Teacher's Perspectives: Differentiation Techniques used within mixed-ability English classes at Junior Cycle and their effectiveness

HIBERNIA COLLEGE

Teacher's Perspectives: Differentiation Techniques used within mixed-ability English classes at Junior Cycle and their effectiveness

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the award of Professional Master of Education (PME) in Post-Primary

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Abstract

This single case study explored what differentiation techniques English teachers, in two post-primary schools in north-west Ireland, use in mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes and which are the most effective from teachers' perspectives. Using a mixed methods approach data was collected through an online survey and semi-structured interviews. Teachers were questioned about the challenges of implementing differentiation techniques within their English classes, in addition to how well-resourced and prepared they think they are to use differentiation techniques within their classes. The findings indicate that while confidence levels when implementing differentiation techniques in English classes are high, teachers face many different challenges on a day-to-day basis in their implementation and feel they could benefit with more specific training, extra resources, and collaboration with colleagues. The study concludes with recommendations on how schools can give English teachers continuous, targeted professional development as well as regular time for collaborative planning so they may create differentiated activities and lessons and share resources.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the background of the research as well as the reasons for choosing to investigate the topic. The dissertation structure and a framework for data collection are explained. There will be an overview of research on the many differentiation strategies employed in junior cycle English classes with mixed abilities, including what challenges teachers have in putting them into practice and which they think work effectively. Literature on professional development, implementation issues, efficacy, and differentiation techniques will be investigated. Findings on teachers' perceptions of effective differentiation techniques in post-primary junior cycle English classes in Irish schools will be given, together with the challenges and supports those teachers encountered when implementing these strategies into practice.

1.2 Background to Study

The educational landscape in Ireland over the last two decades has recognised the importance of addressing the needs of students within mixed ability classes. Within most schools in Ireland, students remain in mixed ability classes, for most subjects, up until the final year of junior cycle (DES, 2007). This is the case in many schools in Ireland as they are unable to separate students in certain subjects, like English, into higher and ordinary level classes. Teachers are therefore faced with having both higher and ordinary level students within the one mixed ability junior cycle English class. In classes like these teachers need to use differentiation - a teaching strategy that adapts instruction to meet the needs of students in a class - which has been given a lot of praise in promoting equality in mixed ability classes and increasing student achievement (Tomlinson, 2001). A study carried out by Kristian Granås (2019) on the Norwegian educational system provides some good insights on how teachers there implement differentiation techniques into their classes. In her findings, she stated that teachers ‘arguably always encounter challenges in their attempts to differentiate instruction’ (Granås, 2019, p. 51). Studies on the Irish secondary educational system in relation to differentiation are sparse, therefore, the background of this study is built off Granås' study of the Norwegian one.

1.3 Rationale

In the context of the Junior Cycle in Ireland, where students of varying abilities are grouped together for English, the challenge that teachers face is to implement effective differentiated instruction that can enhance learning for all students (NCCA, 2011). Even though differentiation makes sense in theory and has been studied outside of Ireland, there isn't a lot of research that looks at how these techniques are used in mixed-ability English classes at the junior cycle level

and how effective teachers think they are. Understanding these perspectives is crucial, as teachers are at the forefront of implementing differentiation techniques in Irish post-primary schools and can provide valuable insights into the practicalities, challenges, and successes associated with these strategies (Westwood, 2016). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the differentiation techniques used by teachers in junior cycle English classes, their effectiveness in fostering student engagement, and the challenges teachers face in implementing them.

1.4 Guide to Methodology

The researcher invited English teachers from two post-primary schools to participate in this case study. A mixed-methods design was employed. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data, gaining a better understanding of the effective differentiation strategies teachers found and the challenges they faced in implementing them in junior cycle English classrooms. An online survey was used to gather quantitative data. Using mixed methods, the researcher was able to triangulate the findings. Triangulation is defined as the application of many methods to investigate 'the same research question' (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 3).

1.5 Dissertation Layout

The dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter One outlines the background and rationale for the research, the methods used, and the dissertation's layout. Chapter Two addresses literature on: current differentiation techniques used in classrooms; the most effective differentiation techniques; challenges teachers face in implementing them; and professional development in relation to differentiated instruction. Chapter Three discusses methodology, describing both the qualitative and quantitative data collection methods used. Chapter Four presents the main findings based on the themes that emerged during the analysis phase. Chapter Five gives an evaluation of the main findings in relation to the research questions and literature presented in Chapter Two. Chapter Six provides a summary of the study's findings along with some limitations and recommendations.

1.6 Conclusion

Conducting research about effective differentiation strategies, especially in post-primary English classes, although challenging, is necessary to provide all students with the highest quality education (Granås, 2019). Gaining the perspectives of teachers in post-primary schools on the implementation of effective differentiation techniques would significantly contribute to the development of training programmes that will assist teachers in successfully implementing these strategies in their junior cycle English classes. This case study will provide an opportunity for teachers to share their experiences and reflections on the effectiveness of differentiation strategies in English junior cycle classes with mixed-ability students.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in interest surrounding the concept of differentiation in education, especially within mixed-ability classrooms where students have diverse learning needs and abilities. This literature review delves into the meaning of differentiation, exploring its theoretical underpinnings and the variety of strategies employed by teachers. Furthermore, it looks at the efficacy of these strategies in increasing student engagement while also addressing the challenges encountered when implementing differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classes. Additionally, the literature review considers the role of professional development in equipping teachers with the required skills and knowledge for successful implementation.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Differentiation in Education

Differentiated instruction, or differentiation for short, is an educational strategy that is based on the recognition of students' varied backgrounds, learning styles, interests, and abilities (Burris and Garrity, 2008). Carol Tomlinson (2001), a leading expert in the field of differentiated instruction, similarly wrote that:

> A differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 1).

This is a somewhat similar approach to the NCCA, which advocates for a holistic approach to education in Ireland that recognises and accommodates the individual strengths, interests, and learning styles of students (NCCA, 2011). However, some scholars believe that differentiation is simply providing students with different tasks of varying complexity (Sternberg and Griorenko, 2000). Therefore, as stated above by Tomlinson, Burris, Garrity, and the NCCA, most research emphasises the need to tailor differentiated instruction to each student's specific needs within the classroom. However, it also establishes the expectation that every student will attain the same overall learning outcomes for a lesson or unit, typically aligned with the curriculum and state standards (Brentnall, 2016). If teachers lack clarity about the learning objectives for differentiated content, it can pose a challenge and potentially lead to some students falling behind (Tomlinson, 2008).

There are a few ways that teachers can differentiate instruction in the classroom. One is by considering Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory. Differentiated instruction, which focuses on adapting teaching strategies to match the various needs of students, strongly aligns with

Gardner's theory of various intelligences. According to Gardner (2011), there are eight different types of intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Teachers can establish a more inclusive classroom that values each student's individual talents and shortcomings by taking into account these different intelligences. Gardner's influence goes beyond just instructional strategies; it challenges the notion of a one-size-fits-all curriculum by showing that teaching and learning need to be more personalised and student-centred. By incorporating the idea of Gardner's multiple intelligences, teachers can create a classroom that respects and promotes the diverse intellectual landscape of all students, which in turn enhances their academic and personal growth (Armstrong, 2009). Gomaa (2014) investigated the impact of differentiated instruction using multiple intelligences on student achievement and attitude. The findings demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach in increasing student achievement and attitude.

Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is another theory that intricately connects to differentiated instruction in the classroom. A teacher who understands the needs of his or her students may adapt their instruction to fit each student's stage of development (Granås, 2019). This is the point at which Vygotsky's theory of ZPD becomes important. The ZPD, according to Vygotsky and Cole (1978), is the range between what a learner can accomplish on their own and what they can accomplish with assistance and direction from a teacher. The teacher's guidance needs to facilitate the students' access to their own ZPD. To ensure that every student reaches their ZPD, the teacher must be able to engage the class and provide them with activities that are achievable (Granås, 2019). One can promote learners' development by using differentiated instruction to cater to each student's individual needs and learning preferences (Riddle and Dabbagh, 1999).

2.3 Differentiation Techniques in Teaching

Teachers on a daily basis use a variety of techniques and strategies to differentiate instruction, ensuring that all students' needs are met effectively (Tomlinson, 2014). One key strategy in literature is flexible grouping, in which the teacher groups students based on topics, shared interests, or levels of ability. As time goes on, the teacher will frequently change these groups based on ongoing assessments (Tomlinson, 2001). Another technique that is frequently used by teachers is tiered assessment. These offer different levels of tasks based on the students' readiness; each tier must be challenging for the student yet achievable, fostering growth within each student's ZPD (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). Olisama, Odumosu, and Areelu (2018) showed that students who are given tiered assessments can develop a strong work ethic, the ability to work and think independently, and that they will participate more willingly when given a choice. Tomlinson's

(2001) view of tiered assessments is similar to that of Vygotsky, Cole and Olisama et al. ; she states that tiered assessments effectively accommodate the diverse needs of students by providing varying levels of challenge and support.

Furthermore, the use of varied instructional materials, such as incorporating visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities, addresses multiple intelligences, ensuring that all students have access to learning in a manner that suits their strengths (Gardner, 2011). Lastly, teachers can use Bloom's taxonomy to create differentiated questions within their classes. Differentiation in Action, published by the PDST (no date), outlines effective teaching strategies that teachers can use in their classes to help differentiate. In this, they state that by using Bloom's taxonomy, teachers can categorise questions by level of complexity, giving students access to a greater variety of higher-order thinking tasks (PDST, no date). Anstee (2014) also acknowledges Bloom's taxonomy for differentiated questioning, stating that it is an effective differentiation technique that can engage and cater to individual students in the class. A study conducted by Rodriguez (2012) on elementary schools in America revealed that the most common differentiated instructional strategies used by teachers on a daily to weekly basis were varying questions and varied instructional methods.

Although there are many different differentiation techniques that a teacher can employ within a classroom, are there any strategies specific to English language teaching? Ny and Amouri (2023) conducted a study on English teachers, revealing that the participants used flexible grouping and varied teaching styles to differentiate their teaching in their English classes. Ny and Amouri (2023) also revealed that a teacher in their study stated that it is important to use games and stories in English classes to awaken and hold students' interest. Other studies on differentiation in English classes did not look at the common differentiation techniques that teachers used, but rather focused on the challenges of their implementation or how effective they are in certain circumstances.

2.4 Effectiveness of Differentiation Techniques

There has been much research on the effectiveness of certain differentiated instruction strategies, including flexible grouping, but less has been said about other strategies (Smale-Jacobse, Meijer, Helma-Lorenz, and Maulana, 2019). Research suggests that flexible grouping is an effective differentiation strategy that leads to improved academic success, increased student engagement, and enhanced social-emotional development (Hattie, 2009). The PDST (no date, p. 16) further states that 'smaller groups are generally... more effective for learning' when conducting flexible grouping in secondary school classrooms. Additionally, only a small number of studies specifically address secondary education in relation to the effectiveness of differentiated instruction; the majority were conducted some time ago in the context of primary school.

Additionally, numerous teachers have expressed the view that differentiated instruction is essential for achieving success among all students, and they maintain a favourable opinion regarding its advantages (Green, 2011; Harman, 2014). However, a study by Nedellec (2015) discovered that many teachers do not regularly differentiate instruction in their classes, which hinders the effectiveness of learning because not every student can benefit from a unique teaching strategy. Melesse (2015) conducted a study to examine the frequency with which teachers implement different strategies of differentiated instruction in their classes. Her findings revealed that 40% of teachers implement differentiated instruction infrequently and irregularly, thereby compromising the quality of their teaching. Teacher self-efficacy is another significant factor influencing the effectiveness of implementing differentiation techniques. John Hattie (2009) suggests that teacher self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to carry out instructional practices successfully, significantly impacts the use of differentiation strategies. Borko and Putnam (1996) corroborated this assertion, suggesting that teachers lacking confidence might experience feelings of being overwhelmed or uncertain regarding how to tailor instruction to accommodate individual student needs, thereby exhibiting reluctance in implementing effective differentiation strategies.

2.5 Challenges and Barriers to Implementing Differentiation

Teachers have observed that consistent implementation of differentiated instruction can be challenging due to the substantial time and resources required for planning differentiated lessons (Grafi-Sharabi, 2009; Green, 2011). This is further identified by Roiha (2014), who says that teachers have numerous challenges when trying to effectively implement differentiation into the lessons they teach. In Grafi-Sharabi's (2009) study, all participating teachers recognised the positive impact of differentiated instruction on student achievement, engagement, and self-esteem. However, 70% of these teachers reported that time constraints prevented them from implementing it on a daily basis. Another research study conducted by Harman (2014) revealed that teachers faced challenges in finding sufficient time for collaborative efforts with their colleagues and for the planning of differentiated lessons. Aftab (2015) further stated that a shortage of planning and instructional time was the primary issue and hurdle teachers faced while implementing and designing differentiated instructions. As a result, it becomes clear that facilitating time and opportunities for teachers to engage in planning and collaboration with their colleagues plays a significant role in their capacity to implement differentiated instruction. Furthermore, resistance from students who may be accustomed to one-size-fits-all instruction can also present a challenge (Tomlinson and Imbeau, 2023). A child may resist differentiation due to feeling like they stand out or as though they are being perceived as different or “slower” from the rest of the students (Lovin, Kyger and Allsopp, 2004).

Another significant challenge teachers face in implementing differentiation techniques in classrooms is the constraint of limited resources. Teachers frequently encounter difficulties when searching for appropriate resources for their differentiated instruction lessons (Lavania and Nor, 2020). Noctor (2019) conducted a study which revealed that teachers were facing a shortage of resources and materials, and that the reading materials for various subjects were becoming increasingly outdated. Shareefa (2021) states that with access to adequate resources and support structures, it is likely that differentiation techniques could be more effective in the classroom.

2.6 Teacher Professional Development and Support

According to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995), professional development is a continuous journey in teachers' training that is designed to assist them in comprehending and shaping their teaching methodologies. Subban (2006) indicates the need for continuous professional development and support for teachers to enable them to successfully implement differentiation techniques within their classrooms. Experts recognise these strategies as pivotal and indispensable in ensuring the success of students' learning experiences. However, teachers grapple with a deficiency in training programmes and methodologies aimed at equipping them for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms (Al-Subaiei, 2017). The reality is that a majority of teachers lack the opportunities for professional development, dedicated planning time with colleagues, or the resources to consistently implement differentiation, as noted by Loiacono & Allen (2008). Teachers in mixed-ability classrooms would greatly benefit from ongoing training in differentiated instruction to enhance their ability to effectively address the challenges posed by their diverse group of students, as advocated by Butterworth (2010). This is further highlighted by Dixon, Yssel, McConnell and Hardin (2014), who state that there are benefits for both teachers and students from training programmes that provide teachers with additional strategies to implement in the classroom.

2.7 Conclusion

In summary, the prevailing literature reflects a range of viewpoints on this topic. First and foremost, differentiation is a method of instruction that recognises the diverse learning styles, readiness levels, and interests of each student and adapts teaching strategies to meet those needs. It relates to Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory because it addresses the various ways in which children learn best intellectually. It also conforms to Vygotsky's ZPD by giving pupils activities that are suitably difficult, allowing them to advance with the proper amount of assistance. The primary themes identified in this section include the challenges associated with implementing differentiation strategies in mixed-ability classes, their effectiveness in relation to student

engagement and achievement, and the support and professional development available to teachers. This research aims to enhance our understanding of these themes by providing insights and experiences from the implementation of differentiation techniques in English Junior Cycle classes, highlighting the diverse perspectives on these crucial aspects.

2.7.1 Focused Research Questions

Through reviewing relevant literature on this topic, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the common differentiation techniques used by English teachers in mixed-ability junior cycle classes?
- What are English teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of differentiation techniques in their mixed-ability junior cycle classes?
- What are the barriers and challenges to implementing differentiation techniques in mixed-ability English junior cycle classes?
- Do English teachers feel adequately resourced and equipped to implement a differentiation technique within their classes?

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The study's research questions were selected based on an analysis of relevant literature as well as the researcher's own classroom experiences and observations during teaching practices. This chapter discusses the methodologies used in this research study, as well as the reasons for selecting the various methods. It informs the reader about the researcher's procedure, participants, data analysis, and limitations. The researcher collected data through online surveys with open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews, conducted between April 8th and April 19th, 2024. This chapter also addresses ethical considerations, emphasising the researcher's compliance with ethical standards set out by Hibernia College and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018).

3.2 Research Design

The research was conducted using a pragmatist paradigm. The pragmatist paradigm gives the researcher the freedom to employ a range of methods and to modify their approach as necessary; therefore, it is more flexible than a positivist or interpretivist paradigm (Houghton, Hunter, and Meskell, 2012). Given its emphasis on real-world applications and action-oriented research, the pragmatist paradigm outperforms positivism and interpretivism in addressing complicated real-world issues (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The researcher's pragmatic viewpoint led to the use of a mixed-methods approach, which integrated both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

This researcher determined that a mixed-methods strategy would yield richer data after weighing the benefits of using each particular method. According to Malina, Norreklit, and Selto (2011), a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods can be fruitful for obtaining profoundly new empirical insights. A mixed-methods strategy allowed for the flexibility required to gather data and look into the many kinds of differentiation strategies employed by English teachers and their efficacy. Interviews served as the primary means of obtaining qualitative data, enabling the researcher to observe and gather detailed information (Creswell, 2021). Online surveys were used to gather quantitative data from participants, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

3.3 Research Methods

A Google Forms online survey (Appendix F) was used to gather quantitative data, while semi-structured interviews (Appendix D) and open-ended questions in the online survey were used to gather qualitative data. An online survey appeared to be preferable over other quantitative data

collection methods for a variety of reasons. The online survey is less expensive than having to print out a hard copy of a questionnaire for each participant; participants can complete it whenever it is convenient for them, from any location; and the researcher can view responses in real time, allowing for immediate analysis instead of waiting to gather questionnaires (Minnaar and Heystek, 2013). In contrast to structured interviews that adhere to a pre-set list of questions, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to use follow-up or probing questions based on the online survey results to gain a deeper understanding of the specific topic or area of interest (Adams, 2015). Additionally, semi-structured interviews provide an examination of unforeseen or unexpected themes or concerns that may surface throughout the interview process, enhancing the comprehensiveness and depth of the qualitative analysis (Legard, Keegan, and Ward, 2003).

3.3.1 Online Survey

Each participant received links to the online survey through email after the principals granted their consent. Upon clicking on the URL, participants encountered information sheets (Appendix E) outlining the confidentiality procedures that would be in place throughout the study. After reading the information sheet, those who decided to proceed received a consent document that required digital signatures to initiate the survey. Following each participant's completion of the Google Forms survey, the researcher compiled and analysed the quantitative and qualitative data collected.

The online survey was designed to collect information regarding the participants' years of teaching experience, the various differentiation strategies used in junior cycle English classes, their frequency of use, and their effectiveness in the classroom. Additionally, it sought to ascertain through an open-ended question whether any resources or other forms of support might be beneficial in enhancing their application of differentiation strategies inside an English junior cycle classroom.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

The online surveys are equivalent to an onion. Similar to peeling off the outer layers of an onion, online surveys serve as the initial layer of data collection. However, interviews are required to get deeper into more complex and in-depth topics, giving researchers access to the inner workings of understanding (Edwards and Talbot, 2014). Each school's head of the English department was identified in order to proceed with the interview stage. The researcher employed a semi-structured interview approach to allow participants to freely express their opinions and delve deeper into the topics discussed. Participants were able to speak freely about what differentiation is, their experiences of using different differentiation techniques, and how effective they think certain

techniques are. There was no rigid running order of questions for the interviews.

3.4 Population and Sampling Method

Given the study's specific focus on particular attributes and the researcher's aim to obtain more comprehensive data on the topic, purposive sampling was employed. Purposive sampling involves the selection of respondents who are more likely to provide relevant and meaningful information about the topic under study (Kelly, Bourgeault, and Dingwall, 2010).

The research participants were teachers who teach English at the junior cycle level in two post-primary schools. Their selection was predicated on their ability to teach English at this level, with the goal of learning more about the methods of differentiation they use in the English classroom and addressing any associated challenges. Additionally, the head teacher of each English department was interviewed due to their comprehensive engagement with the department and to gain a more in-depth view of the answers given in the surveys.

This research was conducted in two post-primary schools where the researcher carried out her placement. Both schools are located in rural towns in the northwest of Ireland. Both schools contain more than seven hundred students and sixty staff members. Given the size of the schools and the intricacy of the research, the researcher had access to twenty-five teachers who teach English at the junior cycle level. Therefore, to maximise participation rates and data quality, the researcher approached all twenty-five teachers as potential participants for this study.

3.5 Data Analysis

The research study aimed to gain insight into teachers' perspectives on differentiation techniques used within English classes at Junior Cycle and their effectiveness. The data was analysed using both statistical and thematic methods because this study combined quantitative and qualitative findings. The data that was collected through online surveys administered via Google Forms was analysed and conveyed using graphs, charts, and descriptive statistics. The summary feature on Google Forms, which displays participant replies in a graph or chart format, makes it simple to generate them. The researcher used thematic analysis to analyse the open-ended questions, which constituted a small portion of the survey, in the same manner as the interview questions. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to systematically examine interview transcripts and open-ended questions, identifying recurring patterns and codes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method facilitated the development of themes pertinent to the research topic.

To assess the mixed-methods approach, the data underwent a merging process. Researchers can cross-check results, provide a more comprehensive explanation of the study's conclusions, and triangulate results by merging data (Creswell and Clark, 2017). Thus, this methodology led to the drawing of conclusions and the identification of common themes.

3.6 Rigour

A researcher can establish the validity of a research study by demonstrating rigour, which is a sign of competence and integrity (Tobin and Begley, 2004). By employing a mixed-methods approach, the researcher was able to triangulate findings. The triangulation of data provides a firmer platform for making findings by resolving the limitations of each particular approach, thus improving the study's validity (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2011). For the qualitative side of the research study (interviews), thematic analysis was used to interpret the results. To ensure the data's creditability, the researcher used a critical friend to evaluate the transcripts from the interviews, removing the identifiers. The researcher's initial round of analysis yielded themes, which the critical friend confirmed and highlighted. Peer debriefing, according to Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017), is one technique to provide an unbiased assessment of the study process and increase its credibility.

Furthermore, researchers can reduce the influence of their personal biases on research outcomes through the practice of reflexivity (Finlay and Gough, 2008). The researcher engaged in continued self-reflection and critically examined her thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the research topic and data. By creating self-awareness, the researcher can ensure the integrity and credibility of their research outcomes (Lambert, Jomeen, and McSharry, 2010).

3.7 Limitations

A single researcher conducted this study on a small scale. As a result, the researcher acknowledges that the findings are neither transferable nor generalisable to a wider teaching population because of the limited sample size and lack of schools included in the study. Further research with a larger sample would be recommended in order to see past these limitations (Lakens, 2022). Surveys are not without challenges. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2022) assert that the structure of a survey may constrain participants' responses. Therefore, the researcher ensured that the survey had multiple open-ended questions. Research studies have limitations, but they can shed light on areas where there hasn't been much previous research (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 2010); this study is one of those areas.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The researcher completed an ethics application form and submitted it to Hibernia College's Ethics Committee for approval before obtaining any data. After seeking this approval, the researcher followed the ethical guidelines established by BERA (2018) and Hibernia College. To meet the primary criteria outlined in these guidelines, no study participant was less than eighteen years old. Participants were invited to opt into the research and informed that they could choose to participate in the research at their discretion. The study participants were informed about their right to withdraw at any time, the data storage procedures, the anonymity of the study using pseudonyms, and the availability of their data upon request.

The principals of each school were asked for their consent before any data could be gathered. The principal was required to sign a letter of consent; a copy of this is provided below in Appendix A. Following approval from the principals, the researcher approached potential participants for the interviews and provided them with a consent form (Appendix C) and an information sheet (Appendix B) about the study. The consent form and information sheet were incorporated into the opening of the online survey for those who decided to participate after being approached in school. The participant had to sign and date the consent form in both cases to indicate their willingness to participate.

Moreover, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity was crucial to encouraging participants to respond. According to Cohen et al. (2002), the key to participant anonymity when it comes to the data they contribute is that it should never reveal who they are. The study assigned pseudonyms to participants and refrained from using the names of the participating schools. All of the gathered data was kept on a password-protected computer, and as soon as electronic copies of the transcriptions were generated, any hard copies were destroyed. All participants will have access to their own data upon request, should the need arise, and the researcher will retain ownership of the data.

3.9 Conclusion

The researcher concluded that a mixed-methods approach would be the most appropriate methodology to adopt, considering the nature of the topic and the study's size. Participants were chosen based on the requirement that they teach junior cycle English. A review of the study's limitations was provided, along with ethical considerations pertaining to data gathering and confidentiality. The next chapter presents the findings from the data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 – Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide the information gathered to address the research questions regarding the effectiveness of differentiation strategies and teachers' perspectives on them in junior cycle mixed-ability English classes. The data was gathered using a mixed-methods approach, and the results from interviews and online surveys were used to create the findings that are presented in this chapter. In addition to the online surveys that collected quantitative data, two semi-structured interviews and open-ended survey questions were also used to collect qualitative data. While qualitative data will be presented thematically, quantitative findings will be presented as graphs and pie charts.

4.2 Demographics

20 post-primary English teachers completed the online survey via Google Forms (N=20). Of the 20 teachers who took part, 40% had been teaching for 0-4 years (N=8), 30% had been teaching for 5-10 years (N=6), 20% had been teaching for 11-14 years (N=4) and 10% had been teaching for 15+ years (N=2)

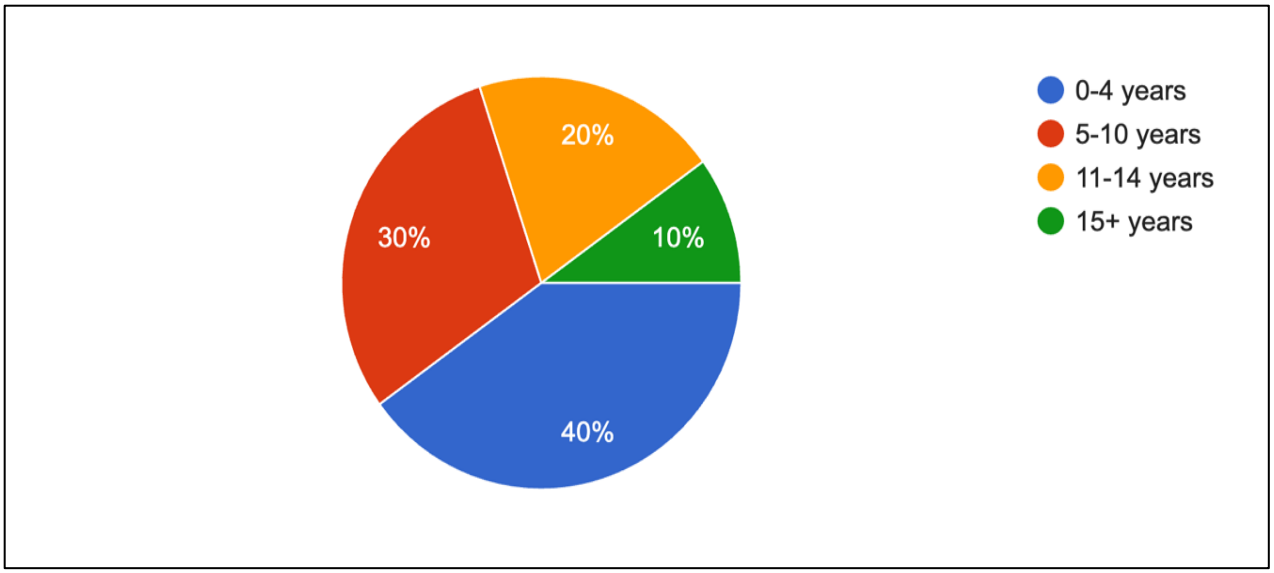

Figure 1 Years of teaching experience

Of the 20 respondents, 85% were female (N=17) and the remainder were male (N=3). There was no participant who wished not to disclose their gender (N=0)

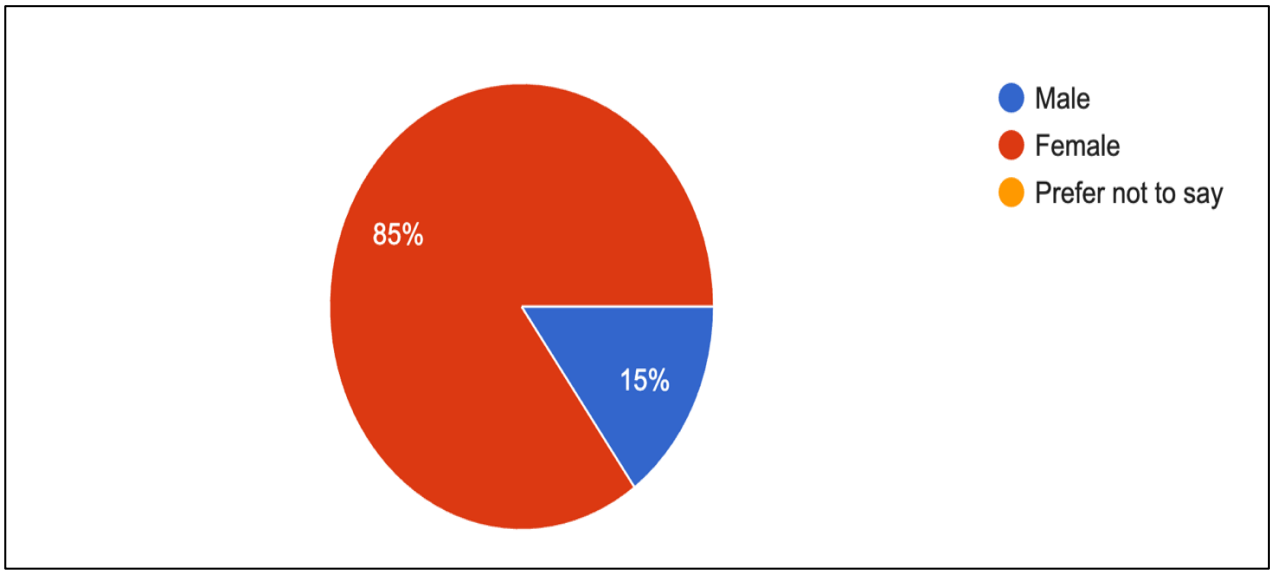

Figure 2 Gender of the teachers

Participants were then asked their age. Of the 20 teachers, 25% were under the age of 25 (N=5), 35% were aged 25–34 (N=7), 25% were aged 35–44 (N=5), 10% were aged 45–54 (N=2) and 1 participant was aged over 55.

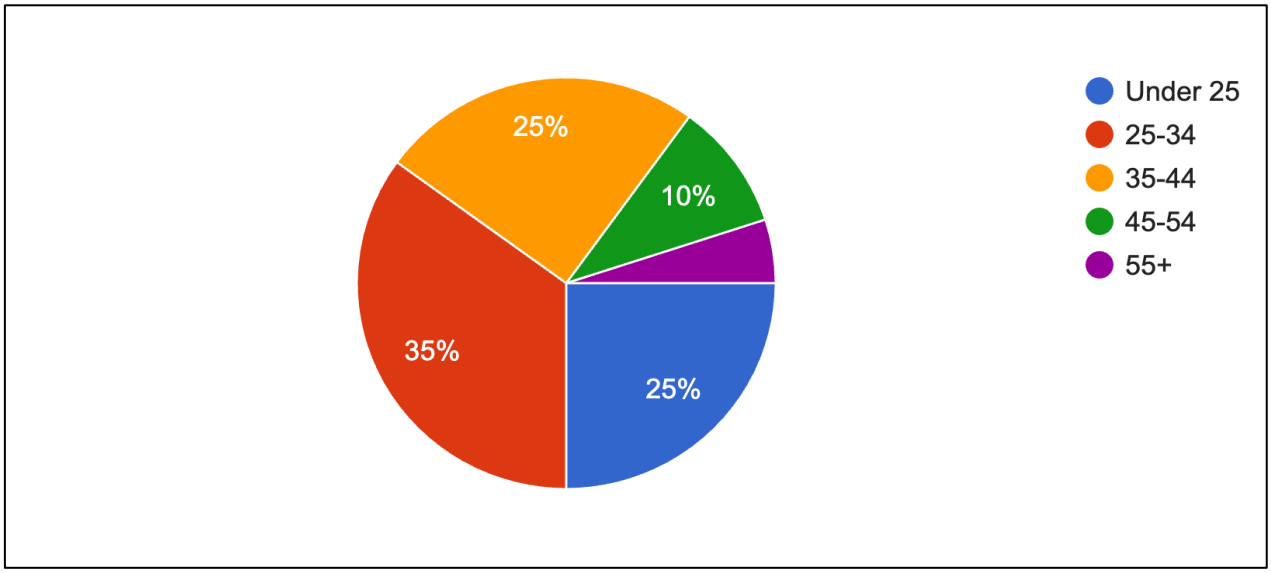

Figure 3 Age range of the participants

4.3 Overview of the differentiation techniques employed and their frequency of use

Participants were asked in the survey if they employ differentiation techniques within their English mixed-ability junior cycle classes, to which they all responded yes (N=20)

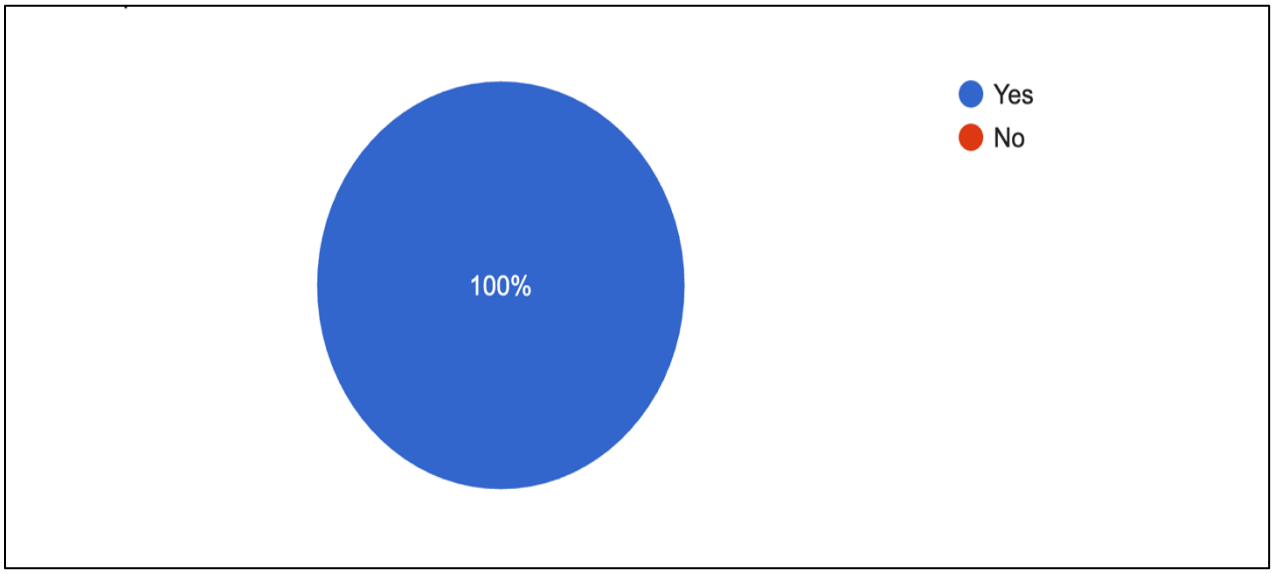

Figure 4 Employment of differentiation techniques in the classroom

Of the 20 participants who implement differentiation techniques in their English Junior Cycle classes, 55% implement them on a daily basis (N=11), 40% use them on a weekly basis in their classes (N=8) and 1 participant says that they implement them sometimes. No participant stated that they use differentiation techniques rarely or never.

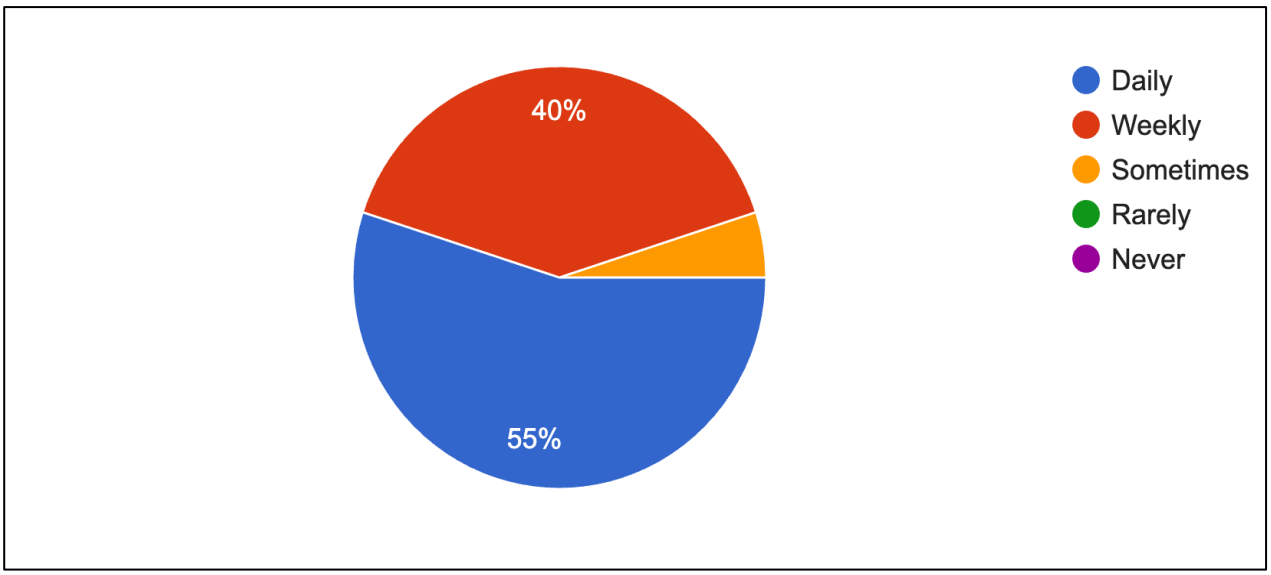

Figure 5 Frequency of differentiation use within English Junior Cycle classes

After further probing this question in the interviews and asking the head of each English Department to explain their response, Teacher A stated:

> *"I do try to implement differentiation techniques on a daily basis; however, this is not always possible as sometimes they are not planned how I'd like them to be or I simply do not have the time, so I chose weekly for that question.".*

Teacher B said that:

> *"I sit down the night before and plan out what questions I am going to ask my students in each class, and I write these down in my diary. I also try to plan at least one small, differentiated activity in my English classes every day.".*

The survey also revealed that questioning through Bloom's Taxonomy is the most common differentiation technique, with all 20 stating that they use it currently in their junior cycle English classes. 80% of participants (N=16) stated that they currently use a variety of instructional materials in their classes. This means that they vary their teaching methods by incorporating videos, pictures, or hands-on activities into their lessons. 40% of participants (N=8) chose flexible grouping as a differentiation technique that they use within their classes, and only 35% of respondents (N=7) stated that they use tiered assessments/homework. The most common combination included varied instructional materials and Bloom's Taxonomy for questioning (N=17).

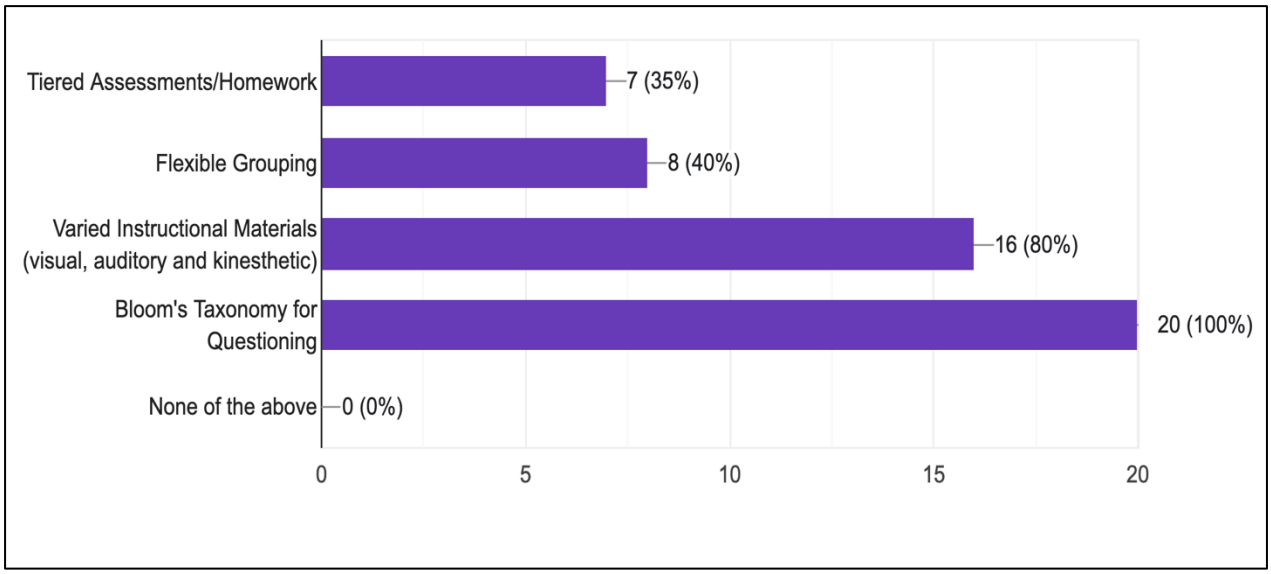

Figure 6 Differentiation techniques used within mixed-ability English Junior Cycle classes

When participants in the interviews were asked what differentiation technique, they believed to be the most common out of the above, the following comments were reported:

> *"You don't even realise you are using questioning as a differentiation technique in English classes, it comes naturally as a teacher, and you do it without thinking."*
>
> *"Bloom's taxonomy for questioning is definitely the differentiation technique that I use the most within my English junior cycle classes."*

4.3 Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of differentiation techniques within their English mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes

Participants in the online survey rated the effectiveness of their differentiation strategies in meeting the diverse needs of their junior cycle English mixed-ability classes. 20% of participants (N=4) stated that they believe that the differentiation techniques that they use are very effective in meeting the needs of students in their classes; a staggering 60% of respondents (N=12) indicated that the differentiation techniques employed are only effective at meeting the needs of students in their classes; and lastly, 20% of participants (N=4) reported that they were not sure if the differentiation techniques that they employ in their English classes are effective or not at meeting the needs of students. No respondent indicated that the differentiation techniques employed by them were ineffective or very ineffective (N=0).

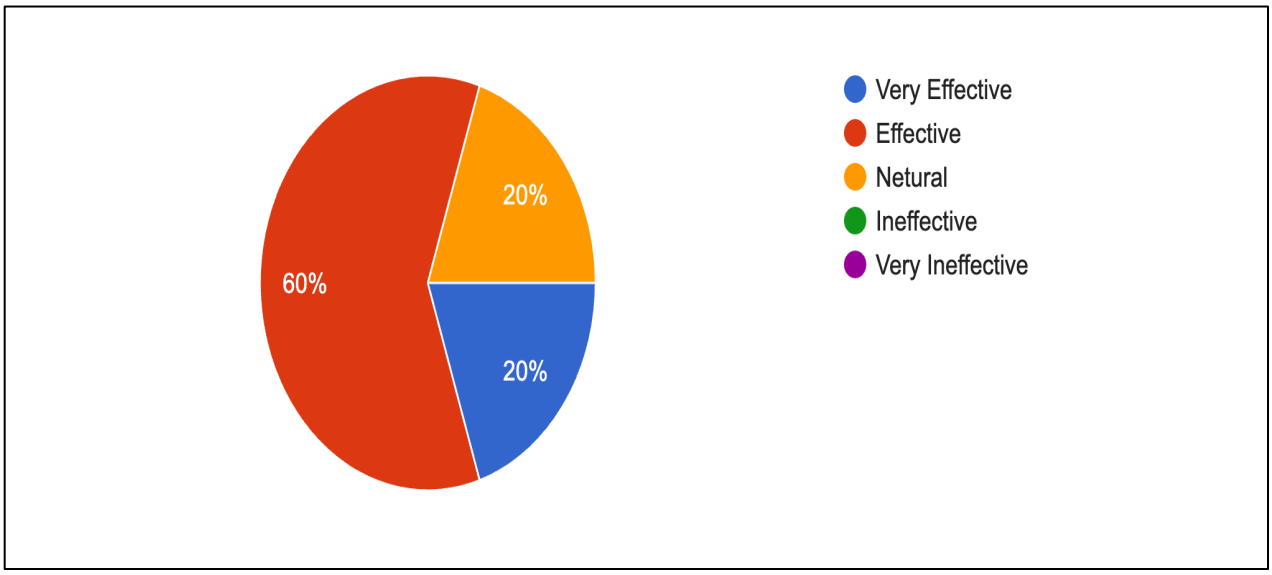

Figure 7 Effectiveness of differentiation techniques in meeting the needs of students in English Junior Cycle classes

To find out what differentiation technique the teachers find most effective within their English mixed-ability junior cycle classes, an open-ended question was asked in the online survey, and this question was further probed in the interviews to gain a deeper understanding of why a certain technique is the most effective. This qualitative data was compiled, and important themes began to emerge from the answers. The open-ended question showed that teachers believed that tiered assessments and homework were the most effective in their English junior cycle classes:

> *"They give a good indication of the level of attainment of each student while catering to their individual ability. Informs me of any concept students may be having difficulty with and informs me of the next stage of learning."*

"Tiered assessments are effective because I can provide varied levels of difficulty within an activity and cater to my students' different abilities and learning styles while still targeting the same learning objectives."

The survey data and interviews both indicated an increase in the participation levels of students when tiered homework was given in an English class, showing its effectiveness:

"Tiered homework: This caters for all the learners in my class and means that they all have an equal chance of completing the homework. I find this the most effective technique, as I notice an increase in the number of children doing homework when this option is given."

"I love given tiered homework as I see an increase in the participation levels when the students are given a choice."

It is evident from both the online survey and interviews that the teachers find tiered homework and assessments the most effective differentiation techniques within their English Junior Cycle classes.

4.4 Challenges/barrier of implementing differentiation techniques in English mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes

The survey asked respondents to state if they faced any challenges or barriers when implementing differentiation techniques within their English mixed-ability junior cycle classes. 95% of respondents responded yes to this question (N=19). One participant answered no; however, in a later question, they chose time constraints as a challenge. Chapter 5 delves deeper into these inconsistent responses. The online survey then asked participants to select the key challenges that they face when implementing differentiation techniques within their mixed-ability English junior cycle classes. Table 1 shows the frequency of responses for each of the challenges.

Challenges	Number	Percentage
Time constraints	16	80%
Large class sizes	15	75%
Student resistance/disengagement	15	75%
Lack of resources	4	20%
Limited support/training	3	15%
None of the above	1	5%

Table 1 List of challenges to implementing differentiation techniques within English junior cycle classes

Most participants indicated multiple challenges. Table 2 shows the groupings that were compiled by respondents from the options in Table 1. Only one respondent reported that there were no key challenges to implementing differentiation techniques within their English Junior Cycle classes.

Challenges	Number	Percentage
Time constraints; Lack of resources; Limited support/training; Student resistance/disengagement; Large class sizes	1	5%
Time constraints; Lack of resources; Student resistance/disengagement; Large class sizes	1	5%
Time constraints; Student resistance/disengagement; Large class sizes	7	35%
Limited support/training; Student resistance/disengagement; Large class sizes	2	10%
Time constraints; Lack of resources	2	10%
Time constraints; Student resistance/disengagement	2	10%
Time constraints; Large class sizes	2	10%
Student resistance/disengagement; Large class sizes	2	10%
None of the above	1	5%

Table 2 Key challenges to implementing differentiation techniques within English Junior Cycle classes

16 respondents (80%) selected time constraints as the most significant challenge, closely followed by large class sizes and student resistance or disengagement (N=15) as the next biggest challenges. The highest combination of challenges was time constraints, student disengagement/resistance, and large class sizes, with 35% of respondents choosing this combo (N=7). None of the challenges were reported exclusively as the only challenge that teachers face when implementing differentiation techniques in English junior cycle classes.

Analysis of the interviews also found that time constraints were a significant challenge when implementing differentiation techniques within English mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes, with interviewees pointing out that there is a lack of time to plan for the implementation of differentiation techniques and that the length of the classes is too short:

> *"...I mean, our schedule is jam-packed, and there's barely a moment to breathe, let alone customise each lesson perfectly for every student's unique needs...it also doesn't help that we have limited class time, you cannot get much covered in a 40-minute lesson...sometimes I just want to go home in the evening and switch off from school work."*

Interviewees identified additional challenges to implementing differentiation techniques within English junior cycle classes, such as an already overcrowded English curriculum, classroom management, and exam revision:

> "*I often find myself struggling to balance covering the required material on the Junior Cycle English curriculum while also providing differentiated instruction daily within my classes…I feel a constant pressure to cover material within a certain timeframe and sometimes it feels like there just isn't enough time to do it all."*

"...managing classroom dynamics while implementing differentiation techniques can also prove quite challenging...I will have students working at varying paces and trying to circulate the room while also dealing with behavioural issues can be demanding."

"It can be very challenging when it comes to exam revision and trying to differentiate, especially with the different levels in the class and the type of exam questions in the English Junior Cycle papers."

4.5 Professional development and training

The researcher started by asking respondents in the online survey if they feel confident when implementing differentiation techniques within their mixed-ability English Junior Cycle classes. Over half of the respondents (60%, N=12) indicated that they are only somewhat confident when implementing them, and 40% (N=8) said that they are very confident when implementing them in their classes. Figure 8 shows this below.

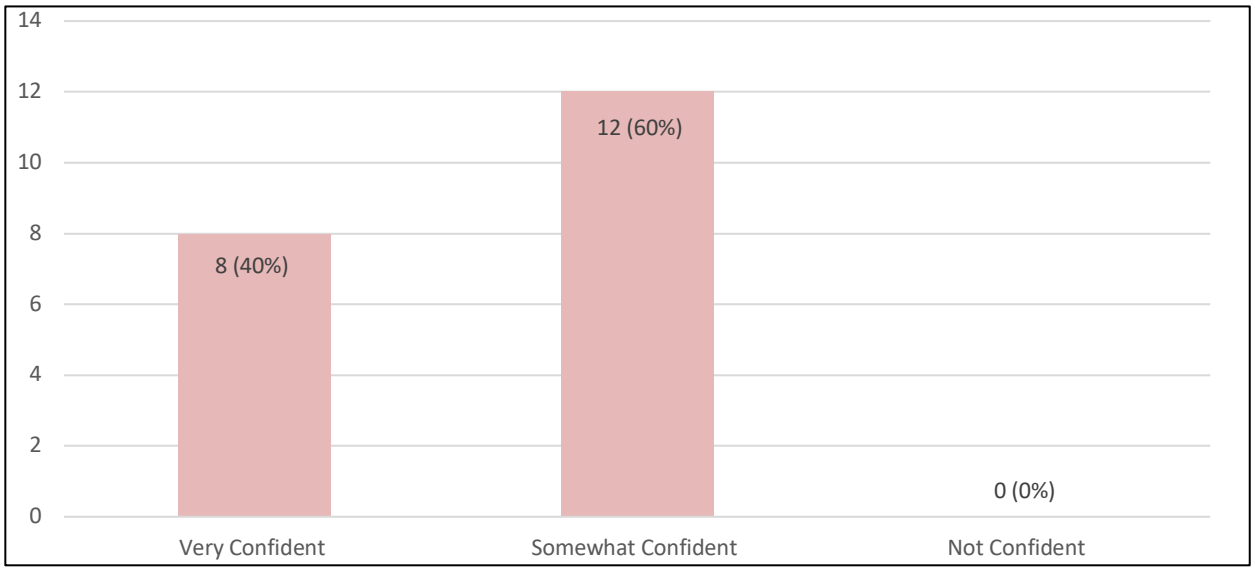

Figure 8 Teacher confidence when implementing differentiation techniques within their Junior Cycle English classes

Respondents were then asked if they had received any professional development training on differentiation techniques within the past two years. 55% of respondents (N=11) said yes, and 45% of them (N=9) said no.

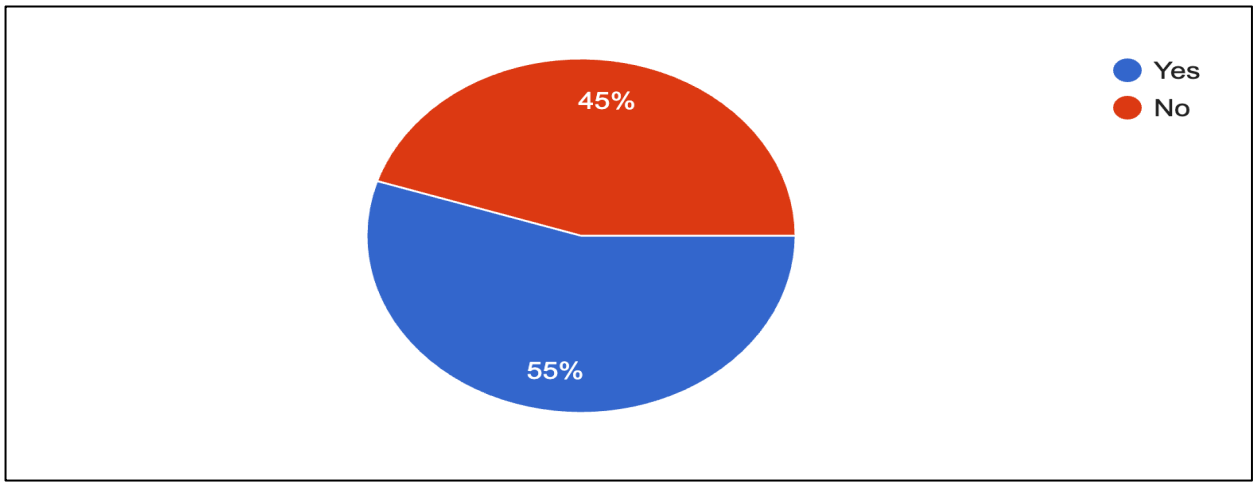

Figure 9 Have you received professional development training on differentiation techniques within the past two years?

If respondents to the previous question in the online survey indicated that they had received professional development training, they were then asked to describe it in an open-ended question. These were some of the responses:

> *"Online CPD on Differentiation and Dyslexia"*
>
> *"School training day by Oide on Differentiation"*

However, findings from the interviews identified a lack of training as a key challenge, saying that there is little opportunity to observe each other's teaching practices and that input from expert teachers or schools where differentiation strategies are working and are making a difference would be beneficial:

> *"...I would love to develop a situation within our English department where we have a meeting at the beginning of the month on differentiation. We pick a differentiation strategy to test for the month in our Junior Cycle English classes and at the end of the month meet up and give feedback to see how the implementation went."*
>
> *"I would find it beneficial if I had someone come into my classes to give me suggestions on how to make my differentiation techniques more effective."*

Although it was stated above that 55% of respondents (N=11) had received training in the past two years, 8 of them (73%) indicated that they still would like to attend a training workshop focused on specific differentiation techniques. Figure 10 below also shows that while 45% of respondents (N=9) said that having access to a larger variety of materials would improve their capacity to apply differentiation techniques effectively, only 20% of respondents (N=4) earlier stated that a lack of resources was a barrier to the implementation of differentiation techniques within their classes.

These inconsistencies in the findings will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

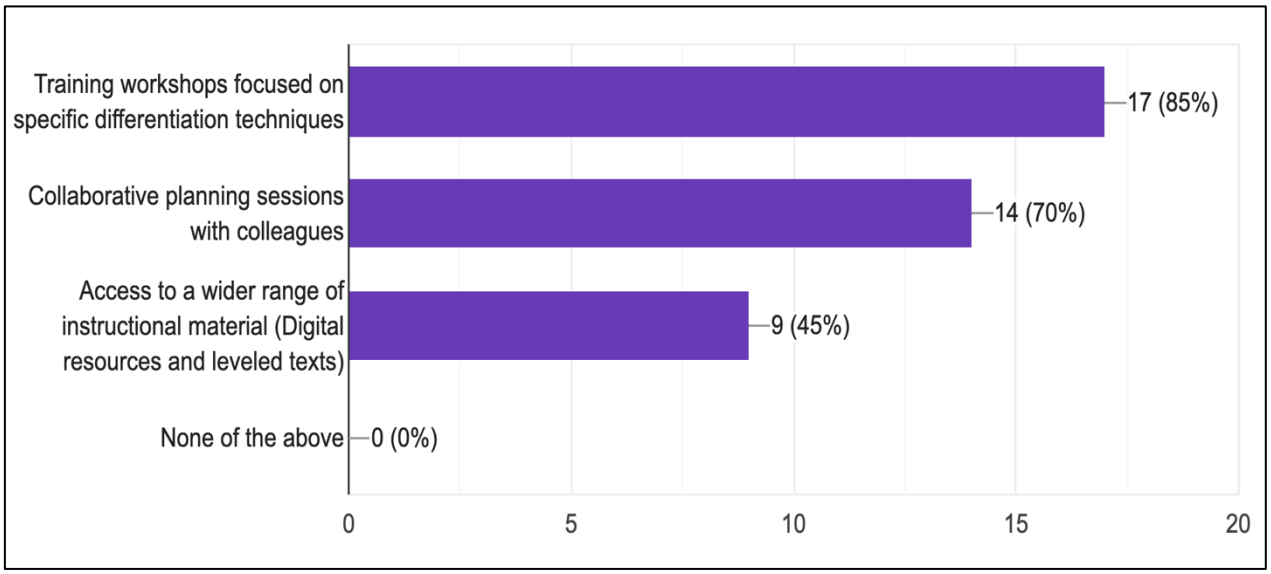

Figure 10 What additional training, resources or support could enhance your ability to implement differentiation techniques effectively within your junior cycle English classes?

4.6 Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative data collected in this case study identified four main themes. Firstly, the data revealed that teachers implement differentiation techniques in their English Junior Cycle classes, which include tiered homework/assessment, flexible grouping, a variety of instructional methods, and questioning based on Bloom's taxonomy. Secondly, teachers considered that the differentiation techniques they use in their junior cycle English classes are effective at meeting students' needs. The data also indicated that tiered assessment/homework was the most effective differentiation technique. It also motivates students and engages them in learning. Thirdly, the research data highlighted a number of challenges identified by teachers in implementing differentiation techniques within their English junior cycle classes. Teachers identified time constraints as the most significant challenge, while the survey and interviews also highlighted several other challenges. Finally, the data suggests that a number of teachers express a desire for additional training in differentiation techniques, while others express a lack of confidence in implementing these techniques in their classrooms. Chapter 5 will further discuss and develop the data and research findings in this chapter, referencing the relevant research literature.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the results of the research. The previous chapter presents the findings using both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from online surveys and semi-structured interviews. The analysis shed light on several aspects of the study's initial research questions:

- What are the common differentiation techniques used by English teachers in mixed-ability junior cycle classes?
- What are English teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of differentiation techniques in their mixed-ability junior cycle classes?
- What are the barriers and challenges to implementing differentiation techniques in mixed-ability English junior cycle classes?
- Do English teachers feel adequately resourced and equipped to implement a differentiation technique within their classes?

This chapter will establish links between this study and other research in this field. Recommendations will stem from the study's findings and will evaluate how they could influence future practices among English teachers who implement differentiation techniques in their Junior Cycle mixed-ability classes.

5.2 Common differentiation techniques utilised by English teachers in mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes

Teachers in both schools reported using a variety of differentiation strategies in their Junior Cycle English classes, including tiered assessment and homework, flexible grouping, a variety of instructional materials, and Bloom's taxonomy for questioning. Research has stated that teachers employ a range of differentiation strategies, not just one, in order to address the diverse needs of students within a classroom (Tomlinson, 2014). In the research already presented in Chapter 2 it was stated by Rodriguez (2012) that the most common differentiation strategies used by elementary school teachers was, varied instructional methods and varying questions. In this study's findings this is also true for secondary school teacher in Ireland, with varied instructional methods and questioning receiving the highest responses (N=17). It's interesting to note that out of all the responses, all 20 respondents said they use Bloom's taxonomy for questioning as their primary differentiation approach in their English Junior Cycle classrooms. These results are consistent with interviews where teachers reported that they use Bloom's taxonomy for inquiry without even realising it during an English lesson and that it comes naturally to them. The PDST (no date) states

that teacher do make regular use of questioning on a daily basis, however, it is important that when doing so they adjust the types of questions according to the child's level of comprehension. This is in line with the findings as all 20 respondents have stated that they use Bloom's taxonomy to differentiate their questioning in their English junior cycle classes. Anstee (2014) further stated that questioning is a key differentiation strategy that engages students and caters to individuals within the classroom. Therefore, the most common differentiation techniques used by teachers in English junior cycle mixed-ability classes are Bloom's taxonomy for questioning and varied instructional methods. In contrast, Granås (2019) discovered that tiered assignments and class discussions were the most utilised differentiation strategies by Norwegian English teachers.

Furthermore, when asked how often they use differentiation strategies in their English classes, respondents' responses varied; just 55% of respondents (N=11) indicated they do so every day. The remaining respondents claimed to use differentiation techniques only infrequently, or once a week. Kupers, De Boer, Loopers, Bakker, and Minnaert (2023) assert that educators and teachers should incorporate differentiated instruction based on students' abilities or learning level on a daily basis. This is not the case in this study, only around half of the respondents (55%) stated that they use differentiation techniques in their English classes every day.

5.3 Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of differentiation techniques within their mixed-ability English Junior Cycle classes

The survey's findings shed light on the varying levels of confidence and perceived effectiveness among respondents regarding the implementation of differentiation techniques in their English junior cycle classes. Among the 20 respondents who expressed their confidence levels, a majority (N=11) indicated that they were only somewhat confident in their ability to implement differentiation strategies within their English mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes. Interestingly, when asked about the effectiveness of their strategies in meeting the needs of all students, a subset of these respondents (N=4) reported feeling neutral, suggesting ambivalence or uncertainty about the impact of their practices. Moreover, eight out of the eleven respondents indicated that their strategies were only effective in meeting the needs of the students in their own classes, implying potential limitations or challenges when implementing differentiation strategies to meet the unique demands of the student body in their English classes. Hattie (2009) asserts that teacher self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to carry out instructional practices successfully, significantly influences the use of differentiation strategies. Borko and Putnam (1996) corroborated this assertion, suggesting that teachers lacking confidence might experience feelings of being overwhelmed or uncertain regarding how to tailor instruction to accommodate individual student

needs, thereby exhibiting reluctance when implementing differentiation strategies.

Additionally, the findings indicate that English teachers believe tiered assessments and homework are the most effective techniques to differentiate instruction in their junior cycle classes with mixed abilities. According to one interviewee, the reason they work so well is that they target the same learning objectives while offering various levels of difficulty within an activity. This allows them to accommodate students with varying skills and learning styles, which corresponds to Tomlinson's (2001) research suggesting that tiered assessments and homework effectively accommodate diverse student needs by providing varying levels of challenge and support. It was also found in research that students who are given tiered assessments/homework can develop a strong work ethic, the ability to work and think independently, and a greater willingness to participate when given a choice (Olisama et al., 2018). Teachers in this study confirmed this, pointing out that when they provided students with a tiered homework assignment, they observed a rise in the number of students completing homework when given various options. This is further supported by Olisama et al. (2018), who report that in their study, they observed an increase in students' participation in maths when they were given a tiered homework assessment.

5.4 Barriers/Challenges of implementing differentiation techniques within mixed-ability English Junior Cycle classes

According to research, teachers have numerous challenges when trying to effectively implement differentiation into the lessons they teach (Roiha, 2014). Lack of time is a key barrier to implementing differentiation strategies in English junior cycle classes. 80% of the respondents (N=16) said that time was a problem for them. This is similar to Granås' (2019) study where all the Norwegian English teachers reported that they had limited time to differentiate instruction. She further mentions that one of the teachers called it a 'typical teacher-complaint' (Granås, 2019, p. 44). Further investigation during the interviews revealed that the issue wasn't just planning time, but also the duration of the classes. Teachers reported that they hardly had enough time in a forty-minute class to cover the curriculum, let alone try to incorporate effective differentiated activities. In a related study, participants concluded that the prime issues and hurdles they had to face while implementing and designing differentiated instructions were a shortage of planning and instructional time (Aftab, 2015). Large class sizes and student resistance were two other significant issues that teachers mentioned in the online survey when implementing differentiation techniques in their English junior cycle lessons. Melesse (2015) discovered similar results in his investigation of the same topic, stating that teachers in his study determined that the primary hurdles to implementing differentiated instruction were large class numbers and a lack of enthusiasm and commitment from students.

Inquiring further about what challenges teachers encounter in applying differentiation strategies in their English junior cycle classrooms, one interviewee stated that she struggles with trying to differentiate exam content for 3rd year students who have to either sit at a higher or ordinary level. She observed that her school failed to divide English classes into higher and ordinary levels, resulting in mixed-ability pupils taking both higher and ordinary level exams within her English classes. The literature has scarcely addressed this challenge, with only one other study investigating a similar issue in the context of geography GCSE exams. According to Dunn and Darlington (2016), teachers in Northern Ireland face challenges in differentiating content for geography exam revision, shedding light on the broader implications of differentiation struggles across subjects and educational contexts.

Through interviews conducted as part of this study, another significant challenge emerged regarding the implementation of differentiation techniques in English junior cycle classes: an already overcrowded English curriculum. Teachers voiced worries about the Junior Cert curriculum's demanding nature, which does not offer much opportunity for further differentiation techniques. This problem is consistent with previous research that emphasises how teachers are under pressure to cover a lot of material in a short amount of time (Putwain and Von der Embse, 2019). Not only does the overcrowded curriculum make time management more difficult, but it also limits the use of creative teaching strategies like differentiation. Therefore, the English curriculum's structural issues hinder the application of differentiation, which has the potential to enhance student learning and engagement.

5.5 Do English teachers feel adequately resourced and equipped to implement a differentiation technique within their classes?

Research indicates the need for continuous professional development and support for teachers to enable them to successfully implement differentiation techniques within their classrooms (Subban, 2006). Data from the online survey indicated that the majority of teachers considered that they had received sufficient training to implement differentiation techniques within their English classrooms. However, some teachers did not feel sufficiently trained to employ differentiation techniques in their English classrooms and would like further training.

Among the three participants who identified a primary challenge to implementing differentiation techniques—specifically, the lack of support or training—two expressed doubts about the efficacy of training workshops focused on differentiation techniques as a means of improving their implementation abilities. This response appears contradictory to their initial identification of limited support and training as a challenge. One plausible interpretation is that the respondents

may have misunderstood the intent of the question or provided differing responses due to varying interpretations. It is possible that they viewed the challenge question as requiring more immediate classroom support rather than external training workshops. Another explanation could be that the respondents have separated ‘limited support’ and ‘limited training’.

Data from the interviews and online surveys identified time as a resource, stating that there was a lack of time to plan, train, and collaborate with colleagues in the schools with regard to implementing differentiation techniques within English mixed-ability junior cycle classes. The English teachers in Granås' (2019) study also expressed a need for additional time to share ideas and get support from colleagues regarding differentiation in their English classes. Tomlinson (2017) emphasised the importance of teachers having a range of abilities and a variety of methodologies to draw from to meet the diverse needs in the classroom. This way, teachers will be better equipped to implement differentiation techniques based on the requirements of their schools and pupils in their English classes. Dixon et al.’s (2014) study corroborates this and cites benefits for both teachers and pupils from training programmes that provide teachers with additional strategies to implement in the classroom.

Four participants in the survey identified a lack of resources as a significant challenge in implementing differentiation strategies in their English classes. However, when questioned about potential enhancements to their ability to implement differentiation strategies specifically in their English Junior Cycle classes, 50% of the respondents (N=10) stated that having access to a wider range of materials would be beneficial. This inconsistency in responses suggests that respondents may have misinterpreted the questions, indicating a need for clearer question formulation. It appears that respondents may have responded inconsistently due to considering personal circumstances for one question ("Do you feel that having access to a wider range of adequate resources to implement differentiation techniques in your English Junior Cycle classes would be beneficial?") and a broader policy context for the other ("Select the key challenges to implementing differentiation techniques within your English mixed-ability Junior Cycle classes"). Whatever interpretation is made of it, it is still clear that certain English teachers might profit from more resources to support their differentiation in junior cycle mixed-ability classes. This is consistent with the feedback provided by English teachers in Granås' (2019) study, who stated that they would also benefit from having extra resources to help them differentiate.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the study's main findings. Teachers reported on the differentiation strategies they employed, how often they used them, and whether or not their use of these strategies was

effective for their English classes. The application of differentiation strategies in English junior cycle classes with mixed abilities presented several significant challenges. Teachers reported that the biggest challenge to implementing successful differentiation techniques in their classes, while trying to deliver an overloaded curriculum to students, was time constraints. Teachers also highlighted a range of other challenges, such as student resistance, managing large class sizes, and tailoring instruction for exam revision. Teachers requested additional time to plan and work with colleagues on applying differentiation strategies. Teachers also expressed a desire for additional training in the implementation and delivery of differentiation strategies in their junior cycle English classrooms. Chapter Six will now discuss the strengths and limitations of the research carried out in this study, as well as suggestions for future research opportunities related to this topic.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This single case study enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of the most effective differentiation techniques in English junior cycle mixed-ability classes from teachers' perspectives. Chapter 2 delved into the literature on differentiation techniques, efficacy, challenges faced, and professional development. The study collected quantitative and qualitative data using an online survey and semi-structured interviews with teachers (N=2) in schools. The data was analysed and interpreted to expose the challenges experienced by teachers in implementing differentiation techniques with students in the English junior cycle classes of mixed-ability in two post-primary schools. The data identified a lack of time as one of the major challenges faced by teachers in balancing the effective implementation of differentiation techniques in English junior cycle classes with the demands of an overcrowded English curriculum, which is consistent with the findings of wider research in this field.

6.2 Summary of Findings

Teachers in mixed-ability Junior Cycle English classes found differentiation strategies to be effective, with tiered assessments and homework proving particularly successful, according to the findings. However, the research also highlighted several challenges and constraints in implementing these strategies. Notably, teachers struggled with insufficient time for proper implementation and not enough time to collaborate with school teachers on subject differentiation (Pozas and Letzel-Alt, 2023). Teachers further identified large class sizes and student resistance as significant challenges to effectively implementing differentiation techniques. Some also expressed a need for additional training and suggested that having an observer provide feedback on their use of differentiation strategies within their classes would enhance their practice. Additionally, one teacher recommended that the English department hold monthly meetings to discuss the application and effectiveness of differentiation techniques in junior cycle English classes.

6.3 Limitations

A mixed-methods approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of differentiation techniques in English junior cycle classes with mixed abilities. The semi-structured interviews provided views, insights, and experiences that could heighten awareness of the topic (Horton, Macve, and Struyven, 2004). The study limited its scope to two schools in the north-west of Ireland, thereby limiting the generalisability of its findings to all English teachers nationwide. A possible misinterpretation of some online survey

questions may have produced apparently contradictory responses and made elements of the data more difficult to analyse.

6.4 Recommendations

The findings emphasised the need for more time to plan and collaborate with colleagues in the English departments in relation to the implementation and delivery of differentiation techniques in English junior cycle classes. The findings also recommended striking a better balance between differentiation and the demands of an overloaded English curriculum. Furthermore, a chance where teachers are observed in their implementation of differentiation techniques within their English classes and given advice would be worthwhile and beneficial to teachers' practice and their ability to make better professional judgments. The data showed that some teachers believe additional professional development, training, and support is helpful in increasing the effectiveness of their implementation of differentiated instruction within English classrooms (Strickland, 2009). To better address the needs of students in their English classes, teachers must equip themselves with a diverse set of skills and knowledge regarding differentiation (Wan, 2017).

Through continuous professional development, teaching professionals will be able to make better professional judgements with regard to how they implement appropriate differentiation techniques that suit the specific needs of students in their English classes. This will ensure that all students will keep up with the Junior Cycle English curriculum. The data suggests that differentiation strategies in English junior cycle classrooms must be tailored to the specific challenges and obstacles of each teacher, and that teachers will need adequate time to implement these strategies effectively (Taylor, 2017).

6.5 Conclusion

The gap in knowledge on the common differentiation techniques used, effectiveness of differentiation techniques, challenges faced in their implementation and professional development in relation to Junior Cycle English teachers has now been filled. While most of the differentiation techniques were effective, this research study identified the challenges of implementing them in English junior cycle classes with mixed abilities. It also indicated that teachers needed more time for planning and reflection, as well as more training and resources, to effectively tailor and implement a range of differentiation strategies for their students. Additionally, this study may also provide a catalyst for encouraging further research in the schools by stimulating discussion of the topic among the participants.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Principal Letter

Principal_____ 12/02/2024
School's Address

Dear_____,

As part of my Professional Masters in Post-Primary Education with Hibernia College, I am investigating differentiation techniques used within English classrooms and their effectiveness. The title of the research project is 'Teacher's Perspectives: Differentiation Techniques used within mixed-ability English classes at Junior Cycle and their effectiveness'.

This letter aims to provide you with an introduction to the research project and to seek consent from you for the project to move forward in order to inform my future professional practice as a teacher.

With your permission, I would like to interview the lead of your English Department and get Junior Cycle English teachers to fill out an online questionnaire. The department lead will be asked to partake in a semi-structured interview to gain an insight into the aims of the study. The online surveys will provide future insights into the aims of the study. Please find enclosed for your perusal, a copy of the information and consent forms. Only those respondents who return a signed copy of the consent form will be purposely selected to take part in the study. Any data gathering will strictly be underpinned by the school's ethical code of conduct. No students will be interviewed or surveyed.

Information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The school's name will not appear on any research findings. Interviews will be recorded, and the data will be securely held under Hibernia College Research Ethics guidelines. Online questionnaires will be stored on secure and password-protected devices. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication.

I would appreciate your cooperation in providing access to the staff at the school over the coming weeks.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.
Researcher:
Mobile:
Email:

This research study has received Ethics approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:
School of Education, Hibernia College Dublin.
Tel (01) 6610168

Appendix B – Research Information Sheet for Interviews

Research Information Sheet for Interview

Dear Participant,

I am writing to you in relation to a research study I will be undertaking in fulfilment of my Professional Master of Education Degree with Hibernia College Dublin. I would like to provide you with information about my study and seek your consent to conduct the research with members of your teaching staff.

My proposed research will contribute to our understanding of the differentiation techniques used within English classes at Junior Cycle and their effectiveness.

The objectives of my research are to identify which differentiation techniques teachers are using in mixed – ability English classrooms at Junior Cycle currently, evaluate the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of differentiation techniques in the English classroom, and to explore the challenges and benefits of implementing the differentiation techniques identified in the research.

What would I need you to do?

Your participation in this research project is greatly appreciated. This research project has received ethical approval from Hibernia College Dublin.

If you're an English department lead and agree to participate, you will participate in a short semi-structured interview with the researcher. Any information you provide about your own identity or that of the school will be anonymous and confidential. Quotes from the interview may be used and may also be published in the research however your name and the name of the school will not be published. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript will be made available to you on request. This research will be used in a publication of a thesis for Hibernia College Dublin. It may also be used in conference proceedings or used in academic articles. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of the research is to complete small-scale study which forms part of the final year of the Professional Master of Education (Post-Primary) with Hibernia College Dublin.

Sincerely,

Researcher

Appendix C – Consent Form for Interviews

Consent Form for Interview	
Researcher's name:	
Organisation:	Hibernia College Dublin
Title of study:	Teacher's Perspectives: Differentiation Techniques used within mixed-ability English classes at Junior Cycle and their effectiveness.

Consent (to be completed by the participant)

Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study? Yes/No Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes/No Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes/No

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason for withdrawing and without your withdrawal having an adverse effect for you? Yes/No

Do you agree to take part in this study, the results of which are likely to be published or presented at a conference? Yes/No

Have you been informed that a copy of this consent form will be kept by the researcher? Yes/No

Are you satisfied that any information you give to the researcher will be kept confidential? Your name and the name of the school will not appear in the research report. Yes/No

Participant's name (printed)

(signature) **Date**

Researcher's signature **Date**

Appendix D – Interview Schedule

Questions used for the interviews.
The four major focal points of the interviews were: Differentiation Strategies; Effectiveness; Challenges and Barriers to their implementation; and Professional Development.

Background
1. How many years have you been teaching English at the Junior Cycle level?
2. How many years have you been the department head for English at your school?

Differentiation Strategies
3. Do you employ differentiation strategies in your English Junior Cycle classes?
4. How would you describe differentiated instruction?
5. In the online survey, you stated that you employ differentiated instruction (daily or weekly). What are your reasons behind this?
6. What types of differentiation techniques would you use most regularly in your English Junior Cycle classes?
7. Which differentiation technique do you believe teachers in your English department use most frequently? and why?
8. Are there any other differentiation methods other than those mentioned in the online survey that you use in your Junior Cycle English classes?
9. Are there any differentiation techniques that you enjoy using in your English Junior Cycle classes? If any?

Effectiveness
10. Are there any benefits to implementing differentiation techniques in your English Junior Cycle classes?
11. How effective do you think your differentiation strategies are at meeting the needs of all the students in your English Junior Cycle class?
12. What factors do you believe enable the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in your Junior Cycle English classes?
13. Are there any techniques that you believe are more effective than others?
14. If so, which ones are you referring to, and why?
15. Are there any techniques that you find ineffective?
16. If so, which ones are you considering and why?

Challenges and Barriers
17. Do you feel fully confident in your implementation of differentiation techniques in your English Junior Cycle classes?
18. In your experience, are there any challenges or barriers when implementing differentiation techniques in your English Junior Cycle classes?

19. What do you find to be the most challenging factor when implementing differentiation techniques, and why?
20. Are there any difficulties in implementing differentiation techniques that have arisen in meetings with the English department?
21. Are there any further challenges that were not mentioned in the online survey that you believe are significant when trying to differentiate instruction in your English Junior Cycle classes?
22. How would you overcome these challenges? If at all?
23. How would the English department as a whole overcome the challenges that teachers face in implementing differentiation techniques in their classes?
24. What changes, if any, would you recommend making to the current practices in your English department that might improve the overall implementation of differentiation techniques in classes?

Professional Development

25. How would you describe professional development?
26. Have you attended any training workshops or CPDs over the last two years?
27. Would you say that you have received ample training in relation to the implementation of differentiation techniques within your English Junior Cycle classes?
28. If yes, explain what training you have received and how it has helped you with the implementation of differentiation techniques.
29. If not, explain what kind of training you would like to receive in relation to implementing differentiation techniques in your English Junior Cycle classes.
30. Is your school sufficiently supportive of implementing differentiation techniques in your classes?

Appendix E – Information Sheet for Online Survey

Teacher's Perspectives: Differentiation techniques used within mixed-ability English classes at Junior Cycle and their effectiveness

Participant Information Sheet

1. What is the purpose of this study?

The research will be written up for a Master's in Education Dissertation. The purpose of the study is to discover the knowledge and understanding that teachers have around the topic of differentiation and how effective different techniques are at Junior Cycle in a mixed-ability English class.

2. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen as a participant in this study because you are an English teacher who specifically teaches English at Junior Cycle level.

3. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be required to complete a questionnaire on the knowledge and understanding that you have of using differentiation techniques in mixed-ability English classes at Junior Cycle level.

4. Confidentiality - Who will know I am taking part in this study?

All information collected during the study will be stored confidentially. Any information about you will be coded, therefore, you will be kept anonymous throughout the study.

5. What will happen to the results of the study?

Once all questionnaires and interviews have been completed, the overall results will be gathered and analysed. They will then appear in the dissertation; however, no individuals will be named in the research.

-

Participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the survey at any point in time. If you have any questions about how the research is being conducted, you can get in touch with the researcher.

Contact Information:

Email: [redacted]@hcstudent.net

Survey will only take 5 minutes to complete

Appendix F – Online Survey

Teacher's Perspectives: Differentiation techniques used within mixed-ability English classes at Junior Cycle and their effectiveness

Participant Information Sheet

1. What is the purpose of this study?
The research will be written up for a Master's in Education Dissertation. The purpose of the study is to discover the knowledge and understanding that teachers have around the topic of differentiation and how effective different techniques are at Junior Cycle in a mixed-ability English class.

2. Why have I been chosen?
You have been chosen as a participant in this study because you are an English teacher who specifically teaches English at Junior Cycle level.

3. What will happen to me if I take part?
You will be required to complete a questionnaire on the knowledge and understanding that you have of using differentiation techniques in mixed-ability English classes at Junior Cycle level.

4. Confidentiality - Who will know I am taking part in this study?
All information collected during the study will be stored confidentially. Any information about you will be coded, therefore, you will be kept anonymous throughout the study.

5. What will happen to the results of the study?
Once all questionnaires and interviews have been completed, the overall results will be gathered and analysed. They will then appear in the dissertation; however, no individuals will be named in the research.

-

Participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the survey at any point in time. If you have any questions about how the research is being conducted, you can get in touch with the researcher.

Contact Information:
Email: [redacted]student.net
Survey will only take 5 minutes to complete

* Indicates required question

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Within this section you will be asked to consent to the survey

1. Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

2. Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

3. Do you agree to take part in this study? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

4. Gender *

Mark only one oval.

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

5. Age range: *

Mark only one oval.

- Under 25
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55+

Teaching Experience and Differentiation Practices

6. How many years of experience do you have teaching Junior Cycle English? *

Mark only one oval.

- 0-4 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-14 years
- 15+ years

7. Do you employ differentiation techniques within your Junior Cycle English classes? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

8. How frequently would you use them in your Junior Cycle English classes? *

Mark only one oval.

- Daily
- Weekly
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

9. Which differentiation techniques do you currently use in your Junior Cycle English classes? If you use any others please specify. *

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Tiered Assessments/Homework
- [ ] Flexible Grouping
- [ ] Varied Instructional Materials (visual, auditory and kinesthetic)
- [ ] Bloom's Taxonomy for Questioning
- [ ] None of the above
- [ ] Other: _____

10. In your opinion, how effective are the differentiation techniques you use in meeting the diverse needs of students in your English classes at the Junior Cycle level?

Mark only one oval.

- Very Effective
- Effective
- Netural
- Ineffective
- Very Ineffective

11. Which differentiation technique do you find the most effective to use within your Junior Cycle English classes? Give a short reason for your answer. *

Challenges and Barriers to the Implementation of the Differentiation Techniques

12. How confident do you feel when implementing differentiation techniques within your Junior Cycle English classes? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Very confident
- ◯ Somewhat confident
- ◯ Not confident

13. Do you face any challenges or barriers when implementing differentiation techniques within your Junior Cycle English classes? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

14. If so, what challenges/barriers do you face? *

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Time Constraints
- ☐ Lack of Resources
- ☐ Limited Support/Training
- ☐ Student Resistance/Disengagement
- ☐ Large Class Sizes
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other: _____

15. How do you address or overcome these challenges/barriers?

Professional Development

16. Do you feel adequately supported by your school in implementing differentiation techniques within your Junior Cycle English classes? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

17. Have you received any professional development training on differentiation techniques in the past two years? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

18. If yes, please describe the type of training or professional development you received and its impact on your teaching practice.

19. What additional training, resources or support could enhance your ability to implement differentiation techniques effectively within your Junior Cycle English class? *

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Training workshops focused on specific differentiation techniques
- ☐ Collaborative planning sessions with colleagues
- ☐ Access to a wider range of instructional material (Digital resources and leveled texts)
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ Other: _____

Additional Comments

20. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with differentiation in mixed-ability English classes at Junior Cycle ?