risk" student as someone who may be smart but is consumed by outside stressors in school or in his or her home life.

**Content**

Content is what teachers teach and what they want their students to learn. Teachers need at times adapt their teaching to the student's capability. (Tomlinson, 2017).

**Differentiated Instruction**

Instruction that provides students with multiple ways of taking in and learning information. This type of learning allows the student to learn new ways of "making sense of ideas" while correctly expressing what they have learned. Differentiated instruction is delivering effective lessons that allows students to learn effectively (Tomlinson, 2017).

**Educational Need**

A need is a combination of essential learning tools and content required to survive, further his or her growth and development, have dignity in a daily life, and learn ways to foster a desire for knowledge and lifetime learning (International Bureau of Education [IRB], 2019).

**Effective teacher**

A person who has certain personality traits such as: a) caring, b) good listening skills, c) understanding, and d) gets to know students on a personal level (Stronge, 2007). Stronge (2007) described an effective teacher as someone who who has good classroom management skills, knows how to implement instruction,

and can help determine student progress and potential. Tomlinson (2003) stated that this type of teacher believes that every student is unique and should have access to the tools required to change his or her outcomes.

**Learner**

A person who works towards mastering a subject or skill (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013). A learner is an individual who takes charge of his or her education

**Process**

This is the act of a student processing or digesting information they have been given. Each student does this at a different rate through analyzing, applying, questioning, or solving problems. In other words, how students make sense of what they are learning (Tomlinson, 2017).

**Product**

Products of differentiated instruction are the completed tasks or outcomes. The products are seen, for example, at the end of nine-week periods or semesters. Students are demonstrating their knowledge, understanding, or skills they have accomplished (Tomlinson, 2017).

**Stakeholder**

Anyone who is invested in the common good and success of a student. These people include, but are not limited, administrators, teachers, and students (First, 2009).

## Summary

This case study aimed to find support of how at-risk students had their needs met in an alternative education classroom. The classroom was not a typical high school classroom,

and this paper focused on alternative education settings that provided equity for all types of students.

Chapter I includes the background of at-risk students and the crisis we are facing in the United States. This chapter also described the theoretical framework used to shape the future study, which is Differentiated Instruction Theory. A model of Differentiated Instruction Theory was included to help guide the study and literature review for Chapter II (see Figure 1). The terms needed for the study were defined, and a summary of how the research could impact teaching was included.

An in-depth literature review of each of these topics are discussed in Chapter II. Chapter II covers a more in-depth look at what a typical at-risk student looks like in high school. The chapter looks at different needs of high school students and why some of them seek an alternative education setting. Chapter II also explores alternative settings to see if these setting provide ways for students to increase their credits and grade completion rates. Chapter II examines what kinds of alternative educational settings are available to high school students and what are the outcomes. Chapter III describes the methods used to conduct this qualitative case study. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study and also discusses emerging themes. Lastly, Chapter V concludes the study and discusses implications to practice, research, and theory. Future research suggestions are also listed in Chapter V.

# CHAPTER II

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perspectives of students, an instructor, and an administrator who are stakeholders in an alternative educational setting, Northeast Academy, that implements differentiated instruction strategies to gain an understanding of how this academy meets the needs of at-risk students. Studying this program may shed light onto how individual student needs are being met. This study may also provide insight into educational strategies being used in the alternative setting that are not being used in a traditional high school setting.

The literature review given includes the topics of how schools strive to meet the needs of students in general, and the importance of equitable education as an influence of educational policy. In addition, challenges of at-risk students are discussed and the role of alternative education as a way in which to mitigate these challenges given. The theoretical framework of Tomlinson and Allan's Differentiated Instructional Model (2000) is also included.

The data sources used were peer reviewed articles accessed through the Oklahoma State University library, books, professional journals, and educational websites. The policies included in the research were accessed from government websites. The journal articles mainly came from EBSCO host database through the University. The keywords that were used to search for information for Chapter II included at-risk students, alternative education, high school dropout rates in the United States, 21st century skills, differentiated instruction, and types of low performing high school students.

**Meeting Student Educational Needs**

Educators in school systems work tirelessly to help students complete high school requirements (Woods & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). Educational rights are not explicitly written into the United States Constitution, but education is valued enough that it is protected by the Constitution through the 14th Amendment (Reuters, 2021). The United States Department of Education (2021), an arm of the Federal Government, stated that each state is required to establish schools and colleges that develop curriculum and determine what is required for enrollment and graduation. Oklahoma has over 682,000 students enrolled in K-12 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). Each state has a Department of Education that through its State Constitution, defines and determines what school should look like in that state. According to the Oklahoma State Constitution, "The Legislature shall establish and maintain a system of free public schools wherein all the children of the State may be educated" (Education Law Center, 2021, Litigation).

In order for schools to meet the educational needs of all students, the basic needs of students such as support, positive teacher relationships, timely access to relevant resources and autonomy must be met. When these needs are met by positive relationships with teachers, higher levels of earning can occur (Fretz, 2015). Additionally, these relationships set a foundation for nurturing, stable prevention programs as needed (Johnson, et al., 2015). Positive school relationships and effective teaching styles can improve the quality of life and cognitive outcomes for students who may be at risk for withdrawing from school (Edwards et al., 2007). Timely access to resources is important to meeting students' needs. Not only do resources need to be available to all students, but also resources need to be relevant and varied to increase the learning potential and construct meaningful knowledge (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). Students need autonomy. Autonomy allows students to have some control over their daily lives, and a good teacher can allow students to have a say in different learning activities (Wisner & Starzec, 2016). When these basic needs are met, higher levels of learning can occur more easily.

Five key teacher responses are important for meeting student classroom needs invitation, opportunity, investment, persistence, and reflection (Tomlinson, 2014). An invitation from a teacher would mean finding ways to invite students to feel welcomed into the learning environment. Teachers should show respect to students and for their backgrounds, become acquainted with students on a more personal level, and ensure the students understand that the teachers have time for them and have a willingness to listen. Opportunity arises when teachers inspire students to be excited about the work they are about to undertake, make each task sound important, and showcase the new possibilities students will gain from the knowledge. Student investment takes place when students feel

that hard work is paying off and when the work is positively reflecting student outcomes. Persistence occurs when students understand their growth but still have room to expand upon the knowledge being received. Students need to have time to process information and to be able to understand and value what they are gaining from their work and engage in the process of reflection (Tomlinson, 2014).

**Equitable Education**

For students to succeed in school, they must have equitable access to education regardless of zip code, race, or background (Alvarez, 2015). Teachers need to understand there is a difference between equity and equality (Morrison, 2018). Equity in education means allowing a more personalized approach to meet students' educational needs. An equitable education means that a teacher can design a classroom that does not require a uniform approach for each student. Teachers can provide a variety of ways to reach each student by providing individualized learning that is rigorous and challenging for each student. Teachers must continually be observing the students in front of them to determine what type of learners they are and how to approach these learners to enhance their learning achievements (Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018). Teachers must learn how to address the needs of each individual student.

Equitable education consists of five principles (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018). The first principle is to implement values and practices that allow students to meet learning goals. This principle requires teachers to create a connection to instruction and curriculum that reaches homes and communities. The second principle is to involve stakeholders to evaluate the program and make suggestions on how to reach students in the specific school area. The third principle is to seek out connections that can be made

across settings by finding relevant artifacts that promote individual learning needs. The fourth principle is to give credit to the students who are contributing. Students need to buy in to what they are learning in the classroom. The last principle is to help learners move from an area where they are not succeeding to an area where they can excel. Teachers and parents need to find ways to promote a learning environment for students, not only at school but outside the classroom as well (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018).

In an effort to provide equitable education, students who were offered a form of alternative education, especially students who attended a failing school district, showed more promise for completing graduation requirements. Students were allowed to transfer, and pupil funding went with the student to help increase good-quality educational outcomes (Simon, 2015). Schools should place more emphasis on heterogeneous classrooms that will provide greater opportunity for an equitable education and more equity and teachers and resources (George, 2010).

Providing equitable education might involve allowing some students, to learn in a school that is not a normal classroom setting, to establish strong 21st century skills. School subjects are important to master, but students need to also understand how to be successful in life after completion of high school (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018). Some students do not excel in these important skills when attending a regular high school, so an alternative setting may offer at-risk students a way to learn and grasp these important skills. Alismail and McGuire (2015) explained that 21st century skills taught in school should consist of critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. Yes, the three "R's" reading, writing, and arithmetic are important subjects for students to understand, but students also need to know how to navigate life successfully. Lombardi (2007) stated

when designing curriculum for school, assignments should incorporate knowledge in life skills needed to move on into careers.

A study of a group of students between 15 and 16 years of age (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018) was conducted to bring to light "informationalism" and "informalization" of learning 21st century skills in a traditional high school. The students claimed the learning they had achieved did not occur in the building but was achieved on digital devices and during times of their own choosing (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018). These students were learning to network with other students about their learning experiences across various settings. Students shared different cultures and outlooks on learning that included helpful videos, cultural artifacts, images, and text that were real time and relevant.

Educators need to begin to explore alternative ways to instruct students and reach them on a personal level that keeps them interested and provides a hunger for knowledge. If students are permitted to use digital means of learning, they can have access to a variety of learning resources and learning contexts beyond the traditional knowledge offered in the schools (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018). All students spend time outside the classroom with others. They should be encouraged to seek out other people and establish an educational relationship with others.

An area of concern for achieving equitable education is making sure students of low socioeconomic or disadvantaged backgrounds are having their needs met in the classroom. Providing different types of schools for different types of students can enhance or determine educational outcomes (Mills et al., 2014). Students of low socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly if they are also members of a minority group, are at risk of being negatively affected when their specific needs are not met in school.

Students of color in poverty suffered the greatest educational injustices (Rodberg, 2019). Disadvantaged students are those who are frequently targeted with processes that repeatedly produce and reproduce situations of being treated unfairly relative to others (Watson, 2011).

Educators need to reflect and find avenues that support equitable education for students regardless of their backgrounds (Mills et al., 2014). Educators should also be careful of assuming that their students are intellectually homogeneous, and that the teacher is equally effective for every type of student in producing high-quality educational outcomes. Curricula in classrooms need to be monitored and assessed regularly to ensure students have access to an equitable education.

**Educational Policy**

Historically, several policies have been enacted to level the playing field. A Nation at Risk was a seminal report that was published in 1983 (United States, 1983). This report highlighted the quality of education being provided in the United States (Aron, 2006). A particularly troubling statistic is that in 2007, only 8% of students in Grade 8 were functioning on grade level (Rodberg, 2019). As a result, the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in school educators began to focus more attention on students and skills that will promote a more successful outcome for students. This policy involved an attempt to outline areas that describe at-risk behavior in students, so teachers and administrators could develop plans to help meet the needs of individual students (Edwards et al., 2007). Identifying at-risk students early is imperative because schools can offset the effects of challenging relationships and other risks that can influence whether a student completes school (Sanders et al., 2018). In contrast, if school leaders

decide to ignore problems facing students experiencing exclusion and marginalization, students can begin to feel anger and resentment towards the school. These feelings can be carried forward into adult life, possibly hindering work and community relationships (Sanders et al., 2018).

The No Child Left Behind Act was not the first attempt by policy makers throughout history of the United States to determine why the educational system is failing some students. President Lyndon B. Johnson enacted a policy aimed at helping to close the gap in education and combat discrimination against students of color in poverty, with the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965 (Paul, 2016). ESEA first indicated the emphasis about at-risk categories of students and ways to cope with diversity. ESEA was acted to assist schools across the country by providing funding for professional development, instructional materials, resources, and parental involvement in the day-to-day educational needs of the students. The Act is examined and revised every five years to ensure it is current and relevant in school systems.

President Obama signed new legislation, Race to the Top, which helped teachers track measurements that would affect students as part of the teacher evaluation process. Many teachers created quantifiable goals and displayed them in classrooms to help monitor student success. This policy worked alongside of ESEA under President Obama, and the law offered more flexibility for states where schools were struggling (Paul, 2016). To qualify for federal help, schools had to show adoption of college and career-ready standards and assessments. These along with evaluation tools would allow principals to guide teachers. The landscape of federal legislation is constantly shifting with party affiliation and leadership.

## At-Risk Students

At-risk students are students who face circumstances that give them a higher probability of failing their academics and the possibility of not completing high school (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013). Several factors might lead to a student being identified as "at-risk". These factors include but are certainly not limited to the following:

- likelihood of not completing high school,
- a sense of being lost at a large school,
- transient with a lack of stable family and home life,
- behavioral issues,
- socioeconomic conditions,
- location of school, language barriers,
- lack of resources
- overwhelming feeling that high school is not meeting their current needs, and not preparing them for their future.

Only 8% of students are obtaining curriculum sufficiently challenging to prepare them for college or work (Gewertz, 2016). Additionally, fewer students complete required courses with grades that exhibit mastery in content and knowledge.

These factors *can* contribute to being at-risk, but these factors can also be overcome with the right type of alternative education. Although research does indicate certain populations seem to be more at-risk, Tomlinson and Imbeau (2013) cautioned teachers not to generalize about their students across culture and ethnicities but instead to become acquainted with and understand the audience.

One of the main goals of education is student graduation. When a student is struggling and high school graduation seems in doubt, often the at-risk student or the school will seek a different learning environment due to the fact that the traditional school is not meeting their needs. EdTrust conducted a study involving 23,000 traditional high school students. The study found that educators in high schools generally focused on credit accrual, with graduation being the main goal, rather than looking beyond graduation to how students would conduct themselves as adults in college or add a job (Gewertz, 2016).

Every year, school educators develop ideas to increase graduation rates, and part of this process involves early identification of at-risk students (Johnson et al., 2015). There are over 195,000 students enrolled in Oklahoma public schools for the 2020-2021 fiscal school year. According to the State Department of Education, (2021), one in four students drop out per week which is equivalent to one every 26 seconds. There are 15.3 million students enrolled in school across the United States, and the current national dropout rate is 5.1% (National Center for Education Statistic [NCES], 2021).

Many students who are considered transient, or do not have a constant school home, are not provided with stability, a sense of security, or opportunities offered to other students. Although behavioral issues must be addressed, students need to feel welcomed at school for learning to take place. When students change schools frequently or are absent for prolonged periods, they lose a great deal of instructional time in the classroom (Brown, 2007).

A determining factor for educational opportunities for students can be socioeconomic background (Teixeira, 2014). Ethnic origin, location of school, and

gender also tide to educational outcomes and can lead to educational inequalities. Many students who seek the alternative source of education are Black and Latino, of low socioeconomic background, and male (Brown, 2017). Other identifying factors for at-risk students can be mobility, language barriers, and personality (Johnson, et al., 2007). Many students in need are attending schools with struggles involving issues of racial or ethnic identity, poverty, poor family composition, and language barriers (Rodberg, 2019). Students who are routinely absent or tardy, or have low achievement scores and low expectations, are at risk for not advancing to the next grade level and withdrawing from high school (Newson, 2005).

All schools have a culture that is socially constructed by the student body, and this culture often determines achievement regarding academic retention (Watson 2011). When a school is not equipped to adequately identify at-risk students, school culture can be affected. Students with negative attitudes towards learning, low motivation, and poor assessment skills a low expectation set by teachers can build a hostile school culture. If students are recognized at an early stage as at-risk or disadvantaged, then clear values and principles can be instilled. This process is essential for creating a positive school culture (Watson, 2011).

***Social and emotional needs***

Social and emotional needs are as varied as the students are. Alienation can occur when the students who have been attending traditional high school begin to feel they do not belong and are not being served well. This alienation may cause these at-risk students to have difficulties succeeding in class. Some schools have adopted a zero-tolerance policy that led many students to find an alternative school setting (Brown, 2017).

Students need to be taught two important skills while in school; to be independent thinkers and to learn how to build honest and powerful relationships with teachers (Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018). In the United States, advanced classes are predominately composed of White students who are more affluent (George, 2010). To cross social and racial barriers, students need to be placed together in learning environments regardless of culture or socioeconomic background. Placing diverse students together helps raise the academic bar in the classroom, and this practice in turn can help struggling students want to achieve more academically (George, 2010).

### *Academic*

One of the basic academic needs for students to complete a school year is having timely access to necessary resources. Schools can help foster a positive academic setting by providing different forms of resources. In this way, schools can help drive the potential for understanding and construct more meaningful knowledge for students (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). The following factors help to meet academic needs:

- collaborative learning activities,
- opportunities for knowledge building,
- access to resources,
- student-teacher interactions,
- improved behavior,
- peer interactions, and parental support.

Developmental assets can be built by giving students the academic support needed along with positive personal attention (Edwards et al., 2007). Teachers must learn to identify students' needs and understand their strengths and weaknesses to make a

positive difference (Irby et al., 2013). Teachers need to vary their teaching methods and strategies to meet individual student needs. To capture all types of learning styles, teachers should also have different types of activities and skill-based components available for students (Edwards et al., 2007).

Allowing more time and flexibility is also an academic need of these students. Students in alternative school settings, such as an online program, were able to take ideas and ponder them thoroughly before answering (Edwards et al., 2007). Teachers believed the students were building knowledge and were able to contribute rich information because their capacity of learning was increased.

***Motivation***

Children in general have a natural drive to explore the world around them, and this exploration increases their skills (Fretz, 2015). Motivation can be linked to how students perceive teachers and approach school, as well as to how much time the students spend on their studies (Usher & Kober, 2012). By learning what motivates students, it is possible to encourage an increase in effort. Understanding motivation can show perseverance to overcome obstacles and can explain why people choose certain behaviors to create an optimal learning environment.

Motivation can be extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation occurs when school systems put certain measures, such as assessments, in place to quantify goals. Intrinsic motivation occurs from within an individual. Students need intrinsic motivation to improve in academic achievement without it, the curriculum or teacher does not matter, because the student is not likely to succeed (Usher & Kober, 2012). Students who are motivated to teach others regardless of their ability or need will often gain a deeper

understanding of the subject matter (George, 2010). According to George (2010), "Interests that are needs driven, in their turn, give rise to motivation to learn; humans are motivated primarily if not exclusively, to learn what matches their individual interest" (p. 191). Teachers must be responsive to individual behaviors of their students to find ways to motivate them properly. To motivate the students, teachers can engage them with material that meets objectives while being interesting and relevant.

***School environment***

Students' social and environment factors affect rates of withdrawal from school (Edwards et al., 2007). Students spend most of their time attending school during fall and spring. They are exposed to the same environment every day. If this environment is not welcoming and productive, a student may decide to discontinue their education. To maintain high levels of engagement in the educational process, positive school environments are an important factor (Sanders et al., 2018).

An alternative education setting with online learning helps build an environment where students feel that their voices are being heard and where they can express and share their outlook on subject matter in varying ways (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). Alternative schools need to create a coherent vision with predictable and familiar purpose and value (Watson, 2011). When school culture is positive, students begin to see their teachers and administrators as adult heroes who incorporate positive values for a diverse population of students. In this way, students can identify with an educator at school, thereby fostering strong academic performance.

To help meet students' needs, educators may try to develop an environment that harnesses the power of peer groups. Additionally, schools need students to feel safe and

need to provide a respectful classroom, especially for students who are members of minority or indigenous groups. Teachers need to help all students understand that diligence is important for personal success and that most students do not have a natural ability to learn on their own (George, 2010). Students will perform better when teachers start to focus on them as individual learners; recognize backgrounds, talents, in needs; and begin to tailor education toward those individual needs (Watson, 2011).

In addition to focusing on individual needs of students, other strategies have shown promise including collaborative learning and strong professional development for teachers. Collaborative learning has shown promise in promoting learning experiences in creating motivation in learners who are members of minority groups. A study conducted with online learners showed value in being able to converse with peers online to solve a problem and to complete task (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). Students felt in control of their own learning and enjoyed the opportunity they received from being able to converse with other students and teachers in a one-on-one learning basis more than in a traditional face-to-face classroom setting. With collaborative learning, teachers were able to monitor student progress closely and to identify areas of need quickly because they were working directly with students online. When students enroll in online programs, they also have instant access to resources, including textbooks, visual aids, and videos (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). Teachers may need to be trained not only in the curriculum of traditional school but also in arts, business, or technology (Perzigian et al., 2017). Teachers need to provide innovative ways to challenge students.

## Alternative Education

Alternative education has been defined as an educational setting with separate facilities to provide services to students unable to attend traditional school settings (Aron, 2006; Wisner & Starzec, 2016). For many American students, school systems have shifted from offering only traditional settings to also offering alternative education settings (Holme et al., 2013). All 50 states now offer some type of alternative education, either on or off campus. The most remarkable growth of alternative education can be seen in online kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12) schools (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). At the beginning of 2000, 39% of public schools had some type of alternative education system for students in Grades 1 through 12. The districts that had the most offerings for alternative education were urban school districts with high numbers of students from minority groups and those living in poverty (Aron, 2006).

Alternative schools can be placed into three broad categories: school choice, behavior reassignment, or academic recovery. Alternative schools can offer tailored education that meets special interest and offers a more intense approach to meeting student needs. Often students who choose to attend an alternative education setting do so because of the risk of withdrawing from school and not completing high school. These schools have students of varying backgrounds. Backgrounds range from the following:

- living in poverty,
- exposure to stressful circumstances,
- alienation from traditional school,
- lack of engagement in the classroom and attending a school in which teachers were not meeting the educational needs of students (Wisner & Starzec, 2016).

Many students in alternative schools are members of minority groups, are on an Individualized Education Plans (IEP), and receive free and reduced-price lunches (Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018). Many of the students were once in a traditional high school setting but were unsuccessful there, meaning they were not advancing to the next grade level. Alternative education may give students a chance for more one-on-one time with the teacher.

Students enroll in alternative education for many reasons, ranging from a need for a more challenging school to the need to combat behavioral issues (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). Although traditional schools typically offer a varied curriculum in a wide range of class options; the curriculum, learning contexts, and teaching methodologies in alternative schools tend to be more focused (Perzigian et al., 2017). Another reason that students are choosing alternative education is because of smaller classroom sizes. Population increases create overcrowding in schools and contribute to academic and behavioral difficulties in both urban and rule school systems (Perzigian et al., 2017).

For some students, alternative schools may be the last chance to be academically successful after being expelled from a traditional high school. One such example is Another Chance High School (ACHS) located in a public high school in the northeast portion of the United States. At this school, students who have been dismissed from the traditional high school need to enroll in an alternative education program (Brown, 2007). ACHS served students in Grades 9 through 12 who were dismissed from their high school because of suspension or expulsion, as well as cases in which a court ordered the student to return to a school setting.

From the beginning to the end of the school year, the population of ACHS more than tripled (Brown, 2007). ACHS had a turnover rate of 75% in students from the beginning of the school year until the end. Only one fourth of the regular attending students were original students. Some students reported being expelled numerous times from traditional schools. For this reason, these students missed a substantial amount of instruction time. ACHS was responsible for helping students gain back time lost from having been dismissed from their traditional high school setting (Brown, 2007). The students were underdeveloped in areas of writing, reading comprehension, and mathematics. The alternative school setting allowed these at-risk students to thrive and become eligible for graduation.

Alternative education typically serves two types of students: either students who need a more innovative approach to learning or students who are failing to excel in a traditional high school such as ACHS (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). Many students who want to attend alternative schools must apply and be accepted (Perzigian et al., 2017). Students who apply to alternative schools often see the potential benefit of being a part of a more specific population of students, including gifted students, students with disabilities, and at-risk students (Johnson, et al., 2015; Yeboah et al., 2018). The students have an opportunity to network with different types of learners and can develop community and networking strategies.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the United States has had a marked growth of alternative education. A possible reason for this growth is that alternative education can provide different or more advanced learning opportunities and offer a wider variety of technology courses (Yeboah et al., 2018). Many students are enrolling in

these programs to graduate with honors, complete dual enrollment, meet graduation requirements, and gain access to courses not offered in traditional school settings. Alternative education provides students with important skills including problem solving, retrieving information, networking among peers, and communication skills that lead to success in postsecondary education. Students who attend an alternative school may gain access to individualized training and individualized instruction (Yeboah et al., 2018).

According to Edwards et al., (2007), traditional schools typically take the "wait-to-fail" approach for at-risk students. Traditional school settings often wait to witness failure before deciding upon an intervention and implementation of a plan that will help to reduce deficits. However, to have a successful transition to adulthood, the successful completion of school is an essential step (Sanders et al., 2018). Regardless of whether a student attend a traditional or an alternative school, educational needs must be met.

Programs should be implemented that will help students improve their academic performance (DeAngelis, 2012). Student services need to be narrowed down in such a way that students know exactly where to turn when they need help. Counseling services, intervention and prevention programs, and community resources should be readily available. These programs are offered in a traditional school setting, but even with the implementation of these programs, students are not necessarily succeeding. Students who have external and internal resources tend to have a more positive outlook on education (Edwards et al., 2007). These students also tend to exhibit better developmental skills and behaviors that help them socially and academically.

Teachers should encourage students to bring value and engage students on a higher level of learning (Mills et al., 2014). Teachers should allow students to voice their

interests and find ways for students to engage in daily learning. These goals can be accomplished by allowing students to be involved in how a classroom will function daily. Teachers who want to encourage learning in the classroom must be acquainted with and understand the lives of their students both inside and outside the classroom, including the injustices that students face (Mills et al., 2014). Culture inside the classroom may or may not fit the norms of society, economic, or gender perspectives of the students, thereby causing a mismatch or slowing of the academic process (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013).

Some students and alternative education settings came from traditional schools but did not fit into the setting for one reason or another (Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018). Teachers need to understand how to trust their students to ensure that the students can take charge of their learning and to become independent thinkers. Classroom programs often have a set curriculum that students need to grasp, but sometimes a gap occurs between teaching and learning. Often set curriculum is in place that consists of teacher, book, and task, instead of putting the student first (Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018).

Although 93% of students can recall what they did in class, only 33% can explain what they learned (Wisner & Starzec, 2016). For an alternative school to succeed, the school program must be flexible and provide a wide variety of academic opportunities. It has been recommended that the program involve intensive psychological support for teachers, students, and administrators (Wisner & Starzec, 2016). Students attending this type of setting needs support, and in the end, they need to succeed. For students to remain successful, educators need to find ways to make attendance important, to have students meet academic objectives, in to engage the students in school events. Alternative schools

need to have all the amenities of a traditional high school while at the same time offering more intensive knowledge.

Standard school systems were not delivering educational needs to help this demographic group of students, and the students began to suffer academically. The literature has shown that existing schools are not meeting the needs of all students (Watson, 2011). The current ways of teaching seem to focus on a forced set of knowledge skills that are either acquired or not acquired, but if students fill in the allotted time frame, they often still advance to the next grade level. If students move forward without gaining required knowledge, they may become frustrated and eventually may withdraw from school (Watson, 2011). The American Psychological Association (2011) has suggested this shift to a more learner-centered approach to education, involving an approach that is student-directed rather than teacher-directed. To make this approach succeed, teachers need to understand how their students learn in a classroom setting (American Psychological Association, 2011).

## Theoretical Framework

### Framework of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiation refers to the recognition of the different set of knowledge and skills students bring into a classroom (Mills et al., 2014). The theory of differentiated instruction describes a method for instructing students based on individual needs. Differentiated instruction was developed with the understanding that people learn curriculum differently from one pupil to another and that teachers will be most effective in the classroom when the teacher learns to consider those differences (Tomlinson, 2003). Differentiated Instruction Theory is geared to working with different types of students in

diverse classroom settings. The theory was also developed to support differentiated instruction for students of different genders, cultures, ethnicities, and economic statuses (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013). The theory provides a framework for understanding how alternative educational settings may help meet the needs of students with different backgrounds.

Teachers have an important influence on a student's academic career. Teachers can stimulate feelings through single actions that will reach a student far more effectively than will someone who simply asks a student to memorize and repeat learning objectives (Irby et al., 2013). A teacher needs to understand how the students learn and process information and to be able to discern if educational needs are being met (Irby et al., 2013). According to Tomlinson (2003), "The good teacher communicates a deep regard for students' lives, a regard infused with unblinking attention, respect, and even awe" (p. 25). Classroom teachers first need to understand that the students have many unique personalities, and the teachers must try to foster a desire for learning in each student.

Communication is an important element in the theory of Differentiated Instruction (Douglas, 2004). For differentiated instruction to succeed, students and parents need to communicate with instructors so the instructors can fully understand the individual needs of their students. Students need a voice in how they are taught (Mills et al., 2014). Although students need to be closely monitored for progress, teaching needs to be geared towards individual learning styles and needs of students (Mills et al., 2014).

For differentiated instruction to succeed, teachers must learn to change their delivery process to one that delivers instruction to a student rather than simply placing emphasis on content (Irby et al., 2013). Teachers using differentiated instruction styles

create classrooms that are inviting to all types of students and that allow for a variety of instruction. Students and teachers become partners in the learning process, thereby allowing students to take charge of their own education.

## The Differentiated Instruction Model

The differentiated instruction model stems from theory, research, and practice and is used as a guide for teachers to plan activities for greater student engagement. The theory is based on the principle that each element of a classroom should function together while the interdependent parts are understood. The classroom elements that function together are environment, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and routine management (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013).

### *Environment*

The classroom environment must support and maintain a high quality of educational practices. For differentiated instruction to take place, the process must begin with teachers who address all individual student needs, not just the needs of the group (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013). Dweck (2006) instructed teachers to pay attention to learner variances to help create a mindset for allowing students to grow. Day-to-day activities should be carefully planned and not improvised. Improvisation has its place in meeting student needs, but a strong plan will help back up classroom learning and allow the student to follow a teacher with greater educational intent (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013).

Students need to understand that it is acceptable to make mistakes in the classroom and to learn politely from their peers. If students feel safe and comfortable with peers, a feeling of belonging takes place and students begin to trust, which allows

for trust and sharing (Dweck, 2006). Trust builds relationships and leads to greater collaboration within a classroom setting.

One important technique that needs to be used in a differentiated classroom is the use of positive tone while teaching students (George, 2010). A teacher needs to respect all the different types of students encountered in the classroom, and in return students will show respect toward the teacher. The result is to foster student ownership and responsibility inside a classroom (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013). George (2010) explored a classroom with heterogeneous types of students and a demographically diverse learning environment. When students from different backgrounds were placed in the same classroom and given real-life situations, they were better prepared to face challenges.

### *Curriculum*

A relevant and strong curriculum is an important foundation for learning (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013). A high-quality curriculum consists of clear objectives that students can understand, engages students in active learning, and ensures that students grasp course content. A curriculum should engage, motivate, and display powerful objectives for students to learn, and teachers achieve this quality by creating lessons authentic to outcomes being studied (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013).

### *Instruction*

A relaxed and safe atmosphere, immersion of the learner in an environment of critical thinking, and time to process experiences are important characteristics of instructional delivery (Irby et al., 2013). When these three areas are emphasized, then deep learning and understanding take place in the classroom. For learning to take place, basic needs of affirmation, contribution, power, purpose, and challenge must be met

(Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013). These ideas need to be immersed into daily teaching and not be ancillary to instruction.

***Assessment***

Students must be assessed at different times to ensure comprehension. According to the framework of Differentiated Instruction Theory, assessments should guide decision making. Assessments should be used to determine how the content should be delivered because teachers have a variety of ways to deliver information. The lessons could be based upon students' readiness levels, interests, and the approach taken that best captures a student's learning process (Irby et al., 2013). Assessments should help teachers evaluate students as a whole and validate those students have essential knowledge, understanding, and mastery of a particular skill (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013).

***Routine management***

Students should feel challenged and encouraged to become partners in their learning (Douglas 2004). Students need time to process and reflect on what they are achieving and learning in a classroom. Education should be unique to each individual learner (Douglas, 2004). Teachers need time to check routinely for understanding and to advocate for meeting students' needs.

The Differentiated Instruction Model by Tomlinson and Allan (2000) is intended to be used for diverse populations and different types of school settings. According to George (2010), education should be regarded as an experience, and the role of the student is to be the worker. Teachers must find ways to become classroom facilitators, allowing the students to set their own goals and drive their own learning. To attend to student variance, classrooms need a balance between structure and flexibility (Tomlinson &

Imbeau, 2013). Students need to feel that they are in control and have some say in what they are learning. When students are given a choice to participate in classroom teaching, they are able to understand the reasons for what they are being taught and to contribute to the success of classroom routines. Differentiation can occur in a large classroom where students are dispersed into groups of similar learning styles and levels in which the curriculum is modified based on students' needs (Mills et al., 2014).

Teaching has long been recognized as a developmental process. Table 1 shows an example of a rubric used to guide teachers and administrators as they develop their skills in the effective use of differentiated instruction in the classroom. Teachers and administrators can use the rubric to help guide practices and determine areas that need to be improved. Teacher will begin to move from an area of novice to expert when they begin to adopt and practice using differentiated instruction.

**Table 1**

*Sample Rubric for Implementation of Differentiated Instruction*

| Criteria | Novice (1) | Apprentice (2) | Practitioner (3) | Expert (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Quality and clarity of the lesson objectives: What students should know, understand and be able to do | Objectives are not clearly articulated for the lesson. | Lesson objectives might be informed by national or state standards, but do not include big ideas meaningful to the content area. | Lesson objectives include big ideas, issues, or problems specific and meaningful to the content areas. Objectives are informed by national or state standards. | Lesson objectives are informed by national or state standards and the important ideas, issues, or problems specific and meaningful to the content area. Objectives extend learning in authentic ways. |
| 2.Alignment of lesson objectives and lesson activities | The activities are mildly related to the objectives. It is not likely that | The activities of the lesson are unevenly related to the objectives. It is likely that | The activities of the lesson are clearly related to the objectives. Most students | The activities of the lesson are clearly and strongly related to the |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | students will master the objectives. | only some students will master the objectives after successful completion of the activities. | are likely to master the objectives after successful completion of the activities. | objectives. All students will master the objectives after successful completion of the activities. |
| 3.Communication of learning goals and outcomes to students | Lesson objectives and desired outcomes are not communicated to the students. | Lesson objectives are desired outcomes listed for students but not referred to during the lesson or connected to lesson components. | Lesson objectives and desired outcomes are clearly articulated to students, but the connection between the objectives, desired outcomes, and the lesson components is not evident to students. | Lesson objectives and desire outcomes are clearly articulated to students, and it is clear to students how the lesson components are related to these goals. |

*Note.* Adapted from "The handbook of educational theories" by B. Irby, G. Brown, R. Laraiecio, and S. Jackson, 2013, *Differentiated Instruction,* p. 1098. Copyright 2013 by Information Age Publishing Incorporated.

## School During a Pandemic

In 2020, the COVID-19 world pandemic occurred and left many schools trying to find unique ways for students to learn from home (Ferren, 2021). Schools across the globe and in the United States closed their doors and began teaching online. As weeks passed, schools made critical decisions regarding when and how schools could safely reopen (Ferren, 2021). Many schools would open in the fall of 2020 in some sort of hybrid fashion which included in-person and online education. School leaders found ways to ensure students had what they needed to learn from home, which included laptops and, in some cases, hotspots for WIFI. The Centers for Disease Control reported that 65 percent of middle school and high school students were wearing masks all day to class and separated from their peers by at least six feet (Ferren, 2021).

## Equity in Technology

One of the biggest hurdles for school leaders was to figure out a way for all students to learn from home. As many as 16.9 million children did not have internet access, and 7.3 million children did not have a computer (Ferren, 2021). Many of the children were of color or low-income families. School leaders had to create ways to provide laptops and hotspots to students to keep from creating a learning gap (Ferren, 2021). The pandemic revealed many technology obstacles for millions of children just in the United States.

## Online Environment

When school did resume, it was anything but normal. There were some schools who were strictly online and others that had a hybrid model in place. But although technology was provided, it did not mean that all students were adequate at-home learners. Many students were not thriving learning from home (Ferren, 2021). Schools quickly realized that not all students had the appropriate skills needed to operate a computer and complete assignments at home. Another barrier for some students was not having parental support at home, so the pandemic made online learning even more of a challenge (Ferren, 2021).

The pandemic also effected many educators. Teachers had to create all new lesson plans to include reaching out to online learners. They had to find new and creative ways to reach their students. Ferrin (2021) reported that by November of 2020, 77 percent of teachers were working longer hours, 60% did not enjoy their jobs as much as they had before the pandemic, and 27% were considering quitting at the end of the school year.

Teachers and normal classroom environments were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perspectives of students, an instructor, and an administrator who are stakeholders in an alternative educational setting, Northeast Academy, that implements differentiated instruction strategies to gain an understanding of how this academy meets the needs of at-risk students. Alternative education may provide a way for some at-risk students to have classroom needs met, thereby potentially leading to better outcomes in school and higher graduation rates (Johnson et al., 2015). Alternative schools can sometimes better meet students' basic daily needs so that students can focus on scholarly outcomes (Yeboah et al., 2018).

Differentiated Instruction Theory has the ability to explain the findings of this study because it identifies a way to meet the needs of at-risk students. Differentiated Instruction provides different approaches to learning by offering a more tailored teaching style (Tomlinson, 2017). A way to help meet educational needs for students is to provide them with positive teacher relationships and to provide nurturing, stable prevention programs (Johnson et al., 2015).

Chapter III discusses the methodology used to support the research of this case study. The researcher roles and research design are clearly laid out so the reader can understand how the research was conducted. The importance of proper data analysis and an in-depth trustworthiness analysis are explained by the researcher as well as limitations.

# CHAPTER III

## METHODOLOGY

I selected a qualitative case study method for this study because a qualitative study is designed to convey why people feel the way they do and why they behave the way they do in their setting (Creswell, 2014). In this study, I observed classroom behavior from a teacher's point of view. I watched how the teacher, in an alternative setting, conducted lessons in her classrooms and observed how the students responded to those lessons. I also had the opportunity to interview the teacher about the feedback she received from her students. The teacher provided me with information about daily assignments during various sessions. I conducted interviews with the principal and gathered information about how he supported his teachers and their delivery of instruction. With the information gathered from the teacher, the administrator, and observations of the classroom, I was able to better understand how the alternative educational setting supported the learning needs of students.

Quantitative analysis provides hard-numbered facts that support a hypothesis and variable, but a qualitative study can paint a clear and rich picture of what the numbers are displaying for those variables (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A qualitative study was valuable for this research because I captured the learning relationships administration and teachers had with the students that directly impacted educational outcomes.

### Location Change

During the time of my study, the world experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. The original site I was going to conduct my study decided that it was too big a risk, and they could not take on a researcher. I still observed an alternative education site consisting of high school aged students taking basic courses required for graduation. The dates of observations changed from four evenly spaced dates in the fall from August to December of 2020 to four evenly spaced observations from January to May in the spring of 2021. The site of data collection changed, but the type of setting did not change.

## Problem Statement

Alternative education settings can foster performance, perseverance, and competence for students who struggle in the classroom (Fretz, 2015). Providing these students with alternative sources of education, such as differentiated instruction, that focus on fulfilling individual needs could potentially help them complete high school (Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012).

However, despite growing efforts to provide accessible and equitable education to all students, research indicates that the efforts to meet the needs of at-risk students through alternative settings are successful in some instances but not successful in others (Nitadary et al., 2015). One reason that these alternative program settings are not

successful may be that these programs do not fully address the individual needs of students. Student performance is influenced by a variety of factors, such as lack of resources, classroom sizes, family and peer relationships, and poverty (Chen, 2019). Therefore, each of these factors must be considered when individualizing student instruction (Wisner & Starzec, 2016; Wood & May-Wilson, 2012).

Students who have difficulty in a traditional high school setting have academic and social needs that require alternative methods that can help them earn credit for grade level work. An alternative approach, such as differentiated instruction, could provide an individualized curriculum and instruction that is aligned with students' needs whether it be academic, social, or contextual. Carol Tomlinson (2003) asserted that daily delivery of curriculum could enhance a student's ability to learn. She further regarded teaching as a belief in the uniqueness of an individual student, and she explained that when taught properly all students can gain tools needed that can be used to "reshape and transform the world" (p. 91). For students in an alternative education setting, a different form of delivery of instruction might be beneficial. One form might be differentiated instruction which would provide them with a more tailored program that could meet positive educational outcomes. Evidence suggests that educators in alternative settings have the flexibility to consider factors that influence student learning and to implement individualized instruction strategies to meet the needs of students. However, little is known about how specific differentiated instruction strategies actually meet the needs of at-risk students in alternative education settings to promote their success.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perspectives of students, an instructor, and an administrator who are stakeholders in an alternative educational setting, Northeast Academy, that implements differentiated instruction strategies to gain an understanding of how this academy meets the needs of at-risk students. This academy's goal is to specifically address the needs of at-risk students through a "whole child" approach, considering all factors that may influence student success. Tomlinson's (2014) Differentiated Instruction Theory provides the lens through which to view stakeholder perceptions. Differentiated Instruction provides multiple learning opportunities and ways for students to gain information presented to them in the classroom. Teachers learn observation techniques that help identify students that are struggling and then provides them with tools to help those students learn differently (Tomlinson, 2014).

## Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do stakeholders describe their role in meeting the needs of at-risk students at the Northeast Academy?
    a. What are student perceptions regarding how Northeast Academy has, or has not, met their needs?
    b. What are teacher perceptions regarding how they have altered instruction to meet the needs of at-risk students?
    c. What are administrator perceptions regarding how Northeast Academy has met the needs of at-risk students?

2. How does Tomlinson and Allan's (2000) Differentiated Instruction Theory help explain how Northeast Academy meets the unique needs of at-risk students?
3. What other realities exist regarding how this center is meeting the needs of at-risk students?

## Researcher Role

### Researcher Bias

I am employed at a technology center that has an alternative program located on campus. I taught a class that could be considered alternative education because it is not a normal class offered in a traditional high school setting. I attended a traditional high school setting and never had any trouble in school, but I know this is not the case for all students. By having taught an alternative type of program, I can see the benefits to students who want something different from what is offered at their high school. I have, in the past, been closed minded to alternative education and believed that students should be required to attend a traditional high school. I am aware that students have certain needs, but I was skeptical of how alternative education would help a student transition to adulthood, a technical school, or college after high school.

I recently had the opportunity to work with a student, in the class I taught, that attended the alternative education classes offered on campus, and it made me want to take a deeper dive into what the program had to offer. I support my school and the decisions it makes to look after the best interests of all students. After seeing the success my student had with a more one-on-one approach, it opened my eyes and mind to doing further

research on alternative education. I now feel that students should have more options than a traditional high school offers if the needs of the students are not being fully met.

My experiences with different student situations have caused me to want to research and discover how the needs of students are being met in alternative education. I understand how I used differentiation in the classroom, but I want to see how the academy uses differentiated instruction that may or may not be meeting student needs. Creswell (2014) discussed that researcher bias occurs when the researcher does not include open dialogue about his or her status that can influence the outcome of the study. I work in a school setting that could be labeled as a type of alternative education, but it is not a part of the district I researched. If anything, my background in teaching has helped me to identify different ways teachers are approaching students. I was mindful of my experiences and made sure to collect and interpret data as it was presented to me (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## Ethical Considerations

It is important that ethical considerations be made to protect the participants and data being collected. The following efforts describe ways to ensure ethical considerations took place.

### *Data collection ethics*

When conducting qualitative research, several areas need to be addressed to ensure that data collection is being conducted ethically. Patton (2002) and Creswell (2014) discussed several ethical approaches that are valid for this case study.

1. When observing a participant, try to do the study with little disruption and if possible, without prepping the site. This allows the researcher to truly see what is

happening at the site. If subjects know they are being observed, they may act differently than normal.

2. Investigational Review Board (IRB) approval is required when conducting any research with human subjects. All participants must be made aware of the study and sign a consent form before the study begins. The IRB protects human subjects from deliberate harm.
3. Build trust by being honest and upfront with the site being studied. Do not give false pretenses or information about the study. Visit with the site and get approval to conduct the research by forming relationships with participants.
4. Ensure all participants and places of observations are disguised with pseudonyms to protect privacy and allow participants to feel free to share experiences and data.
5. Create safe places for data to be stored under lock and key or password protection. Data should be stored for no longer than five years according to the American Psychologist Association (Creswell, 2014).

Creswell (2014) advised against pressuring the participants into doing a study or to sign consent forms. The researcher needs to ensure that participants understand that participating in the study is strictly voluntary. Creswell also pointed out the importance of treating collected data carefully. Do not collect any data that is harmful. If a participant shares something that is harmful in nature, it is up to the researcher to protect that information and keep it private. Ethical data collection is vital to qualitative research and should be conducted in a safe way that protects the participants within the study.

### *Data analysis and reporting ethics*

Creswell (2014) identified several areas to consider when analyzing data and reporting the data ethically. The researcher needs to be cautious when reporting findings, making sure the data is constantly reflected upon and checked for accuracy. When analyzing and reporting data, only state the facts. Do not make up or add feelings to what is being conveyed by the participants (Creswell, 2014). Also, do not try to hide data that is discovered. Always report all findings the way they are presented. Make sure that all participants understand the study being conducted and any risks associated with the study. Researchers should protect the participants and the establishment of the study by giving pseudonyms and fake names to sites (Creswell, 2014). During my field work, I introduced myself in front of the whole class, described my study, and told the faculty and students how the study was to be conducted. I was transparent about why I was there and what I did while spending time in their classroom. I also explained to the teacher why I needed certain documents to support the findings of the study.

## Research Design

Crotty (1998) stated that, "Constructivists are deeply committed to the contrary view that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective" (p. 57). He also said that constructivists use theory as a practical instrument to help support what the researcher knows and wants to portray to the reader. Constructivists are interested in the unique experience that individuals offer, meaning that everyone has their own way of interpreting what the world is offering, and each experience is valid and worthy (Crotty, 1998). The nature described by Crotty applied to this case study because the researcher painted a picture of how the academy provided an individual program to

meet student needs. The needs of the students were based on their own testimony and the testimonies of an instructor and principal. The research needs to go beyond number-driven data to get a clear understanding of what students, instructors, and administrator are doing collectively to ensure student success. Crotty (1998) wrote,

> It is the view of all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essential social context. (p. 42)

Constructivists conducting research want to ensure the following points are met throughout the study:

1. Understanding
    - investigate and try to provide valid truths
    - provide examples and paint a picture of the world where participants live and work
2. Gain multiple participants' interpretations of the setting
    - develop open ended-questions and look for broad views instead of narrow-minded view
3. Social and historical backgrounds
    - discover what led up to the participant being involved, and what is the cultural background
4. Theory
    - find patterns that help to form a working theory

I sought to honor constructivism by addressing the four points as they provide meaning and support for the findings of the researcher conducting qualitative research from a constructivist point of view (Crotty, 1998). By conducting several observations and interviews with students and school personnel, I was able to collect data for understanding; gaining multiple participants interpretation of setting; social and historical background; and theory. When I began my observations, I was taken on a tour the school and was told about the history of the building. The tour helped to lay a foundation for rich description that I passed down to my readers, so they could feel as though they were taking a walk through the building themselves. The setting is important because it provides a safe and inviting place for the students to learn. After learning about the layout of the school and meeting the teacher I would be observing, she gave me a tour of her classroom. I used open-ended questions to interview students, a teacher, and the principal to allow them to share with me their experiences of the school and how classes were conducted. This allowed me insight to how the school utilizes differentiated instruction. Using the guidelines of Crotty's (1998) constructivists points I was able to pinpoint common themes witnessed while conducting observations and interviews.

Discovering and researching how students' needs are being met in the classroom can be managed using a qualitative method approach. Creswell (2014) explained that a qualitative study occurs when a researcher explores and understands the points individuals or groups are describing. The researcher finds emerging themes discovered by questions and procedures chosen carefully that are collected in the participants' environment (Creswell, 2014).

A qualitative case study was conducted, at an alternative education school in Northeast Oklahoma. Due to COVID-19, my original research site changed their minds about allowing me to do research at their location. As I considered other alternative education sites, I thought of Northeast Academy as a possible research location. I asked to do a study at this school, because I had students in class I taught, that had success with the program. I reached out to the superintendent of Northeast Public Schools, and she granted my request to do research at the facility. My ability to conduct research at this site was guided by the principal. The principal chose the teacher I would observe and interview because she had taught for many years and had experience teaching alternative education in other schools besides Northeast Public Schools. Also, the teacher had an exceptional reputation, per the principal, and varied experiences as a tenured teacher. The sample consisted of participants of the academy: students, an instructor, and an administrator. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) expressed that qualitative research provides understanding and meaning. The researcher was the instrument used in the study to obtain data collection and perform analysis and created ways to induce research in a way that clearly provided a rich accurate picture for the reader (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study occurs when a researcher conducts a study on a phenomenon that unfolds in a real-life setting (Yin, 2014). Also, a case study is said to be a "bounded system," meaning that it is a case that is being studied with observations, interviews, audio material, institutional material, and other reports that support creating an accurate description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## Case Selection

After IRB approval, I focused my research on an alternative educational setting in a suburban city in Oklahoma. The alternative education academy enrolls at-risk students who are in jeopardy of not finishing high school, or students who feel like the traditional high school setting is not meeting their educational needs. Prospective students must apply to the program which consists of filling out an application and taking a tour of the campus before being admitted into the academy. This school has a great success rate in helping students earn their credits to graduate from high school. The academy covers the required basics: English, Math, Science, and History along with some electives. For the purpose of this study, I focused on the English class.

## Introduction of Participants

The following individuals were part of the research site: Bill, principal; Alexandria, teacher; and the following six students: Delilah, Charles, Nora, Mary, Lee, and Cole. The class sizes ranged from two to ten students, and the six students who were interviewed ranged from the age of sixteen to eighteen. Some students participated online via Google Classroom and a live stream while others were in person. The classes were almost evenly distributed between males and females that were mainly White students. The school does have a counselor designated to meet students' needs although she was not part of my study.

Bill became the principal at Northeast Academy for the 2016-2017 school year and served as the principal five years. He was devoted to the school's mission and supported each student in getting the best education they could to be successful.

Alexandria started working at the academy in 2010. She prides herself on making sure students gain the knowledge they need for graduation.

**Participant Selection**

My original plan for this case study was to observe and interview four instructors, two administrators, and several students, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, my location was changed before data collection began.

At the time of data collection, Northeast Academy had 100 students enrolled, five teachers and one principal. The superintendent of the school district granted me access to the location for my research and the principal decided which classroom I observed. Alexandria thought it best for me to observe her English I and II courses because I could see two different courses at different times of the day. I observed a range of ages of students from freshman to senior grade levels. As an observer, I ensured I had minimal disruption to the classroom which was a stipulation of both the superintendent and the principal (Patton, 2002).

IRB approval was obtained before this study began. I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) because I had a specific case that provided an in-depth understanding about its culture and instructional delivery. Because I looked at a specific case, at-risk students, I selected participants in a particularly small alternative education school that allowed me to develop a clear understanding about how lessons are being delivered. The site that was studied had staff that worked with the students daily under the same administration. The instructor, administrator, and the students who chose to participate were interviewed. The students who had the opportunity to be interviewed, were enrolled

in Northeast Academy, had signed the appropriate consent and assent forms required by the IRB, and were students in Alexandria's classes.

All participants in the Alexandria's classroom were asked to participate in the study following IRB protocol. The students who chose to have their IRB approved consent and assent forms signed, participated in an interview (see Appendix A). The principal and teacher filled out and signed a consent form, and the students who were 18 years of age or older, filled out and signed a consent form. Students who were under the age of 18 completed a parental consent form along with a student assent form (see Appendix A).

Observations of the classroom were limited to general observation of the relationships between the teacher and students. Individual responses were limited to interviews. During the morning observations, I observed a maximum of three students in English I and a maximum of seven students in English II. During the afternoon observations, I observed a maximum of four students in English I and a maximum of six students in English II. At the time of data collection, I interviewed the one administrator, one teacher, and six students total from English I and II.

## Data Collection Strategies

The following data collection strategies were utilized when researching alternative education.

### *Documents*

One of the documents I studied was a copy of the mission and vision of the alternative education school which was found online. This document helped guide me while I was doing my observations. I also used a revised version of the teacher

observation tool school administration used to aid teachers in becoming more effective in the classroom, (see Appendix C). I used this form during my observations to make sure I looked for certain criteria the instructor was supposed to use day to day in the classroom. Table 1 is an adapted rubric obtained from *The Handbook of Educational Theories* (Irby et al., 2013). This rubric helped determine the level of understanding the teacher had for Differentiated Instruction. I also obtained assignments the teacher created to see if students were given an opportunity for differentiated learning. Creswell (2014) wrote that documents help the researcher with time and language, and it also helps with bias by providing an "unobtrusive source of information" (p. 192).

***Observations***

Creswell (2014) stated that qualitative observations occur when a researcher examines the behaviors and activities of the individuals the researcher is observing. The researcher creates observation questions that they seek answers while in the field (Creswell, 2014). Clarifying questions asked during observations were open-ended questions. Patton (2002) cautioned against assumptions. He stated that if the researcher needs clarification, then make sure to ask questions. I observed two different levels of English being delivered by the same instructor. I watched how the teacher interacted with the students during lessons. The students were in class for 50 minutes at a time and completed one semester every nine weeks. With the way my observations were spread throughout the spring semester, I observed a whole year's worth of work for students.

I was originally going to conduct four observations during the fall semester as evenly spaced as possible. The observations would have taken place in the fall semester: the first one was scheduled for late August to early September, the second observation

was scheduled for late September early October, the third was scheduled for late October early November, and the last one was scheduled for late November early December. Because of the location change, the schedule for observations were postposed to the following spring. They were still conducted evenly to provide insight to the students' daily activities and how they completed their courses. The schedule was changed to: February, March, April, and May. I observed two different levels of English being taught at different times of the day to see a wide range of students and how they performed in the morning and the afternoon. I observed morning classes in February and March and afternoon classes in April and May.

***Interviews***

Creswell (2014) explained that interviews are conducted either face to face or via phone. Interviews should be conducted with a minimum of six to eight different participants to gain a clear picture of the topic. Open-ended questions should be used, and the researcher should start with a few questions that can be expanded upon during the interview (Creswell, 2014).

At the time of data collection, I was able to interview one principal, one instructor, and six students. I spaced out the interviews to gain a clear understanding of the progression of the school year. I interviewed the principal to gain a better understanding of the mission, vision, and goals of Northeast Academy. The instructor I interviewed teaches five courses, but only I observed her English I and English II courses. I also interviewed the instructor to allow her to add depth and understanding to my observations. With the observations and interviews, I feel I have a strong understanding about how her classroom was ran and what she provided her students.

### *Audio-Visual Materials*

Cresswell (2014) listed several types of audio-visual materials that are useful for qualitative study. I used audio recordings for my interviews, so if I needed to go back and re-listen to an interview for clarity, I had it recorded. I also used email for follow-up messages. Email messages were utilized for follow up questions and correspondence. I photographed the classroom with no participants included, and I did this to showcase and visually show ways a differentiated classroom was set up to help meet individual student needs.

## Data Storage and Security

Data storage and security was important for protecting the participants throughout the study. Creswell (2014) recommended that data should be kept for five years, according to the American Psychology Association, and then should be discarded appropriately so it does not end up being misconstrued or misinterpreted by another researcher. It is also important to not duplicate data or store it in multiple areas that are not locked up or on a computer that does not contain password protection.

IRB approved consent and assent forms were used to allow interviewees to know exactly how the data was used and stored. The data was always kept and locked in a filing cabinet or on a password locked computer during the study. The forms will be destroyed upon the completion of the study so that private information will not be shared with anyone not involved in the study.

**Table 2**

*Data Storage and Security*

| Data Type | Storage and Security Location | Possession Time | Identifying Information |
|---|---|---|---|
| Observation Notes | Kept in a locked filing cabinet. | Approximately one year after initial collection. | Name of the school, location, and names of participants. |
| Interview Notes | Kept in locked filing cabinet. | Approximately one year after initial collection. | Names of faculty and students participating. |
| Audio Recordings and Photos | On researcher's cell phone which is security password locked. | Approximately one year after initial collection. | Saved the audio recordings, using a number system to tie them back participant. |
| Transcriptions of audio files | On researcher's password protected personal laptop. | Approximately one year after initial collection. | Names of faculty and students. |
| Documents | Scanned or downloaded into Researcher's laptop. | Approximately one year after initial collection. | Facility, faculty, and students. |

## Data Analysis

The data for this case study was obtained via observations, interviews, emails, and site policy and procedures. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) wrote that this is one of the most critical and delicate procedures in a qualitative study. Data is messy, and when a researcher must critically analyze his or her own data a careful approach is crucial. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that data is often "inductive" and "comparative" meaning that the researcher must continually compare new data to build a solid study. One process is to consolidate, reduce, and compare findings and putting them into

appropriate groups and categories. Another process is utilizing a coding method that analyzes data during the research process (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The type of case study I conducted provided data that can be coded. I gathered the data from observations, interviews, emails, and policy and procedures adopted by the site and looked for common themes (Creswell, 2014). To capture common themes, I analyzed the data collected, looked for commonality presented, and found overarching similarities. Then I created a spreadsheet to organize and identified the emerging themes. After the themes were established, I triangulated the data under the main themes that helped to support the information received from the sources according to Creswell (2014). Once all the data was coded and interpreted, illustrations, figures, and tables were created to help the reader visualize the outcomes.

## Trustworthiness of Findings

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated there are four criteria that need to be met to establish trustworthiness of the findings for a qualitative case study. The four criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### Credibility

Creswell (2014) wrote that for a researcher to gain a thorough understanding of a phenomenon, they must spend a prolonged period of time in the field or on site. I spent one to two times per month observing the two different levels of English classes that Alexandria taught. I met with the principal of the academy, and he was eager to accommodate any time I needed to come and observe the academy. I established a relationship with all members of the academy, and I gained the trust of the instructor and students. This allowed me to gather reliable observations and interviews described in the

findings. I felt I needed to spend a complete semester with all members of the site to paint a clear picture that determined if student needs were met. Persistent observations allowed me to sort through what was relevant to include in the findings. To identify relevant data, I used triangulation of common themes recommended by Patton (2002). As the study progressed, I utilized my cohort to help review and suggest procedural edits. This allowed for recommendations and changes to data collection instruments. Member checks were used to ensure information participants gave was accurately portrayed according to Creswell (2014).

**Transferability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) said for a study to be valid and relevant, the study must have meaning that can be transferred into a future study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that qualitative research needs to be generalized and researchers need to not try to control all factors because this could restrict outcomes of the study. I gathered all the information I could from observations, interviews, emails, and documents that provided a rich and detailed description of the site. Creswell (2014) discussed thick description should allow the reader to feel they are being transported into the study. The reader should be able to visualize and understand the setting completely without ever stepping foot into the actual field of study (Creswell, 2014).

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Reflexivity is a core characteristic of valid qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Researcher bias and interpretation are shaped according to individual backgrounds, so it is imperative that these two items be discussed. Also, a researcher must know how to avoid any bias possible and understand how to interpret the data they are collecting

(Creswell, 2014). Patton (2002) explained that reflexivity is a constant analysis of asking how the qualitative inquiry is relevant to the study. The researcher must pay close attention to the voice being used when reporting findings and make sure that it is the voice of the organization and studied individuals that is being displayed (Patton, 2002). I interpreted data exactly as it was presented, and I created data tables along the way to ensure accuracy. I reflected on my studies often to see if any gaps existed and then returned to my subjects for clarification.

Table 3 was adapted from Lincoln and Guba (1985) and displays how my research was trustworthy to the best of my ability.

**Table 3**

*Trustworthiness Criteria and Examples*

| **Credibility** | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Criteria/Technique*** | ***Intended Results*** | ***Examples*** |
| Prolonged engagement | Establish relationships with administration, instructors, and students | Spent one full school year (Nine weeks is equivalent to one semester at a traditional high school) with location one to two days per month observing two levels of English Class |
| | Gather complete data | |
| | Obtain a full understanding of the culture of site | Conducted face to face interviews and communicated via email |
| | Establish trust with students | |
| Persistent observation | Help sort data by what is necessary and not necessary | Observed students and teachers interacting in the classroom |
| | Gather in-depth and complete data | Observed the teacher helping to meet students' needs during class |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Triangulation | Look emerging themes in observations and interviews | Sources for triangulation came from interviews, emails, and observations |
| Peer debriefing | Have a trusted source offer his or her perspective on the site and observations completed | Gathered observations, interviews, and emails then ask peers in my doctoral class to help read over and critique technique along the way |
| Member checking | Verify all documentation and outcomes | Allowed principal and instructor who participated to look over results to verify accuracy of the study, and allowed them to fill in any gaps they see fit in adding to the results that help support the findings |
| Purposive sampling | The site chosen for the case study allows for a clear understanding or whether student need is met in an alternative school setting | Purposeful sampling selection was based on the employees of the site and number of students at the academy during the time of the study. |

| **Transferability** | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Criteria/Technique*** | ***Result*** | ***Examples*** |
| Referential Adequacy | Give enough information from interviews to provide a complete and full description of program | Gathered information about the alternative school, the layout of the class, and methods the teacher used from the principal, teacher and students |
| Thick description | Provide data from alternative school to show student outcomes that can help support if student needs are being met | Provided background about what an at-risk student is in education.<br>Explained the experiences from participating candidates in the program that allowed the reader a clear picture |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Provide a written paper that allows the reader to understand the perspective of students from the alternative school setting | pertaining to students' needs being met |

| **Dependability/Conformability** | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Criteria/Technique*** | ***Result*** | ***Examples*** |
| Inquiry audit | Establish fact for findings and data analysis | All data gathered and placed in a data base that if needed could be audited at any time |
| Reflexivity | Reflexivity allows options to obtain more information if needed while going through the research process | After interviews and observations were conducted, the data was transcribed and stored in case anything needs to be added or updated as the field work progressed |

Adapted from "Naturalistic Inquire" by Y.S. Lincoln & E.G. Guba. Copyright 1985 by SAGE.

## Limitations

Limitations are weaknesses found in data collection and should be noted and avoided if possible. Patton (2002) listed several limitations in areas of observations, interviews, and other recorded documents. Limitations, while doing observations, can occur if the researcher influences the site which may cause the participants to act differently than if the researcher were not present. The researcher needs to carefully design observation check lists before going on site to help gain needed and valid information (Patton, 2002). When I conducted my field work, the Pandemic created a few limitations. One limitation when I conducted interviews were masks and social

distancing. Due to the pandemic, the principal, teacher, students, and I had to wear a mask while at the academy. The researcher needs to create open-ended questions and be prepared to audiotape the interviews to capture all that was said during the conversation. The audiotape then needs to be interpreted word for word, and not have any emotions or opinions from the researcher added to the responses (Patton, 2002). At time because of the masks and social distancing, I had to ask more than once for clarification so that I would make sure my audio files could be interpreted correctly. During field work it is important to use several methods to capture data to avoid some limitations in the study, but in the end all limitations and biases should be noted in the study (Patton, 2002).

## Summary

Chapter III discussed in depth the methodology used to guide this qualitative case study. Chapter III discussed my role as the researcher and bias I avoided while conducting research. Then the research design I chose was discussed, by providing the sampling techniques, data collection, and data analysis procedures used for the case study. A trustworthiness table was included, and techniques used were discussed. Lastly, the limitations of the study were summarized.

Chapter IV reveals the findings discovered during research. Emerging themes were identified by the questions that guided the case study. Chapter IV also contains a synopsis of the observations and interviews that were conducted at Northeast Academy.

# CHAPTER IV

## FINDINGS

Chapter IV presents the findings of the qualitative case study conducted at an alternative education school. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perspectives of students, an instructor, and an administrator who are stakeholders in an alternative educational setting, Northeast Academy, that implements differentiated instruction strategies to gain an understanding of how this academy meets the needs of at-risk students. The following research questions drove the study:

1. How do stakeholders describe their role in meeting the needs of at-risk students at the Northeast Success Academy?
    a. What are student perceptions regarding how Northeast Success Academy has, or has not, met their needs?
    b. What are teacher perceptions regarding how they have altered instruction to meet the needs of at-risk students?
    c. What are administrator perceptions regarding how Northeast Success Academy has met the needs of at-risk students?

2. How does Tomlinson and Allan's (2000) Differentiated Instruction Theory help explain how Northeast Success Academy meets the unique needs of at-risk students?
3. What other realities exist regarding how this center is meeting the needs of at-risk students?

The intent of Chapter IV is to present overarching themes discovered from data analysis and present findings of each research question. First, a rich description of the school is provided for the reader which includes the layout and location of the school, number of faculty, class sizes, provisions for students, and the application process. I also describe items collected from the teacher. Next, the readers are introduced to a representative of each stakeholder type: administrator, teacher, and student. Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of each participant. I follow up with accounts from each participant. I also include descriptions from each observation conducted. Then, I discuss the themes that were found during the data analysis. Lastly, I answer each of the research questions with supported findings.

## Data Presentation

This section presents data that supports the case study conducted. First, the school district and the academy where the research occurred are described in depth, along with a comparison of the closest urban school district of similar size. This contrast and comparison is given to help the reader understand the differences in the communities, education levels, and resources. This comparison is vital to better understand the context of the research site. Next a detailed account of the observations was given. Lastly, a summary of each interview was provided.

## Research Site: District Information

Northeast Public Schools is a suburban school that is located about 20 miles from a larger urban city school district. The suburb has grown throughout the years to have over 54,000 residents in an area of 17 square miles. The average income for this school district is $78,000 per year (NCES 2021). The population of the school district is made up of the following ethnicity of students 76% White, 3% Black, 6% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 6% American Indian, and 7% listed two or more (NCES, 2021). Also, a little over 40% of the students' parents hold a bachelor's degree and only 4% of the parents have not graduated from high school (NCES, 2021).

Northeast Public School district consists of a total of 13 schools: nine elementary schools, a separate sixth, a separate seventh, a separate eighth grade center, and one high school (NCES, 2021). Research data was collected in the alternative education program located in a separate building but is a part of the high school. Northeast Public Schools educates roughly 10,000 students that attend grades pre-K through 12$^{th}$ grade. The school's yearly revenue is over $81,000,000 and approximately $822 of that revenue is spent per student in a school year (NCES, 2021).

## Comparison District: Urban City School District

The closest city to Northeast Public Schools is approximately ten miles away. The city population is a little over 282,000 and the average income is $43,000 (NCES, 2021). The city is more diverse with 50% of residents being White, 18% Black, and 17% Hispanic. Also, 72% speak English as the only language and 27% speak English and

another language. The parents of the students for this school average about 19% earning a bachelor's degree and 22% that have not finished high school (NCES, 2021).

The school consists of 69 schools that make up elementary, middle school grades sixth through eighth, and high school grades ninth through twelfth. There are over 35,000 students who attend pre-k through twelfth grade (NCES, 2021). The revenue for this large urban school is over $411,000,000 and approximately $1200 of that revenue is spent per student in a school year (NCES, 2021).

The two school districts although not far apart have some distinct differences. The suburban city was the location of the research. The first difference is the size of the city and population. The urban school district has 228,000 more residents than the smaller suburban city where the research occurred. Then, the average income of families in the suburban school is approximately $35,000 more per year. Next, around 21% more of the parents have a college education of a bachelors or higher. Lastly, the urban school is more diverse compared to the suburban school district.

**Northeast High School**

Northeast High School has approximately 2,948 students. The high school is made up of a student population with wealthier parents than their closer urban school district. This allows more money to be spent on the school in general, so buildings are nice, new, and large enough to accommodate a larger number of students. The student to teacher ratio at the high school is 20.9:1. According to NCES (2021), students perform higher than the state's average in English, Math, Science and History. There are also many elective opportunities for students to participate in as well as various sports, drama, and music. The students also have the option of attending a junior college and or a

technology center for advanced education and training. The high school sets in a beautiful part of town surrounded by homes where many students can walk safely to school. According to the principal of the alternative school, many of the students at the high school have been in the district since kindergarten.

Table 4 displays the number of students who attend the area high school along with the student to teacher ratio. It also indicates that the students score above state average on state exams in basic courses such as: English, Math, Science and History (NCES, 2021).

**Table 4**

*Northeast High School Demographics*

| Number of Students | Student to Teacher Ratio | State Average | High School Scores |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2,984 | 20.9 to 1 | English 36% | English – 40% |
| | | Math- 26% | Math – 31% |
| | | Science – 19% | Science – 22% |
| | | History – 51% | History – 62% |

Note. The above table is information for the high school only, not the district. This table was adapted from NCES, 2021, *District Directory Information*. https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?ID2=4023280.

**Northeast Academy**

Northeast Academy received a national award called the Crystal Star Award in 2015 for dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery. The alternative education center has a 97% graduation rate (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2015). Northeast Academy is a stand-alone building separate from the high school and was at one time an elementary school. The building is part of the high school but is located about four miles

from the main high school. Most of the students drive, but the ones who do not are offered transportation via a school bus. Students stay at the academy for the whole day unless they attend classes at a local technology center, then, they leave for either half the morning or half the afternoon. Grades ninth through twelfth are housed at the academy, and classes could consist of students from all four grades. My first visit to the school I was offered a tour and given historical background about the occupied space. Even though the building was once designed for elementary school aged children, it did not seem to make a difference in the attitudes of the students. The ceilings were low, the classrooms were big and bright, and the walls were made of cinder blocks and were painted bright cheerful colors. The lunchroom had an old performance stage and smelled of fresh baked goodies.

Two walls really stood out to me, one was a graffiti wall and the other was painted pictures on cinder blocks. Bill, the principal, explained that the graffiti wall was for students who successfully completed the program. Students could write their name and a message of encouragement to the upcoming students. The cinder block paintings were in the student lounge, and these were expressions of the students. Some were brighter themed, and others were darker themed, but they reflected the thoughts and feelings of the individual student. Bill thought this was important because it allowed them freedom of expression, and he also said, of course, they are approved before they can be painted.

The principal's office was not what I expected. I walked in and noticed the traditional set-up of a desk and bookshelves, but then I also saw a refrigerator and a comfy couch. His room was also big and bright with two big windows which let in a lot

of natural light. He told me that he wanted students to feel comfortable coming to speak to him and that they were welcome not just when they were in trouble, but also any time they needed to talk or vent. Sometimes the students would come in and ask to be alone and he would offer them a water from the refrigerator, and they would sit on the couch and collect themselves. He explained to me that his students needed a safe place to talk, and they needed to learn how to deal with their feelings other than acting out. This space offered a way for students to be comfortable, think through what they were facing, and then he would come back in, and they would talk through the problem. Bill takes pride in how he runs the academy, and he has helped many students learn how to deal with life's hardships and distractions and still be successful.

**Acceptance and Classes**

Prospective students who want to attend Northeast Academy must apply. These prospective students fill out an application, get invited for a tour, and then wait to see if they are accepted into the program. According to Bill, the process adds accountability and helps the students feel like they are welcomed and not forced to attend. He wants the students to feel like they still have a choice and buy-in with completing their education. When problems arise or students begin to misbehave, he can refer to the fact that they were accepted into the academy as a privilege not by force. He said this helps with ownership and accountability of behavior.

Classes are designed to be completed in nine-week blocks. One nine-week block is equivalent to one semester of a traditional high school calendar. The instructor understands the courses are fast paced and gives students plenty of time to complete their work. Alexandria teaches five different subjects: creative writing, communication, Art,

English I, and English II. I observed English I and II, which are core courses and were the ones Alexandria recommended I observe.

**Class Setting**

When I first walked into her classroom, I noticed immediately that the doors had inspirational posters on them and there were other inspirational posters hung around the room. Her room was bright, colorful and had lots of space. The room consisted of two whiteboards that went from one wall to the other. One whiteboard was used for weekly at-a-glance assignments, and the front board was used for daily assignments and a space for Alexandria to write notes for lecture and discussion. Desks were arranged in rows facing the front of the classroom, and a table was in the back for group work and for one-on-one discussion space. Alexandria's desk was located at the back so she could quickly scan the students' computers to make sure they are working on assignments. She had a total of three bookcases filled with books for students to access and two windows that keep the classroom bright and cheerful. I also noticed she spent time making sure students felt welcomed and prepared for the school day. Alexandria had online students due to COVID-19 and the school had a set up to where the students could hear her no matter where she was in the classroom. She also carried a laptop so that the online students not only heard her but could always see her.

Students were in her classes as part of a credit recovery program; meaning they did not pass the courses at their traditional high school. Some students have attempted English I and II more than once, so she likes to ensure they got a different experience than what they had at their high school. So, for example, she explained to me that she

cycled through six different novels, that students had not read at the high school, to ensure they were getting something new and different.

**Faculty**

Northeast Academy is a small school with five instructors. The English teacher that I interviewed taught not only English I and II, but also taught three electives. The academy also had their own principal and counselor onsite. A team approach to differentiated instruction was used and demonstrated the ability of a teacher to sometimes reach a student that perhaps the other teacher(s) were not able to reach. Teachers collaborated and helped each other discuss ways that might reach students together. The principal was involved with the students daily. He would stop by the classroom in case a student needed them. He explained that sometimes students felt more comfortable talking in their classroom then going to an office. I noticed the teacher and principal worked together as a great team for the students.

**Observations**

My observations were of a class that was made up of ninth through twelfth graders in the same classroom. Northeast Academy used a one-to-one approach with their students. Each student was equipped with a Chromebook, and they all had their own school Google accounts. I conducted four evenly spaced observations with Alexandria and her English classes. I was able to observe a whole year's worth of work due to the academy's school calendar. Appendix C is an adaptation of a teaching tool that administrators use to evaluate teachers. I looked for the following: classroom management and instructional effectiveness.

## Observation tool

Appendix C is the observation tool that was utilized to gather information while observing the classroom. The observation tool is used was drafted from the TLE (Teaching and Leader Effectiveness) tool provided by the Oklahoma Department of Education. I only used the rubric, published by the Oklahoma Department of Education, to better understand how the teacher met students' needs in the different categories, not to evaluate the teacher. The modified TLE tool provided me a step-by-step approach to look for classroom effectiveness. There are five different sections in the original TLE which are classroom management, instructional effectiveness, professional growth and continuous improvement, interpersonal skills, and leadership. I utilized only the first two sections for this study classroom management and instructional effectiveness. I felt these two areas provided the support and guidance needed to answer my research questions. Each time I visited the classroom, I would set up by Alexandria's desk so I could observe what she taught for both students in the classroom and students online. I used my observation tool to make sure I watched for certain items during my observations. I also asked for supporting documents when needed. Next, I discuss what I saw utilizing my observation tool for the two main categories; classroom management and instructional effectiveness (see Appendix C).

### *Classroom Management*

Alexandria has been in the classroom for more than twenty years. She has helped develop alternative education programs, she was the leader of an alternative education center, and now teaches five different subjects for at-risk students. She is extremely organized, and I can tell she is very comfortable with the fast pace of nine-week

semesters and what the students need to learn to graduate. Her classroom routine works well for her students, and it helps move them towards their goal of graduating high school.

**Preparedness.** Alexandria was always prepared for class. In Appendix E, one can see a sample of the pacing calendar she has made for the week. She told me when she first started teaching, she wrote so much detail into her pacing calendar with notes and reflections, but as time passed, she feels very confident in keeping a pacing calendar with lesser detail. She does have detailed lessons ready for the students, for example, she sent me a screen shot of the directions she used that her students see on Google Classroom for a resumé assignment (see Appendix D). She also sent me the lesson the students would be completing for a book, "The Giver", which was a mind map and a page which prompted a free write (see Appendix D). Alexandria was always well prepared for class. The assignments were prepared for different levels of understanding; they would start with something easier such as vocabulary and then work their way up to a more complicated assignment.

The students were equipped with classroom tools so they could easily keep track of daily assignments. An example of a classroom tool was the use of one of her whiteboards for each subject and what was due for the day. Alexandria taught five different subjects and had many of the same students in different courses she taught. The whiteboard layout helped students keep track of which class and what assignment was expected of them for the day. Appendix F shows pictures of her classroom whiteboards.

**Classroom Routine.** Alexandria had a system for starting and ending classes that she used each time I observed. The first 10 minutes she would ask the students if they had

any questions about the work from the day before. When students had questions, she would not simply give them the answers, but would use probing questions to guide them in finding the answers on their own. After the students had their questions answered, she would spend a few minutes going over what the students would be working on in class that day. She had students both in person and online due to COVID-19, but the online students received announcements and discussion at the same time as the in-class students.

The academy had a computer set up on her desk with a microphone and a laptop she could use to move about the classroom. I noticed that no matter where she was in the classroom, her online students could hear her and ask questions when needed. Next, the student did the work assigned and during this time, Alexandria would walk about the classroom to help students one-on-one. Once she helped the in-class students, she would then check on the online students. The students worked in Google Classroom, so she was able to help them in real time. I watched the students type on their assignment and I could see her type questions, directions, and suggestions live to the students whether they were in class or online. During the last 10 minutes of class, she would do a "wrap up". She would ask the students clarifying questions, remind them of what was due the next day, and then would give them a preview of what they would work on tomorrow. She also reminded them they could email her or message her with any questions they had after they left school for the day.

**Discipline.** Northeast Academy has students who are not strangers to being in trouble at school. Alexandria has taught in alternative education for most of her career, so she knows how to deal with classroom discipline issues without causing much disruption between classmates. In one of my observations, I noticed a student with a hood on and

looking at his phone instead of paying attention. I watched Alexandria simply approach the student and tap him on the shoulder and he put his phone away. The student continued to be distracted so she changed gears and gave them all something quick to work on individually and she brought the student back to her desk so they could talk one on one. The student said he did not understand what was going on and I listened to her calm the student and re-direct the negative attitude into positive class-related conversation. Soon the student was answering her questions out loud and returned to his seat to work. She then picked up where she left off.

**Feedback.** The teacher used real time feedback with the students. They used Google Classroom so they could ask questions electronically while they worked live in the classroom. She provided instant feedback and helped to correct or re-direct a student in a live document. I watched her on more than one occasion, while students were working independently, as she typed alongside of the student who struggled to answer a question about a book they were reading in class. She would ask a question that would get them back on track and if they did not understand, they would come back to her desk for one-on-one help. She also had students working from home online because of COVID-19. She gave them the same attention as she did the students in the classroom.

**Student Relationships.** Alexandria displayed that she created positive and caring relationships with her students. Not only was she their teacher, but I also witnessed her being a friend and counselor in a way. This was observed as they talked to her about trouble they had at home, with relationships, or at their work. They also got excited about their personal lives, and she inquired about events they had previously talked bout with

after school activities and weekend plans, which demonstrated to me that she took an interest in what they did outside of school.

### *Instructional Effectiveness*

The second part of my observation tool allowed me to focus on instructional effectiveness. During this time, I saw what she offered the students and what the students gained and produced. Alexandria taught English, as one of her courses, so I started by observing literacy support.

**Literacy.** Alexandria used several different activities that supported literacy learning. The students went through a book every nine weeks and she helped make sure they understood what they read. She gave assignments that provided free writes and discussion questions that evaluated students understanding. I observed her providing support to students that helped them with their reading. Sometimes she read aloud when she felt that students had a difficult time with understanding, or she supplemented with video materials. She also pre-recorded readings of the book if the students needed to listen and read along, but in the end, the students had to answer the questions and participate in discussion to evaluate comprehension of the lesson.

**Involving All Learners.** When I talked to the students, the majority said they were hands on learners. Alexandria found creative ways to meet the hands-on learner needs for her English classes. She involved several different teaching strategies such as class discussion, independent study time, and one-on-one help when needed. She was also available outside of regular class hours in the evening to help students if they had questions while working at home. Because the classes were one semester in nine-weeks, she was more flexible with dates. She understood that some of the assignments came easy

and others did not, so she adjusted the time and allowed the students to turn in assignments later if they needed more time to work.

**Content Explanations and Directions.** Northeast Academy was a one-to-one school that provided each student with a Chromebook so they could access Google Classroom. Alexandria utilized Google Classroom to house students' assignments so they could be accessed anywhere and anytime. She wrote daily assignments on her whiteboard and talked about expectations at the beginning and ending of each class. She also held class discussions and lectures with students in class and online then, accompanied these with written assignments. She gave clear directions and allowed students time to ask clarifying questions before they worked.

**Monitoring Progress and Closure.** After Alexandria presented the assignment for the day, she went to each student and inquired about their progression and invited them to ask questions. If a student had questions or was not understanding what was expected, she adjusted the assignment on the spot. Alexandria not only did a "wrap up" of the current day, but also left five to ten minutes to remind the students what they would be completing the next day. Her expectations of student work were clearly laid out, and she gave the students a chance to ask questions.

## Data Analysis

### Content, Process and Product

I used the criteria descriptions of content, process, and product, developed by Carol Tomlinson and Susan Allan, when I conducted my observations to look for ways the instructor utilized differentiated instruction (see Figure 1). The following is what I

observed in the classroom (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Table 5 gives examples of differentiated instruction I observed in Alexandria's classroom.

**Table 5**

| **Observation** | **Content** | **Process** | **Product** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Observation #1 | Taped materials- Recorded lessons in case students needed to listen again.<br><br>Varied supplementary materials- Teacher had auditory files for students who had trouble reading could listen and follow along. | Tiered lessons- Students in different places in the book. She had lessons ready for struggling students and advanced students.<br><br>Independent study- Students were given directions and then they would engage in their work. I could watch Google Classroom and see students working on assignments. | Complex instruction-Teacher linked book, definitions, and instruction all together. |
| Observation #2 | Taped material- Students who need to have the book read to them, the teacher has it recorded, and students can listen with headphones.<br><br>Varied supplemental material- students were in different places in the book, teacher arranged lesson plans that day for student who had moved ahead. | Tiered Lessons- Students that finished ahead of others were assigned extra enriching work or were moved ahead.<br><br>Independent Study- After instructions, students would be given time to work by themselves and ask questions as needed. | Varied Questioning Strategies- Students were never given an answer directly. Teacher would ask student a directing question to help them learn to find answers on their own. She also allowed students to send messages via google or email. Students had several ways to get help when needed, but always encouraged to use |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Anchored Activities- Starts activities then lets them progress as needed | | higher order thinking. |
| Observation #3 | Taped material and Varied Supplementary Materials-students have finished book and are now watching the movie and comparing differences between book and movie. | Group investigation-students worked as a class to find and discuss differences between the movie and the book. | Complex instruction-students had to work together to find differences between a book and a movie. |
| Observation #4 | Varied text- teacher has in class and online students. Students are reading and completing vocab and questions for book they are reading.<br><br>Anchored Activities- Starts activities then lets them progress as needed | Independent Study- Students were given time to read, free write, and complete vocab and questions.<br><br>Tiered lessons- students given simple to more complex ways to understand the book they are reading. | Complex instruction-teacher went over lesson at the beginning of class. Students' work would start out with definitions and then work into complex questions. |

**Findings from Interviews**

The interviewees were selected based on voluntary participation. The following is an excerpt from each interview that supports the findings. First, the students' interviews are shared followed by the teacher and then the principal. Appendix B displays the questions that were utilized during the interview process. I conducted the interviews in a

computer classroom that was not being used so we could keep six feet from each other to follow COVID-19 protocols see (Appendix A).

The computer room was not like Alexandria's room. It was not as bright and colorful; the walls were a plain and forgettable color with little hanging on the walls. The room had computers around its perimeter. The principal said the room was not used very often and that was not a concern because students had their own personal devices. COVID-19 also hindered normal body language. Students, staff, and guests were required to wear masks on school grounds. This made it hard to see their faces and the interviewees spent a lot of time adjusting their masks. I feel it made them antsy in a different way, for example, instead of fidgeting with their hands or something on the desk they would rearrange their masks. At times it also made it hard to hear what the students were saying, but I simply asked the questions again and they were very respectful in repeating. Overall, the students who chose to do the interviews were open with their feelings and seemed to enjoy talking about their experiences at Northeast Academy.

***Mary***

Mary was a sixteen-year-old White female that conducted herself in a calm and polite manner during our discussion. It took her a little time to warm up to me, but once she did, our conversation went really well. She began by telling me that she was not doing well in high school, and it was originally her mother's idea for her to attend Northeast Academy. Like most teenagers, she was resistant at first because she had several friends at the high school, but she also realized she was not progressing academically. She explained to me that even though the decision was a hard one to make, she is glad she decided to apply to the academy and get back on track for graduation.

Mary said at first it was hard to make friends, but once she started talking to the other girls in class, she made friends with them quickly. She also shared with me about how big of a difference the teachers made in her life. Mary said, “I get more time for assignments, they help me understand, and will change the assignment for me if it doesn’t make sense to me”. She went on to say at times her classmates get out of hand, but she likes how Alexandria gets everyone to settle down and how she gets everyone back to what they were working on before the disruption occurred. Another piece of the interview that stood out to me was when she said, “Northeast Academy changed the way I learn, I look forward to learning instead of saying everything is stupid”.

One challenge she pointed out was how the pandemic made it harder for her to learn in class. She explained to me that she is a hands-on learner and enjoys being in the classroom. When the pandemic first hit and all students were sent home to learn virtually, she struggled, so she has a new appreciation for her school and realizes how lucky she is to be in a classroom. Being a hands-on learner in an English class is also a challenge, so she makes sure she is taking notes to keep her hands and mind busy while they are discussing books. Mary also said that Alexandria knows what type of learner she is and helps her find meaningful ways to aid her in staying focused. She said she also knows exactly where to put us in the classroom. Mary is not a fan of the Chromebooks as she would rather work in groups but understands the importance of technology and realizes the pandemic has changed some ways in which the students are able to gather into groups.

***Charles***

Charles was an eighteen-year-old White male. He was quiet and blended in well with the crowd. I was surprised, after we got to talking, how direct he was about his feelings towards the high school. He was so quiet in the beginning, but his demeanor changed when he finally started to share. He sat up straight in his chair and looked me in the eyes when he talked. He started by discussing the trouble he was having at the high school and how he fell behind. He believes that the academy was his "last hope" for finishing high school. He said, "I either come here or I don't graduate". Charles really believes that he has better teachers and support at the academy rather than the high school because of the one-on-one attention he gets with his schoolwork.

I was sad to hear that he felt like the teachers at the high school only helped students that were part of certain groups, for example, if you were a football player you would get more attention. He believed that the teachers here know him, they support his learning, and create assignments that help him succeed and stay engaged. Charles told me for the first time in a long time, English actually makes sense because Alexandria takes time to clearly explain assignments and makes them interesting for the class. He knows he struggles, and he told me the school has him on an individual success plan which helps him focus and stick with his goals.

***Nora***

Nora was a seventeen-year-old White female who was extremely social and moved around a lot while she talked. She started the conversation right up; she had no problem talking to me and was energetic and spirited the whole time. Nora told me she was an empathetic person and that she really cares about people's feelings. Like the other

interviewees, she started by telling me what troubles she had at the high school and that it ended up leading to extreme social anxiety. She was so wrapped up in other people's problems, she began to not focus on her work, and her parents pulled her from public school to be home schooled. Nora did not like this because she enjoyed the social aspect of school but realized she could not go back to her high school, so she applied for Northeast Academy. She was so relieved when she got started because she immediately saw they had a plan to get her caught up on her credits.

Nora told me that Alexandria was very good at keeping her involved in class, and when she had trouble or needed help, she emailed Alexandria. She said that the teacher emailed back different options for completing the assignment. They are the same expectations but worded to where she can understand what is expected of her to complete the work. She really wanted me to understand how caring and helpful Alexandria was, so she told me about an incident in class where she had a meltdown over a question. She said that the teacher stepped in and explained it again and reworded it until she understood what was being asked. The work is challenging, but manageable with the help she is getting from the teacher. Nora said now she finishes her work before most of her classmates, so Alexandria allowed her to read other books of her choosing. She went on to say that her teacher had heard about most of the books, so they engaged in discussion about what she was reading as an extra, more advanced, assignment. The academy changed her outlook on school. She expressed to me that, "I'm excited for school every day, instead of dreading going to school and getting bad grades". Nora went from earning F's to making A's and B's which she told me has helped her self-confidence in her education. She also explained to me that it is nice that the principal and teacher here

really knew who she was and not just her name, but really knew her, and this also helped drive her to make good grades so she could make them proud of her.

One interesting thing Nora pointed out about herself is that she is a hands-on learner, and to her that means her hands and mind always need to be busy. She would get in trouble at the high school because she liked to play Tetris when the teacher was lecturing. Nora explained to me that this was not to be rude, and it was not really to focus on a game, it really helped her focus on what the teacher was telling her. She felt that the academy kept all of this in mind and helped her find other ways to keep busy that did not look like she was not engaged in her work.

***Delilah***

Delilah was an eighteen-year-old White female. She conducted herself very maturely and was comfortable answering my questions. It did not take her long to warm up to me, and I could tell that she was confident. She started out by telling me that she was homeschooled until the seventh grade and then entered into Northeast Public Schools. She had a hard time adjusting and felt there were too many people going to her high school. Her real struggle came with a breakup with her boyfriend, and many of their mutual friends quit talking to her and she felt alienated and alone. This event started her downward spiral of bad grades, and she began to fail her classes. She explained to me that she tried to reach out for help, but the classes were so big, and her teacher did not have the time she needed to devote to her. She also told me that she was always in trouble for being late and was constantly being put into in house suspension which did not help her emotionally. Delilah tried to explain to her high school that she was having to get up at 6:00am to catch her ride and if she missed it, she would have to be absent from school.

She felt as though this was an endless cycle and no one cared. She said, “I was having trouble getting out of trouble”.

Delilah told me that once she came the Northeast Academy, she really started to see her grades improve. She also told me that she enjoys being in English now and that her teacher, Alexandria, helps her understand the assignments. Delilah has trouble focusing sitting in a desk chair reading so she said often times Alexandria allows her to go to the student lounge where she can sit in a more comfortable chair and read (see Appendix G).

Delilah said she also is pleased that she can get a hold of her teacher in the evening if she needs assistance with homework. She said she emails her with questions and her teacher is quick at responding. She also feels like she knows where she stands grade wise at all times because Alexandria puts assignment grades in quickly. Since Delilah knows her grades, and is more excited about school, she has set a goal to keep all of her grades above a C. She said this will be an achievable goal because Alexandria understands that she is a hands-on learner and knows how to adjust lessons to help her be successful. She said she also likes that her teacher allows her to doodle while they read or discuss books so she can stay focused. Delilah closed with telling me she did not enjoy her high school experience, but because she changed to the academy, she looks forward to coming to school every day.

***Lee***

Lee was an eighteen-year-old White male who wanted to do an interview, but when it was his turn, he was really quiet and withdrawn. Once he began to tell me his story, I understood why he was so reserved. He said he was taken out of school and sent

to a mental facility and while he was there, he tried to do classes online, but the technology was poor, and he fell further behind. So, when he heard about Northeast Academy, he knew it was probably his last chance to get help to graduate. He explained the process of getting into the academy, which was filling out an application and doing a tour of the school. He has more support here than he ever had at the high school. An example of how school is different for him at the academy is that when he was in English at the high school, he would just skip writing papers, and now that he is here, he turns all of his papers in and on time. He feels he gets the attention he needs and that the teacher is great at explaining assignments and making small changes he needs to be successful in completing his work.

***Cole***

Cole was an eighteen-year-old White male who was very shy, and although I used the same questions for him that I did for the other students, he was very quiet and did not have a lot of extra information to share with me. He explained to me that his classes were too big at the high school, he was not getting the help he needed, and he mostly just played on his phone. His teachers did not seem to care or mind, and he just started to feel lost and began to get bad grades. He likes the academy because he gets the one-on-one attention he needs.

Cole realizes he is a visual learner and he said that Alexandria will give him examples when he is having trouble with assignments. After he sees the example, he knows how to finish his work correctly. Cole said his class feel like family not just students he sees daily. They seem to watch out for each other and help each other stay on

task. He said he has a good mindset and is looking forward to graduating and going into the military.

### *Alexandria*

I conducted Alexandria's interview via phone so that I would not disturb her during her work hours. I also knew that we would have a lot to talk about because of her years of experience and how she handles her classes, so I wanted to give her plenty of time for the interview. Alexandria is a White female who has been in education for over twenty years, and she has always had a passion for helping at-risk students. An example of how she started working with at-risk students was a project she did for young pregnant woman in a Texas school district. She reminded me that this was well before the internet so in order to keep these young ladies from falling behind, she would gather all their work and take it from house to house tutoring each of them personally before going to the next student. After she helped establish the tutoring for teens who were at home after giving birth, she developed a transition plan for them to return back to school.

**Student stress.** Alexandria is always thinking about what is best for the students not just their grades, but also their wellbeing. She realizes the magnitude of some of the struggles students face while they are outside of school, and understands mental health plays a huge role in some students' progress. She went on to say, "because of their mental health, struggles have caused such anguish at the traditional high school." She works hard not only to help them navigate the courses she teaches, but also, she gets to know each of them, so they feel comfortable talking to her about other issues that affect the work they are doing in class. Students trust her with their feelings and know that she will help them find ways to cope while also completing the required work for graduation.

The pandemic has hindered her in getting to know her students as quickly as she has in the past. The masks cover up so much of the students' faces that it makes it hard to read their true feelings or see that they are confused. The masks have also led to students being quieter, which most of the time people would be happy about, but it makes participation in discussions more difficult. She said, "Because we have kids that come in every nine weeks, there are kids that I've never seen their whole face". She does the best she can with showing a smile with her eyes and positive body language so students feel like they can trust her and get to know her.

**Differentiated Instruction.** Alexandria understands the students she works with and knows they sometimes need classwork and homework to be presented in different ways and they need to be given a little more time for assignments. When she was in traditional school, the schedule was rigid and now that she is at the academy the general rule for late work is extremely flexible. She still gives deadlines, but she also takes student needs on a case-by-case basis. At the academy they have nine-week semesters, so they set hard dates every four weeks. For the majority of students anything in the first four weeks will not be rewarded a grade in the second four weeks. It provides the student with some flexibility, but also teaches them time management skills.

Alexandria taught in traditional high school for ten years, and she can say firsthand how hard it was to keep track of so many students and get all the grades reported in a timely manner. She said she would have over 30 students at a time in class and when she thinks back, she said she does not know how she ever got it all done. There were days when it was a challenge to get lesson plans created and ready for the next day. She felt extremely stressed and thought if she was feeling the way she was, imagine what

the students were feeling. She said, “I would say 99% of our kids struggle with being successful at just doing school”. Alexandria decided to leave the traditional classroom. She expressed how glad she was to leave when she learned that she would have smaller class sizes, would be able to get to know her students, and create lessons that would enrich student growth and learning.

Alexandria has really learned how to get creative with assignments, using new technology and finding other ways to allow the students to show they have learned the assignment without it always being in writing. The majority of the students are at the academy because the traditional assignments were not working for them, so she saw a need for change. So instead of a writing assignment, the students may illustrate a comic or as a group they may create their own film or screen play from a concept instead of a five-paragraph essay. Not only does she find ways to make assignments different, but she also believes in choice.

Over the years, she has completed several different novels with students and has differentiated lesson plans created so she will give them a choice in what they would like to read as a group. She explained to me that the key is that she has less students and is less stressed, so she has time to be more creative with assignments. She told me when she was in a traditional high school setting, she would have to grade for over 150 students, so they all had to complete the same assignment. She would come up with a formula to grade everything in a timely manner. But now, she has between 10 and 15 students at a time in class, so if the students need a variety of choices to complete the assignments, then it is more manageable to grade.

The academy is a Google Classroom school, so she said, “I have ‘real time’ communication with the kids when they’re working. That actually has been kind of a benefit of working online so much. With Google Classroom the way it is, they can be working on a document, and I can open up the document that they’re working on and literally watch them work”. The students are working on a novel about the Vietnam War and are answering questions before they come together for class discussion. She can watch what they are typing and can keep a closer eye on the students who she knows are lower performers and can either comment and correct them while they are working, or if there is a bigger issue, she calls them back to her desk for one-on-one help.

Understanding student types is important for being able to use differentiated instruction in the classroom. Alexandria starts a new school year and then quickly gets to know her students’ learning styles. She said sometimes she will use a tool that helps students to identify what type of learner they are, and other times, she has them write a paragraph or letter. This nine-week block she had the students write a letter to themselves with specific instructions they had to follow. She explains the assignment and puts the assignment in writing. She said she has been teaching for so long that by reading the responses and seeing how the student follows directions, she can tell the comprehension level the student is on and what needs they may have in class.

**Teacher exhaustion.** Alexandria did mention to me that teacher exhaustion is very real right now. She said with the ongoing pandemic, mask wearing, students and staff being sick, it has started to wear on her. Every time I visited with her though, I could see a smile through her eyes, and she was upbeat in her speech. Students more than ever just want to shut down and teachers have to find a way to lift their spirits and keep them

moving forward. Because of the pandemic, students seem to want to be more reclusive than ever before and at times, she said it makes her think she is an ineffective teacher. The students seem to be at times unreachable, but she reminds herself that she knows her students, they are in this block together, and they will figure it out. Alexandria said the only saving grace is that she is great at establishing relationships and trust from the start. For example, she had a student who kept sleeping in class. She pulled the student aside and asked him what was wrong, and he said he had closed at work for four nights in a row. She empathized with him and said let us talk about what we can get done today. She made the assignment into smaller chunks for him. She did not make excuses for him, she simply let him talk through his frustration, and then adapted the assignment to make it more manageable. Alexandria believes the academy is great for at-risk students because of the smaller class sizes and the family type atmosphere.

***Bill***

Bill was the principal at Northeast Academy for five years. The largest school he was ever in charge of had over 3000 students, so coming to Northeast Academy was quite a change. He instantly liked it because he saw the teachers were able to spend more one-on-one time with students and could be very bold and creative with learning objectives. Most of the classes will have at most fifteen or sixteen students, so this provides the staff with a unique opportunity to really get to know the students.

Most of the students struggle socially with large crowds. They just get lost in the shuffle. Many of the students that are at the academy lack social and emotional skills they need to be successful in high school. Bill understands and empathizes with his students, but he is also the first one to tell them we have to find a way to cope and get through

class. He stated, “I mean, it’s just ridiculous what some of these kids have been through, and I want to be empathetic, but it doesn’t give them an excuse to not go to school, not to do their homework, or cuss out a teacher”. He is both empathetic and firm with the students because he realizes they all have potential. He said he really likes to see the students step up to be leaders. He sees students who were sitting in the back row of their home high school being quiet and reserved become leaders at the academy. He also notices students that were said to be quiet and shy at their high school come to the academy and show a new courage and ability to step out in front of others and be a little vulnerable with their ideas.

**Teacher Collaboration.** Bill encourages his teachers to work closely together. He said if teacher relationships are strong, they can be good examples for students. The teachers at the academy do cross curriculum. For example, there are three teachers working together to create civil rights lessons. He also pointed out that teachers help with each other’s students. He explained that they keep each other in the loop with behavior and subject matter concerns. The teachers meet once per week to make sure there are no major concerns that need to be addressed. He believes that with the school being smaller, he has an opportunity to develop strong relationships with the teachers and students.

**Supporting Students.** Bill wants his students to be successful and sometimes he has to be stern, but he has the student’s best interest in mind. He explained to me that just when he believes he has seen it all, he will come across a student with a new struggle. Bill knows how to speak to students on their level, and he refers to obstacles of adulthood as getting through different doors that can be open and shut by the student. There was a struggling student who really wanted to go into the military, but the student was not

performing well enough to make that dream happen. He pulled the student aside and said, “How many doors are you going to choose to let close because you’re not willing to do what needs to be done with your GPA”. He went on to tell the student the process belongs to them, and they have to see it through because he cannot do the work for them. One very interesting idea Bill shared was that he has all the new students write him a letter telling them what they enjoy doing along with what their greatest fears are in life. He makes sure that he can have a story or an object ready to relate to that student if needed. He explained that many of the students get to the academy and start to turn their life around and do well with little to no disruption, but there are others that keep falling apart and that is when he focuses on the letters they wrote. For example, he had a student who loved to skateboard, but Bill knows nothing about skateboarding. So, when the student began to struggle, Bill would watch YouTube videos on skateboarding to pick up popular lingo and people so he could relate to the student and talk about something the student enjoyed. He said, “I think if you’re struggling with a kid, I think you have to try to find ways to communicate and bond a little bit outside of class”. He went on to express how so many have trust issues and think you will not like them because of their past.

## Themes

Once an in-depth analysis of the observation notes, interview transcripts, and collected artifacts was completed, the following themes emerged that aligned with the research questions created for this case study.

1. Strong relationships were built and developed between student and student, student and teacher, and staff and principal.

I witnessed the power of strong relationships each time I observed Alexandria’s

classroom. I could see the ease at which she conversed with her students and the respect they gave to her while working together on assignments. Alexandria was always present, meaning she demonstrated care and offered stability for her students. This was further expressed during the interviews when the students would discuss with me the level of trust they had with their teacher and principal. Also, students explained to me that the new friendships they had developed at the academy helped them to stay on track and felt more like family than just classmates.

2. Resources were provided to the alternative education site that allowed smaller student to teacher ratio.

The suburban community, where the alternative school was located, offered the students an opportunity to have smaller student to teacher ratios based on the resources the school was provided. The town as a whole has greater financial stability than surrounding schools. Students were provided a one-to-one learning approach with Chromebooks along with smaller class sizes made up of only fifteen or sixteen students at a time.

3. The teacher provided multiple ways for learning to occur. The teacher understands the outcomes thoroughly so she can provide different methods for students to show competency and completion of work.

The teacher shared with me examples of assignments, how she can intervene live to help students and can immediately change and adapt the instructions to help a student be successful. I observed her helping students in the classroom and doing on the spot changes to work when a student struggled. During the interviews, each student shared

with me ways Alexandria adapted an assignment to fit their individual need, so they could complete it and show competency.

4. The teacher provided students with strength of choice in their education.

During the observations and interviews, the teacher, students, and principal all shared with me about the individual choices the students got to make about their education. First, the students have the privilege to decide if they will attend Northeast Academy, they are not forced. Second, the teacher offers the students choices in the classroom such as different ways to complete assignments, and she also offers them a variety and choice in books they want to read for English. Third, the principal offers choice when it comes to speaking to him or needing space to think and re-direct. All of these scenarios were seen in observations and heard in interviews by each stakeholder: student, teacher, and principal.

## Research Questions, Answers and Related Themes

The three research questions that guided this case study are addressed through themes which emerged through data analysis. After comparing the data of observations, interviews, and collected artifacts, it was determined that a comparison of the research question to its related emerging theme was the best way to show how the findings support each question. The three research questions for this case study and the emerged themes demonstrated data alignment.

### Alignment of Research Question and Theme

- Research Question 1: How do stakeholders describe their role in meeting the needs of at-risk students at the Northeast Success Academy?

a. What are student perceptions regarding how Northeast Success Academy has, or has not, met their needs?
b. What are teacher perceptions regarding how they have altered instruction to meet the needs of at-risk students?
c. What are administrator perceptions regarding how Northeast Success Academy has met the needs of at-risk students?

- Theme 1: Strong relationships were built and developed between student and student, student and teacher, and staff and principal.
- Theme 3: The teacher provided multiple ways for learning to occur. The teacher understands the outcomes thoroughly so she can provide different methods for students to show competency and completion of work.
- Theme 4: The teacher provided students with strength of choice in their education.

***Relationships***

Through observations and interviews, I observed the close relationships the students, teacher and principal shared. The atmosphere was laid back and students seemed to genuinely care about their coursework and each other. They were comfortable in asking for help from the teacher and also comfortable with speaking to the principal.

***Meeting Individual Needs***

Table 5 illustrates varying ways the teacher utilized differentiated instruction to meet the individual needs of her students. Alexandria demonstrated her knowledge of Differentiated Instruction by changing assignments or instructions to help students with understanding (see Figure 1). She also allowed the students to make choices in how they

completed assignments. During the interview process she described varying ways for an assignment to be completed instead of writing, the students would create a screen play. An example of choice as a group, she allowed them to choose the book they all wanted to read together in their English class. I also observed students working at different levels and on different assignments via Google Classroom.

***Perceptions***

Northeast Academy demonstrated a clear understanding of the importance of meeting students' needs. The students utilized relationships and various instructional strategies to ensure they were completing coursework and gaining the credits they needed to graduate. During the interviews with the students, each one expressed how happy they were with the choice they made to apply to Northeast Academy, and how they received more one-on-one help with instruction. They each explained to me that they had a better understanding of the subject matter and knew the pathway needed to graduate. The teacher demonstrated her understanding of the importance that her students received a high level of instruction and at the same time, she could change the assignment so the student would have a better opportunity to complete the task.

The teacher also expressed how much she cared for each student, wanted them to be successful, and the pride she took in each of them when they graduated from the program. The principal also understood his role in ensuring the students that applied were good candidates for the alternative education program, and that they were receiving what they needed from each teacher. He made sure the campus was a place of safety and trust for both the staff and students. His interview allowed him to give examples of dealing

with difficult situations with students and how he handled each situation differently to fit the need of that particular person.

- Research Question 2: How does Tomlinson and Allan's (2000) Differentiated Instruction Theory help explain how Northeast Success Academy meets the unique needs of at-risk students?
- Theme 3: The teacher provided multiple ways for learning to occur. The teacher understands the outcomes thoroughly so she can provide different methods for students to show competency and completion of work.
- Theme 4: The teacher provided students with strength of choice in their education.

Carol Tomlinson and Susan Allan's Differentiated Instruction Theory illustrates how the teacher developed instruction in her classroom to meet individual student needs (see Figure 1). Differentiated instruction is centered around three main principles for teachers to utilize for meeting students' needs which are: content, process, and product (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Repeatedly during interviews and observations, the teacher showcased her knowledge and understanding of how to use differentiated instruction. Table 5 shows a breakdown of content, process, and product that were observed. When the teacher would see a student struggling, she would alter the assignment to meet the need of the student. The teacher also had several varieties ready for the same lesson. If the students were struggling, she explained she could put them into groups (pre-COVID-19) to work on a project, they could work independently if needed, or she could change the assignment completely if the student was lost. The teacher viewed each student truly as an individual and could tailor the assignment to meet the needs of the student.

- Research Question 3: What other realities exist regarding how this center is meeting the needs of at-risk students?
- Theme 2: Resources were provided to the alternative education site that allowed smaller student to teacher ratio.

Other realities outside of differentiated instruction existed to ensure that students' needs were being met. Northeast Academy was part of a school system that was made up of wealthier households than a neighboring school district which means more financial revenue for the school district. The funds provided a way for the class sizes to be smaller so in turn, this created a smaller student to teacher ratio. Northeast Academy is part of the high school but is a separate building that students attend all day. The academy's focus is directed towards at-risk students but wants the students to have buy-in and accountability towards their graduation. The principal practiced a differentiated approach in the way he ran the academy from the setup of his office to the choice he gave students in enrolling in the academy.

## Summary

Observations, interviews, and collected artifacts helped to support the findings of how Northeast Academy utilized differentiated education to meet students' needs. The students, teacher, and principal all worked together to develop positive relationships which in turn helped the teacher gain the respect of students. They trusted that she would help them attain credits for graduation by differentiating instruction based on individual students' needs. Chapter V concludes the case study and discusses implications and recommendations based on the findings from Chapter IV.

# CHAPTER V

# CONCLUSION

Chapter V discusses the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework, implications of this case study, and suggests recommendations for other alternative education programs. The theoretical framework from Tomlinson and Allan (2000) supports and directs the findings of the data collection and analysis. A case study was used to research for understanding and meaning that in turn created a clear rich picture that would support the use of differentiated instruction (Merriam &Tisdell 2016). Interviews, observations, and document collection were used to create a rich description. These tools indicated how Alexandria used the theoretical framework in her classroom.

## Discussion of Findings

### Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perspectives of students, an instructor, and an administrator who are stakeholders in an alternative educational setting, Northeast Academy, that implements differentiated instruction strategies to gain an understanding of how this academy meets the needs of at-risk students. Tomlinson (2014) stated:

> Only teachers who utilize a variety of instructional models will be successful in maximizing the achievement of all students. Teachers need to 'play to' students' strengths and to mitigate student's learning weaknesses. This can be done only through the use of instructional variety. (p. 1734)

Differentiated instruction is the response of a teacher to change curriculum delivery and content to meet individual student needs. Day-to-day activities should be carefully planned and constructed for students, lessons should not be improvised (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013). A teacher with the knowledge and understanding of this teaching style uses Tomlinson's guiding principles which include respectful tasks, flexible grouping and ongoing assessment and adjustment while preparing for class and helping students complete daily tasks (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2013) The teacher adjusts lessons for content, process, and product according to students' readiness, interests and learning profiles. Once the teacher has this valuable knowledge, they will be able to arrange effective lesson plans into varying types of instructional and management strategies. Because of the complexity of the theoretical framework, I have separated the framework into three parts. Each section of the theoretical framework is presented by a figure with a brief description of each component. Corresponding conclusions are given for each section.

**Differentiation Instruction Theoretical Model**

The first portion of Tomlinson and Allan's Differentiated Instruction model illustrates how the teacher can create different lessons for students based on learners' needs. The following section describes ways the teacher utilized respectful tasks and

ongoing assessment and adjustment, and how it could be applied to all areas of education. Because of COVID-19, flexible grouping was extremely limited.

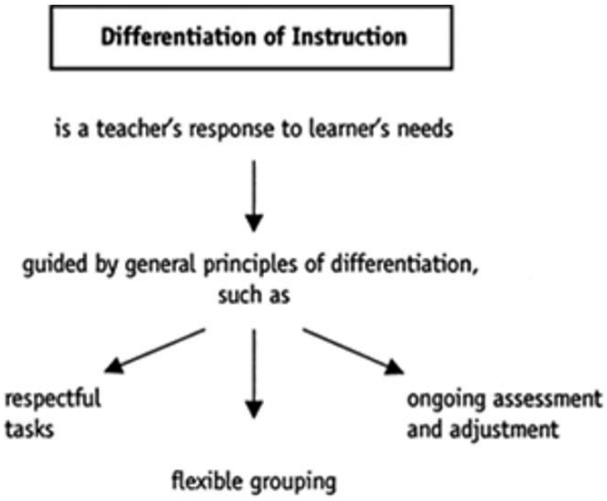


*Figure 2.* A flowchart of the elements of differentiated instruction. Adapted from "Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms" by C. A. Tomlinson and S.D. Allan, 2000, *Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms,* 3. Copyright 2000 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

### *Respectful Tasks*

Tomlinson and Moon (2013) described respectful tasks as one of the central successes of differentiated instruction. Because differentiated instruction provides students with opportunities for different types of assignments based on learning needs, respectful tasks remind teachers to make sure that the work is interesting and inviting from one student to another. While observing, I noticed that when students struggled, the alternative work Alexandria created did not lose rigor. She routinely made sure that even with a different assignment, the students were applying important skills for critical thinking. One of the interviewees said that when he did not understand the original assignment, Alexandria would change the questions to be clearer for him. The assignment

still covered the same material, and the student was expected to show they comprehended the objectives for the lesson. Differentiated Instruction provides autonomy in ways students complete and engage in assignments (Wisner & Startec, 2016).

One way in which instructors show respect in assigning tasks is by offering students choice. When teachers offer different choices in the classroom, teachers demonstrate they respect each student's individuality.

**Choice.** Northeast Academy used an application process to admit students. Students were not forced to go to the academy; they chose to go to the academy. This process is not typical for alternative education schools. Edwards et al., (2007) reported that students were usually forced to attend an alternative school in order to complete their education requirements. Often times, students were left with no other choice but to attend an alternative school because of behavior issues. Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) explained that most schools take an approach of "wait to fail" before providing aid to a student. Northeast Academy was different because they allowed students to choose to attend a school that fit their needs. The academy used a type of differentiation in their acceptance process by allowing students to choose to attend. This is important because students have more buy-in to finishing their education.

There are many examples of choice discussed during the interviews that explained why students chose to attend Northeast Academy. Despite choosing to come to the academy, students were still considered at-risk and brought challenges from their former high school experiences with them to their new school. The following paragraphs discuss choice from the perspective of the teacher and principal and how these roles intertwine to create meaningful differentiation in the classroom.

***Choice Provided by Teacher.*** Alexandria demonstrated choice on several occasions with her students in the classroom. She had learned each student's learning style which helped her better understand how to deliver information to her students. She also allowed the students to choose from a variety of assignment choices. For example, I observed the students getting to choose which book they would read next from a list of options. They worked together to decide what would be most interesting to the group. Tomlinson (2014) wrote, "Provide directions and guidelines for quality, but leave some ambiguity, choice, and flexibility so that students have to make leaps of transfer and apply common sense" (p. 1024). Alexandria used choice, which is a characteristic of differentiated learning, in order to reach all her students and create accountability for learning.

***Choice Provided by Principal.*** Not only did the teacher allow for choice, but the principal of the academy provided students with choice as well. The Northeast Academy Principal was a former teacher, so when he moved into this role, he brought the perspective of a teacher and some solid practices with him into administration. Bill did not have the typical relationship that most principals have with their students. Because he was the principal of a small school, he could get to know his students on a more personal level. He made sure he knew interests of each student so he could really connect to them on their level. He also had an office that was inviting with a couch, table, and refrigerator. With his approach, he used aspects of differentiation. At-risk students need to feel they can not only be heard, but they also need to feel like they can trust those around them who have authority (Kumi-Yeboach et al., 2017). Learning begins to take place when students feel safe, confident, and have a feeling they belong (Dweck, 2006). I concluded

from observations and interviews that the students felt safe, and they trusted their principal.

### *Flexible Grouping*

Because of COVID-19, I did not get to see a lot of flexible grouping, but I observed respectful tasks and ongoing adjustment and assessments repeatedly. One observation of small group, or flexible grouping, was when Alexandria worked with students who were online in Google Classroom. I also confirmed through speaking with Alexandria that during normal circumstances she utilized more flexible grouping. I observed where this would take place in the classroom as well.

### *Ongoing Assessment and Adjustment*

Ongoing assessment and adjustment allow for an array of ways a student can demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skills they have been taught. I noticed on more than one occasion Alexandria would conduct ongoing assessment and adjustment (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). One example I observed in the field was Alexandria's devotion to stay connected to students both in class and online. She would carry around a laptop to ensure her online students were gaining the same class delivery as her face-to-face students.

Alexandria used a pacing calendar as a differentiated process (see Appendix E). She taught five different courses at a time, so she had to be extremely organized and have well planned assignments. I observed the teacher making corrections and changes necessary to keep students on track while also making sure they understood the assignments and materials.

At times, teachers have to be able to read their audience, students, and may need to do a quick assessment to check for understanding (Tomlinson, 2017). I observed this interaction in the classroom and was impressed when Alexandria would not simply give students the answers but would ask clarifying driving questions so students would seek out the answers they needed on their own. She brought her students to a higher level of thinking. I concluded from my data collection that these three principles of differentiated instruction in the theoretical framework were confirmed.

**How Teachers Differentiate**

The second portion of Tomlinson and Allan's model illustrates ways a teacher can differentiate in three different curricular elements: content, process, and product (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Before a teacher is successful with this teaching style, they should have a clear understanding of all three elements separately before attempting to integrate them. Students should be able to express they can access and understand the material (content), how it was learned and how it can be applied (process) and demonstrate what was learned (product). A master teacher understands each element but also is skillful at integrating them into the classroom at a point to where it is difficult to separate content, process, and product as an observer.

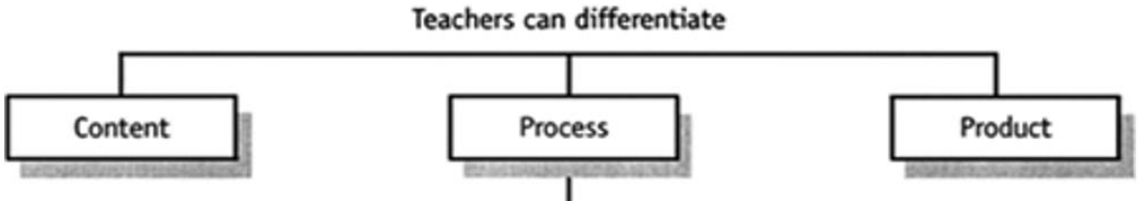


*Figure 3.* A portion of Figure 1 taken from a flowchart of the elements of differentiated instruction. Adapted from "Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms" by C. A. Tomlinson and S.D. Allan, 2000, *Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms,* 3. Copyright 2000 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

### *Content*

The example used to discuss content will also be used to discuss process and product elements that were seen in the classroom. Content, which can also be considered as input, is the "what" of a student's lesson. Tomlinson (2014) explained content as, "What teachers want students to learn from a particular segment of study, or the materials or mechanisms through which students gain access to the important information" (p. 390). During observations, the teacher displayed competency for content.

### *Process*

Tomlinson and Moon (2013) described process as activities designed to discern and demonstrate that students fully understand the lesson and can relay important knowledge and skills to the teacher. Tomlinson (2014) described process as, "Activities designed to ensure that students use key skills to make sense of, apply, and transfer essential knowledge and understandings" (p.390). From my observations, I concluded that the teacher allowed student to choose from differentiated activities for their lessons.

### *Product*

Products are the means by which students demonstrate what they have learned (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Teachers use products when they want to gauge a complete understanding of a project as a whole. Product goes beyond just the content learned in class; it is the knowledge students can apply to other areas. In other words, product is how the teacher determines the use of higher order thinking and application. Products generally are open in supporting interest and voice and more time is required for completion (Tomlinson, 2017). An important aspect to keep in mind about product is that the assignment or assessment should motivate the student. Tomlinson (2014) stated

"Products are vehicles through which students demonstrate and extend what they have learned" (p. 390). I concluded from observations, interviews, and documents that the teacher allowed for thoughtful assignments and assessments in the classroom that demonstrated the students understanding.

***Content, Process and Product in Action***

The teacher knew how to change lessons based on student's readiness, interest, and learning profile (content). During observations, the teacher displayed competency for content when she had students, who were not strong readers, get excited about reading because she let them choose from a variety of books.

Knowing the end goal was to read a grade-level book, students could choose how they achieved their own learning. An example of this differentiated "process" for reading was that students could listen to a recording of the book and follow along with the text instead of reading to themselves. The teacher would also follow up with movie clips, if they were available, to further explain difficult portions of the book. Several of the students explained how helpful this was in their interview.

The teacher would also assign questions for comprehension but would differentiate the questions based on the student's competency level (process). For example, I observed the teacher working one-on-one with a student who did not understand the question. When they were working on different chapters in the book if they ran across questions they did not understand, the teacher would change the questions, still obtaining the same objective, to make the assignment more obtainable. I also watched students work on questions in Google Classroom, which was convenient, because the teacher was able to re-direct when needed at the time the student was

answering questions. Based on what I observed in the classroom, I concluded the teacher used process when designing lessons.

Observations and interviews with Alexandria and her students demonstrated she was thoughtful in "product" differentiation as well. She shared with me different ways students were measured to ensure they understood the objectives of the book. Occasionally she gave comprehensive exams, but she realized sometimes projects suited the students better. One example of an assignment, other than an assessment, was a project-based activity. The students would conduct a character analysis, describe the plot, or explain the overall theme. During observations and interviews, I concluded Alexandria understood ways to "test" her students without always giving them a formal exam. I also concluded Alexandria understood ways to differentiate content, process, and product for her students. She blended these elements together seamlessly and made this teaching style appear much easier than it actually is for many teachers.

**Differentiated Strategies According to Student's Needs**

The third part of the model is how teachers differentiate according to student needs. The areas that address student needs according to Differentiated Instruction Theory are readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This section describes how the teacher used different teaching strategies that provided students variance in assignments. Conclusions were made that the teacher utilized several of the instructional and management strategies in creating assignments and delivering lessons to students.

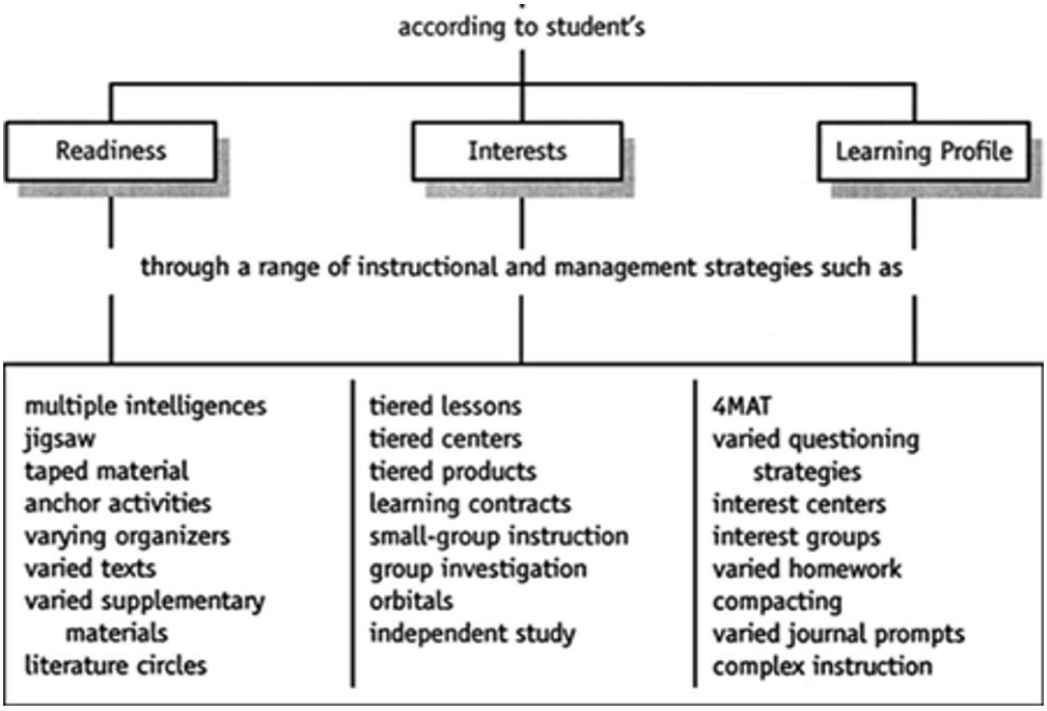


*Figure 4.* A portion of Figure 1 taken from a flowchart of the elements of differentiated instruction. Adapted from "Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms" by C. A. Tomlinson and S.D. Allan, 2000, *Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms,* 3. Copyright 2000 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

***Readiness***

Tomlinson & Moon (2013) described readiness as the proximity a student has to specific learning goals. Often times teachers assume students' capabilities and teach them accordingly, but teachers need to view their students based on capacity and what the student needs to do to be successful. An example of readiness, or varied text was when the teacher made sure that the books, she was having the students read were not being used at the high school (see Table 5). Alexandria said some of the students had already repeated English I and II courses at the high school unsuccessfully, so she wanted to take a different approach which included using different books than the students had previously read. She took this one step further by letting them choose from a small list of

approved books for the course. Students choosing what they would like to read, allowed them to feel more in control of their learning. Alexandria also made sure students had a variety of ways to read and comprehend the books. She chose books that had audio recordings to make the books more accessible to students who struggled with reading. This was a readiness example of varied supplementary materials. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) stated, "A primary goal of school must be to have students take control of their own growth as learners with competence and confidence in doing so" (p. 601). A conclusion was made that Alexandria knew how to implement readiness in the classroom, for example, when she put them in charge of what book they wanted to read and how they wanted to explore the material. She created an opportunity for students to be in charge of their learning. She allowed them some control, which created autonomy for students.

***Interests***

Knowing students' interests is an important tool that allows for comfortable, engaging, and inviting learning to take place (Tomlinson, 2017). Once teachers understand that students learn at different timetables and vary in their ability for abstract thinking and combing through complex ideas, they can begin to develop assignments that will be more individualized.

Alexandria displayed her understanding of student interests many times during my observations. She knew students who enjoyed working independently on reading assignments and she knew when the material would be more difficult and require classroom discussion. She also realized the ages of her students and their learning levels. The students, depending on their interests, could read or listen to an audio version of the

book they were studying. I concluded the teacher understands this portion of Differentiated Instruction Theory and knows different approaches to meeting students' needs based on their interests.

### *Learning Profile*

Teachers should identify early on the different types of learners they have in their classroom. This allows for specific one-on-one tailored lessons for students to complete with confidence. When students are confident, they want to further their learning. Usher and Kober (2012) described this type of learning as intrinsic motivation. Students enjoy making good grades and when they see passing grades, have a supportive teacher and principal, they begin to perform at higher levels. Tomlinson (2017) explains that a student learning profile is when a student has the freedom to work in a way that is efficient and accessible for them.

Alexandria offered varied homework assignments for students based on their understanding and work level. She would create a lesson, but then would tailor them to fit what her students needed. When I interviewed students, they told me she would change the questions if they did not understand the wording, or they could talk through the questions with her for more understanding. When talking with Alexandria, she told me that she never made the questions easier, she would just rephrase or give examples to help with understanding. Through observations and interviews I concluded she used different examples of learning profile activities to meet student's needs.

## Differentiated Instruction Theory Model

My data analysis was guided by Tomlinson and Allan's (2000) Differentiated Instruction Theory as a model (see Figure 1). The instruction observed in the classroom

and support of information provided during interviews, suggested the teacher performed at a high level of differentiated instruction. When conducting my research, I witnessed over and over again how the teacher utilized respectful tasks and ongoing assessment and adjustment in order to provide the right content, process, and product for each student.

I also observed repeatedly how Bill differentiated his actions with students and the general atmosphere of his office to best meet the needs of students. Tomlinson and Allan's theory is written from the role of the teacher and does not address the practice of differentiated instruction from an administrator's point of view.

**Summary of Research Questions, Findings and Themes**

Table 6 illustrates how the research questions are supported by the finding and themes that emerged from observations, interviews, and documents collected.

**Table 6**

| Research Question | Findings | Themes |
|---|---|---|
| How do stakeholders describe their role in meeting the needs of at-risk students at the Northeast Academy? | | |
| a. What are student perceptions regarding how Northeast Academy has, or has not, met their needs? | Students indicated their needs were met. | Theme 1: Strong relationships were built and developed between student and student, student and teacher, and staff and principal. |
| b. What are teacher perceptions regarding how they have altered instruction to meet the needs of at-risk students? | The teacher provides differentiated instruction to meet the needs of multiple education level students. | Theme 3: The teacher provided multiple ways for learning to occur. The teacher understands the outcomes thoroughly so she can provide different methods for students to show competency and completion of work. |
| c. What are administrator | The principal is aware of the teaching practices of | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| perceptions regarding how Northeast Academy has met the needs of at-risk students? | the observed teacher. The principal himself also uses strategies laid out by differentiated instruction by allowing the students choice. | Theme 4: The teacher provided students with strength of choice in their education. |
| How does Tomlinson and Allan's (2000) Differentiated Instruction Theory help explain how Northeast Academy meets the unique needs of at-risk students? | The theory explained how Northeast Academy meets the unique needs of at-risk students. | Theme 3: The teacher provided multiple ways for learning to occur. The teacher understands the outcomes thoroughly so she can provide different methods for students to show competency and completion of work.<br><br>Theme 4: The teacher provided students with strength of choice in their education. |
| What other realities exist regarding how this center is meeting the needs of at-risk students? | The role of the principal and his leadership from the framework. Also, resources provided means for smaller student to teacher ratios. Lastly, students had a choice in not only attending the academy, but also in their work. | Theme 2: Resources were provided to the alternative education site that allowed smaller student to teacher ratio. |

## Conclusions

Tomlinson and Allan's (2000) Differentiated Instruction Theory provided a strong framework for this study. The only missing piece from the framework was the emphasis on the leadership style of the principal and the role the principal plays in this setting. Case study as a methodology and the use of the Rubric for Implementation of Differentiated Instruction was also critical in this study (see Table 1). As is true in all

education, the role of strong relationships cannot be overemphasized. Resources are also critical including the use of one-to-one teaching, such as the use of Chromebooks, and teachers that know of all relevant state standards and who are comfortable with multiple avenues that can be taken to reach those standards.

## Implications

### To Practice

Teachers new to alternative education may benefit from professional development that allows teachers to learn the importance of how to implement differentiated instruction correctly into their classrooms. Teachers need to be taught how to utilize Tomlinson and Allan's framework for instructional effectiveness. One possibility could be when a teacher is going through his or her teacher internship, it would be valuable to observe a teacher with a strong practice in differentiated instruction. Another possibility would be for teachers to be placed with mentors who use differentiation in the classroom. When a teacher is new to the classroom, it would be a valuable practice for mentor teachers to watch the new teacher in action to be able to provide feedback for improvement in the area of differentiation. New teachers need to keep in mind that implementing any new instructional instrument such as, Differentiated Instruction, takes time to perfect. Implementing this type of practice would be for a teacher that has taught for a few years (Irby et.al, 2013). Another important element that mentors and new teachers need is the support of campus leadership that ensures classrooms provide the proper environment for teachers to be able to deliver differentiated instruction.

A benefit to traditional public high schools would be to realize that differentiated instruction could be utilized in all types of classrooms not just alternative education

settings (Tomlinson, 2014). Many classrooms have a mixture of student capabilities so developing relationships with the students from the beginning and identifying learning styles will allow teachers to create different learning paths that enhance outcomes and successes for their students. Differentiated instruction could help teachers relate learning material to students who were more advanced. Some students struggle with paying attention and finishing assignment simply because they are not challenged enough. Teachers may have a variety of student learning ranges so it would be valuable and a time saver for teachers to have one lesson and be able to create multiple learning levels from that one assignment.

### *Differentiation During a Pandemic*

During the time this case study was being researched and studied, a pandemic called COVID-19, swept throughout the entire globe. The spring of 2020 put teachers to the test on their technology and differentiation teaching strategies. Classrooms were forced to pivot to online learning instantly, and teachers learned new ways to reach students. Because of the pandemic, some of Tomlinson and Allan's in person classroom techniques could not be utilized including small groups, jigsaw, group investigation, small group instruction and group investigation. Then once students were able to come back to in person learning, the Centers for Disease Control (2021) announced students must be kept at least six feet apart. The world has not seen a pandemic on this scale since the early 1900's, so how it will effect students' learning will unfold in the years to come.

Flexible grouping in Differentiated Instruction Theory provides opportunity for students to work together in groups and allows for collaboration on assignments. When a teacher uses this method, they should frequently change the groups so that students get to

work with a variety of peers (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic conditions caused Alexandria to change assignments and to create activities that were meaningful but were geared towards independent study. She demonstrated that differentiation is a successful approach to delivering content.

**To Research**

One implication for research is the need to propose and test a theoretical framework that includes the role of instructional leadership. One could conduct a study to determine what the relationship is between the role of the instructional leader and differentiated instruction. Also, research could explore the addition of the role of the instructional leader in this model including which leadership style would best facilitate successful differentiation. The role of the principal at Northeast Academy was clearly different than traditional principal roles I have seen at traditional high schools. Bill fostered a culture and climate based on relationships and trust.

Another important area to note is teacher collaboration and how it enhances differentiated instruction. Fretz (2015) stated that it is imperative to have the right teacher in the right place for support and engaging in a higher level of learning. Northeast Academy adopted differentiated instruction and illustrated how teachers come together to provide multiple ways to reach students with varying activities. This was not found in the literature at the time of the study but was observed and mentioned in interviews about how helpful collaborating amongst staff was to serving students.

**To Theory**

Tomlinson and Allan's (2000) Differentiated Instruction Theory was used to frame how the teacher at Northeast Academy met the needs of at-risk students. This case

study showcased how students were allowed different approaches to their daily work that ultimately helped them be successful in the classroom. Additionally, this study illustrated how important not only teacher relationships were for student success, but also the relationships of authoritative figures. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) discussed the importance of a well-rounded team approach for reaching at-risk students. The theory supports the importance of knowing and understanding the Differentiated Instruction Theory in order to implement valuable strategies for meeting the needs of students.

## Recommendations

### Classroom Practices

At the conclusion of the study, there were a few recommendations for further research. A recommendation could be for Northeast Public Schools to adopt differentiated instructional practices into all curricula and classrooms. Northeast Academy students benefited from the differentiated instruction used and it met the needs of students with many different learning styles. Actually, school districts throughout the country should look at the operations and success of the Northeast Academy and the role differentiated instruction plays in meeting students' needs. All students should have assignments that provide rigor, encouragement, support, and impactful remediation. Further research could be conducted in a school that claims to use this model for their teaching style.

### Professional Development Opportunities

Further research could also be done to see what types of professional development would be needed to teach teachers how to differentiate lessons on the spot. A recommendation could be that teachers need to be taught they should not use a one-size

fits all approach to teaching their students as this approach will leave many students frustrated. Respectful tasks, or choices, that teachers provide as assignments should contain flexibility. A good plan could be, when teachers develop new lessons, to create different ways assignments could vary to fit multiple needs while maintaining rigor and opportunities for higher order thinking. Further research needs to be done to find ways to measure readiness, interests and learning profiles.

Next, student teachers and new teachers would benefit greatly by observing a classroom and master teacher that really understands and knows how to implement differentiated instruction. If student teachers could witness firsthand and learn alongside a teacher that excelled in this type of instruction, then they could improve lessons and take their teaching to a higher level. Perhaps even the first couple of years a new teacher could team teach with an established teacher. Schools need to develop professional development that gives teachers the tools they need to provide students the opportunity to be taught using differentiated instruction.

**District Resources**

Another recommendation, for further research, would be how adequate funding would allow for smaller student to teacher ratio. School districts vary greatly across the nation as illustrated by the compare and contrast of the two districts, Northeast Academy and Urban City School District. Smaller class sizes and smaller student to teacher ratios would enable teachers to better implement differentiated instruction. If school had a smaller student to teacher ratio, identifying at-risk students earlier could be easier. I observed small student to teacher ratios and this practice made it possible for the teacher to create trusting relationships with students. Low student to teacher ratios could allow

school personnel to identify at-risk students more quickly which could in turn provide students a greater chance for graduation. Also, low student to teacher ratios allows teachers to work one-on-one with students who are struggling.

For a successful program, the school district needs to have adequate resources and financial stability. Northeast Academy provided a one-to-one approach for learning by giving each student a Chromebook and setting up the teacher and student with Google Classroom. If schools across the country had proper funding, this would provide more at-risk students equitable education regardless socioeconomic background (Alvarez, 2015).

I also believe it would be interesting to see how Tomlinson and Allan could revamp the model to include the gap that the pandemic may cause, and what changes could be made with so many different online methods being utilized. Another interesting area that could be added to the model is the role the principal or administration plays in differentiated instruction. These two areas could be further researched to see if they play a significant role in differentiated instruction.

## Summary

As a career technology instructor, I am no stranger to differentiated instruction. My training prepared me for students who typically enjoyed hands on learning and were searching for something different than what a traditional high school had to offer. My career technology program required the ability to adjust and modify instruction in order to meet students' needs to prepare them for the workforce. My research allowed me the opportunity to see firsthand the applicability of using differentiated instruction in all types of classrooms. I now understand the significance of offering differentiated

instruction, not only in technical education or alternative education sites, but to apply this type of instruction throughout all levels of education.

Now that I have conducted this research and witnessed firsthand how it was used in a classroom other than my own, I can see how important it is to share this teaching style with other teachers. Since the beginning of my dissertation journey, I have switched from being in the classroom to being an instructional coordinator. My goal now is to help other teachers learn how to use differentiated instruction to raise the level of activities being completed in their classrooms. I get to work side-by-side with instructors and help them develop strategies for classroom effectiveness and well-developed curriculum, and I better understand the importance of developing relationships with students and creating different types of lessons to reach all students to ensure their learning needs are being met. I believe that all students have the capability of learning and that educators need to provide equitable education to all students. Differentiated instruction provides that platform and can meet a vast number of learners' needs and help them to reach their education potential.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A – INFORMED CONSENT

### Consent Form Example

**Student**
The Role of Differentiated Learning in Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Students: A Case Study

**Background Information**
You are invited to be in a research study of how Differentiated Education in a classroom setting meets the needs of at-risk students. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time. You can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable and can stop the interview/survey at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your employment, evaluations, or grades in school.

**This study is being conducted by:** Kari Gibson, Oklahoma State University, under the direction of Dr. Mary Jo Self, Oklahoma State University.

**Procedures**

**If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:** Allow me to observe classroom setting, interview people on the administration team, and interview and observe teachers and students in the classroom setting. For the interviews, I would like to record the sessions on my iPhone so I can refer back to them when writing the findings. The recordings will be uploaded to my computer that is password protected and deleted from my phone. No recordings will be saved to the cloud. I would also like to photograph the classrooms, with no students or teachers present. This will help me describe the layout of the classroom and how it aids with one on one teaching styles. The photographs will be saved to my computer that is password protected, deleted from my iPhone and never saved to the cloud.

**Participation in the study involves the following time commitment:** The study will involve four observation and session. The sessions will take place as follows: a) January, b) February, c) March, and d) April. Each observation session will last approximately one hour for two class periods. Interviews will be conducted with one administrator twice, an initial and follow up interview at the end of the observations. There will be four interviews with the one instructor during the observations. The interviews should be approximately 30 minutes per interview.

**Compensation**
You will receive no payment for participating in this study.

**COVID Risk**
Precautions will be taken for all participants in the study that follow up to date CDC, University, and Campus guidelines for safety. For the latest guidelines, please see cdc.gov. At minimum, all participants need to check their temperatures daily, wear a mask, and practice social distancing while being a part of this study.
The following steps are being taken to address the risk of coronavirus infection:
Screening: Researchers and participants who show potential symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, cough, shortness of breath, etc.) will NOT participate in this study at this time.
Physical distancing: Whenever possible, we will maintain at least 6 feet of distance between persons while conducting the study.
sue Mask/Covering: Researchers will wear and participants will be required to shield their mouth and nose with a cloth face cover or mask during the study, even when maintaining at least 6 feet of distance. Tiss will be available to cover coughs and sneezes. Approved:
Protocol #: IRB-20-337
Handwashing: Researchers and participants will wash hands before/during (activity) or use a hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol. I will wash hands before and after interviews.
Disinfecting materials: When feasible, researchers will clean and disinfect surfaces between participants, using an EPA-registered disinfectant or a bleach solution (5 tablespoons of regular bleach per gallon of water) for hard materials and by laundering soft materials. Disinfected materials will be handled using gloves, paper towel, plastic wrap or storage bags to reduce the chance of re-contamination of materials.
Electronics: Alcohol-based wipes or sprays containing at least 70% alcohol will be used to disinfect shared touch screens, mice, keyboards, etc. Surfaces will be dried to avoid pooling of liquids.

**In person study**
The study hopefully will be conducted in person. If you choose to participate, you will have interview questions to answer and you will also be observed in the classroom along with your classmates.

**Virtual or Remote study/ Hybrid**
In the event that school gets moved to a virtual setting or the school decides for safety precautions distance needs to be used for interviewing students, electronic measures such

as email would be used to answer interview questions. If school is completely virtual then the observations would also be conducted electronically. If they class is still meeting in person a combination may be used to enhance safety such as answering interview questions via email, but the researcher observing the classroom in person.

**Online Study**
The research team works to ensure confidentiality to the degree permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that unauthorized individuals could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. However, your participation in this online survey involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the internet. If you have concerns, you should consult the survey provider privacy policy at https ://www.qualtrics.com/privacy- statement/

**Confidentiality**
The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number/pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report
We will collect your information through interviews, audio recordings, emails, and observations. This information and data will be stored on a computer that is password protected and not on a cloud file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the code list linking names to study numbers will be destroyed. This is expected to occur no later than spring of 2022. The audio/video recording will be kept as part of the study records until spring of 2022.

**Contacts and Questions**
The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Oklahoma State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at 918-625-4344, kari.gibson@okstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about concerns regarding this study, please contact the IRB at (405) 744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.
Approved:
Protocol #: IRB-20-337

**Statement of Consent**
I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have my questions answered. I consent to participate in the study.
Indicate Yes or No:
I agree to participate in this study.
Yes No
I acknowledge that they understand the consent form and agree to participate
Yes No
I give consent to be observed in a classroom setting.
Yes No

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.
Yes No
I give consent to be contacted for follow-up in this study:
Yes No
Signature: Date:
Signature of Investigator: Date:

# APPENDIX B-QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

## Interview Questions

The following questions will be utilized during the interview process with administrators, teachers, and students.

**Administrators**

1. Tell me about the educational setting here at the Northeast Academy.
2. What made you decide to become an administrator for at-risk students?
3. How many years of experience do you have working with at-risk students?
4. What determines a student to be considered at-risk?
5. What do you want teachers and students to take away each year upon completion of the program?
6. How do you support and critique your instructors?

**Teachers**

1. What made you decide to teach at-risk students?
2. How long have you been in the teaching profession, and what are some of your professional instructional goals?
3. What type of skills assessment tools do you use to determine different learning styles?
4. How do you reach each of your students' individual needs?
5. What are some of the biggest challenges you face when teaching at-risk students?
6. How do you stimulate and support students on different learning levels?
7. When you have a student who is an advance learner, how do you challenge them in a classroom that may have other students who are not at the same level?

8. Feedback is valuable, what type and how often do you provide feedback and then what type of remediation do you offer students?

**Students**

1. What made you decide to apply for the program at the Northeast Academy?
2. How did you hear about the program?
3. What type of learning activities are provided for you, and what are your favorite?
4. In what ways are you challenged in your daily coursework?
5. How often do you receive feedback from your instructor?
6. What type of learner are you?
7. Individualized study is important, what are some ways you are given assignments that make you feel they are tailor made to fit your learning style?
8. What ways are used in class to keep you engaged?
9. How has this program changed your outlook on education, and how is it helping you to meet your goal of graduation?

APPENDIX C-TEACHER OBSERVATION TOOL

**Observation Tool**

**Classroom Observation Tool**

Instructor Information

_____ _____

Name Date of Observation

Duration of Observation

__ 30 minutes, __ 1 hour, ___1.5 hours, ___2 hours

Number of students

_____

**Section One: Classroom Management**

**Preparedness**

Are there lesson plans developed and how is instruction helping meet short-term and long-term objectives?

_____

_____

_____

**Discipline**

How is behavior being managed in the classroom?

_____

_____

_____

**Climate and Culture**

Does the teacher show a positive nature that will support the overall culture of school?

_____

_____

_____

**Feedback**

What feedback is the teacher giving during class?

_____

_____

_____

**Student Relations**

Does the teacher show positive and caring relationships with the students?

_____

_____

_____

**Section Two: Instructional Effectiveness**

**Literacy**

What activities can be seen in the classroom that support literacy learning?

_____

_____

_____

**Involving All Learners**

How does the teacher involve all types of learners in the classroom?

_____

_____

_____

**Content Explanations and directions**

What delivery methods are being utilized in the classroom? Are clear instructions being given?

_____

_____

_____

**Monitor Progress and Adjustments Made**

Does the teacher move about the classroom to check on student progress? If a student is struggling, what adjustments are made?

_____

_____

_____

**Closure**

What type of end of day activities are being used? How much wrap up time is being given to the students? Did the teacher provide a summary of the lesson taught?

_____

_____

_____

**Student Achievement**

Were the assignments modified if needed to meet student need?

_____

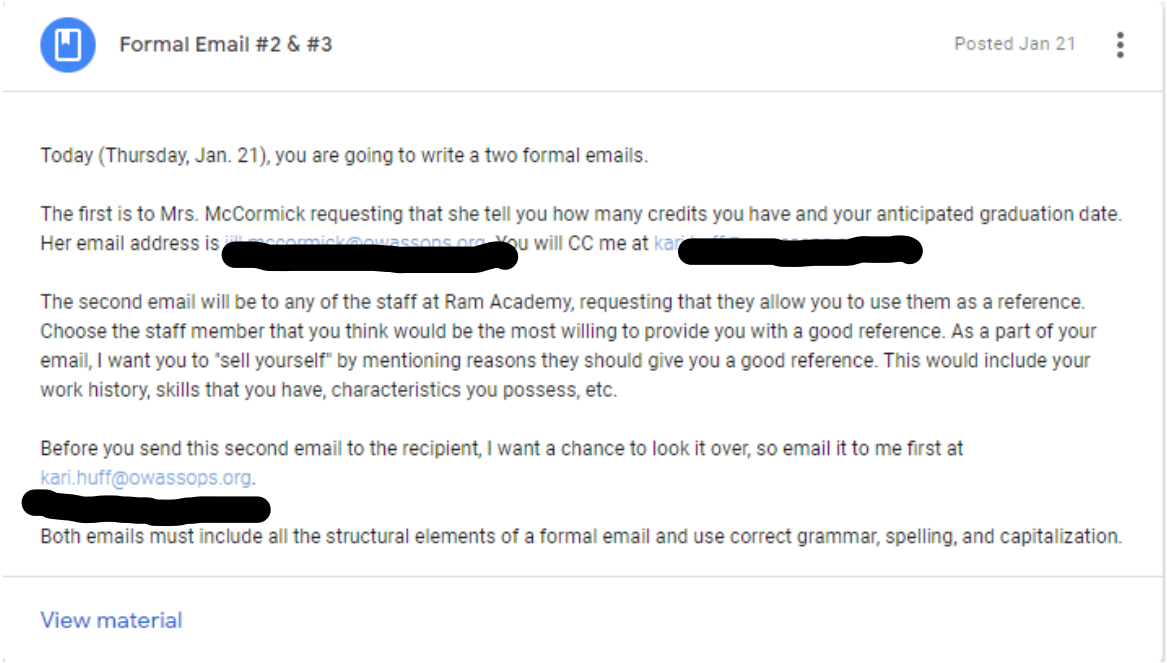
_____

_____

**Reflections, comments, and areas that need follow up:**

_____

APPENDIX D- SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT COMMUNICATION AND INSTRUCTION



Formal Email #2 & #3

Posted Jan 21

Today (Thursday, Jan. 21), you are going to write a two formal emails.

The first is to Mrs. McCormick requesting that she tell you how many credits you have and your anticipated graduation date. Her email address is [redacted] You will CC me at [redacted]

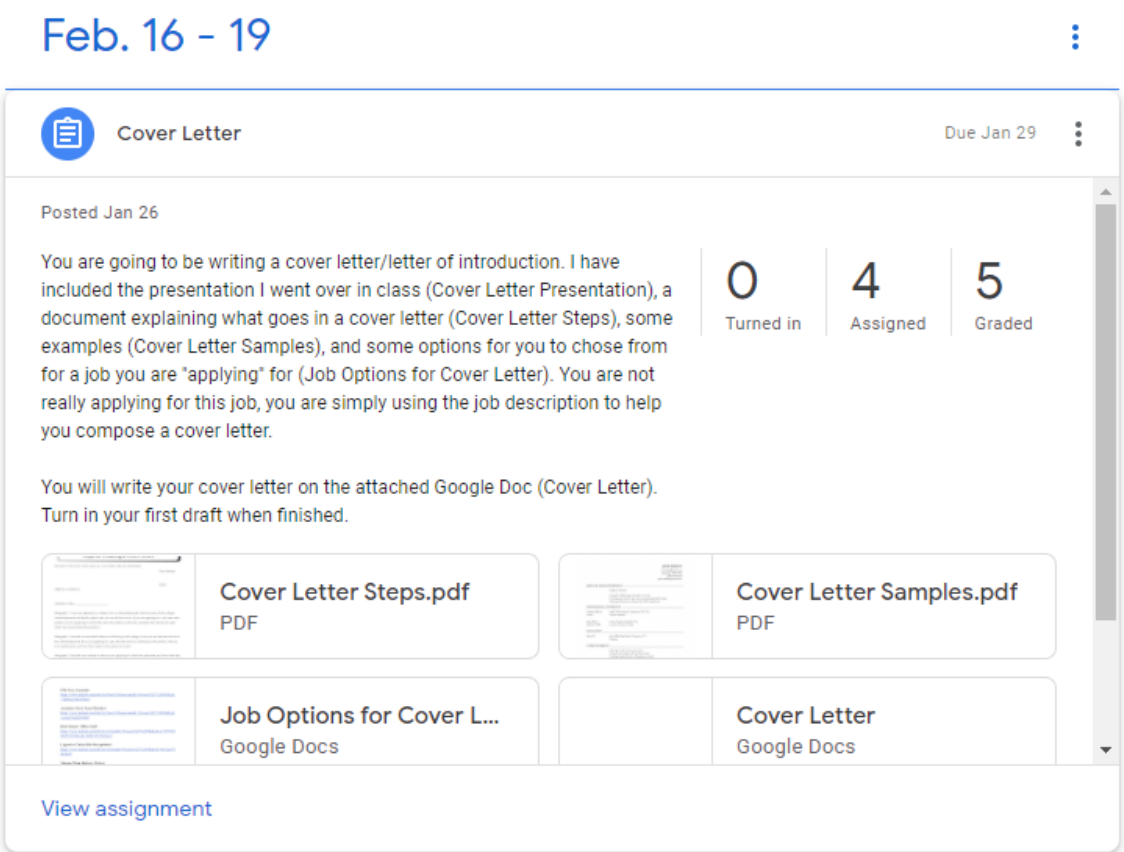
The second email will be to any of the staff at Ram Academy, requesting that they allow you to use them as a reference. Choose the staff member that you think would be the most willing to provide you with a good reference. As a part of your email, I want you to "sell yourself" by mentioning reasons they should give you a good reference. This would include your work history, skills that you have, characteristics you possess, etc.

Before you send this second email to the recipient, I want a chance to look it over, so email it to me first at kari.huff@owassops.org.

[redacted]

Both emails must include all the structural elements of a formal email and use correct grammar, spelling, and capitalization.

View material



Feb. 16 - 19

Cover Letter

Due Jan 29

Posted Jan 26

You are going to be writing a cover letter/letter of introduction. I have included the presentation I went over in class (Cover Letter Presentation), a document explaining what goes in a cover letter (Cover Letter Steps), some examples (Cover Letter Samples), and some options for you to chose from for a job you are "applying" for (Job Options for Cover Letter). You are not really applying for this job, you are simply using the job description to help you compose a cover letter.

You will write your cover letter on the attached Google Doc (Cover Letter). Turn in your first draft when finished.

0 Turned in | 4 Assigned | 5 Graded

Cover Letter Steps.pdf
PDF

Cover Letter Samples.pdf
PDF

Job Options for Cover L...
Google Docs

Cover Letter
Google Docs

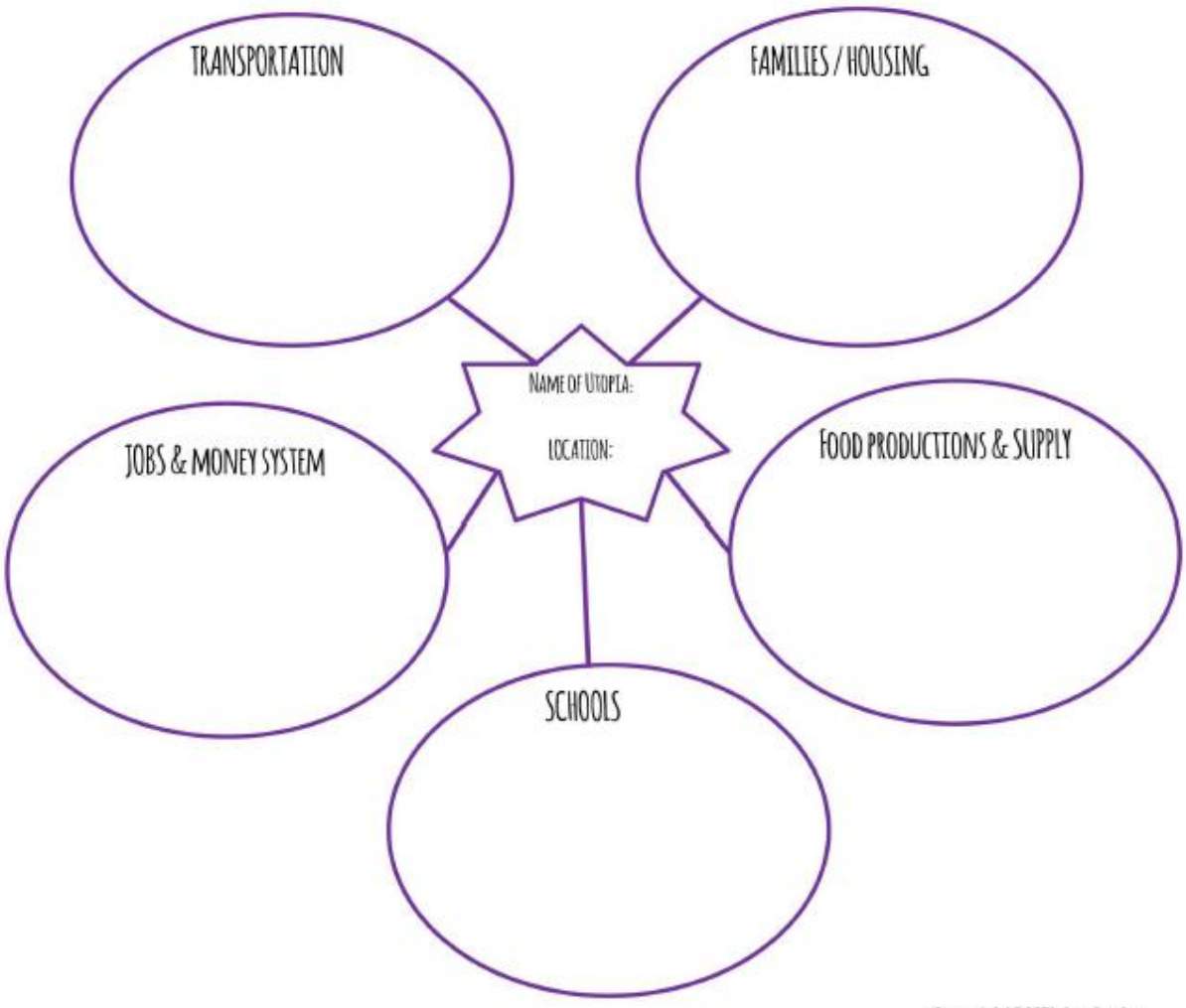
View assignment

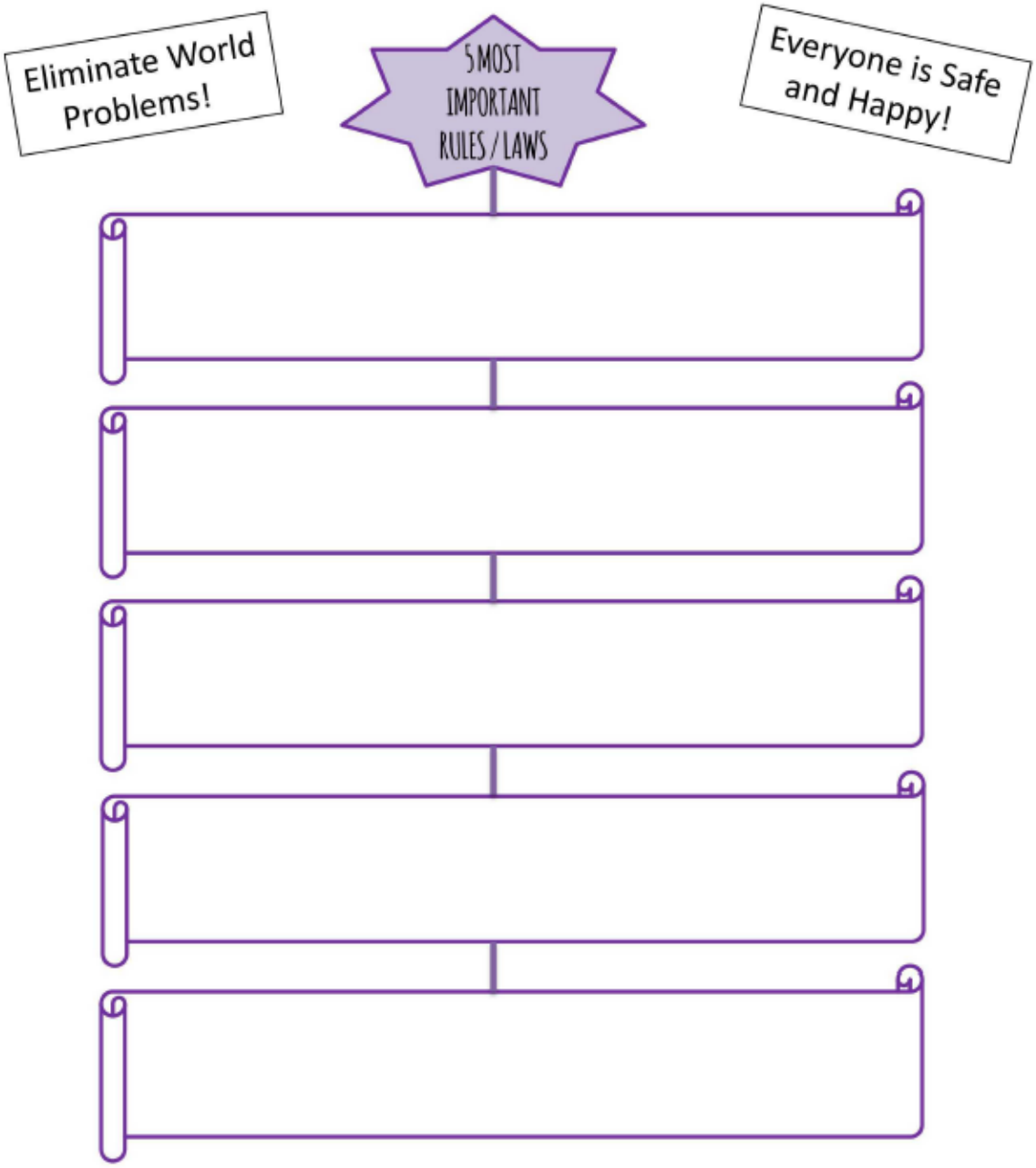
# The GIVER - UTOPIA MIND MAPS

**"Utopia"** is a word that represents a perfect society where people live in near-perfect conditions without the problems that generally exist in our world. Sounds great, right? Actually, utopian societies exist more in fictional literature than in real life. A writer named Sir Thomas More first used the word "utopia" in 1516 when he wrote a book about a utopian island in the Atlantic Ocean.

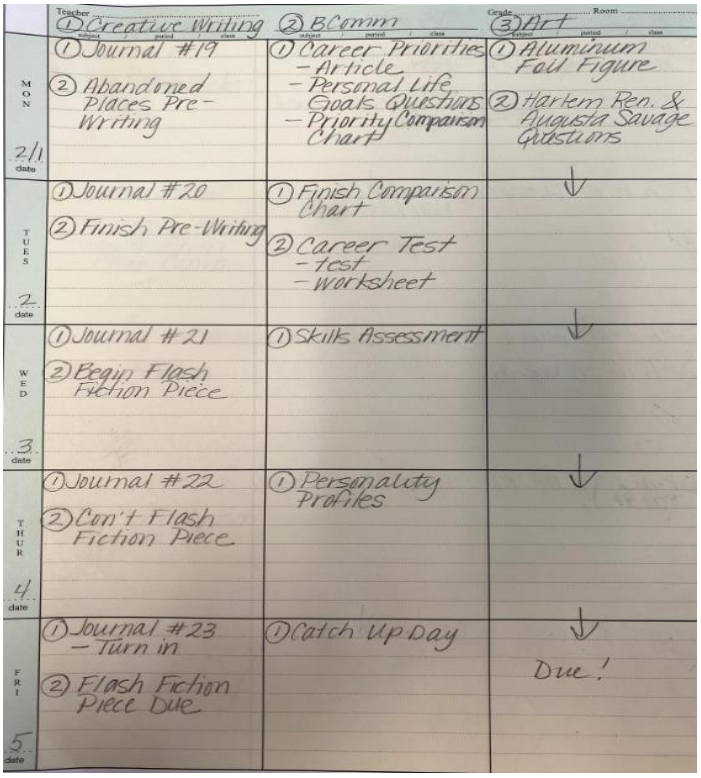
The idea of a utopian society is also present in Lois Lowry's novel ***The Giver***.

**DIRECTIONS:** If you could create your own utopia, what would it be like? Complete the mind maps using specific details as you discuss each topic with your group members. Use bullets. Come up with a name and location for your group's utopia, and be ready to share your ideas with the class.

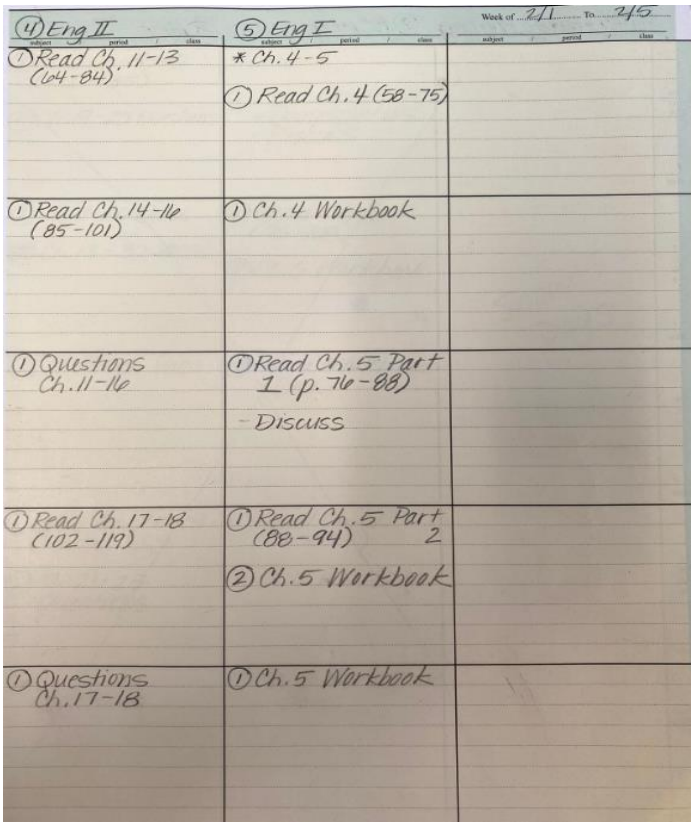



Eliminate World Problems!
5 MOST IMPORTANT RULES / LAWS
Everyone is Safe and Happy!

# APPENDIX E-SAMPLE PACING CALENDAR



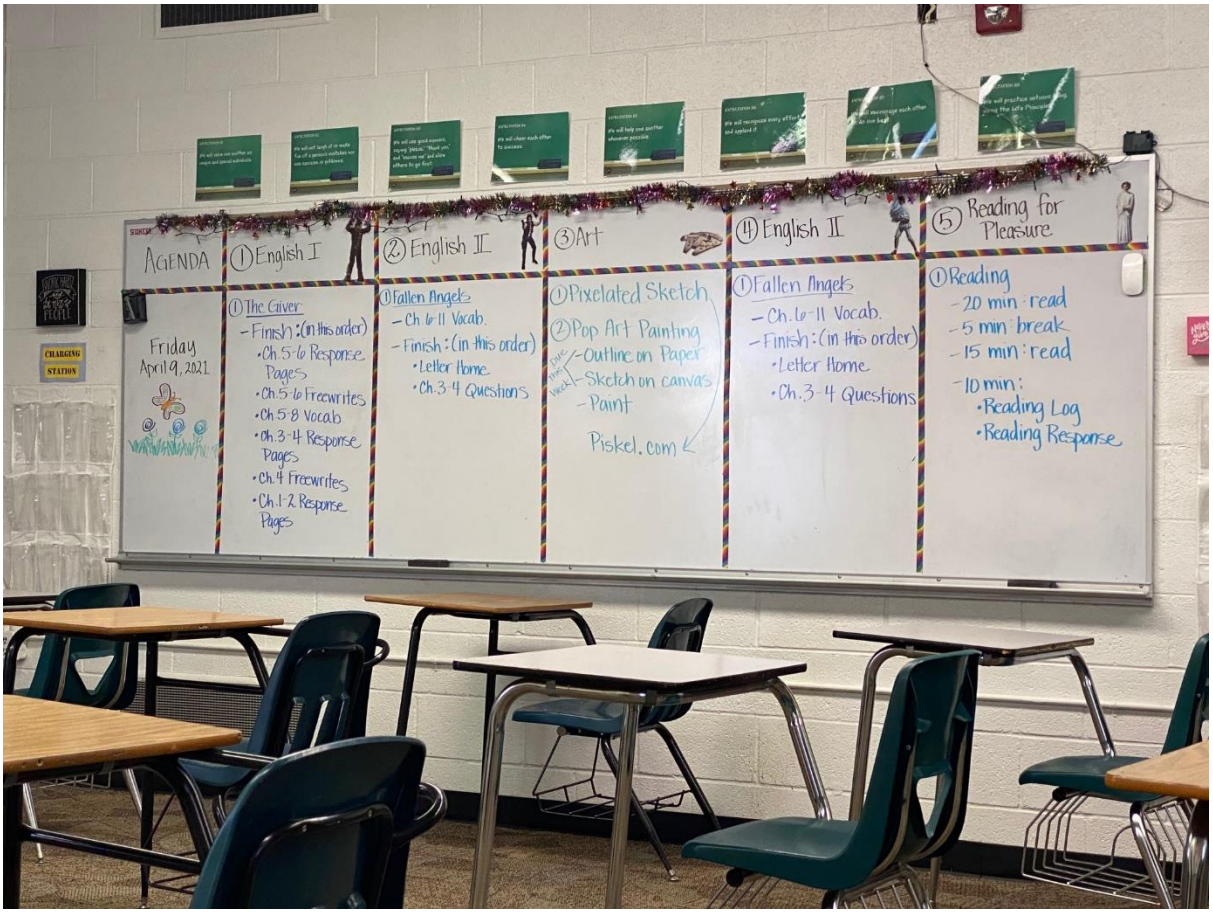
| Teacher | ① Creative Writing | ② BComm | ③ Art |
|---|---|---|---|
| MON 2/1 date | ① Journal #19<br>② Abandoned Places Pre-Writing | ① Career Priorities<br>- Article<br>- Personal Life Goals Questions<br>- Priority Comparison Chart | ① Aluminum Foil Figure<br>② Harlem Ren. & Augusta Savage Questions |
| TUES 2 date | ① Journal #20<br>② Finish Pre-Writing | ① Finish Comparison Chart<br>② Career Test<br>- test<br>- worksheet | ↓ |
| WED 3 date | ① Journal #21<br>② Begin Flash Fiction Piece | ① Skills Assessment | ↓ |
| THUR 4 date | ① Journal #22<br>② Con't Flash Fiction Piece | ① Personality Profiles | ↓ |
| FRI 5 date | ① Journal #23 - Turn in<br>② Flash Fiction Piece Due | ① Catch Up Day | ↓<br>Due! |



Week of 2/1 To 2/5

| ④ Eng II | ⑤ Eng I | |
|---|---|---|
| ① Read Ch. 11-13 (64-84) | * Ch. 4-5<br>① Read Ch. 4 (58-75) | |
| ① Read Ch. 14-16 (85-101) | ① Ch. 4 Workbook | |
| ① Questions Ch. 11-16 | ① Read Ch. 5 Part 1 (p. 76-88)<br>- Discuss | |
| ① Read Ch. 17-18 (102-119) | ① Read Ch. 5 Part 2 (88-94)<br>② Ch. 5 Workbook | |
| ① Questions Ch. 17-18 | ① Ch. 5 Workbook | |

APPENDIX F- CLASSROOM WHITEBOARD



APPENDIX G-STUDENT LOUNGE

VITA

Kari Anne Gibson

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: THE ROLE OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

Major Field: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Oklahoma State University, Tulsa, Oklahoma in December, 2021.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Teaching, Leadership, and Learning at Oklahoma State University, Tulsa, Oklahoma in December, 2015.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Organismic Biology at Northeastern State University, Broken Arrow, Ok in May, 2010.

Experience:

Instructional Coordinator, Tulsa Technology Center, Tulsa, OK 2020-2021
Career Technology Center Instructor, Tulsa Technology Center, Owasso, Ok 2013-2020
Certified Pharmacy Technician/Trainer, Walgreens, Tulsa, Ok 2006-2021

Professional Memberships:

Oklahoma Association of Career and Technical Education
Pharmacy Technician Education Council