

Australian senior-secondary teachers' perceptions of leadership and policy for differentiated instruction

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Abstract

Differentiated instruction (DI) is an educational praxis that is built on the premise that all students can be engaged in learning and achieve positive academic outcomes. Previous research in secondary schools has shown promise in the success of DI practices and outlines the importance of sustained professional development (PD) for teachers. There is, however, little research on DI within senior-secondary classrooms in the Australian context. This research is part of a larger study which recruited 12 participants from three schools across two states in Australia, and aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions of school leadership and support in implementing DI in their classrooms as well as awareness of relevant policies. Findings indicated that when teachers were aware of policies involving DI, they tended to describe policies relating to special education. This suggests that DI is viewed by these teachers as an approach for students with additional needs rather than seen as a whole class philosophy. Similarly, the results indicated that when teachers said that leadership supported them in using DI, this support was commonly reported as isolated professional development in supporting students with additional needs. Discrepancies around awareness of DI policies were also found between teachers at the same school, with those in leadership roles indicating that requirements to utilise DI

Geolocation Information: Data was collected in Adelaide and Brisbane, Australia.

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were embedded in their general teaching and learning policy. Implications for future practice and policy are discussed.

KEYWORDS

differentiated instruction, policy, school leadership, senior secondary education

Key insights**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

This paper addresses the importance of policy and professional development for effective differentiation in senior-secondary schools in Australia. The paper draws on case studies across three Australian schools through semi-structured interviews.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

This paper provides insights into the impact of school leadership teams and school policy, in implementing differentiated instruction in senior-secondary schools. It highlights the importance of leadership support in providing ongoing professional development in differentiated instruction to increase teacher capacity.

INTRODUCTION

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is a pedagogical framework and praxis that addresses student diversity in the classroom (Frankling et al., 2017; Pozas et al., 2019). It does this by addressing the individual needs of each learner in one's classroom and acknowledging the differences between them, ensuring that teachers understand student readiness, utilise student interests, allow students to engage with content and adapt to learners' preferences to increase motivation and engagement (Tomlinson, 2014). Furthermore, DI allows teachers to plan strategically while operating within a common curriculum framework and is considered as such when teachers deliberately plan adaptations to facilitate student learning (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Many schools worldwide use DI to create inclusive classrooms (Gheysens, Coubergs, et al., 2020; Jarvis et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2018). A review of the relevant research literature, however, has uncovered only a limited number of studies on inclusive teaching practices within a senior-secondary education context (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

While there are multiple models for DI, this research focused on DI through the lens of Tomlinson (2014), who proposed that teachers can accommodate student diversity in the classroom and apply DI to student learning goals through content, product, process, affect/environment or a combination of the four. Sometimes, personalised learning and adaptive teaching are terms that are discussed alongside DI (Abawi, 2015; Parsons et al., 2013). Secondary educators have been described as being less positive towards inclusive education compared with teachers of younger students (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001; Ross-Hill, 2009; San Martin et al., 2021), raising concerns over inclusion in senior-secondary education. Senior-secondary education in Australia is typically defined as Years 10–12 of school.

Differentiated instruction, personalised learning and adaptive teaching

Differentiated instruction has been established as a framework that has the potential to create inclusive education for students. It has been a hot topic in education for the past two decades (Sun & Xiao, 2021), and only recently has research investigated the outcomes when multiple elements of the model are utilised (Sun & Xiao, 2021; Tomlinson, 2013). With that, DI has attracted a degree of criticism throughout the last 20 years. Gheysens, Coubergs, et al. (2020) argued that teachers experience a great deal of pressure to create inclusive classrooms and may not feel sufficiently prepared to do so, particularly if they have a perception of a lack of necessary time to implement inclusive practices properly (Yngve et al., 2019). Effective inclusive practices support all students in enabling participation in the teaching and learning environment. Therefore, the concept of DI as an inclusive practice may alarm teachers in the first instance, especially given the complexities of each element within the DI framework by Tomlinson (2014). Many educators criticise the framework, however, seeing DI as too ambitious (Tomlinson, 2013). Furthermore, educators see the framework as too complex to implement, particularly when addressing all students' needs (Yngve et al., 2019). This complexity requires teachers to think about the impact their learning techniques have on children and to adapt them accordingly (Sogo & Jeremiah, 2018).

Internationally, DI shares many similarities to personalised learning and adaptive teaching. Personalised learning, much like DI, probably originated from Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). A common misconception is that DI is individualised instruction, leading teachers to believe they have to make an individual lesson plan for each student (Tomlinson et al., 2008). Personalised learning has often been associated with providing individual instruction to students, whereby teachers assist students to become independent learners by addressing individual needs (Prain et al., 2013). Personalised learning, like DI, is multifaceted; however, involves individual goal setting, varied learning tasks, adapted pace and embedded elements of choice for the learner with students driving their learning (Abawi, 2015). Differentiated instruction, however, is more teacher centred, focussing on what the teacher is doing to proactively adapt their lesson.

In contrast, according to Parsons et al. (2013) adaptive teaching and DI share many similarities; however, adaptive teaching involves teachers providing moment-by-moment adaptations to meet the specific learning needs of their students. Hence, DI is seen to be more proactive, and adaptive teaching is more responsive to students' needs. Parsons et al. (2013) stated that the adaptations teachers make during instruction, are crucial to DI, but are frequently overlooked and discouraged. Tomlinson et al. (2008) stated that the most powerful DI is based on preassessment and proactive planning, recognising, however, that some improvisation is still needed, but is not a dominant means of DI. More recently, Tomlinson and Borland (2022) outlined that in addition to proactive planning, DI requires responsiveness in teaching, reflecting similarities to adaptive teaching. According to Smit and Humpert (2012), who created their own framework for DI, differentiation is newer and more detailed than adaptive teaching and works on the premise that teachers should expect student diversity, and thus plan ahead for such diversity, rather than taking a reactive approach. Thus, while both personalised learning and adaptive teaching share some similarities to DI, they are both different approaches to teaching; however, this paper is focused on the philosophy of DI.

School leadership and leadership for DI implementation

Educational or school leaders are those who hold coordination, assistant principal, deputy principal and principal roles. Research on how educational leaders have engaged in the

philosophy, culture and practices of DI in schools is minimal (Jarvis et al., 2016). Likewise, there is emerging evidence that school leaders have an impact on student achievement (Goddard et al., 2019). More specifically, instructional leadership—where leaders place teaching and learning at the forefront of school decision making—appears to be a positive predictor in student success (Gumus et al., 2018). Hallinger (2005) suggested that instructional leadership is made up of three key dimensions: (1) defining the school's goals; (2) managing the instructional programme and curriculum; and (3) promoting a positive learning environment. Hence, for leaders to effectively embed a culture and practice of DI, DI needs to form part of their strategic direction and be prioritised as a philosophy teachers can use for instruction. Schools have varying degrees and organisational structures for leadership worldwide and the way the school is organised impacts upon the school's vision and learning experiences (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016).

School leaders play an integral part in the way schools are managed and the direction schools take with professional development (PD). School leadership teams have been seen to influence the PD programmes in which their staff participate. In a study at only one Australian secondary school, Sharp et al. (2018) emphasised the need for sustained and contextual PD in DI, to support a culture of inclusive education to be embedded. In a broader research study encompassing 95 US elementary schools, Goddard et al. (2019) found that teachers were more likely to employ DI in their classrooms when supported by strong leadership. These researchers also found that when leaders supported teachers, teachers were reportedly differentiating more in their school. In Serbia, Ninković et al. (2022) investigated the effect of transformational leadership on teachers use of DI. They found that when transformational leadership—where leaders work with their teams to create change—was present, teachers participated more in cooperative activities, leading to more frequent DI use. Thus, leadership support in DI may directly or indirectly influence the provision of DI in school classrooms. This international research highlights that leadership teams play a key role in encouraging teachers to differentiate, however, may not reflect the context of senior-secondary education in Australia.

Gibbs and McKay (2021) conducted a systematic literature review on DI practices in Australian mainstream classrooms and reviewed six Australian studies. They found that ongoing professional learning, as well as coaching on DI, is necessary for effective DI implementation; however, these practices must also be supported by leaders. One of the studies reviewed was Jarvis et al. (2016) who reported the view of eight leaders. Jarvis and her colleagues found that there was a need for leaders to develop a shared vision for DI and to become enablers for DI. Comprising of middle and secondary school leaders, the study conducted by Jarvis et al. (2016) may not accurately reflect the views of leaders in senior-secondary education.

The reviewed literature highlights the need for ongoing support by leaders, in enabling their staff to implement DI in their classrooms. There is a need, however, to investigate school leadership and DI in the senior-secondary education space, given that there is no known study which has focussed on senior-secondary education in Australia.

Policy and relevant documents for DI in the Australian landscape

In the Australian context, DI is represented in curriculum documents and teaching standards such as the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022) and Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017) as a response to the diversity that exists in all classrooms (Frankling et al., 2017; Schipper et al., 2020; Sharp et al., 2018). Specific

reference to DI, however, does not exist in Australian legislation (Gibbs & McKay, 2021) such as the Disability Discrimination Act (Commonwealth Government, 1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (Commonwealth Government, 2005). A Belgian study by Roose et al. (2019) discovered that much of the variance in teachers' beliefs towards utilising and implementing DI techniques could be attributed to a general lack of policy and, hence a lack of shared vision regarding DI. Although Australian curriculum and frameworks differ from Belgium, this point suggests that either schools are not utilising policy documents regarding DI from curriculum frameworks, and translating this into practice in the classroom, or that policy or documents that support DI use do not exist in other relevant areas.

Conversely, Bhattacharya (2017), who conducted research on high school differentiation strategies in the US, argued that education itself has become fraught with policy, that the teachers were being asked to do more with less time, and that policy changes were not a priority. Furthermore, Bhattacharya (2017) attributed the lack of policy changes to the notion that DI is not endorsed within Australian legislation, unlike the US, with information about DI being more so embedded within curriculum documents and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017; Gibbs & Beamish, 2020).

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers were created by the AITSL (2017). These standards are used to support 'teachers to reflect on their practice and develop and grow their expertise' (para. 1). Within their written guide, AITSL (2017) describe their standards as 'a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality' defining teacher's work and explicitly identifying 'elements of high-quality, effective teaching ... that will improve educational outcomes for students' (p. 3).

Within the domain of professional knowledge and standard 1, 'know students and how they learn' – teachers must (at a graduate level) 'demonstrate knowledge and understanding of strategies for differentiating teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities' (AITSL, 2017, p. 11). This standard reflects the importance of teachers having a deep understanding of frameworks that promote DI, such as that of Tomlinson (2014). In addition to the graduate level, three further career stages 'guide the preparation, support and development of teachers' (AITSL, 2017, p. 3), allowing teachers to better their practice in relation to each of the standards. Thus, while the standards reflect a common ground for what teachers need to be doing in their classrooms, AITSL recognises that there are varying degrees of competency and experience when meeting these standards.

More recently, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Australian Government, 2019) identifies the goals of creating an education system that promotes equity and excellence, supporting young Australians to become confident lifelong learners. For example, goal 1 states that 'the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity' (Australian Government, 2019, p. 5), suggesting that the government is committed to work with the education community to 'promote personalised learning and provide support that aims to fulfil the individual capabilities and needs of learners' (Australian Government, 2019, p. 5). The declaration is important to this research, as the South Australian and Queensland Education Ministers signed this declaration and the case studies within this research are conducted in these respective states. The declaration reflects a 'commitment to improving educational outcomes for all young Australians' (Australian Government, 2019, p. 2) and teachers are the ones who ultimately enact this in their classrooms.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

While limited research exists on the outcomes of DI utilising multiple elements of Tomlinson's (2013) framework, there has been some criticism of the practicalities of the

framework for teachers. Gheysens, Coubergs, et al. (2020) argued that teachers experience pressure to create inclusive classrooms and may not feel sufficiently prepared to do so, particularly if they have a perception of a lack of necessary time to execute inclusive practices properly (Yngve et al., 2019). Therefore, the concept of DI, as an inclusive practice, may lead teachers to feel a sense of apprehension in the first instance, especially given the complexities of each element within the DI framework. Tomlinson (2013) argued herself that educators criticise the framework, seeing DI as too ambitious and complex to implement, particularly when addressing all students' needs (Yngve et al., 2019). This complexity requires teachers to think about the effects of their learning techniques on children, and to adapt them accordingly (Sogo & Jeremiah, 2018). There is a need to investigate how senior-secondary leadership teams are enablers in encouraging teachers to implement DI, even with such criticisms for DI. Furthermore, given that DI is not mandated in any formal legislation, with schools possibly having their own policies for DI, there is a necessity to determine if teachers are guided by school policies to implement DI. A greater understanding of the influence of leadership teams and school policy in DI may allow for more effective approaches to supporting teachers in implementing DI in their classrooms. This may lead to improved implementation of DI and greater inclusion in senior-secondary classrooms.

Given that there is no formal policy that guides teachers in DI implementation, instead, documents such as the AITSL standards (2011) and Alice Springs Declaration (Australian Government, 2019), there is a need to investigate whether a lack of formal policy in DI may be impacting upon the way teachers interpret and implement DI. In light of the evidence that school leadership teams may influence the provision of DI, and that there are no formal policies in Australia specifically supporting DI implementation, the aim of this research was to explore the influence of school leadership and policies for DI. While this research takes an Australian perspective, it may be useful to the international audience, even if schools have differing leadership structures and policies across the world. This study explored the following research questions:

How do school leadership teams influence the provision of differentiated instruction in senior-secondary education settings?

In what ways do school policies support/not support the use of differentiated instruction in senior-secondary education?

DATA COLLECTION

Research sites

The research was conducted at three independent schools across Australia, each catering for early years to Year 12. Two of the sites were located in Adelaide, Australia, teaching the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) (Government of South Australia, 2021) in Years 10 to 12 and the Australian Curriculum (AC) in Year 10 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022). Year 10 is often considered a transition year, with students studying the AC and SACE at the same time. Furthermore, one of these two sites also taught the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program in Years 11 and 12 (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2021), which is an alternative to SACE in South Australia, and is an assessed programme implemented around the globe in approximately 160 countries (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2021).

The third site was located in Brisbane, Queensland teaching the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) (Queensland Government, 2022) in Years 10–12, and the AC in Year 10 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022), with Year 10 similarly considered a transition year. The Index of Community Socio Educational Advantage

(ICSEA) value for each site has been provided to give context to the educational background and educational advantage of each school that participated in the research. 'ICSEA values typically range from approximately 500 (representing schools with extremely disadvantaged student backgrounds) to about 1300 (representing schools with extremely advantaged student backgrounds)' (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020, para.4). The ICSEA values for the three sites are: Highview, 1145 (South Australia); Lakes, 1174 (Queensland); and Hills, 1142 (South Australia), thus, representing schools that are in the mid-to-high socioeconomic bracket. Pseudonyms for participant names and schools have been used to preserve anonymity.

Methodology

This study reports on one part of a larger collective case study, which recruited 12 teacher participants across the three sites. This paper reports on results pertaining to leadership and policy for DI, across all 12 teacher participants. A case study methodology was chosen for this research as case studies allowed the researcher to study real people in real situations (Cohen et al., 2017), to gain a deeper understanding of teacher perceptions of leadership support and policy use in DI. Case studies allowed the researcher to make comparisons and contrasts between each case study, providing further insight into the issue of DI use (Creswell, 2012). Purposeful sampling was used throughout the interviews as random sampling in a small site, such as a school, is usually less feasible (Cohen et al., 2017). Furthermore, purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to gather richer data, as this type of sampling permitted the researcher to choose participants who contribute extensive knowledge (Emmel, 2013; Patton, 1990).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 12 participants (see Table 1 for participant characteristics), ranging from 20 min to 1 h. Patton (2015) stated that the sole purpose of an interview is to find out what is 'in and on someone else's mind ... [and to] find out from them those things we cannot directly observe ... allow[ing] us to enter into the other person's perspective' (p. 426). This method was particularly important for this research, as while it can be observed by a researcher that teachers choose to engage in differentiation or not in their classroom, the researcher is unable to observe perceptions of teachers. According to Stollman et al. (2021), most of the studies surrounding DI utilise observations and semi-structured interviews related to teacher knowledge and practices of DI; however, they believe that more focus needs to be on methods understanding teachers' unconscious cognitions during teacher practices. Therefore, this notion influenced the decision to include evidence artefacts, such as lesson plans, to complement the conscious interactions that teachers have during semi-structured interviews. The evidence artefacts were used specifically as prompts, and not analysed through the reflexive analysis, to elicit a deeper response from teacher participants and their use of DI. The use of personal documents added a unique lens to this research and the case study methodology itself, through giving senior-secondary teachers a voice in multiple ways. The aim of the evidence artefacts was not to analyse these documents, but to use them as a discussion point during the interview, for the participants to discuss their application of DI in their context. This allowed for greater depth—using the personal documents as a way of gaining teacher perceptions from the semi-structured interviews.

An interview schedule (Appendix 1) was developed to guide the researcher during the interview process. Interview questions were derived from previous literature; however, they were constructed to relate specifically to DI. For example, some of the questions from derived literature were specifically about inclusive education, not DI, and were therefore modified to reflect DI. All interviews were conducted by the first author, audio-recorded,

TABLE 1 Participant view of leadership support and policies for differentiated instruction.

School (pseudonym)	Participant (pseudonym)	Role	Leadership support	DI policies
Highview School	Anna	English teacher	There is mostly leadership support for DI. Leadership do offer some PD on DI.	Anna knows DI policies exist, but does not know where they are.
	Lisa	Food technology teacher	Yes, leadership support DI. There is PD on DI and a culture of DI.	Lisa considers ILPs to be policy but aside from this, is not aware of any other policy.
	Mary	Economics teacher	Theoretically the culture is we should differentiate. DI is encouraged. Leadership turnover has caused DI focus to lose traction.	Mary considers planning documents and requested by SACE coordinator, to be policy.
	Michael	Business and humanities teacher	Yes there is leadership support as they offer PD in DI.	Michael is not aware of policies but states that DI is recommended by leadership.
	Carol	English and humanities teacher	A revolving door of leadership has meant DI was once a focus. Currently, DI is not a focus.	Carol considers course templates for the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme to be policy.
Hillis School	Jane	Careers counsellor and mathematics teacher	The leadership team of the school are encouraging for the use of DI.	Jane is not aware of any DI policies.
	Tina	Science teacher	There is leadership support for DI.	Tina is not aware of any formal policy for DI implementation.
	Amber	English and humanities Teacher	There is leadership support and you need to differentiate. There is a positive leadership culture for DI.	Amber is not aware of any DI policy, stating ILPs could be considered policy.
Lakes School	Jennifer	Deputy principal and English teacher	There is leadership support with a range of professional learning on DI	DI is part of the teaching and learning policy (which Jennifer created).
	Sally	English as an additional language teacher	DI PD has not been a focus in the past but now a focus.	There is no formal policy on DI. But the school has a students with additional needs policy.
	Linda	Mathematics teacher	PD is not driven by the school and is 'fend for yourself'. There is no coordinated approach to DI.	No formal policy on DI exists, but the NCCD does guide teachers to differentiate.
	Elizabeth	Science teacher	The school is supportive of DI and supporting of catering for additional needs students. There is some PD and collegial chats on DI.	Elizabeth is not aware of any DI policy.

Abbreviations: DI, Differentiated instruction; ILP, individual learning plans; NCCD, Nationally Consistent Collection of Data; PD, professional development; SACE, South Australian Certificate of Education.

and transcribed by Pacific Transcription in Queensland, Australia. Transcribed interviews were emailed to teacher participants for member checking, whereby interviewed teacher participants were able to check and approve particular aspects of the data they provided (Carlson, 2010; Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015), and were used as a way of finding out if teacher participants' experiences aligned with the data collected from the interview questions (Curtin & Fossey, 2007).

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data were analysed using the criteria for a reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2021) which are practical guidelines based on their earlier work for a six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis was used as it aligns to exploration of the 'lived experiences' of particular social groups (Braun et al., 2019), which, in this instance, were senior-secondary teachers. Furthermore, Braun et al. (2019) outlined that reflexive thematic analysis is particularly useful when exploring factors that influence or underpin a particular phenomenon, specifically, the factors of leadership and policy, and how these impact upon teachers' perceptions of DI. The goal for reflexive thematic analysis is not to summarise the data, but the researcher takes on the role of storyteller and interprets the data based on the research questions.

In step one, the researcher first familiarised themselves with the data set by listening to each audio-recording of the 12 interviews and reading and re-reading each of the transcripts. This phase made the researcher more cognizant, not only of what was said in each of the interviews, but also how the data was said, to ensure accuracy in representation of what teacher participants were saying. In step 2, the researcher undertook coding of the data, with constant refining of codes. For example, one of the initial codes was 'positives of DI implementation'; however, as the coding process progressed, the researcher found this code to be too broad. The researcher refined this broader code into more specific codes, to accurately capture what the data was portraying. For example, part of the code, 'positives of DI implementation', became 'DI helps students to develop confidence', reflecting a more refined code. During steps 3–5, the researcher developed and reviewed candidate themes, and named each of them accordingly. This was an iterative process. This paper reports on two key themes constructed from the dataset. The themes were: (1) leadership teams influence differentiated instruction professional development; and (2) differentiated instruction in school policies and relevant documents.

A reflexive journal was used as a means to reduce bias and show an audit trail of why the researcher coded and themed the data in this way (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Data were coded initially, with candidate themes being constructed and reconstructed from the coded data. Both an inductive and a deductive approach (through the use of Tomlinson's, 2014 framework for DI) were used for the core themes, permitting the researcher to be open to new and unexpected findings. The researcher found that they coded through a deductive means too much during the initial coding phase, which prompted the coding and recoding of data, to ensure an inductive approach was also taken.

RESULTS

The results showed that for some participants, their school leadership teams supported the use of DI, but did not provide opportunities for professional development that focuses on the practical implementation of DI in their respective schools. Furthermore, for some participants, results demonstrated DI was written into special education policies. The results

are reported under two key themes: (1) leadership teams influence differentiated instruction professional development; and (2) differentiated instruction in school policies and relevant documents.

Leadership teams influence differentiated instruction professional development

The 12 teachers held a variety of views about whether their school leadership teams supported the use of DI in their classrooms. Half of the teachers ($n=6$) stated that their school leadership teams supported them in implementing DI. The other half ($n=6$), however, revealed that their leadership teams supported them in theory only, and not through PD that focuses on implementing DI practically. For example, Carol, who had taught at the same school for over 10 years, stated that DI had been a sporadic focus for the school, supported only by leaders who were passionate about DI. She specified:

Honestly, I think that the revolving door of leadership has really gotten in the way of that. I think [a previous colleague], if she had become deputy, would've had a really good program running. Because it was her absolute focus. She's the last leader I can think of who really burned a flame for differentiation.

(Carol, International Baccalaureate Diploma Program)

Mary, Carol's colleague at Highview School, expressed the same view: 'I think because of the turnover in leadership, it's probably lost a bit of traction, to be fair.' While over half of the participants stated that leadership support was sporadic ($n=7$), five teacher participants expressed that support was more so in encouraging the use of DI rather than targeted and sustained professional learning. For example, Jane, from Highview stated that leadership teams were encouraging: 'I think they're absolutely, positively encouraging' and 'they certainly do encourage it as well'. Mary, also from Highview, commented, 'theoretically, the culture is that we should differentiate'. Therefore, while leadership teams supported DI, these teachers still wished for a deeper level of support through PD.

Participants in all three schools asserted that when PD was offered by leadership, the PD mainly had a focus on special education or learning support. For example, Amber, who works at Hills School, stated that PD was sporadic and tended to focus more on differentiation for particular types of diverse learners, such as for students with autism spectrum disorder or selective mutism. When asked further about whether the leadership team had run PD, she outlined, 'kind of, maybe for some instances ... my last two schools have provided PD opportunities for those students [with additional needs]. Also, I think learning a lot from Individual Support Plans (ISPs), lots of schools use a different thing ... such as an individual learning plan'. Sally, who works at Lakes School, held a similar view in that the PD her school provided for DI was targeted towards a specific demographic of students. She asserted:

We had a whole school wide PD about differentiation for EAL/D [English as an Additional Language or Dialect] and I've led some of that EAL/D differentiation stuff in a previous role here. But we haven't looked at it as a whole concept for our whole suite of learners and at its core what it means [which is] what it should [be doing]. We've looked at pockets of it rather than from a broader perspective.

(Sally, QCE & AC)

Lisa, who worked at Highview School, shared a similar view with Amber (From Hills School) and Sally (from Lakes School) in her statement, outlining that the PD she had received on DI was targeted towards Students with Additional Needs (SWAN), or those with ILPs. Furthermore, the PD was focused on how to differentiate through ways outlined in these ILPs:

There's a lot of really specific information on student's ILPs. About how to differentiate for particular students. So, I think yeah, that's really helpful for staff. I think ... there is a culture of you know, you look at your class list and then you look at you know, the list of students who might need differentiation and yeah, there's definitely a culture of that that is just what you do to support the student.

(Lisa, SACE)

The statements by Carol, Mary, Jane, Amber, Sally and Lisa, from all three schools, reflect that the focus of DI in their respective schools has been sporadic and typically focused on particular groups of students with additional needs. For example, students with EAL/D or students with autism spectrum disorder. Hence, these teachers are viewing DI as a strategy for specific student sub-groups, in particular, students who have additional needs.

Differentiated instruction in school policies and relevant documents

School policies or relevant documents regarding DI, or perceived lack thereof, further supported the idea that DI may be seen as relating to special education and SWAN. Ten of the 12 teachers stated that no policy or relevant written documents solely on DI supported them in the implementation of DI in their classrooms. If there was a policy, it was stated by participants that DI is part of existing special education policies. For example, Sally, a teacher at Lakes School, stated that to her knowledge, there was no formal policy on differentiation; however, she commented that there was some reference to DI in the special education policies. She stated:

To my knowledge, there is no formal policy on differentiation. But I do think it's—I know that it is mentioned in the SWAN (Students With Additional Needs) policy. So, in our learning support policy and in the EALD policy and currently a gifted and talented policy. It's definitely parked in there. It doesn't exist in a form on its own. But I know it's part of the other areas.

(Sally, QCE & AC)

The other teachers at Lakes School, Linda and Elizabeth, also stated that they were unaware of the existence of a policy supporting them in the implementation of DI. Elizabeth, however, referred to the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD), the funding model and annual census of students who meet the broad category of disability in Australian schools, to conclude that DI is part of the school's framework for catering to students with additional needs. Linda outlined:

I mean there's NCCD collection, data collection that we have to do, there's that. Of course, we've all got—the kids have IEPs and PLPs and we do that. Is there a specific document? I actually couldn't tell you if that even exists. Maybe there is and I just don't know about it.

(Linda, QCE & AC)

These responses indicate that the teachers at Lakes School consider DI more suited to particular groups of students rather than the whole class. Further, the participants expressed that while no DI policy existed, encouragement to implement DI was often part of special education policies, intended for providing adjustments to students with disabilities, and those with ILPs.

Teacher participant responses from those at Hills School, reflect that there were differences in whether policies existed at the school. Jennifer was the only participant in this research who stated that DI was in their school's general teaching and learning policy and was not bound by special education policies. She asserted:

We have our teaching and learning policy specifically states that student learning must be differentiated that assessment needs to be, so it's written in our overarching policy ... it's fairly clear in the overarching that you're just expected to do it.

(Jennifer, SACE)

This view by Jennifer was not shared, however, by her colleagues Tina and Amber, at Hills School. Tina stated that she was aware that a policy in DI was still being written: 'I think within the exceptional learning, I think that policy is being written and we're implementing it at the same time while they're finalising the policy'. Amber stated that ILPs were a means for formal documentation of DI; however, not all students are typically on ILPs, which are usually reserved for students with learning difficulties or disabilities. Amber stated:

Well, we're bringing in a new procedure called the Individual Student Plan which is given to every teacher if we have a student with a learning difficulty. On that document is all the differentiation you have to put in place for that student. So, it relates to the learning context, it also relates to teacher led instruction, homework and it's just all encompassed on the one document. So, we have that for individual students, yeah.

(Amber, SACE & AC)

These results are noteworthy since Jennifer, who stated that DI was written in Hills School's general teaching and learning policy, was the school's deputy principal at the time and wrote the policy herself. Jennifer stated in the interview that she believed she had good knowledge and consistent application of DI. Amber and Tina stated, however, that they were unaware of the incorporation of DI into the general teaching and learning policy and related DI to special education rather than as a whole-school approach. As deputy principal, Jennifer was more aware than her teaching staff of the DI policy being written in the general teaching and learning policy.

In contrast to Hills School, all six Highview School participants outlined that they were unaware of the existence of policies for DI implementation (as outlined in [Table 1](#)) on their site. Michael outlined that he did not know of a policy at Highview School that stated that teachers needed to differentiate for students. Further, he acknowledged that DI was encouraged, and may be supported by means other than a policy. He stated, 'I don't know if there is [a DI policy], I think it's probably heavily recommended, but I don't know if there's a requirement that you have to meet a certain or anything like that, I've never seen it if there is'.

Two Highview participants expressed that policies regarding DI may not be important in being able to differentiate well. Jane and Anna assert that teachers who are unaware of policies either do not seek them or let them determine their use of DI:

I think I am going to have to say if any. That might be because—only because of my ignorance. Because having been here a long time, I don't go much beyond my own organisation of my own classes.

(Jane, SACE)

I don't know the answer to that question, even though I do it, and seek it out, I think—I don't have to rely upon a policy, regarding—it's not that I'm just plain ignorant—although that may be true, it's more that that hasn't been something I've had to seek out and rely on.

(Anna, SACE)

Overall, teacher participants from Highview highlighted a lack of understanding of the existence of DI in policy and some indicated that policy was not important to DI implementation in their classrooms.

Teachers at both Lakes and Hills mainly indicated that if DI policies existed, they existed within special education policy, however, Highview teachers indicated a lack of knowledge of any policy on DI and three of these teachers did not think one was needed to support DI in their classroom. Jennifer, the only teacher and deputy principal, stated that DI was written in the general teaching and learning policy, and also asserted that she was confident in differentiating.

DISCUSSION

There are three clear findings from this research. First, results highlight that it is difficult for policy on DI to support DI when: (1) DI is mostly contained within special education policy; and (2) teachers are not aware of DI in any other policy or relevant documents. Second, implementation of DI in school classrooms was mostly influenced by teachers' understandings of policy (that DI was for SWAN) and teachers' experiences with PD (DI PD was only provided for SWAN). Third, teachers indicated that school leadership teams could influence classroom DI practices if the PD at their schools had a strong focus on DI.

This research found that DI was viewed by 11 out of 12 participating teachers as a practice specifically for students with additional needs, such as those students with learning difficulties. This view was intensified as a result of DI being included in policies targeted towards SWAN, and PD on DI usually targeting SWAN. Similarly, half of the teacher participants in this study stated that they differentiate for students with additional needs or learning difficulties, with Jane referring to these students as 'lower end students'. This finding highlights the misconception held by teachers, that DI is for select groups of students and individuals, supporting the findings of a configurative review by Eikeland and Ohna (2022) which determined that DI is viewed as a philosophy for specific groups of students. The inclusion of DI in school special education or SWAN policies, rather than in general teaching and learning policies, contravenes Tomlinson's (2014) proposal that DI is for all students.

If teachers view DI as a practice specifically for students with additional needs, they may feel they are actioning DI appropriately to how they have defined DI. With reference to Tomlinson's (2014) DI framework, teachers are partially employing DI effectively. This is particularly so when teachers differentiate only for a select group of students, such as those with additional needs. Thus, other students who could benefit from a differentiated classroom but who do not have additional needs may not be as successful in their academic schooling. Hence, special education/SWAN policies that include references to DI may be doing a disservice to other students who would benefit from a differentiated learning environment.

Notably, Jennifer, a deputy principal, was the only participant to state that DI was written into her school's general teaching and learning policy, and was responsible for developing the policy. Jennifer's reason for doing this was her passion for DI and her aim for all teachers to implement DI in their classrooms; however, Tina and Amber, both colleagues of Jennifer, stated that they were not aware of DI in this policy, reporting that DI was in their special education policy. Hence, while Jennifer's instructional leadership included DI as being of importance in her school, supporting teachers in changing their views and practices for DI may require specific whole school PD on DI and the teaching and learning policy. This finding is a new contribution to the field of DI in Australian senior-secondary schooling, extending the research insights of Roose et al. (2019), who noted variance in teachers' beliefs regarding DI implementation due to a lack of policy. The findings further support Eikeland and Ohna's (2022) contention that without DI being embedded in policy, teachers develop an understanding of DI that limits its application to certain contexts. The current study highlights the need for DI to be included in general teaching and learning policy, and for school leaders to ensure that staff understand the policy.

Worldwide, policies are being created with the aim of increasing inclusive education practices to address additional needs (Gheysens, Consuegra, et al., 2020), and this research found that policies geared towards inclusive practices may be embedded in special education policies, or general teaching and learning policies. Hence, there is a need to determine whether DI should sit within inclusive education policies or general teaching and learning policies, given that the premise of DI promotes inclusive education and that inclusion of DI in special education policies could misrepresent who DI is for. The results highlight that school leaders like Jennifer may have deeper knowledge of differentiation policies compared with general teaching staff, but with this deeper knowledge comes a responsibility to support the understanding and professional development of staff to implement DI in their classrooms. Given that Özdemir et al. (2022) found that school leadership teams influenced teachers' willingness to implement DI, the results from this research extend the research by Özdemir et al. (2022), arguing that school leaders may first need to educate staff on DI policies, so as to avoid DI misconceptions.

In contrast, policies that omitted mention of DI did not appear to have hindered teachers' ability or desire to differentiate their instruction, reflecting that DI policies are not relevant to some senior-secondary teachers, like Jane who stated that she does not let policy dictate how she teaches. This requires further investigation, owing to the competing views of teacher participants. The utilisation of policy highlights the importance of ensuring that policies are current and do not mislead teachers who are guided by such policies, for example, leading teachers to believe that DI is a special education practice or for SWAN, as this can cloud teachers' understanding of certain philosophies and educational practices.

Similar to school policies, PD regarding DI experienced by the teacher participants was focused on students with diverse learning needs, rather than presenting DI as a whole-class, whole-school praxis and philosophy. This view was seen in the statement by Amber regarding DI PD with a focus on students with ASD and selective mutism. Likewise, Sally stated that DI PD had focused more on students with EAL/D. Therefore, while school policy and school PD position DI within special education, teachers will view DI for certain groups of students, rather than DI being viewed for all students as a whole-class construct. While Yngve et al. (2019) argued that students with additional needs should be given priority, the findings of this research suggest that educating teachers about DI by focusing solely on diverse learning groups positions DI to be misconstrued as a special education practice, despite Tomlinson's (2014) framework being intended as an approach for all students. Teachers believe that they are differentiating well, when they are in fact only differentiating for select groups of students. It has been established that ongoing PD in DI is crucial for teachers in implementing DI (Gibbs, 2022; Jarvis et al., 2016; Porta et al., 2022). This research supports

this premise, further adding that ongoing PD needs to also ensure that DI is conveyed as a practice for all students, not just select groups of students with additional needs, to avoid DI being misrepresented.

Viewing DI as a practice for students with additional needs creates a tension between what the DI framework is built upon and those who receive a differentiated classroom. Yngve et al. (2019) argued that students with additional needs must be prioritised given their need for the highest level of support within the classroom environment; however, if this detracts from all students receiving a differentiated classroom, then the premise of DI may only be partially upheld. Thus, this research argues that DI needs to be included in policy and PD for *all* students to ensure that teachers understand the premise on which the DI framework is built. While needs of some students may be prioritised in the classroom, a thorough understanding of DI, supported by ongoing PD, may allow teachers to support the best outcomes for all students in their differentiated classroom.

LIMITATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This collective case study has several limitations that affect the generalisability of results. First, the research had a relatively small sample size, consisting of 12 teachers from three schools across Australia. Furthermore, each school had a similar ICSEA value and they were all independent schools. Hence, participant views may not represent teachers' views of DI leadership and policy across Australia. Further research should utilise participants from government and Catholic schools, and schools of varying ICSEA values, to add to the picture of DI implementation and the study's identified themes. In expanding to government and Catholic schools, this may highlight other complexities in school leadership and policy, given their different organisational structures and policies. Participants could also be from other states and territories across Australia, to confirm these participants views of leadership and policy for DI. Second, as this study did not actively seek participants who were leaders in their schools, interviewing those who hold leadership roles and gaining their view of how they support or do not support teachers in implementing DI may further support or negate the research themes, offering an alternative perspective. Last, analysis of policy documents could supplement the investigation of DI policies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to understand senior-secondary teacher perceptions of how school leadership teams support teacher implementation of DI, and whether school policies also impact upon such implementation. One of the key points this research revealed was that leadership teams and policy play a role in shaping teacher perceptions towards DI. The study identified that when DI policy and PD sit within special education, teachers view DI as a practice solely for students with additional needs. This detracts from the essence of DI as a form of inclusive education, and a framework for supporting *all* students. The results highlighted the need for a collective commitment to, and responsibility for, implementing DI by school leadership teams. This commitment and responsibility are warranted not only for teachers, but for school leaders too, as they are seen to have influence over what professional learning their staff undertake, as well as the policies created and enacted in their sites. Similarly, when policies are created that guide teachers in DI implementation, these need to form part of the PD given to staff, to ensure they are aware of such a policy. Furthermore, a collective commitment to DI may allow school leaders and teachers to develop and hold a consistent understanding of what DI is, and who DI is for, as to avoid DI being seen as being exclusively

for students with special or additional needs. The aim for this collective understanding is that teachers may be able to develop a consistent understanding of DI, viewing DI as being beneficial for all students, not just select groups of students, such as students with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Schools are encouraged to find ways to develop a collective understanding of, and collective responsibility for, DI so that teachers uphold the DI framework in its entirety. Misconceptions surrounding DI are encouraged to be addressed in policy and by leadership teams so that teachers in senior-secondary education settings can take a unified approach to DI. School leadership teams may believe that having a DI policy is not relevant to them as DI does not exist in any formally endorsed legislation in Australia (Gibbs & McKay, 2021); however, this research highlighted that including DI in special education policies can increase misconceptions of DI. Hence, Australia is urged to introduce legislation that includes DI and how teachers should be utilising DI in their classrooms. Similarly, Sharp et al. (2018) posited that when policies exist, teachers have a clear understanding of DI and clearer expectations behind when and how to utilise DI. While further investigation is still needed, the results indicate that special education policies influenced the majority of teachers' perception of what DI is and who it is for. Therefore, a clear policy declaring that DI is for all students and not just those with additional needs may encourage all teachers—and not just those who teach students with additional needs—to feel responsible for implementing DI.

School leadership teams are encouraged to invest in creating professional learning communities with a sustained focus on DI application, specifically PD that focuses on *all* students, not specific groups of students with additional needs. Furthermore, PD needs to highlight the various DI practices teachers are doing well, and highlight such practices to other teachers. This investment requires a commitment by school leadership teams, and not just a one-off PD session on DI. In this way, DI may be implemented by senior-secondary teachers in a consistent manner.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no financial interest (or other potential benefits) which will follow from the direct applications of the research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Owing to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data are available upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted on 19 May 2021 by the University of Southern Queensland's ethics committee.

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APPENDIX 1

Period	Aspects
Warming up/ establishing rapport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewer to re-read important points from information sheet to interviewee and ask: <i>Do you have any questions for what I just explained?</i> • Ask interviewee: <i>May I turn on the digital recorder?</i> • Establish rapport—<i>tell me about yourself?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Prompts:</i> • How many years have you been teaching for? Tell me about your teaching career. • What is your education background? Where did you complete your university studies? • Have you always taught senior secondary education? • What senior secondary subjects taught do you teach currently and have taught in the past?
Exploration phase <i>Introduction to DI and learning difficulties</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is differentiated instruction to you? What does this look like in a senior secondary classroom? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> • What do you do in your classroom to promote inclusion? • What are learning difficulties and what do they consist of? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> • Many students with individual learning plans often have identified learning difficulties—can you describe their needs if you have students with an ILP? • Tell me about your education of and experiences with differentiated instruction. Adapted from Leatherman and Niemeyer (2005). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> • Have you always known about differentiated instruction? • Did you receive formal training in DI during your teacher education? • What are the difficulties associated with using differentiation in your lessons? Adapted from Dulfer (2019). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> • Classrooms consist of students with various needs—how do you manage to ensure all your students receive an equitable education? • Describe a time when you successfully differentiated for your senior secondary school classes. How did this make you feel? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> • What were you teaching at the time? • What were your students doing?

APPENDIX 1 (Continued)

Period	Aspects
Exploration phase <i>Depth in DI attitudes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you know when you are effectively meeting the different learning needs of every student in your classroom? What indications are there? Adapted from Chandra Handa (2020). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your students doing in a successful classroom? • What might your students be saying? • What are you doing when you know you are meeting the needs of your students? • What can cause your attitude to change (positive or negative) in a classroom? Adapted from Short and Martin (2005). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example, when a student understood a concept, how did this impact you? • DI utilises a variety of assessment strategies—describe when you used a variety of strategies and how confident you were in using these strategies to accommodate for students with learning difficulties. Adapted from Monteiro et al. (2019). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example, DI can involve the use of exit cards and formative assessment to guide decisions for future lessons. • Why do you choose to, or not to utilise differentiated instruction in your senior secondary classrooms? Adapted from Short and Martin (2005). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes DI challenging? • What makes DI achievable? • What are the positive and negative aspects associated with implementing differentiated instruction? Adapted from Helena Martins et al. (2018). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you have utilised DI, what do you notice about your students and yourself?
Exploration phase <i>Self-efficacy and DI</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What benefits do you receive by utilising differentiated instruction? Adapted from Filipi and Keary (2018). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel after you have successfully differentiated? • Are you confident in using differentiated instruction? Why/why not? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Possible prompts:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think back to what made you feel confident / not confident—what were you doing?
Interview finalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarisation (by the interviewer) • Reminder of benefits of participation in the research • Reminder to interviewee that data will be transcribed, and the verbatim script will be provided to them via their nominated email for review for a two-week period. • Interviewer to ask: <i>Is there anything else you would like to comment on that I have not already asked you about?</i> • Interviewer: Thank you very much for your time and the information you shared today.