

## Overcoming Obstacles to Differentiate Instruction When Implementing Prepared Curricular Resources in a Diverse Classroom

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Teachers face obstacles when executing prepared curricular resources in diverse classrooms, trying to provide quality fair learning opportunities to all students. Examining ten teachers' insights and experiences with the EngageNY language arts modules differentiation allowed presenting the phenomenon's comprehensive overview. Teachers from schools across the United States shared information during semistructured interviews and focus groups. The six-step thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed that quality standards-aligned resources, which consider diverse learners, require teachers to understand the resources' structure and apply specific methods—unpacking the modules, backward planning, and script use—to thoroughly plan for differentiation to ensure equal learning opportunities for all students. Maintaining a constant dialogue with their learners helps educators successfully differentiate resources by selecting strategies and text excerpts, adding the basics, compacting information, and offering variety of relevant material in response to students' needs. The article provides suggestions for administrative support, teacher practices, and further investigations.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, prepared curricular resources, *EngageNY* English language Arts modules, obstacles, diversity

### INTRODUCTION

While a new school year in a secondary school means meeting new students with diverse traits, experiences, abilities, and learning styles, it also often entails utilizing new curricular resources. Educators have preferred prepared curricular resources, and, consequently, often relied on them as a sole authoritative source of the subject instruction. Teaching English Language Arts (ELA) to the 7<sup>th</sup> graders has allowed me to experience their implementation in the classroom. Initial precise use and professional training helped me understand the resources' organization, elements' association, and possible barriers. Exactly following the prepared materials revealed that not every component benefitted my students. Additionally, authorities' directives, deficiency of time, and lack of opportunities for teacher collaboration compounded the difficulty of resources' initial implementation. After several years of using the same curricular resources, the barriers to their classroom use were minimized because of my knowing the resources and fitting them to my learners' needs. My colleagues admitted that they also gradually adapted prepared resources: Differentiating instruction for their diverse students helped achieve the necessary quality and equality of learning. However, researchers (Bondie et al., 2019; Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018; Malacapay, 2019; Timberlake et al., 2017; Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018) who explored DI's significance in the classroom also urge its further investigation. Provided the obstacles teachers face when using prepared curricular resources and growing dependence on such materials, the problem of overcoming barriers when enacting these resources and guaranteeing impartiality persists to be one of the highest urgencies worldwide. Thus, the purpose of this article was to explore the ways teachers overcame initial obstacles and provided quality differentiated instruction (DI) for all students when using prepared curricular resources, and in

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turn, offer suggestions on resources' effective enactment in a diverse classroom. The article's goal is consistent with future research recommendations of Timberlake et al. (2017), who proposed focusing on the intricacy of equity when differentiating the *EngageNY* curricular resources. So, this article details the findings attained during the study that explored how middle-school teachers perceive and implement the *EngageNY* ELA modules, state-prepared curricular resources, to provide equitable learning opportunities for diverse students (Greco, 2021). The question focused on in this article is: How do middle-school ELA teachers overcome barriers and differentiate instruction when using state-prepared curricular resources?

### **Context and Review of Literature**

Though much of international research is dedicated to DI, few studies connect overcoming obstacles during the initial implementation of prepared curricular resources and their differentiation when instructing diverse students. Mili and Winch (2019) revealed that some teachers try their best to adopt the materials but resent them in the long run. Shalem (2018) found out that teachers attempt to adapt the resources to their classroom context and, in turn, develop personal pedagogical knowledge and skills. However, the discussion of differentiating prepared resources focuses only on a few ideas: The teachers utilize these resources as outlines for self-prepared lessons and supplement them with other materials (Hintz, 2017; Mili & Winch, 2019). They discovered that they could employ DI when using the resources, so they kept the initial curricular purposes but adapted the activities for their diverse classrooms (Hintz, 2017). Consequently, without exhaustive comprehension of the efficient method of resources' application, we cannot assist teachers in overcoming initial challenges in meeting their diverse students' needs.

### **Lesson planning**

Many teachers are required or voluntarily rely on ready-made lesson plans. However, lesson planning constitutes the foundation of curriculum and instruction and is considered one of the teacher's critical responsibilities. Therefore, teachers must embrace this task and carry it out with a commitment to acknowledging unique classroom diversity and addressing its challenges. Internationally, lesson planning relies on Tyler's (2013) backward design that initiates the process with setting the desired outcomes, lesson objectives, supported with educational experiences, and evaluated in terms of their mastery (Black et al., 2019; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018, Tyler, 2013). Other models have been used successfully as well. Regardless of the model, in this creative, strategic process, teachers become the decision-makers concerning complex curricular and instructional matters, and lesson plans turn into connecting links between the curriculum and classroom instruction (Black et al., 2019; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018). Planning for DI helps teachers respond to students' needs (Tomlinson, 2014).

### **Differentiation and differentiated instruction**

Differentiation is "a philosophy—a way of thinking about teaching and learning . . . a set of principles" that guide teachers in a proactive response to each learner's needs (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 13). Tomlinson (2014) outlined the DI framework to assist educators in ensuring equal access to quality education for all students. Within the framework, she expanded the concept of differentiation into an outline for its instructional application: that is, "for thinking about, planning for, and evaluating the success of differentiation" (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000, p. 4). Therefore, educators' beliefs prompt the teachers to react to students' needs and overcome difficulties aptly.

### *Teaching Philosophy*

The foundation for DI efficient application lies within the teachers' mindsets. DI correlates with the fundamental belief in a person's worth; therefore, differentiation entails expanding teachers' ability to respect and magnify learners' capabilities. Believing in each student's learning ability should stimulate

every teacher to focus on students' individual abilities and, in turn, inspire differentiation. Amplifying students' innate abilities becomes feasible when the educators recognize diversity as a norm and a benefit because the assortment of thoughts and experiences enriches people's lives (Tomlinson, 2014). When the teachers believe in personal ability to successfully implement DI in the classroom, they promote students' growth. Believing in supporting each student prompts teachers to honor each learner's humanity and provide fairness of access to quality education (Timberlake et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2014). However, the teachers often misconstrue fairness as sameness and adopt resources designed for a typical learner of the grade as a means to educational equality (Timberlake et al., 2017). The teachers should consider students' needs and curriculum requirements equally when responding proactively (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2013).

#### *Student Factors*

Consequently, differentiating "according to the student's readiness, interests, and learning profiles" can aid teachers in adapting, not merely adopting the resources (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 20). To offer each student equal access to learning, the teachers should coordinate student factors with strategies and tasks. Understanding students' readiness levels allows teachers to combine learners' skill and knowledge levels with the more difficult assignment than the students' autonomous abilities. A learner's individual problem-solving during collaboration with a more knowledgeable partner can assist in determining the gap (Tomlinson, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Combining fundamental skills and content with themes that inspire students helps teachers differentiate for learners' interests (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Smets (2017) revealed that teachers rely on students' readiness levels and interests to enhance learning in flexible grouping. Methods of learning, which permit individuals to reach an understanding, constitute learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014). The objective of differentiating by learning profiles is to promote students' understanding of personal optimal approaches to learning and teachers' offering those modes to assist learners in conquering learning difficulties (Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018; Malacapay, 2019).

#### **Curriculum and resources**

However, to provide all students with ideal learning opportunities and ensure they grasp grade-level content standards and skills, teaching should correlate five elements, "learning environment, curriculum, assessment, instruction, and classroom leadership and management" (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, p. 1). Curriculum and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) represent P-policies (Peters, 1973; Shalem, 2018; Wessel-Powell et al., 2019). The national curriculum guarantees that all students receive fair access to subject content, yet the learners' background often impedes their content attainment, requiring the teachers to tailor content to their students' needs (Leite, 2018). The teachers acknowledge that the standards assist in designing instruction, ensuring commonality, and determining grade content knowledge; however, they advocate for standardization (Stosich, 2016). Standards, required resources, and mandated assessments negate societal demands for the students to build real-world problem-solving skills and for teachers to apply DI for each student to thrive.

#### *Curricular Resources*

Various curriculum resources reflect the demands of the curriculum. These resources vary in detail extent and execution flexibility (Shalem, 2018). The developers' and teachers' goals define the level of commitment to the resources' application. The developers frequently expect the resources to serve as sources the teachers can modify using their professional reasoning. As a result, teacher-experts utilize these resources as manuals to guide their lesson planning (Mili & Winch, 2019). They use these resources as the primary teaching tool but find the materials insufficient in helping ill-prepared teachers (Hintz, 2017; Mili & Winch, 2019).

### *EngageNY Modules*

In the USA, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) collaborated with *Expeditionary Learning (EL)* to develop standard-driven curricular resources, the *EngageNY* ELA modules. These materials have become the most widely used prepared resources since they are free of charge, available in digital format, excellent, and designed to enhance teachers' interpretation of the CCSS (Kaufman et al., 2017). The curriculum developers explicated that the *EngageNY* modules are not required for teachers to follow but can be executed as is or modified for classroom implementation (New York State Education Department [NYSED], n.d.). However, the educators frequently admit that the extent of freedom in "adopting" or "adapting" the modules compromised their capability to deliver fair instruction (Barrett et al., 2017).

Barrett et al. (2017) determined that the *EngageNY* modules offer possibilities to address the inequalities in accessing content knowledge. The developers of the *EngageNY* resources followed principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which implies that the modules were designed with diverse learners in mind (NYSED, n.d.). The modules are written for students with a two-year gap up to the eighth grade (NYSED, n.d.). UDL is a framework that considers the approaches teachers use to modify curricular objectives, instructional practices, materials, and assessment to build on each student's strengths and to accommodate individual needs (Ok et al., 2017; Smith Canter et al., 2017). DI and UDL share similar goals, philosophies, and praxes; therefore, their distinct characteristics can be used in harmony to instruct diverse students successfully. Both DI and UDL focus on content (representation), process (engagement), and product (action) and presume a proactive approach driven by learner diversity evaluation (Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018; Ok et al., 2017). DI and UDL modify teaching to learning; yet, in UDL instructional changes happen throughout curriculum development when the developers consider only typical learner characteristics. The developers include options for different learner types (Ok et al., 2017; Smith Canter et al., 2017). Formative and summative assessments determine students' needs and the selections of DI strategies (Tomlinson, 2014). So, UDL-founded curricular materials necessitate their further modification and DI application.

### *Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment*

Employing proficient instruction to endorse an intricate curriculum and utilizing adaptable instruction to guarantee curriculum efficacy for diverse learners require their autonomous and harmonized quality. However, students learn at a different pace and in different ways, so differentiation of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment help teachers meet students' needs (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Therefore, teachers should differentiate these three elements through the skillful application of curricular resources and assessments. When they modify materials, they employ little p-policies, making complex choices involving content, process, and product delineated in the pre-planned modules. Teachers' relations with the students determine their decisions (Peters, 1973; Shalem, 2018; Wessel-Powell et al., 2019). Tyler (2013) regarded curriculum and instruction development as an iterative process that involves searching for solutions to overcome barriers. The teachers constantly assess curricular resources to identify the constraints and integrate changes for their enhancement. Considering curricular resources' basic philosophies and assessing them against personal values and practices helps them execute the curriculum (Hodge, 2019). In turn, curriculum understanding allows concentrating on content, process, and product in relation to student factors.

### **Content, process, and product**

Students' needs determine teachers' modification of instruction. Thus, educators differentiate content, that is, "knowledge, understanding, and skills . . . [they] want students to learn" (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 15). They modify these elements and methods (e.g., reading silently, with a partner, or with an audio recording) learners can use to access the content. Students significantly enhance results when

content differentiation is determined by their knowledge levels. The instructional activity incorporates making sense of information and represents the process (Tomlinson, 2014). Consequently, the activity must involve students in sense-making of content and real-life use because it aids learners in transitioning from basic knowledge to advanced thinking. When differentiating the process, the educators preserve the learning objectives but decide on approaches, time, form and number of supports, skills, and content necessary (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2013). Teachers accrue data from final summative assessments, tests or real-world assessments, that offer learners opportunities to reveal their content understanding and skill mastery in a culminating product. While maintaining the learning objectives, the educators determine the ways to differentiate products. However, teachers more frequently differentiate the product, not process or content, limiting students' access to essential content knowledge and its thorough understanding (Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018).

### **Planning for diverse learners**

When adopting a curriculum, the school is responsible for ensuring the teachers understand that they can and should adapt all its components to meet the students' needs (Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018). The metacognitive processes correspond with lesson stages: planning (proactive)—reflection-on-action, teaching (interactive)—reflection-in-action, and evaluating (reflective)—reflection-on-action and underscore iterative nature of lesson planning (Hintz, 2017; Parsons et al., 2017). When planning instruction, the teachers commonly use pre-planned interactive DI strategies, which initially ensure the provision of flexible options and create a learner-centered environment (Smith Canter et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2014). Some teachers use lesson scripts as formal guides, which allow “in-flight planning” to steer the instruction during lesson implementation (Black et al., 2019; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018). In-flight planning, that is, questioning, ongoing evaluation, providing feedback, provoking deeper thinking, and connecting ideas, becomes the teachers' response and a necessary component of the lesson execution (Black et al., 2019; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018; Hintz, 2017; Parsons et al., 2017). The latter strategies reveal teachers' ability to construct responses to difficulties while reflecting-in-action (Parsons et al., 2017). However, the educators need to be mindful of retroactive instructional adjustment because it can result in deviation from the learning objectives and, in turn, their misalignment with activities and assessments (Capp, 2017). Teachers' application of self-reflection, which can be “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action,” can enhance lesson planning and, in turn, student learning (Parsons et al., 2017; Schon, 1983). Teachers can overcome obstacles if they strategically prepare for differentiation during initial lesson planning.

### **METHOD**

This article presents a portion of the qualitative descriptive study, which focused on the exploration of the ways middle-school teachers implement and differentiate the *EngageNY* ELA modules, state-prepared curricular resources, to provide equitable learning opportunities for diverse students (Grecu, 2021). Thus, a qualitative descriptive design, which involves minimal inference interpretation, assisted in presenting a thorough description of the phenomenon. The design aims to analyze insufficiently understood phenomenon like DI. So, precise factual accounts of the teachers' subjective meanings regarding adapting resources to students' needs and overcoming difficulties constituted data. The researcher used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine data gathered during in-depth semistructured interviews and focus group discussions. A detailed summary of the ways teachers overcame obstacles when differentiating *EngageNY* modules for students' equitable learning concluded the study.

### **Participants**

Ten certified teachers who implemented and differentiated the *EngageNY* ELA modules in grades 6–8

were purposefully selected to participate in the study. The participants were recruited for the study to guarantee a variety is embodied and in the hope of exhausting developing common themes required for saturation (see Table 1). Nonrandom and purposive sampling method was utilized.

Table 1  
Participant description

Participant Pseudonym	YE	HED	ELA 6–8 Certified	Grade	EngageNY YI	Students taught	School location
Bob	13	M	Yes	6	10	MAC; ELL	Northeastern
Tori	14	M	Yes	8	5	SL; AL; ELL	Southeastern
Helen	11	M	Yes	8	8	MAC	Northeastern
Mandy	16	M	Yes	8	5	SL; AL	Midwest
Sarah	30	M	Yes	8	6	GS; ELL	Midwest
Lydia	6	M	Yes	7	3	SL; AL	Northeastern
Anna	8	B	Yes	6	3	MAC	Midwest
Celeste	5	M	Yes	8	4	SL, ELL	Southeastern
Kayla	12	M	Yes	8	4	SL	Southeastern
Jonah	4	M	Yes	6	2	MAC	Southeastern

*Note.* YE—years of experience; HED—highest educational degree; M—Master’s; B—Bachelor’s YI—years implemented; GS—gifted students; SL—struggling learners; AL—advanced learners; MAC—mixed-ability classroom; ELL—English Language Learners.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Using Zoom software helped the researcher collect data through semistructured interviews and focus groups. The research questions and the literature review directed the researcher in developing interview and focus group guides. Because the guides were self-developed, the researcher convened an expert panel to review the questions and conducted a field test. The guide contained questions about the teachers’ experiences with (a) planning for diverse learners, (b) obstacles they encountered and overcame, and (c) the reasons for their choices of differentiation. The researcher prepared probes to guarantee the exhaustiveness and precision of the answers. The guide for focus groups comprised questions about the participants’ experiences with lesson planning, facing and overcoming barriers. Using interviews and focus groups allowed the researcher to enlarge the coverage of the intricate educational phenomenon: It promoted eliciting evidence not only about teachers’ actions but also their ideas and views.

The thematic analysis aided the researcher in identifying and examining significant themes or reoccurring patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher searched for semantic themes—openly stated, not merely implied topics—and used these themes to develop a complete summary of the phenomenon. The six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) helped the researcher familiarize with data, code data initially, correlate codes into categories and themes, review themes, and develop a comprehensive scholarly account (Greco, 2021).

### FINDINGS

Three themes were extracted from the data to answer the research question: How do middle-school ELA teachers overcome barriers and differentiate instruction when using state-prepared curricular resources? These themes compile a detailed account of the phenomenon in participants’ everyday language. The first theme, teachers encountered obstacles when implementing resources the first time,

focused on teachers’ initial perception and experiences with the modules. Their perception was determined by these categories: (a) overwhelming volume of information, (b) district and school leaders’ requirement to precisely follow the modules, (c) time restrictions’ effects on teachers’ choices, (d) doubting students’ abilities to learn, and (e) modules’ stifling of teachers’ agency (see Table 2).

Table 2  
Teachers encountered obstacles when implementing resources first time

Theme 1	Theme meaning	Aligned categories
Teachers encountered obstacles when implementing resources for the first time.	Teachers perceived the <i>EngageNY</i> modules as daunting due to the sheer amount of information and obstacles they encountered when implementing the resources for the first time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overwhelming volume of information</li> <li>• District and school leaders’ requirement to precisely follow the modules</li> <li>• Time restrictions’ effects on teachers’ choices</li> <li>• Modules’ stifling of teachers’ agency</li> <li>• Doubting students’ abilities to learn</li> </ul>

The participants perceived the *EngageNY* modules as daunting, “pretty overwhelming” (Anna). Lydia compared dealing with the resources to “drinking from the firehose at first.” Mandy also admitted that “the biggest obstacle was reading . . . a typical lesson . . . is about 18–20 pages.” Kayla admitted “that every lesson needed a PowerPoint.” “Turning those Docs from PDFs that they couldn’t use . . . was a huge obstacle” (Sarah). Celeste discovered that “you have to be strong with your content in order to deliver these modules” (Celeste). However, Tori pointed out, “it might seem like a lot when you print them off, but it’s a good read.”

The teachers explained that they were required to use “a lesson a day” (Kayla). They “felt kind of handcuffed to . . . teach it as it was written” (Jonah). However, Celeste understood “that they were just trying to see . . . if the data will speak for the curriculum.” Helen concurred that the “biggest thing is that you cannot teach it in the amount of time allotted.” So, “it was always just a fast-paced, downhill spiral” and “a lot of times the protocols were swept under the rug” (Celeste). Anna admitted, “If I had time to do everything in the module . . . , I think it would be very successful.”

The teachers admitted that the prescriptive nature of the modules “stifles [their] ability to teach” because they “miss the creativity of it . . . , being able to . . . pick . . . [a] novel . . . African-American students could relate to” (Lydia). Kayla agreed, “it does take away our agency,” yet she reported that the students’ scores encouraged her: “I can be a little bit uncomfortable.” So, teachers experienced the initial implementation as “very rocky, very shaky, and after the first semester . . . quit using it completely” (Celeste). The teachers worried that the “kids [cannot] do the amount of work independently”(Helen). Tori recognized it as “putting limits on students,” which contradicted the reality: “They stayed with me, and it challenged me to go even further” (Tori). These findings identify the struggles teachers face when implementing prepared materials for the first time.

The second theme, thorough preparation helped teachers successfully implement the modules, revealed that going through lesson planning aided the teachers in having a positive experience with *EngageNY* implementation. The aligned categories were (a) ongoing PD from *EL*, (b) unpacking resources for their understanding, (c) script various applications, (d) backward planning for success, and (e) teacher learning through the implementation of *EngageNY* content (see Table 3).

Table 3  
Thorough preparation helped teachers successfully implement modules

Theme 2	Theme meaning	Aligned categories
Thorough preparation helped teachers successfully implement the modules.	Going through lesson planning helped the teachers have a positive experience with <i>EngageNY</i> implementation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing PD from <i>EL</i></li> <li>• Unpacking resources for their understanding</li> <li>• Script various applications</li> <li>• Backward planning for success</li> <li>• Teacher learning through the implementation</li> </ul>

Though the participants experienced PD differently, they all acknowledged its value in implementing the *EngageNY* modules. Bob elucidated, “When my school . . . got a grant, I . . . really sort of drank the Kool-Aid” when it came to PD participation. He stated, “until you really hear somebody describe the design, . . . I just I couldn’t wrap my head around how this was, one, doable and, two, going to be beneficial for students.” Lydia explained, “I have received an ongoing support from a mentor.” However, Kayla noted, “We really didn’t have any training the first year.” Even the teachers, like Sarah, whose “school district has never adopted *EngageNY* or *EL* curriculum” engaged themselves in PD: “it’s scripted, and you can figure it out.”

Though the resources were often introduced as “kind of a grab-and-go curriculum, . . . that [was] not the case,” Anna said because “you need to spend a lot of time upfront digging into them . . . unpacking them and thinking of the students you teach.” Tori underscored her responsibility, “My homework comes in with me dissecting that module, reading it, thinking . . . what is the end result.” Teachers acknowledged that the modules were “heavily scripted in that it tells you what to say” (Mandy). “And it was . . . presented . . . [as a] script . . . that you need to follow just the way it’s written,” as Bob noted. Realizing it, Kayla replied, “I am not a person who would speak from a script.” Tori revealed, “I followed it to the *T*.” So, the teachers used the script to “plot out . . . and then used that as a reference to start my lesson” (Anna). “Having this type of curriculum can really help a new teacher because it’s grounded, it’s current, and it’s good versus trying to figure out” something new (Mandy). Both Bob and Helen were able to find out from “the people who created the modules . . . It’s meant for you to adapt it. You’re the teacher; you know what’s best.”

Bob discovered that it was “more comfortable working through those units with . . . the end in mind.” “Look at the assessment . . . and then look at the standards that are going to be assessed on the test, so that you don’t get to skip that particular lesson” (Mandy). Working through the lessons helped teachers enhance their content and pedagogical knowledge. Kayla admitted, “we actually learned a whole lot the first year . . . it was different.” Tori figured out that “*Engage* allowed me to have way more confidence as a teacher.” Lydia concurred, “I’ve learned . . . how to just differentiate teaching.” Yet, Celeste admitted that because “there was no answer key . . ., the uncertainty of . . . not knowing if the information was correct” prevented her from enhancing her knowledge. The results revealed the necessary steps teachers should take to overcome obstacles and advance their pedagogical knowledge when implementing resources for the first time.

The final theme, building relationships with students helps teachers know how to differentiate, revealed the interaction between participants’ professional beliefs and students’ responses. Therefore, the teachers elucidated how their relationship with learners affected their differentiation. The data categorized into four groups: (a) teachers enhance students’ learning through communication, (b) teachers’ beliefs foster student success, (c) students’ factors affect teacher’s differentiation, and (d) teachers’ choices depend on students’ interests illuminated the theme’s essence (see Table 4).

Table 4  
 Building relationships with students helps teachers know how to differentiate

Theme 3	Theme meaning	Aligned categories
Building relationships with students helps teachers know how to differentiate.	Sharing personal beliefs and understanding students' needs allows teachers to differentiate instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers enhance students' learning through communication</li> <li>• Teachers' beliefs foster student success</li> <li>• Students' factors affect teacher's differentiation</li> <li>• Teachers' choices depend on students' interests</li> </ul>

Teachers relied on communication with students. Sara stated, “The biggest thing is [to] let them [students] talk, and share, and reflect.” Lydia explained what “being in conversation with those students” meant: “looking at what they’re turning in, . . . what their exit tickets are saying, . . . understanding how they’re learning.” Sarah referred to communication as “the synergy between us.” The teachers agreed that communicating “the classic [belief] . . . that every child can achieve” (Helen) drives their instructional practices. This belief resonated in high standards and practices: “I try to keep that bar so that there’s something they can achieve” (Sarah); I “choose the [protocols] that I think that my students can . . . be successful with” (Lydia), I am “focusing on specific excerpts that allow them [students] to be successful at the standard” (Bob).

On the other hand, students shared content understanding through their work and teachers differentiated for them: Jonah “did have to do a bit of a backtracking.” Sarah, who taught “a group of very high learners,” accommodated, and they “got to move faster.” Celeste looked at “their capabilities” and “set the stage . . . [to] differentiate for each set of students.” When “dissecting that module reading” to prepare for class, Tori focused on “thinking if this [lesson] is going to be interesting to students.” Helen said, “The topic . . . needs to be relevant in some way to their own lives in order for them to really be engaged.” However, Tori’s conclusion revealed a key notion, “Sometimes it’s good to get . . . them out of their comfort zone and read different things because if you don’t offer that variety . . . they might not get that variety.” The findings emphasized the impact of teacher-students interaction on teachers’ decisions regarding using DI when implementing prepared curricular resources.

**DISCUSSION**

The research question—How do middle-school ELA teachers overcome barriers and differentiate instruction when using state-prepared curricular resources? —was answered through three themes, analysis of which allowed to make inferences to arrive at conclusions. The first theme revealed the initial obstacles teachers encountered when enacting new resources and the teachers’ inability to apply their beliefs to practice during the modules’ initial application. This study’s results correspond with the findings that deficient organizational support and lack of time negatively affect curriculum execution (Bondie et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2017). According to Ismajli & Imami-Morina (2018), curriculum adoption presumes that the school is accountable for teachers’ understanding that they have to differentiate the resources to address students’ needs, which is not what the participants of this study reported.

The findings aligned with research that noted that when authorities considered resources valuable for students’ development, they mandated following the lengthy scripts to fidelity (Mili & Winch, 2019). The teachers became discontented because they lacked the time or autonomy to be creative (Mili & Winch, 2019; Powell et al., 2017). Policies restricted teachers’ choices in developing DI (Barrett et al., 2017, Timberlake et al., 2017, and Wessel-Powell et al., 2019). The study’s findings of teachers’ initial implementation contradicted Tomlinson’s (2014) DI philosophy, which did not presume

teachers to revert to a fixed mindset when considering new resources. The teachers admitted that they used their professional judgment minimally, did not read the script to the students, but attempted to conform the resources to their learners when mandated to follow them. Hence, the participants' knowledge and beliefs intuitively drove them to overcome the obstacles they perceived paramount initially.

The second theme was thorough preparation helped teachers successfully implement the modules. The interview and focus group results revealed that to ensure students' learning is sufficient, the educators need to understand how the developers of the modules connected the components. Thorough preparation involving various PD forms, unpacking the modules, and backward lesson planning allowed the participants to understand and, in turn, better differentiate the *EngageNY* lessons. When implementing new resources, the teachers verified that they wanted to ensure each student's learning, personal success, and confidence in the curriculum enactment. The study's participants attributed successful resources' implementation to various formats of PD. The existing literature notes that unsatisfying PD prevents teachers from growing in their professional expertise (Smets, 2017; Tadesse, 2018; Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018). The findings concerning training for new resources' use correspond with literature concerning PD in terms of DI implementation. Teacher training in DI implementation, just like in the use of the *EngageNY* modules, shaped teachers' mindsets and rationale and, consequently, encouraged finding ways to overcome barriers and enhance instructional quality (Tomlinson, 2014).

The teachers initially and continuously tested the curricular resources following Tyler's (2013) rationale. The participants concurred that to ensure the curricular resources correspond with the learning environment, the teachers need to read the materials strategically. They understood that their knowledge and experiences with the use of the resources would allow for consequent autonomous enactment and differentiation of the instruction (Shalem, 2018). This study's results correspond with Hodge's (2019) findings that the requirement to follow the resources may benefit teachers who lack necessary knowledge by guiding them with specific directions. Additionally, Shalem concluded that inexperienced teachers struggle while enacting new curricular resources as they do not possess enough knowledge and experience. One of the teachers pointed out that content knowledge was required for *EngageNY* resources' successful implementation.

Teachers underscored that module were not a "grab-and-go curriculum" (Anna) but required strategic lesson planning—interpretation and creativity in connecting curriculum and instruction by solving intricate matters (Black et al., 2019; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018, Tyler, 2013). The participants accepted their responsibility to plan lessons for their unique classroom as the groundwork of curriculum and instruction (Black et al., 2019; Chizhik & Chzhik, 2018). They learned to look at the standards assessed in the middle and end of the unit, lesson targets, and related activities to effectively plan DI (Black et al., 2019; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018, Tyler, 2013). Ok et al. (2017) presented the findings that the teachers felt more confident when they had materials ready for the class instead of adjusting lesson plans "Johnny on the spot" (Tori). This study's findings corresponded with the research conducted by Capp (2017), who warned against retrospective modifications. Therefore, existing research and this study's results verified the significance of training and teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge in overcoming obstacles and using DI when implementing new prescriptive resources.

The final theme revealed that the study's participants prioritized their relationship with students because it promoted trust. This theme is consistent with the conceptual framework and the existing literature. Tomlinson and McTighe (2013) explained that differentiation is a philosophy that leads teachers in decision-making concerning students' needs and curriculum requirements, which stems from teacher-students collaboration and is conducive to the learning environment. The findings also

support the idea that differentiation depends on teachers' observing and listening for diversity (Bondie et al., 2019). Teachers who believed in students' abilities to learn and improve reading and writing skills while participating in learning activities use prepared resources to plan for all students' engagement in learning (Hintz, 2017). The participants underscored that considering students' interests was imperative because students need to see the connection between school and life, between existing and new knowledge and skills (Tomlinson, 2014). The teachers of this study achieved a safe learning environment, a prerequisite for DI use, by building relationships with their students and relying on the resources' structure.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The critical understanding of this research was that thorough preparation and communication with students helped teachers overcome initial obstacles when developing DI using the *EngageNY* ELA modules in the middle grades. What it implies for practice is that the school leaders need to capitalize on their role as teachers' supporters, promoting curricular resources' flexible application and teachers' authority (Shalem, 2018). As Cramer et al. (2018) stated, policies do not presume teachers to apply predetermined pedagogical strategies to instruct various students. However, to affect teachers' beliefs and, in turn, their practices, administrators should ensure teachers receive PD, which is timely, ongoing, engaging, and beneficial in addressing challenges teachers encounter when implementing new resources (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018). Thus, utilizing available from developers training is necessary for profound understanding and successful differentiation of the modules.

On the other hand, the teachers need to embrace their professional authority of policymaking. Increasing interactions and various ways of communication with learners within a complex environment will help them make independent decisions when unpacking prepared resources and planning for DI with the end in mind. Consequently, they will be able to strategically address Policies to create DI for successful student learning (Hintz, 2017; Wessel-Powell et al., 2019). Utilizing prescriptive resources implies initial planning through adherence to directions but using open-mindedness and professional judgment to thoroughly get acquainted, analyze the effectiveness, and differentiate the resources within the Policy's and diverse classroom's constraints. Getting familiarized with the resources assumes teachers make mistakes yet requires them to persevere and execute the entire unit while holding the bar high for students' success. Lesson planning requires teachers to be creative, innovative, and strategic: Solving intricate curricular and instructional issues of prepared resources by selecting strategies and text excerpts, adding the basics, compacting information, and offering variety of relevant material in response to students' needs allows connecting the curriculum and instruction (Black et al., 2019; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2018).

Based on what the literature presents and this study's findings regarding teachers' abilities to modify the prepared resources demonstrated, differentiating curricular resources based on UDL principles may be a challenging but feasible and essential task. However, more research regarding the phenomenon is necessary. The dearth of literature exploring the differentiation of prescriptive curricular materials made comparing and presenting supporting evidence challenging. Using other data collection methods besides participants' self-reporting will allow triangulating the results. Therefore, observations and document (the modules and teachers' lesson plans) analysis will enhance the overall depiction of the phenomenon. The mixed-methods design can also benefit the research: Data gathered through a survey will supplement the results and assist the researchers in a more profound phenomenon understanding.

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