URBAN ELEMENTARY TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES IN MAINE MANAGING THE PARADOXICAL TENSION TO BOTH DELIVER GRADE-LEVEL INSTRUCTION AND CUSTOMIZE SUPPORT: A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

To address historic levels of students’ unfinished learning, teachers must balance two competing objectives: maintaining grade-level instruction so that students do not fall further behind, while simultaneously customizing support so that students can rise to grade-level. This complex instruction is particularly important for teachers serving students from communities under pressure who were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and historic barriers to education. The problem addressed in this study was the lack of understanding of urban elementary teachers’ experiences as they managed the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction to the entire class while customizing support according to individual student needs. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to learn from and better support teachers with this paradoxical management. Through literature review, culturally informed pedagogy and differentiation pedagogy described the practices of grade-level instruction and customization respectively. Paradox theory provided a framework to examine both the tension and interrelation between these two pedagogies. I employed a phenomenological approach to interview eight experienced, White teachers, who served Black, Black African, Latinx, White, and multilingual learners. Themes emerged from the data that shed light on (a) teachers’ expertise, (b) perceptions of an overcorrection towards grade-level standards, (c) the destabilizing influence of time pressures, and (d) the cost of struggling to comply with outside expectations. The imperative to create productive struggle for all students emerged as a common goal between the two pedagogies. Findings provide suggestions for administrators to both learn from and support teachers as they grapple with this complex and challenging paradoxical management.
Keywords: unfinished learning, multilingual, urban, paradox, grade-level standards, classroom management
DEDICATION

For Lena and James, who educated me on the impact of that double-edged sword called data.

For Bill, who makes everything possible.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

American public schools have recently regrouped to address students’ unfinished learning from (a) the corona virus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Dorn et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021) and (b) historic barriers to education (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Hammond, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, USDOE; 2021). Nationally, these concerns are particularly acute for the schools that serve students from communities under pressure, whose members have faced historic barriers to education (Dorn et al., 2021; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; USDOE, 2021) and whose strengths often go unrecognized by the dominant educational paradigm (Hammond, 2020). During the country’s ongoing recovery from COVID-19, these historic barriers have only become larger compounding the unfinished learning of these students (Dorn et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; USDOE, 2021).

Teachers are deeply engaged in the complex management needed to engage and lift a diverse student body to maximize their achievement (Davis et al., 2022; Dorn et al., 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021). To reach this goal, researchers have suggested that classroom teachers must maintain grade-level instruction so that students do not fall further behind and must customize support so that students can rise to grade-level (Dusseault et al., 2021; Fordham Institute, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Lynch & Hill, 2020; The Education Trust, 2021). Districts are moving to assist teachers in this management with new scheduling and curriculum (Fordham Institute, 2021; Louisiana Department of Education, 2021; The Education Trust, 2021). However, classroom management responsibility, before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, has rested primarily on the individual teacher to calibrate a precise approach for each unique student in their unique classroom (Davis et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings,
The urban, Maine, elementary school, the site of this study, was a microcosm of the nationwide efforts to address post-COVID-19 unfinished learning, especially for students from communities under pressure. This school has been working to lift the achievement of its students to grade-level standards for some time (Maine Department of Education [MDOE], 2022). The site served a diverse group of more than 400 students with a demographic profile of 62% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, 10% unhoused, 65% students of color (primarily Black, Black African, and Latinx) and 48% English language learners (ELLs; MDOE, 2022). All the classroom teachers were White. In the spring of 2021, the school board of this urban district in Maine approved a pivotal equity policy that guaranteed all students access to grade-level curriculum, dismantling some of the historic barriers that relegated students from communities under pressure to endless remediation. Local references (e.g., school board policies, city periodicals, and school websites) were not cited in this research to maintain the confidentiality of the site.

At the classroom level, this policy meant an increasing district expectation of maintaining consistent grade-level instruction, regardless of students’ unfinished learning. The 2022, Northwest Evaluation Assessment showed that this policy appeared to have worked for some students, who made some gains during in-person learning (MDOE, 2022). However, a significant and concerning group of students, particularly in early elementary who were primarily English language learners, stagnated (MDOE, 2022). This trend mirrored national data from researchers who noted that a significant group of students was not bouncing back to grade-level
achievement, even with in-person learning (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

This district began adding back some strategic, individualized instruction through standardized scheduling to meet the needs of ELLs and a new foundational literacy curriculum. This scheduling and curricular approach mirrored a national trend (Fordham Institute, 2021; Louisiana Department of Education, 2021; The Education Trust, 2021). Although these changes might indeed have helped teachers manage balanced instruction, they did not address the pivotal role that only teachers can play in individualizing the balance for each of their unique students academically and culturally (Hammond, 2020; Ladson-Billings 2021, Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021; Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). To make a lasting change for students, the teachers’ dynamic management of grade-level instruction and customized support—for each of their unique students—needed to be explored.

As an educator, a student researcher, and a parent, my questions regarding balanced instruction stemmed from “personal and practical experience” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 74). Professionally, I was interested in understanding specific teacher practices that maximized student learning for each unique learner. As a White, middle-class teacher, who has worked for more than 20 years in public schools with students from communities under pressure, I was particularly interested in the systemic changes that I was beginning to see from administrators who recognized the barriers that these children have faced and the strengths that they bring. Finally, my personal experience of raising and advocating for two gifted children with identified learning disabilities, sharpened my interest in academic achievement that reflected the strengths of all learners. The crux of my teaching experience and my own children’s academic experience
led me to grapple with the dynamic management of consistent grade-level instruction and customized support to serve the needs of all learners.

Definitions of Key Terms

**Communities Under Pressure:** These communities are “under-resourced communities, families, and students” who are “rich in resources for learning and teaching, though those resources have historically been ignored, denigrated, or dismissed” (Ares et al., 2021, p. 1). In this study, these communities included Black, Black African, Latinx, and White students who live at or below the poverty level.

**Grade-level Standards:** Common core grade-level standards are national, academic standards “in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade” (Common Core, 2022, para 2).

**Guardrails:** This term from paradox theory describes agreed upon boundaries for two interrelated tensions managed within an organization (Smith & Besharov, 2019). These boundaries indicate that one polarity has gone too far and destabilized dynamic management, pulling the organization away from its mission. When one polarity crosses a guardrail, it signals that the organization must communicate and recalibrate dynamic management to achieve its mission (Smith & Besharov, 2019).

**Northwest Evaluation Assessment:** A national, computer adaptive assessment for math and literacy, normed for both age and grade level. This assessment can be given up to 3 times a year to track a student’s growth over time (Northwest Evaluation Assessment, 2022).
**Productive Struggle:** A productive struggle is the ability of a child to sustain effort and grapple with new learning, just above their level, in a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Remediation:** This is the practice of pulling a student from classroom instruction to practice an unlearned skill from a lower grade. It is generally understood to be disconnected from classroom learning (Lynch & Hill, 2020).

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this study was the lack of understanding of urban elementary teachers’ experiences in Maine as they manage the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support. The combined effects of historical barriers to education and the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in students facing significant levels of unfinished learning (Dorn et al., 2021; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; USDOE, 2021). To address this challenge effectively, teachers need to maintain grade-level instruction so that students do not fall further behind and to customize support so students can rise to grade level (Dusseault et al., 2021; Fordham Institute, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Lynch & Hill, 2020; The Education Trust, 2021). This can be complex and challenging work for teachers (Kane & Reardon, 2023).

Even before COVID-19, researchers had identified a need to improve classroom management of delivering grade-level instruction and customized support simultaneously (Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). In a case study, Naraian (2019) concluded, “Exemplars of how teachers have accomplished the reconciliation of such competing forms of instruction need to be made available” (p. 1602). Neophytou et al. (2020) also concluded, “The cultural component remained unconnected from teaching effectiveness” (p.
identifying the need for instructional models that connect and effectively manage culturally informed and differentiated instruction. Without an understanding of teacher experiences, their complex management task could not be explored to learn from and support teachers.

This lack of understanding was particularly acute in multilingual and multicultural classrooms even before the pandemic (Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). Recovery from COVID-19 pandemic schooling and a long overdue focus on equity increased both the interrelated nature and tension between the two polarities of grade-level instruction and customized support (Dusseault et al., 2021; Fordham Institute, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Lynch & Hill, 2020; The Education Trust, 2021). The district administrators for this site addressed COVID-19 pandemic recovery and equity with new curriculum and scheduling policies. However, the district policies did not acknowledge this paradoxical tension or the “both/and” dynamic management of paradoxes (Smith et al., 2016, p. 62).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of urban elementary teachers in Maine who manage the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support. Teachers were doing this work (Dusseault et al., 2021; Fordham Institute, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Lynch & Hill, 2020; The Education Trust, 2021), but little was known about their perceptions regarding effective paradoxical management or about the outcomes of district policies on paradoxical management. This study could contribute to existing literature and shape district policy by learning from and better supporting teachers as they work to maximize student achievement.
Research Question and Design

A single research question guided this study: How do urban elementary teachers in Maine experience the management of the paradoxical expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support?

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described phenomenological research as depicting the essence or basic structure of a lived experience. In this study, I adopted a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry that was suitable to capture the complex, collective, lived experiences of teachers. The phenomenon in this study was the experiences of teachers managing the paradoxical expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support. This phenomenon was explored by conducting eight semistructured interviews with teachers, and then by analyzing the transcribed interviews through phenomenological reduction analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Little research existed on how teachers manage consistent grade-level instruction and customized support (Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018), but a great deal of research existed on how teachers should separately implement these two instructional practices (Bondie et al., 2019; Gay, 2000, 2018; Griful-Freixenet, 2020; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Magableh & Abdallah, 2020; Paris, 2012, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019). Therefore, I built the conceptual framework of this study around the pedagogies of differentiation and culturally informed instruction that embody each of these two practices.

Differentiation was the most well-known pedagogy for customizing individual instruction, especially for students who were working above or below grade level (Bondie et al.,
Tomlinson (1995) defined differentiation as the commitment to modify “content, process, and/or products in response to individual student differences” (p. 80). Researchers used this definition consistently throughout contemporary research (Bondie et al., 2019; Griful-Freixenet, 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Magableh & Abdallah, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019). Differentiation emphasized the polarity of customizing support, but it embedded that customization within the polarity of maintaining grade-level instruction.

Culturally informed pedagogy was an umbrella term (Kelly et al., 2021) that researchers used to encompass culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021), culturally responsive (Gay, 2000, 2018) and culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012, 2021) pedagogy. Culturally informed instruction supported grade-level instruction for all students by emphasizing asset-based approaches that used culturally relevant curriculum and teaching modalities to build academic achievement, as well as the heritage culture and language (Kelly et al., 2021). Through culturally informed pedagogy, Kelly et al. (2021) emphasized the polarity of maintaining grade-level standards, but it lifted individual students academically by embedding grade-level standards in curriculum and instruction that developed students’ cultural identity and social consciousness.

Although differentiation and culturally informed instruction were understood separately, teachers were constantly managing both as they delivered grade-level instruction and customized support for their students (Naraian, 2019; Valiandes et al., 2018). In one classroom, explicit differentiated instruction involved students (a) listening to teacher explanations, (b) observing teachers modeling thinking, (c) memorizing vocabulary, and (d) repeatedly practicing with feedback until they were independently able to generalize the content to other settings (Naraian, 2019). In that same classroom, explicit, culturally informed instruction
involved teachers’ clear understanding of their own cultural lens, as well as identifying and embedding their students’ culture into all aspects of relationship building, communication, and curriculum (Naraian, 2019). Naraian (2019) demonstrated that teachers were managing a dynamic and complex instructional balance.

Paradox theory was a particularly pertinent management theory, for it accurately described the interdependent tension between the simultaneous polarities of grade-level instruction and customized support (Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith et al., 2016). By centering teacher management through the lens of paradox theory, I hoped to develop a more accurate understanding of front-line teaching experience. Paradox theory emphasized the value of both polarities, the interdependence between them, and the tensions that arose from their coexistence (Huq et al., 2017; Konrad et al., 2021; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith et al., 2016).

In addition, paradox theory described guardrails, agreed-on boundaries for the two interrelated tensions managed within an organization (Smith & Besharov, 2019). These boundaries showed that one polarity had gone too far, destabilizing dynamic management, and pulling the organization away from its mission. When one polarity crossed a guardrail, it signaled that the organization must communicate and recalibrate dynamic management to achieve its mission (Smith & Besharov, 2019). Guardrails facilitated the management of virtuous cycles and prevented the emergence of vicious cycles (Huq et al., 2017; Konrad et al., 2021; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith et al., 2016).

Paradox theory also provided a unifying focus for managing interdependent tensions. Organizational mission was central to guiding dynamic management (Huq et al., 2017; Konrad et al., 2021; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith et al., 2016). Educational research revealed that student productive struggles might be the common organizational mission for both polarities
(Bui & Fagan, 2013; Hammond, 2014; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

My personal experience shaped the conceptual and theoretical framework of this work. Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated, “How researchers view and make sense of the world, or what we refer to as the researcher’s tacit theories or working conceptualizations” (p. 40) influences all aspects of a study. As an experienced educator, a student researcher, and a parent of neurodivergent learners, I had developed tacit theories that suggested that classroom instruction was much more nuanced and crafted than prescriptive pedagogies or policies. Therefore, formal theories and pedagogies that embraced complexity and the teacher/student relationship, while maintaining grade-level standards, were central to this research. I also had tacit theories that suggested that teaching complexity and efficacy increased as the dominant, White educational paradigm was dismantled and rebuilt to address the strengths of all learners. As a White, middle-class educator, working with students from communities under pressure, theories and pedagogies that guided an equitable rebuilding of the educational paradigm were also central to this research. My tacit theories led me to grapple with a dynamic management approach that embraced the complexity of managing interdependent and conflicting goals in a diverse classroom.

**Assumptions and Limitations**

To investigate the lived experiences of the participants, I used phenomenological research methods. These methods involved gathering subjective descriptions from a small sample size (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). It is important to acknowledge that using a small sample size and subjective data collection methods could have had implications for the reliability and validity of my findings. It was essential to outline and bracket my assumptions about the research to develop a more nonjudgmental stance toward
analysis and to reduce bias (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, I assumed that teachers would have considerable expertise and craft knowledge that could clarify the management of paradoxical tension. Also, I made an assumption of teacher understanding and experience with both delivering grade-level instruction and customizing support. I made a final assumption that White, middle-class teachers had developed social consciousness and understood their role in asset-based instruction for students from communities under pressure.

A small, qualitative phenomenological study also came with limitations. The limitations to the study included the small sample size that could suggest a further platform for research but could not make results generalizable to a larger population. Also, observations and student work were not examined to corroborate teacher narratives, making the results completely reliant on teacher perceptions. The findings of this study are limited to a teacher’s perspective.

**Rationale and Significance**

Researchers conducted many studies on separate pedagogies to maximize student learning, particularly for students from communities under pressure. However, research into both differentiation and culturally informed instruction showed that teachers sit at the center of decision making for each unique student in each unique classroom (Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021; Neophytou et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2017; van Geel et al., 2019). The few studies whose authors directly examined teachers delivering both grade-level instruction and customizing support demonstrated that teachers can be expert managers (Naraian, 2019; Valiandes et al., 2018). This information has become essential for teaching and learning, especially as Maine and the Nation have become more diverse. However, I needed
more information to learn from and to support educators, particularly teachers who work with multicultural and multilingual students.

Summary

To explore how urban elementary teachers in Maine experienced the management of the paradoxical expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support, I used a phenomenological approach for this research. Differentiation and culturally informed instruction were two pedagogies that described these paradoxical tensions in practice and placed teachers at the center of decision making to engage students in productive struggle (Bondie et al., 2019; Gay, 2000, 2018; Griful-Freixenet, 2020; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Magableh & Abdallah, 2020; Paris, 2012, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019). Understanding the management of this tension was especially important to address the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic schooling and the new policies that were implemented to address unfinished learning (Dusseau et al., 2021; Fordham Institute, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Louisiana Department of Education, 2021; Lynch & Hill, 2020; The Education Trust, 2021).

A phenomenological approach to research was used to explore these teachers’ collective experience with management of this paradoxical tension. Some studies showed that teachers do expertly manage these tensions to maximize student productive struggle, but little is known about this management in multicultural and multilingual classrooms (Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). Through this research, I hoped to illuminate that gap, to learn from teachers and to support them in this complex and challenging work. Chapter 2 examines current educational research and outlines how paradox management theory could
harness the interrelated tension between differentiation and culturally informed instruction to describe teacher management experiences.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Our public education system was reeling from the impact of COVID-19 pandemic schooling, which created barriers to educational opportunity for many students (Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Dorn et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021; USDOE, 2021). These students, disproportionately from communities under pressure, were often the same students impacted by long-standing historical inequities in education (Dorn et al., 2021; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; USDOE, 2021). Teachers were challenged to address students’ unfinished learning because of historic and pandemic barriers to education (Davis et al., 2022; Dorn et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021). In this study, I examined one tension that was central to education: the need to both maintain grade-level instruction so that students did not fall further behind, and the need to customize support so students could rise to grade level (Dusseault et al., 2021; Fordham Institute, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Lynch & Hill, 2020; The Education Trust, 2021). Having a deeper understanding of teachers’ experiences managing these paradoxical demands could help educational administrators and policy makers learn from and provide support to teachers.

This literature review was organized with paradox theory at the center, for it directly addressed the dynamic management of paradoxical tensions. Two pedagogies examined in the conceptual framework provided guidance for maximizing student achievement, particularly for students who have faced barriers to education and whose strengths are undervalued. These pedagogies were differentiation (Tomlinson, 2017) and culturally informed instruction (Gay, 2000, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Paris, 2012, 2021). The two paradoxical polarities (of grade-level instruction and customized support) were embodied by these two conceptual pedagogies: culturally informed and differentiation respectively. Management of these two
pedagogies created a dynamic tension that researchers examined, using the dynamic management model of paradox theory (Huq et al., 2017; Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith et al., 2016).

**Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

In exploring the dynamic and paradoxical relationship between delivering grade-level instruction and customizing support, I examined two pedagogies that embodied these polarities. Differentiation is a highly researched instructional practice that is focused on customization for individual students (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Parsons et al., 2018; Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021). Tomlinson (1995) defined differentiation as the commitment to modify “content, process, and/or products in response to individual student differences” (p. 80). Researchers used this definition consistently throughout contemporary research (Bondie et al., 2019; Griful-Freixenet, 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Magableh & Abdallah, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019). Initially developed to meet the needs of gifted and talented students, differentiation began as a reactive process to meet student needs (Tomlinson, 1995). However, as differentiation developed, the pedagogy became a proactive model with structures that prepared teachers to meet the needs of all students by modifying curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products (Bondie et al., 2019; Griful-Freixenet, 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Magableh & Abdallah, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; van Geel et al., 2019). Differentiation emphasizes the polarity of customizing support, but it embeds that customization within the polarity of maintaining grade-level instruction.

Culturally informed pedagogy was the second pedagogy examined in this study and is a highly researched instructional practice that focuses on raising all students to grade-level
standards (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Parsons et al., 2018; Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021). Kelly et al. (2021) used the term culturally informed pedagogy as an umbrella to encompass three foundational pedagogies: culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021), culturally responsive (Gay, 2000, 2018) and culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012, 2021). Banks’ (1993) seminal work was centered on multicultural education in the curriculum and on the strengths of multicultural students. Building on Banks’ (1993) early work, culturally informed pedagogy was expanded to address academic achievement and “[to] develop social consciousness, civic responsibility, and political activism to reconstruct society for greater pluralistic equality, truth, inclusion, and justice” (Gay, 2004, p. 32). Culturally informed pedagogy emphasizes the polarity of maintaining grade-level standards, but it lifts individual students academically by embedding grade-level standards in curriculum and instruction that develops students’ cultural identity, and social consciousness (Kelly et al., 2021).

Culturally informed and differentiation pedagogies embody the two polarities of grade-level instruction and customized support in the central paradoxical question of this research. Paradox theory provides a structure to examine how these two polarities might be managed effectively. The theoretical framework of paradox theory clearly describes the dynamic and interrelated tensions of culturally informed and differentiation pedagogies.

Paradox theory directly identifies interrelated tensions in organizations and manages them dynamically (Huq et al., 2017; Konrad et al., 2021; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith et al., 2016). This theory was originally developed for business and other large organizational management (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In paradox theory, Smith and Lewis (2011) described the dynamic management of “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (p. 382).
To begin to understand paradox theory, Besharov’s (2014) case study of the familiar grocery store, Whole Foods, provided a clear outline of how the theory functions. Besharov identified Whole Foods as an extreme example of a company that has the persistent, interdependent tensions that the author identified in paradox theory. In 2014, this organization had dual identities and goals that it embraced for profit business and sustainability. Each of these goals were polarities, which were often in tension with one another but were also essential to their mutual existence. Whole Foods could not turn a profit if it did not embrace an identity of sustainability. However, it could not continue sustainable practices if it did not also turn a profit. In the case study, Besharov used paradox theory to identify these tensions and suggested a managerial modeling of dual identities. This dual identity model harnessed the power of identified tensions and broke through persistent conflict.

In paradox theory, the theorists stated that the conflict and interrelation between two polarities must be actively managed to be sustainable (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith et al., 2016). The contradiction between the two elements, or poles, creates tension (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith et al., 2016). However, the interrelation between the elements, or poles, also creates dependency (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith et al., 2016). Organizational management theory (e.g., contingency theory) might help leaders decide, “Under what conditions should managers emphasize either A or B?” (Lewis & Smith, 2014, p. 133). In paradox theory, the theorists encourage leaders to examine, “How can we engage both A and B simultaneously?” (Lewis & Smith, 2014, p. 133). Smith and Lewis (2011) named this perpetual state of tension, dependency, and recalibration: dynamism. Successfully managing this consistent inconsistency might be
challenging, but much more effective than creating false constants that favor one polarity over the other (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith et al., 2016).

Paradox theory might be particularly effective when applied to tensions that continually resurface, despite managers’ best efforts to resolve these tensions (Huq et al., 2017; Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith et al., 2016). By effectively managing dynamism, leaders might begin to dismantle the whiplash effect of either–or polarities that Smith et al. (2016) described as a vicious cycle. Vicious cycles occur when “defensive reactions to paradoxes involve emphasizing one pole, fueling pressure from its opposing force, resulting in a downward spiral” (Lewis & Smith, 2014, p. 133). To achieve effective dynamic management, structures might be created to integrate the polarities and facilitate ongoing recalibration between them (Lewis & Smith, 2014, Smith et al., 2016). Smith et al. (2016) referred to this process as a virtuous cycle. According to Lewis and Smith (2014), virtuous cycles are created by “embracing and accepting that paradox sparks creativity, and learning, fueling synergies that enable systems to thrive among tensions” (p. 133).

Step 1 to managing paradoxical tensions is to identify stakeholder perceptions of paradoxes by describing the opposing poles (Huq et al., 2017; Lewis & Smith 2014; Smith et al., 2016). Step 2 in managing paradoxical tensions is to assess stakeholder perception of the balance or imbalance of poles (Huq et al., 2017; Lewis & Smith 2014; Smith et al., 2016). When an imbalance is identified, the pole with less power should be supported (Huq et al., 2017). Also, stakeholders should develop a dual understanding of the benefits of both poles through a common focus on mission (Besharov, 2014).
Finally, strong managerial support for both poles needs to be in place with agreed-on guardrails to protect against future imbalance and formalized communication for constant recalibration (Smith & Besharov, 2019, Smith et al., 2016). Guardrails are boundaries that both polarities agree on to indicate that one polarity has gone too far and destabilized dynamic management, pulling the organization away from its mission (Smith & Besharov, 2019). When one polarity crosses a guardrail, it signals that the organization needs to communicate and recalibrate dynamic management (Smith & Besharov, 2019).

In my study, I viewed culturally informed and differentiation pedagogies through the lens of paradox theory to explore teacher management of grade-level instruction and customized support. In this literature review, I explored how teachers experience this management task. As paradox theory suggests, both interdependence and tension are found between the two educational pedagogies (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith et al., 2016), signifying that the pedagogies might be appropriate for dynamic management.

In this literature review, I sought to understand how differentiation and culturally informed pedagogies could help teachers manage the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support. First, I examined differentiation pedagogy, identifying strengths and weaknesses in the model. Then, I examined similarly culturally informed pedagogy. I found commonalities between the two pedagogies. They both centered classroom teachers as the educational professional with enough detailed knowledge of students to effectively implement instruction (Endo, 2015; Hammond, 2014; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Milner, 2011; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; van Geel et
also, both pedagogies highlighted student productive struggle as the bell-weather of success (Hammond, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003).

**Differentiation Pedagogy**

Differentiation is a highly researched instructional practice that can improve student academic achievement (Magleth & Abdullah, 2020; Parsons et al., 2018; Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021). Differentiation pedagogy and instruction, as explained in the conceptual framework of this literature review, can be applied to understand how students, who work at different academic levels, can receive customized support within the same classroom (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020; Swanson et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, Valiandes et al., 2018). By providing practical strategies to meet all students at their academic level, students can receive specific instruction to build the skills that they need to make academic gains (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020; Swanson et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

Tomlinson (1995, 2014, 2017) was the standard bearer for this practice which provided teachers with practical strategies and an overarching outlook to serve a diverse array of learners. This practice began as a reactive response to serve the individual needs of students with learning differences (e.g., students with disabilities and gifted students) who were receiving instruction in the general classroom, instead of the special education classroom (Tomlinson, 1995). Differentiation grew to become a guiding philosophy and practical set of strategies for teachers to anticipate, instruct, and assess the expected and celebrated diversity of their classrooms to ensure that all students maximized their learning (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Swanson et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010,
Valiandes et al., 2018; van Geel et al., 2019; Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). Differentiation received both support and pushback from researchers around the world, evolving as differentiation researchers addressed criticisms (Larina & Markina, 2020; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Spina, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017; Vaughn et al., 2021).

Tomlinson et al.’s (2003) seminal definition of differentiation is frequently paraphrased today as adapting the content (curricula), process (methods, resources, activities) and product (student demonstrated knowledge) to match students’ readiness, interest, and learning profile (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Swanson et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018; van Geel et al., 2019). Later research broadened the definition by including adapting the learning environment (physical classroom and social climate) to match student affect (emotional well-being; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Lindner and Schwab (2020) also highlighted the importance of teacher collaboration and progress monitoring as essential to the differentiation “process” category.

**Efficacy of Differentiation Pedagogy**

Contemporary researchers support the efficacy of differentiation. In a synthesis of literacy research, Parsons et al. (2018) stated that differentiation was “a corner-stone of effective instruction” and “considered the gold standard teachers should strive for” (p. 206). Also in literature review, Vaughn et al. (2021) noted that using knowledge of content, students, and pedagogy to adapt instruction was a point of teacher evaluation on Danielson’s (2007) Framework for Teaching (an empirically based framework used across the United States to evaluate teacher performance). In a study of English as a foreign language for fourth and fifth graders, Magableh and Abdullah (2020) found that students who received differentiated instruction had better reading comprehension than those who did not.
Complexity of Differentiation Pedagogy

In a case study of master teachers, van Geel et al. (2019) noted the complexity of differentiation, for they found that differentiation involved constant monitoring of all aspects of instruction during all phases of instruction for all students. Effectively practicing differentiation also required a degree of expertise in teachers to observe and make meaning from all students in the classroom throughout the day (Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; van Geel et al., 2019). A description of the tasks that teachers performed for differentiation highlighted this complexity: “teachers proactively modify curricula, teaching methods, resources, learning activities, and student products to address the diverse needs of individual students and small groups of students to maximize the learning opportunity for each student in a classroom” (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 121). Differentiation is a complex but valued teacher practice that is difficult to master (Tomlinson et al., 2003, 2014, 2017, van Geel et al., 2019).

Puzio et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of Tier 1 (general classroom) literacy differentiation research to determine whether the practice of differentiation was effective or too complex to be implemented. This systemic review meta-analysis examined differentiation content, process, and product. Overall, through the meta-analysis that the researchers conducted, they found that differentiation was indeed an effective, empirically based practice for literacy instruction at the elementary level with an overall mean effect size of +0.13. This meta-analysis demonstrated that the differentiated instruction in the research reviewed did have a positive impact on student achievement overall. When administrators supported teachers with professional development, differentiation could be more powerful, particularly with letter–word work (+.20) and writing (+.96). The most powerful differentiation in the research reviewed took more radical approaches (e.g., student choice and alternative curriculum). This meta-
analysis showed that differentiation could be an effective tool to maximize student learning despite its complexity.

**Critiques of Differentiation Pedagogy**

Differentiation received pointed critiques from researchers regarding the practice of grouping students (Bannister, 2016; Francis et al., 2017; Larina & Markina, 2020; Park & Datnow, 2017; Spina, 2019) and the practice of deficit-based decision making (Bannister, 2016; Hammond, 2014; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2003, 2014; Valiandes et al., 2018). Researchers criticized grouping students by their academic achievement level because the practice restricts students from accessing complex and critical thinking at grade level, creating a predetermined course of failure (Bannister, 2016; Francis et al., 2017; Larina & Markina, 2020; Park & Datnow, 2017; Spina, 2019). Culturally informed scholars (Bannister, 2016; Hammond, 2014) critiqued the work of differentiation scholars (Suprayogi et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2003, 2014) for using a deficit mindset to set predetermined levels of readiness for students, further restricting students from complex grade-level content. Grouping and deficit-based decision making can undermine equity and academic achievement by restricting students from grade-level content and focusing solely on remediating student deficits (Bannister, 2016; Francis et al., 2017; Hammond, 2014; Larina & Markina, 2020; Park & Datnow, 2017; Valiandes et al., 2018).

**Grouping**

Grouping is one aspect of differentiation that researchers carefully examined and critiqued. Francis et al. (2017) described seven concerning impacts of homogeneous grouping: (a) misallocation of students to groups, (b) a lack of fluidity in groups, (c) quality of teaching, differential pedagogy, (d) curriculum and assessment, I teacher expectations, (f) pupil
perceptions about themselves, and (g) the combination of these factors to create a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic failure. Homogeneous grouping had greater negative impacts on students with lower academic achievement (Francis et al., 2017). Therefore, homogeneous grouping in differentiation should be monitored to ensure that it did not take the route of monolithic tracking (Park & Datnow, 2017; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017).

Tracking is a homogeneous grouping that is (a) based on a single decision about perceived student ability, (b) persists throughout the school year, and (c) might have negative consequences for student learning (Park & Datnow, 2017). According to differentiation pedagogy, ability grouping was “considered to be effective if instruction is carefully tailored to students’ needs, if students remain in a heterogeneous setting for most of the day, and if the groupings are flexible” (Park & Datnow, 2017, p. 286). Ability grouping is done not because a student might be perceived as incapable, but because the student might need specific instruction to make academic gains (Park & Datnow, 2017).

Research into grouping continues to raise concerns with the practice of differentiation. In qualitative interviews with 30 Russian teachers, who taught either exclusive or inclusive mathematics classes, Larina and Markina (2020) explored teacher beliefs about student ability and achievement. For teachers who taught exclusive mathematics classes that only admitted students achieving above a certain level, teachers viewed student ability in relation to their perception of a fixed “normal” math student. For teachers who taught inclusive mathematics classes, with mixed ability students, teachers viewed students in relation to their individual progress. Larina and Markina (2020) went on to note that,

In practice, however, the effects of the differentiated approach fall short of the high expectations held for it. A significant volume of empirical research has demonstrated that
students from lower academic tracks have less access to educational resources, which in turn affects their learning outcomes. (p. 464)

In a 3-year, institutional case study of two schools in Australia, described only as socio-economically diverse, Spina (2019) documented a change in school culture around differentiation with ability grouping. A new district requirement to promote evidence-based decision making had the effect of creating ability grouping for literacy and mathematics instruction. Although there were no district mandates to group students by ability, teachers used data from classroom and standardized assessments to group children by achievement level. Educators were aware of and concerned with the impact of ability grouping on student well-being and achievement, but ability grouping still became normalized within the school culture. There appeared to be a connection between formal assessment, differentiation, and homogeneous grouping (Spina, 2019).

In a case study of teachers and teacher teams in four elementary schools that served primarily White, Asian, and Latinx students, Park and Datnow (2017) examined how teachers made decisions about grouping students. They found that teachers planned mixed grouping to reduce stigma for lower achieving students or to have higher achieving students help them; therefore, mixed grouping did not fit the differentiation model of engaging all learners in critical and complex thinking. Also, ability grouping increased as data about student achievement increased. In general, Park and Datnow (2017) found that “the ideal goal of meeting the needs of all learners is simultaneously enabled and constrained by policies, curriculum tools, and logics about the purposes of differentiation across classroom, school, and district contexts” (p. 303). Policies and curriculum, combined with staff reasons for differentiating, were at times successfully used to differentiate small groups for instruction but often they were not. The
negative impacts of grouping, differentiation, and assessment were still present and exacerbated by school policy (Park & Datnow, 2017).

In further exploring a critique of mixed grouping, Bannister (2016) noted that mixed grouping was often designed to have higher achieving students assist lower achieving students. This arrangement also created negative effects for lower achieving students. Bannister (2016) found that hierarchical, mixed grouping was based on “the assumption that some students have more to contribute and are expected to contribute more than others while others are less capable and have less to contribute, quickly becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy where low status students contribute very little” (p. 340). Mixed grouping, as well as homogeneous grouping, could further isolate students from complex, grade-level instruction (Bannister, 2016).

In examining the dynamic management of paradoxical tensions to deliver consistent, grade-level instruction and customized support, unmonitored homogeneous and mixed grouping can overemphasize customized support and underemphasize grade-level instruction. Monitoring of grouping is complex, constant, and tends to default towards homogeneous grouping by achievement level. A default towards homogeneous grouping was especially true when it was driven by achievement data and school policy.

**Deficit-Based Decision Making**

Deficit-based decision making is another aspect of differentiation that has been carefully examined and critiqued. Some differentiation scholars have viewed diversity through a deficit mindset and have set barriers to complex thinking through definitions of student readiness (Suprayogi et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2003, 2014). These practices can undermine equity and academic achievement by focusing solely on remediating student deficits and not building on
student assets (Bannister, 2016; Hammond, 2014; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2003, 2014; Valiandes et al., 2018).

Tomlinson et al. (2003) documented the rising diversity of students in American schools, noting that teachers might view increasing diversity as problematic but should see diversity as offering “positive possibilities for teachers and students alike” (p. 124). Tomlinson et al. (2003) then went on to describe this diversity as “inevitable” (p. 124). Suprayogi et al. (2017), also differentiation researchers, used words such as “cope” or “deal” when addressing diversity. Valiandes et al. (2018) noted that the language of differentiation regarding diversity is deficit-based and at times attributes deficits to “the students and their families, rather than to the curricular, pedagogical, and organizational structures of schools and the inequitable framework of our society” (p. 393). Differentiation was sometimes set within a deficit-based vocabulary that undermined the pedagogy’s commitment to promote equity.

Bannister (2016) also critiqued differentiation practice regarding equity. Bannister’s first equity critique called into question Tomlinson’s (2014) construct of “readiness,” in which students of less developed readiness received instruction that was direct and routine, and students of more developed readiness received instruction that was complex and advanced. Bannister (2016) noted that this tiered instruction might be inequitable and might deny students who are perceived as having low readiness the rich inquiry-based instruction that they need. Bannister (2016) centered the second equity critique on Tomlinson et al.’s (2003) description of diversity as hierarchical, from “students with identified learning problems” to “highly advanced learners” (p. 120). Tomlinson et al. (2003) then provided a description of the increasing demographic of migrants and children of color and added that “half of all children will live in single parent
homes” (p. 120). Bannister (2016) characterized these descriptions as reinforcing stereotypes and deficit-based decision making.

Deficit-based decision making and restricting students who are perceived as having lower levels of readiness from complex thinking were critiques of differentiation (Francis et al., 2017; Larina & Markina, 2020; Park & Datnow, 2017; Spina, 2019). Bannister’s (2016) and Valiandes et al.’s (2018) equity critiques of differentiation practice highlighted its deficit perspective in descriptions of academic performance, immigration status, and race. This perspective was in stark contrast with the stated equitable goals of differentiation practice and might restrict students from access to grade-level instruction in the name of delivering customized support (Francis et al., 2017; Larina & Markina, 2020; Park & Datnow, 2017; Spina, 2019).

Summary of Differentiation Pedagogy

Differentiation is an effective, research-based, instructional method that researchers used particularly for students who need customized support (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Parsons et al., 2018; Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021). Differentiation is a complex instructional method that requires teachers to monitor during all aspects of instruction (Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019). However, grouping in differentiation practice could restrict students from access to grade-level content and complex thinking, and might affect a student’s self-perception as a learner (Francis et al., 2017; Larina & Markina, 2020; Park & Datnow, 2017; Spina, 2019). In addition, deficit-mindset decision making restricts students from grade-level content by predetermining students’ readiness for complex curriculum (Bannister, 2016; Valiandes et al., 2018). Both the practice of grouping and the deficit mindset of differentiation run counter to the pedagogy’s stated construct of educational equity (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Swanson et al., 2020). Mills et al. (2017)
described differentiation as “a lever for progressing the case that schools can do more for their most vulnerable/marginalized students,” (p. 2) but warned that it could also be “deployed as a device to reinforce the politics of reproduction and the stratification of schooling to maintain the privileges of the powerful groups in society” (p. 2).

**Culturally Informed Pedagogy**


Culturally informed scholars centered culture in the classroom not only to promote academic growth, but also to foster critical understandings of race and power in a democracy (Gay 2002, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014, 2021). Moreover, additions to the pedagogy emphasized the importance of developing curriculum and learning communities that were based on students’ cultures (Gay, 2002, 2018), while Paris (2012, 2021) highlighted the need to value and nurture students’ heritage cultures. Unlike differentiation, I found no direct critiques of culturally informed instruction in the literature reviewed for this study. Researchers focused their
ritiques of culturally informed instruction primarily on the pedagogy falling short of its ideals (Endo, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021; Milner, 2011; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Ramsay-Jordan, 2021).

**Foundational Research of Culturally Informed Pedagogy**


Ladson-Billings’ (1995, 2014) construct of culturally informed instruction, which she named culturally relevant instruction, was the basis for culturally informed pedagogy. Ladson-Billings’ early case studies of teachers who worked effectively with multicultural students revealed three domains of culturally relevant instruction: academic success, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness. According to Ladson-Billings (2014), academic success refers to intellectual growth that students experience as a result of classroom instruction and learning experiences. *Cultural competence* refers to the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture. *Sociopolitical consciousness* is the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems. (p.75)
Gay (2000) added on to the concept of culturally relevant instruction through curriculum research and defined culturally responsive instruction. Culturally responsive instruction focused on embedding culture within the curriculum and included “using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for students” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Gay also included a second aspect to culturally responsive instruction: a culturally caring learning community. Gay (2000) wrote, “Teachers have to care so much about ethnically diverse students that they accept nothing less than high-level success” (p. 109).

Paris (2012), in his case studies of Black and Indigenous youth, continued the construct of culturally responsive instruction with culturally sustaining instruction. Paris (2012) questioned the usefulness of the terms “relevant” and “responsive” to ensure that “one goal of an educational program is to maintain heritage ways and to value cultural and linguistic sharing across difference” (p. 96). Paris’ construct of culturally sustaining instruction noted the essential nature of the heritage culture and highlighted that this culture (particularly youth culture) continuously develops and changes (Paris, 2012, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2014). I have summarized foundational research in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Culturally Informed Instruction: Foundational Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of instruction</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culturally relevant</td>
<td>Ladson-Billings (2014, 2021)</td>
<td>• Academic success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Cultural competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Socio-political consciousness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this literature review, I use the term culturally informed to include all aspects of the three pedagogies. Together, the three approaches are asset-based and rely on the teacher to center the cultures of the students in instruction (Gay, 2000, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014, 2021; Paris, 2012, 2021). Essential to culturally informed pedagogy is the teacher’s ability not only to form strong relationships with students but also to develop their own cultural consciousness so that they could further adapt instruction (Gay, 2000, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014, 2021; Paris, 2012, 2021). Ladson-Billings (2006) warned future teachers that the author would not give step-by-step instructions “because you would probably do exactly what I told you to do” (p. 39). To be culturally relevant, future teachers must respond to the particular community and the particular student in their classrooms, not follow a predetermined instructional manual (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ladson-Billings (2021) stated that top-down programs (e.g., the culturally responsive teaching guides for Indiana and New York) fell “far short” (p. 352) of the complex and locally dependent character of culturally responsive teaching. Culturally informed instruction addresses academic achievement, cultural consciousness, sociopolitical consciousness, curriculum, classroom community, and heritage culture (Gay, 2000, 2002, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014, 2021; Paris 2012, 2021). However, culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining instruction are also separate constructs that stand on their own.
Present Research on the Efficacy of Culturally Informed Pedagogy

Present empirical research confirmed the claims of culturally informed foundational research (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gray et al, 2020; Kumar et al., 2019; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021). Mitton and Murray-Orr (2021) recreated Ladson-Billings’ (2013) early research in a rural Nova Scotia case study by identifying and researching the practices of highly effective teachers instructing African Nova Scotian and First Nation Mi’kmaw students. Mitton and Murray-Orr (2021) identified that culturally responsive teachers had built conditions that allowed students “to take that leap and reveal their learning, it is evidence that they have faith in those who are teaching them” (p. 1108). In a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research study, Gray et al. (2020) found that Black and Latinx students reported being much more engaged in communal learning opportunities, especially when teachers more frequently used culturally relevant instructional methods. This finding supported Gay’s (2000) emphasis on curriculum delivery. In another exploratory sequential mixed-method research study, Kumar et al. (2019) found that students from Arabic and Chaldean immigrant communities were calling out “for sincere and candid engagement focused on culturally sensitive issues” with a “need to promote cultural competence and cultural sensitivity” (p. 101) before they could feel safe at school and engage fully in learning. As Paris (2012) observed, teachers must value heritage culture equally with the dominant culture. In a literature review of 40 culturally relevant educational studies, Aronson and Laughter (2016) found that culturally relevant instruction increased student test scores but more importantly developed life-long learning behaviors (e.g., motivation for learning, interest in learning, participation in content area discourse, and maintaining a self-perception as a capable student).
Culturally Informed Pedagogy and the Brain

Hammond (2014, 2020) outlined how culturally responsive instruction shapes and grows the brain, noting that “culture is the brain’s software” (p. 34). Hammond broke down the instructional moves and relationships that leveraged culture for learning through the lens of brain science. Hammond (2014) researched brain development and found that a systematic, culturally responsive approach was the “perfect catalyst to stimulate the brain’s neuroplasticity so that it grows new brain cells that help students think in more sophisticated ways” (p. 15). This systematic instruction involved:

- an educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing. (Hammond, 2014, p. 15)

Hammond (2014) addressed the lack of specific instructional moves found within foundational culturally informed pedagogies by outlining instruction in four categories, called Ready for Rigor. First, teachers must develop awareness of their own cultural lens and the socio-political context of race and language within which they teach. Second, teachers must build learning partnerships with students that balance care with push to ensure that students take ownership of their learning. Third, teachers must learn how the brain does information processing, using previous knowledge, culturally familiar instruction, cognitive routines, and formative feedback to instruct. Fourth, teachers must build a community of learners that is intellectually and socially safe, including communal talk and task structures.

Hammond (2014) noted that culture cued the brain’s two primary responses either to minimize a threat or to maximize a benefit. Learners become dependent when the culture around
them tells them that academic participation is a threat to their well-being, and when they are shamed or repeatedly unsuccessful. Hammond outlined how dependent learners could become independent learners through culturally responsive instruction. Culturally responsive instruction re-trains the brain to perceive academic participation as a benefit to the person’s well-being, by productive struggle and repeated success. Hammond suggested that low-achieving students from communities under pressure are not deficient; it is the dominant, culturally White, educational system that is ill-prepared to teach effectively these students.

**Critiques of Culturally Informed Pedagogy**

 Culturally informed instruction has a deep research base and is generally accepted to be an effective practice (Gray et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2019; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021). However, the complexity of culturally informed instruction can lead to issues of superficial instruction (Hammond, 2014; Kelly et al., 2021), difficulties in implementation (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Ramsay-Jordan, 2021) and conflicts with school policies (Christianakis, 2011; Hoss & Kaplan-Wolff, 2020; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021). In addition, definitive research regarding the efficacy of culturally informed instruction is difficult to execute because culturally informed instruction does not have a clear and consistent definition in practice (Kelly et al., 2021).

**Inconsistent Definitions and Superficial Instruction**

In a literature review, Kelly et al. (2021) analyzed 56 culturally informed, literacy studies for methods, student outcomes, and student populations. They also analyzed how culturally informed pedagogy is defined and which instructional practices are determined to be culturally informed. Overall, Kelly et al. noted how difficult it is to build a consistent body of culturally informed research. This difficulty occurs because of inconsistent definitions of culturally
informed instruction, the inability to quantify or qualify consistently essential but complicated concepts (e.g., cultural competence and socio-political consciousness, as well as overrepresentation of the more superficial aspects of culturally informed instruction). Kelly et al. determined that the most common instructional practice was simply having students read literature that researchers deemed culturally informed. Research reviewed that used culturally informed vocabulary was often found to be simply employing a “buzzword without deeply engaging” (Kelly et al., 2021, p. 89) in culturally informed instruction.

Kelly et al. (2021) determined that “culturally informed approaches are hard for educators to implement” and are “prone to being oversimplified” (p. 92) because comprehensive culturally informed instruction requires educators to craft extensive and complex local solutions for local conditions. Hammond (2014) warned, “Simply adding surface-level cultural details to low-level decontextualized activities doesn’t offer any cognitive challenge and won’t build intellective capacity” (p. 140), which reinforces concerns about the efficacy of culturally informed instruction. Kelly et al. (2021) called for more research that both quantifies and qualifies academic achievement and its relationship to culturally informed instruction. Kelly et al. also called for further examination of more complex equity related outcomes that move beyond academic achievement (e.g., cultural competence and socio-political competence). Even with these critiques, Kelly et al. (2021) found that there is “much good work that highlights the work of educators who care about equitable school experiences” (p. 94).

**Difficulties in Implementation: Balancing Consciousness and Content**

Kelly et al. (2021) provided a critical overview of culturally informed research, and other researchers further deepened their findings. One critique was on the difficulties that teachers experience in implementing culturally informed instruction (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011; Olayemi
Classroom teachers described the necessity for introspection to determine a teacher’s own cultural/racial lens as difficult and emotionally taxing (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011). Equally taxing for teachers was the need to identify and address the socio-political climate of the classroom (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011).

In Milner’s (2011) case study of one White teacher working with primarily Black students, the teacher noted that, before learning could happen, he had to build relationships with his students. Building relationships came from leaning into his own discomfort and listening to what his students were telling him about their experiences. To do this work, the teacher had to refuse to adopt a color-blind approach.

Ramsay-Jordan (2021), in a case study of pre-service teachers, found that, when there is a cultural mismatch between the student and the teacher, the teacher might be more hesitant to discuss race and the socio-political climate of the classroom. A culturally informed educator must push through this discomfort and, in the words of Milner’s (2011) teacher participant, “had to demonstrate to his students how similar they really were, to use tensions and incongruence as opportunities to learn, and to develop the kinds of relationships with his students that allowed the students to get to know him” (p 87). This pedagogy was found to be challenging and vulnerable work.

Building awareness of one’s own cultural lens and the culture of one’s students is difficult for teachers; therefore, this difficulty can lead to ineffective instruction (Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021). In a literature review regarding culturally relevant instruction in STEM classes, Olayemi and DeBoer (2021) found that teachers struggled with identifying their own biases, incorrectly inferred their students’ academic abilities, and were unable to understand the lived reality of their students or to assimilate into their communities. This difficulty was also present
for teachers instructing students of their same race (Redding, 2019). Again, the idea of culturally informed instruction can be unsuccessful in practice.

Not only do teachers find it challenging to examine critically their own cultural lens, while building understanding about the cultures of their students, but they must also deliver the instructional content (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021). One of Endo’s (2015) participants, a White preservice teacher stated, “You have to know your content AND how to teach everyone. I also learned how to adapt how I explain everything, even simple directions” (p. 30). One Black preservice teacher, in this same study, noted that there simply was not enough time to both plan and execute culturally relevant lessons that met grade-level standards (Endo, 2015). In a case study, Milner (2011) found that teaching science content could not even begin until the work of self-reflection and relationship building had been established. Olayemi and DeBoer (2021) also found that teachers had difficulty using the inquiry-based approach of culturally informed instruction to teach hard science. This conflict was particularly difficult for mathematics teachers to manage (Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021). However, it is important to note that, although teacher participants described culturally informed work as challenging, they also described it as essential, particularly for teaching students from communities under pressure (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011). Teachers wanted to use culturally informed instruction in their classrooms (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011).

Conflicts With School and District Standards

Although teachers find culturally informed instruction challenging to practice, district and school policies can further obstruct culturally informed instruction (Christianakis, 2011; Hoss & Kaplan-Wolff, 2020; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021). Olayemi and DeBoer (2021) outlined several policies that obstructed culturally informed instruction. Testing policies overemphasize
vocabulary practice and underemphasize the complex thinking skills of inquiry-based STEM instruction. To ensure success on assessment, the overemphasis on vocabulary bleeds into instruction and restricts ELLs from content. In addition, teachers who want to implement inquiry-based, culturally informed instruction are denied more time for planning or longer lessons. Small policies (e.g., not allowing students to play music while they work) made it difficult for teachers to build community and a welcoming learning environment (Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021).

Other researchers outlined more obstructions to culturally based instruction. In an ethnography of Black and White fifth-grade students engaged in a poetry unit, Christianakis (2011) found that canonical definitions of literacy (e.g., standard English) restricted students from using their preferred rap music (as opposed to rock music) in their poetry unit. This restriction denied these students an asset-based approach to their own poetry writing. Hoss and Hoss & Kaplan-Wolff (2020), in a case study of English language teachers teaching Latinx elementary students, noted that teachers quietly ignored or changed test-based, standardized curriculum to better reflect the needs and culture of their students. Ladson-Billings (2013) found that culturally relevant teachers were often the teachers challenging school policies. One of the teachers in Ladson-Billings (2013) study stated, “I have problems with the administration . . . I refuse to set my philosophy aside for one that doesn’t have the best interests of the children and the community at heart” (p. 166). Conflicts with school policies is an additional stress for teachers implementing culturally informed instruction.

**Common Ground Between Differentiation and Culturally Informed Pedagogies**

Although, in this literature review, researchers have presented differentiation and culturally informed pedagogies as separate pedagogies, they also overlap in some areas. Both
pedagogies show teachers as the central managers and decision makers for instruction (Endo, 2015; Hammond, 2014; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Milner, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; van Geel et al., 2019). Naraian (2019) described teachers simultaneously delivering both models of instruction. In addition, both pedagogies incorporate Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of student productive struggle as an optimal state for student learning (Hammond, 2014, Tomlinson et al., 2003). In addition, both pedagogies include the same instructional techniques of vocabulary development and activation of prior knowledge (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Finally, a framework for embedding differentiation skill building within a culturally informed community outlines a more integrated approach to both pedagogies (Valiandes et al., 2018).

**Teachers as Decision Makers**

Teachers are at the center of implementing both differentiation and culturally informed instruction for their unique students in their unique classrooms (Endo, 2015; Hammond, 2014; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Milner, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; van Geel et al., 2019). Hammond (2014, 2020) also positioned the classroom teacher at the center of management to ensure a careful balance of rigor and scaffolded expectation. Finally, the teacher is the primary manager who builds a culturally informed community that allows students a safe place to take risks in learning (Hammond, 2014, Ladson-Billings, 2013; Gay, 2002; Kelly et al., 2021).

The teacher is a central figure for effective instruction in either instructional pedagogy. However, a lack of research existed regarding how teachers managed complex decision making in either differentiated instruction or culturally informed instruction, much less research that described managing both instructional methods (Naraian, 2019; Puzio et al., 2020). Puzio (2020)
described a lack of understanding regarding teacher decision making in differentiated instruction stating, “However, across the studies, there was an alarming lack of information about the decision-making processes used to guide differentiation” (p. 1). Although research into culturally informed instruction has more description of the teacher role, researchers did not clearly explain how teachers successfully balanced this complex instruction (Endo, 2015; Hammond, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Milner, 2011; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021). Naraian (2019) stated, “We have very few close descriptions of teachers in urban contexts effectively navigating conflicting educational paradigms . . . to achieve greater academic and social gains” (p. 1583).

In this literature review, I identified only one study whose author explored teachers managing both differentiation and culturally informed instruction. In a case study, Naraian (2019) researched a fourth-grade, Spanish-English, bilingual classroom of Latinx children that included students with special needs. Two Latinx teachers cotaught this classroom: one a special educator and one was a general classroom educator. Naraian described in detail how the coteachers of this classroom instructed all levels of English language learners, as well as students with learning disabilities. Although Naraian had a lens towards inclusion of students with disabilities, the author clearly outlined how teachers balanced explicit, customized support and grade-level, culturally informed classroom instruction with all English language learners. The explicit differentiated instruction involved students listening to teacher explanations, observing teachers modeling thinking, memorizing vocabulary and repeatedly practicing with feedback until they were independently able to generalize the content to other settings. This instruction sometimes occurred in homogeneous groups of students who had been identified as needing a skill. Students did not necessarily begin with complex thinking; however, teachers also provided
many opportunities for more complex learning in heterogeneous groups or whole-class instruction (Naraian, 2019).

Other aspects of culturally informed instruction were present as well in Naraian’s (2019) case study. The teachers were comfortable with and knowledgeable of their own cultural lens. Also, both teachers and students shared Latinx culture. The teachers encouraged students to include their culture in assignments and developed curriculum based on Latinx culture. Interestingly, Naraian noted that the teachers deliberately did not develop socio-political consciousness in the classroom because they assessed that this instruction would conflict with the conservative parents of their students and undermine their learning community. Naraian’s (2019) participant stated, “The biggest way you can promote social justice is that you teach somebody how to read and write” (p. 1582). Naraian (2019) neatly summarized teacher management of differentiation and culturally informed instruction:

Supporting a group of learners who might be described as disadvantaged in several ways, the teachers’ focus in this study was not on the remediation of individual deficits, but on developing relevant skills and positive dispositions in the context of an inclusive community. (p. 1599)

Naraian’s (2019) participants named this instructional method “real teaching” (p. 1600).

**Productive Struggle**

Productive struggle is the ability of a child to sustain effort and grapple with new learning, just above their level (Vygotsky, 1978). Differentiation and culturally informed pedagogies both value student productive struggle, even as both pedagogies emphasize different qualities of productive struggle (Hammond, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Tomlinson et al. (2003) differentiation and Hammond’s (2014) cultural responsiveness both draw on Vygotsky’s
(1978) zone of proximal development and productive struggle as a basis for their model of instruction. Both pedagogies also include the importance of actionable feedback from the teacher on specific student performance to promote productive struggle (Hammond, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Tomlinson et al. (2003) outlined in differentiation the careful construct of the zone of proximal development—a building of skills that pushes a child into “tasks that are slightly more complex than the child can manage alone” (p. 126)—and the repetition of the task until the child experiences mastery. By carefully constructing the zone of proximal development around a task, teachers make productive struggle possible for the student. Tomlinson (2003) also acknowledged that students must have their interests honored and must have opportunities to work with others to experience productive struggle; this is complementary to culturally informed instruction.

Hammond (2014) described culturally informed instruction as focusing on the support needed for a child to be willing to step into the zone of proximal development. This support occurs when a teacher becomes a “warm demander” (p. 97) helping children achieve a state of “relaxed alertness” (p. 97). A relaxed brain state allows students to avert a crises response and to engage, which transitions them from dependent to independent learners and experiencing productive struggle. Hammond also emphasized the community of learners that is essential for students to experience extensive productive struggle. However, Hammond (2014), did acknowledge that careful instruction of academics is necessary, noting that the culturally responsive teacher “develops the skills, tools, and techniques to help students rise to the occasion as she invites them to step out of their comfort zone into the zone of proximal development” (p. 98). This skill development is complementary to differentiation.
Both culturally informed instruction and differentiation show productive struggle as an optimal state for learning (Hammond, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Differentiation emphasizes careful calibration of academic level to promote student productive struggle (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Culturally informed instruction emphasizes social interaction within a safe environment to promote student productive struggle (Hammond, 2014). In addition, both pedagogies employ customized support for skill development and actionable feedback to create conditions for productive struggle (Hammond, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003).

### Instructional Techniques

Overlap in instructional techniques also occurs in both differentiation and culturally informed pedagogies (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Olayemi and DeBoer (2021) noted that systematic vocabulary practice was part of culturally responsive instruction. Both differentiation and culturally informed instruction researchers highlighted activating prior knowledge as a strategy to build academic achievement (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Hammond, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003). This shows that, although culturally informed instruction does not delineate academic interventions as extensively as differentiation, both models include interventions (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). The use of comparable instructional techniques in both pedagogies to promote productive struggle highlights their commonalities.

### A Culturally Informed Framework for Differentiation

Valiandes et al. (2018) offered a possible model for a more complete integration of culturally informed instruction and differentiation that might maximize student productive struggle. They outlined a culturally informed framework to deliver differentiated instruction.
Step 1 ensures that teachers could instruct all students to build “decision making and critical thinking skills” (Valiandes et al., 2018, p. 388) to promote academic growth. This involves differentiating academic instruction. In Step 2, teachers must also understand the identities of each student so that all students have equal learning opportunities to maximize their learning. This involves using culturally informed instruction. Valiandes et al. (2018) emphasized that teachers face a complex task of balancing both the cultivation of knowledge and the cultural and social development of their students. Valuing the shared objective of a student’s productive struggle can enable teachers to manage effectively tensions and to situate differentiated instruction within a culturally informed instructional framework.

**Research Gap**

The pedagogies and practices of differentiation and culturally informed instruction are well researched and they influence how educators manage delivering grade-level instruction and customized support (Gray et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2019; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020; Vaughn et al., 2021). Teachers are at the center of managing and integrating these two practices (Endo, 2015; Hammond, 2014; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Milner, 2011; Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; van Geel et al., 2019). Some researchers explored how teachers explicitly managed the complex task of differentiation or the complex task of culturally informed instruction (Endo, 2015; Hammond, 2014; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Milner, 2011; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; van Geel et al., 2019). However, few researchers have examined how teachers manage the tension of balancing both (Naraian, 2019; Valiandes et al., 2018). Naraian (2019) came the closest to researching how teachers manage the tension between two instructional pedagogies; however, Naraian examined a bilingual classroom, not a
multilingual classroom. In addition, Naraian’s (2019) participants shared the same language and culture as their students. Therefore, a research gap exists in understanding how teachers managed the tension between differentiation and culturally informed instruction to both customize support and deliver grade-level instruction. This gap is particularly evident in multicultural classrooms where teachers do not share the same culture as their students.

Summary

In this literature review, I examined the research related to differentiation and culturally informed instruction to understand how teachers can manage both grade-level instruction and customized support. Differentiation is an empirically based practice that provides students with customized support (Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; Tomlinson et al, 2003). Culturally informed instruction is also an empirically based practice that engages all students in grade-level instruction (Gay, 2000, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Hoss & Kaplan-Wolff, 2020; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2013, 2014, 2021; Milner, 2011, Paris, 2012; 2021). However, the two practices are often in tension with one another (Bannister, 2016; Naraian, 2019; Valiandes et al., 2018). There is some overlap between the two pedagogies, including a shared emphasis on student productive struggle (Hammond, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003) and common instructional techniques (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

Teachers are at the center of managing both differentiation and culturally informed instruction in their classrooms (Endo, 2015; Hammond, 2014; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Milner, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; van Geel et al., 2019). In addition, teachers manage the balance of the two instructional approaches (Naraian, 2019; Valiandes et al., 2018). Therefore, teacher management of balanced instruction is integral to effective instruction.
This management is also an extremely challenging and complex task for teachers (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021).

Paradox theory might serve as a framework for effectively managing this complex task by acknowledging the strengths of both polarities, recognizing their interdependence, and setting up guardrails that lead to the achievement of organizational mission (Huq et al., 2017; Konrad et al., 2021; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith et al., 2016). Student productive struggle might be the common mission that drives the dynamic management of these polarities. Differentiation offers strengths for students who needed academic skills to engage in productive struggle (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Parsons et al., 2018; Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019; Vaughn et al., 2021). Culturally informed instruction offers strengths for students who face barriers to engaging in productive struggle (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gray et al, 2020; Kumar et al., 2019; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021). By leveraging the interdependence of differentiation and culturally informed instruction, the negative impacts of grouping, restriction to grade-level instruction, superficial instruction, and obstructive school district policies might be mitigated. In addition, by leveraging interdependence, teachers might be more empowered to take on this complex task of dynamic, paradoxical management.

Naraian (2019) found that teachers in one Spanish–English bilingual class could and did balance these two pedagogies, deliberately and expertly pulling from either one, in dynamic adjustment for each student. They followed a paradoxical management model. However, educators need more research to understand teacher management experiences, especially for teachers of multilingual classrooms, who do not share the same culture as their students. The purpose of this research was to explore further how urban elementary teachers in Maine
experienced the management of the paradoxical tension to both deliver grade-level instruction and customize support.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of urban elementary teachers in Maine who manage the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support. My research review showed that a general lack of understanding exists regarding this complex and challenging management, particularly regarding teachers who work in multilingual and multicultural classrooms (Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). Without an understanding of teacher experiences, I could not explore this paradoxical management task to learn from and to support teachers. Therefore, the central research question for this study was: How do urban elementary teachers in Maine experience the management of the paradoxical expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support?

There was a very small research base that directly addressed teacher management of the paradoxical tension to deliver consistent grade-level instruction and to customize support (Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). Consequently, I looked to the conceptual framework of two pedagogies—differentiation and culturally informed instruction—that represented each polarity of the paradox. Differentiation described the polarity of customized support and culturally informed, grade-level instruction. Paradox theory outlined an overarching structure for the dynamic management of the two pedagogies that addressed their interdependence and their tension.

Phenomenological researchers examined collective human experience qualitatively (Larkin et al., 2019; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994) and were well suited to explore the central question of this study. In this research approach, I sought to understand the essence or phenomena of a group’s collective experience through detailed
examination of their lived experience (Larkin et al., 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon is examined by repeatedly, leading the researcher “back to the experience of the participants and to reflect on it” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 227). To understand this collective experience, the researcher gathers and examines detailed, first-person accounts as data for scientific analysis. “Scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 83). Through thematic analysis of first-person descriptions, the researcher uncovers the structural “underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). The phenomenon studied in this research was the experience of urban elementary teachers in Maine as they managed the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support. In this study, I explored this phenomenon by collecting teachers’ lived experiences in interviews and analyzing those interviews through phenomenological reduction analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Moustakas (1994) noted that phenomenological methods recognize human behavior in dynamic interaction with experience. Therefore, to explore teachers’ management behaviors, I examined simultaneously the overarching phenomena of teachers’ management experiences (Moustakas, 1994). It is only by understanding the texture of the experiential phenomena, that the structure of teachers’ management behavior can be understood (Moustakas, 1994). Larkin et al. (2019) noted that phenomenological methods “give us an in-depth view of a specific experience and do so with a recognisably personal scale to that view” (p. 184). This approach both gives voice to the participants and makes sense of their experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). By analyzing teacher management experiences, I also explored teacher management behaviors. I delineate throughout this chapter the methodology of this exploration.
Site Information and Demographics/Setting

This Maine, elementary school serves a diverse student body of more than 400 students with a demographic of 62% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, 10% unhoused, 65% students of color (primarily Black, Black/African or Latinx) and 48% ELLs (MDOE, 2022). Five primary languages, other than English, are spoken by its students—Spanish, Portuguese, Somali, French, and Arabic—with 15 secondary languages spoken as well. This school also serves students from one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city. All classroom teaching staff are White and only three teachers grew up speaking a language other than English. Although the students were not the subjects of this research, it is important to understand the student body that teachers serve, for it directly affects the primary paradoxical tension explored.

As the primary researcher, I requested permission from the superintendent of schools and the teacher leaders of the school. After receiving permission from the district, school, and the University of New England, I conducted purposive sampling to recruit experienced teachers from the site. I completed the purposive sampling through a posting in the staff newsletter and an invitational email to teachers with more than 10 years of experience. I included the recruitment information in the study’s mission and goal, logistics, and participant protection procedures. Interested candidates replied to me by email, text, or phone call. All of the candidates were interviewed on Zoom over 5 weeks.

Participants and Sampling Method

The nonprobability sampling of participants in this phenomenological study was purposive and homogeneous “precisely because they can offer a valuable perspective on the topic at hand” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 103). I was “not interested in generalizing findings to a population, but only in describing a small group of participants in a study” (Creswell &
Guettman, 2019, p. 143). Purposive sampling “is based on the judgement of the researcher as to who will provide the best information to succeed for the objectives study” (Etikan & Bala, 2017, p. 1). The site employed veteran classroom teachers who had extensive experience managing the paradoxical tension to deliver consistent grade-level instruction and to customize support, particularly with students from communities under pressure. These teachers also did not share the same language or culture with all their students, further challenging them to manage expertly the central paradox that I explore.

Interview sample sizes for phenomenological research are dependent on the research question being explored (Bartholomew et al., 2021). Generally, a sample size of four to 10 interviews is considered appropriate to delve into complexity and capture a collective experience in phenomenological analysis (Bartholomew et al., 2021). Therefore, the goal of this study was to conduct 10 interviews to understand the collective experiences of participants. After outreach, I identified eight teachers as meeting inclusion criteria and participated in this study.

This study’s inclusion criteria were participants with more than 10 years of classroom teaching experience, including at least 5 years at the research site. There were 15 potential participants at the site who met these criteria. All of the potential participants were above 18 years of age. The criteria aligned with the study’s purpose to explore the experiences of urban elementary teachers in Maine, regarding management of the paradoxical expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support.

**Instrumentation and Data Collection**

Data collection took place through qualitative phenomenological interviews that I conducted with eight participants. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval (Appendix A), I initially solicited the participants through an announcement at a staff meeting
with an invitation to contact me via phone or email. A recruitment flyer was subsequently passed out to all of the staff with my contact information (Appendix B). Follow up solicitation occurred through recruitment flyers that I placed in the staff mailboxes of the teachers who fit the inclusion criteria and I included my phone and email contacts; I also sent follow-up emails with the same information. Round 1 of recruitment remained open for 1 week. At the end of the first week, I scheduled the interviews. After the first week, I scheduled the interviews on a first-come-first-served basis until all of the interested participants were solicited. Eight participants expressed interest in participation within the first 3 weeks of solicitation. I then conducted, transcribed, and coded the interviews with the participants over the next 2 months.

Interviews were semistructured and in-depth, lasting approximately 1 hour. The participants were aware of a possible 30-minute follow-up session and opportunities to member check the transcription and analysis. No interviews required follow ups, although one participant independently chose to add a few comments through email, which I included in analysis. Interview questions followed the central question of this study (see Appendix D). The central question was “How do you experience the management of consistent grade-level instruction and customized support?”

The participants received the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) prior to the interview in which I explained the purpose of the study, how the data was to be collected and analyzed, how their privacy was to be maintained, and how data was to be kept confidential, as well as their rights as participants. Rights included the participants’ ability to review and remove details that they felt jeopardized their confidentiality until the master list was destroyed. I gave the participants gender-neutral pseudonyms to identify their transcripts and I used gender-neutral pronouns throughout the study. I also gave the school a pseudonym. I stored a master list of
names and pseudonyms securely and separately from the study data on a password protected computer that was accessible only to the principal investigator. I destroyed this list after I member checked the data. I stored data in audio, video, and text form on a password protected computer that was accessible only to the principal investigator. I destroyed the audio and video recordings after the participants had had the opportunity to verify the transcription. I will retain all other study data for a minimum of 3 years after completion of the project, and then I will destroy them.

I conducted the Zoom outside working hours at the convenience of the participants. The Zoom interviews took place in a private setting so that they could not be overheard. I gave all of the participants 7 business days to member-check their transcripts and the initial coding. If I received no response after 7 business days, I assumed that the participants had approved of the transcripts and initial coding. All of the participants approved of both the transcripts and initial coding. One participant contributed additional data through email upon approving their transcript. I added this data to their transcript and included them in the analysis. In addition, I shared the theme and structural analysis with the participants, using the same timeframe, to elicit further insight. All of the participants approved of the theme and structural analysis without changes.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed the interview transcripts using phenomenological reduction analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). My aim was to understand participants’ management behaviors by delving into the overarching phenomena of their management experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The analysis process involved several steps.
First, I conducted free coding and reflexive journaling to identify and acknowledge my initial responses, hunches, and thoughts, thereby uncovering any potential bias and minimizing its impact (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Second, I used the software Atlas ti. for line-by-line coding of “objects of concern” (anything that mattered to the participants) and the “experiential claims” (the meaning attached to what mattered; Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 107). I carefully and descriptively coded each interview, using the smallest unit of meaning or “splitting” to ensure a nuanced analysis (Saldaña, 2013, p. 23).

Third, I filtered the initial coding through the overarching theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2013) to categorize the codes into negative, positive, neutral, and emotional codes.

Fourth, I then identified categories by merging similar words and subjects. In addition, I kept an overarching theme notebook during the initial coding and categorization to track repeated words and subjects (Saldaña, 2013).

Fifth, after categorizing each transcript, I consolidated all codes and categories into a master document within Atlas ti. and examined for axial categories. I created these axial categories or themes by combining related categories and identifying those that were representative of all participants (Saldaña, 2013).

Sixth, I completed further analysis of themes to illustrate the structure of the relationship between themes that “clearly evoke the content of the material within them, and the meanings that are attached to that content by the participants” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 111). This analysis followed an iterative process.

Seventh, I offered all participants an opportunity to member-check the analysis. This triangulation further enhanced the validity and reliability of the results.
Limitations, Delimitations, Ethical Concerns

Limitations “describe the problems inherent in qualitative research” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 79). Phenomenological research is based on subjective description and is a small sample (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). I described the participants’ perceived experience in-depth but it was inherently subjective (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Larkin et al., 2019). Therefore, this research “may not tell us what causes x, or whether y works – but they can help us to understand what it is like to live with x, and how y works” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 114). Research participants in this study related their experiences in managing paradoxical tensions, but they did not provide an objective analysis of management. In addition, the small sample size can provide an in-depth understanding of a homogeneous group’s experiences at one site, but it might not be generalizable to the larger population (Larkin et al., 2019). In interpreting phenomenological research, researchers should take care to limit the analysis of the phenomena’s causation and to limit generalization to a larger population (Larkin et al., 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) noted that “interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering; they are the result of the interaction between the interviewer and the participant and the context in which they take place” (p. 82). My bias and assumptions influenced data collection and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). However, as a collaborative educator, a student researcher, and a parent of neurodivergent learners, I have developed tacit theories that characterized classroom instruction as much more nuanced and crafted than prescriptive pedagogies. This could have led me to overemphasize the teacher expertise in decision making. In addition, I was a White, middle-class, educator who was interviewing other White, middle-class educators, and I acknowledge that I too could unconsciously reinforce the dominant educational paradigm that
favors White people. This paradigm can undervalue the strengths of students from communities under pressure.

As noted in the data collection section, I explained to the research participants’ their rights, privacy, and confidentiality, and maintained them. I ensured prior informed consent, clear explanation of purpose and process, as well as confidentiality of participants. The participants could withdraw from the study at any time until I destroyed the master list. The participants’ rights to review and redact interview details that they felt jeopardized their privacy were of particular importance. Although details (e.g., the grade-level taught) would not violate their confidentiality outside the school district, the participants were given the opportunity to remove details to protect their confidentiality inside the school district. I described the themes in aggregate to protect confidentiality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For additional ethical considerations, I addressed citations and participant risks. To preserve confidentiality, I did not include in the references, citations, and details that identified the school district or site. These references included the district’s website, the school’s website, and local publications that contained the name of the district. The risks involved with participation in this research project were minimal, but they could have included an invasion of privacy or loss of confidentially. I minimized this risk by using pseudonyms and gender-neutral pronouns for each of the participants, and eliminated any identifying information from the study. I gave the participants the opportunity to review the accuracy of their transcribed interviews and the entire analysis, ensuring that their confidentiality was preserved.

**Trustworthiness**

I used credibility to evaluate whether “the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 107). The steps to ensure the
credibility of this research included the bracketing procedures in phenomenological reduction analysis that involved free coding and reflexive journaling to reveal my bias and to minimize the impact of bias (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). In addition, the iterative data analysis in phenomenological reduction included both inter- and intra-interview analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Triangulation methods included member checking to validate the transcripts and thematic analysis, as well as the peer debriefing (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). I coded and analyzed all transcript texts, including negative or discrepant findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I used dependability to demonstrate that “the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 107) could be tracked. An audit trail of data collection and analysis is available upon request, stored within the Atlas ti. Software. The software tracked the entire analysis process, starting with the initial coding, and progressing to thematic analysis.

Transferability allows the reader of research to decide whether “similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding in depth how they occur at the research site” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 108). I used thick description and detailed context to ensure a clear picture of the participants’ experiences in context. This detail allows consumers of the research to determine whether the experiences of the teachers in my study could provide insight into their own schools.

Summary

In this study, I explored the experiences of urban elementary teachers in Maine as they managed the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support. Phenomenological reduction analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012) of eight semistructured
interviews provided an opportunity for in-depth exploration of their collective experience. This analysis yielded themes that offered a rich description of teachers’ perceptions of paradoxical management in the classroom.

Specific procedures ensured the participants’ confidentiality and the trustworthiness of data. The participants were purposefully selected from this site that contained a heterogeneous student body and homogeneous teaching staff. I addressed ethical concerns for the participants through the disclosure of my purpose and process in the research, obtaining consent, insuring confidentiality protections for both identity and data, as well as allowing member checking for data accuracy and analysis. Additionally, I did not include references that compromised confidentiality of the site.

I understood the interview data through transcription, bracketing, coding, member checking, and participant triangulation to identify key themes. Member checking and bracketing supported the credibility of the research, addressing researcher bias. In addition, rich description informed transferability and an audit trail of data collection supported the dependability of the research. Phenomenological research is limited to the subjective description of a homogenous group’s experiences and is not appropriate for evaluating performance or automatically generalizing to larger groups. However, a rich description of teachers’ experiences highlighted themes that showed what it was like to walk in these teachers’ shoes. Themes that described their journey might provide opportunities to learn from and to support teachers as they grapple with this complex management to maximize student achievement. In Chapters 4 and 5, I present the outcomes of this research and the conclusions that I could draw from them.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this phenomenological study, I explored the experiences of urban elementary teachers in Maine who manage the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support. As noted in the literature review, there was a lack of understanding regarding this complex and challenging management, particularly regarding teachers who served multilingual and multicultural students (Naraian, 2019; Valiandes et al., 2018). Therefore, the central research question for this study was: How do urban elementary teachers in Maine experience the management of the paradoxical expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support?

I chose a phenomenological research approach to understand the essence or phenomena of a group’s collective experience through detailed examination of their lived experience (Larkin et al., 2019; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, examined the lived experiences of teachers who manage the tension between delivering grade-level standards and providing customized support to their students. This approach gave voice to the participants and made sense of their experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

In this study, I selected eight elementary school classroom teachers with teaching experience of 10 or more years as participants. After the interview and data collection process, I initially reviewed and bracketed the transcripts by running analytic notes (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). I filtered the coding through the lens of this study’s theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2013) and completed the coding using the Atlas.ti software. I identified categories within each participant’s transcript, and then I identified themes by combining all of the participants’ codes and categories into one master document (Saldaña, 2013).
**Analysis Method**

I conducted the analysis by building from the smallest meaning of a participant’s transcript, as described in initial coding, to more encompassing themes that I derived from the collective experiences of all of the participants. My analysis followed Saldaña’s (2013) and Larkin and Thompson’s (2012) coding techniques and I used the software program Atlas.ti to execute coding, categorization, and thematic analysis. I coded each interview descriptively, using the smallest unit of meaning or “splitting” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 23) to provide the most nuanced analysis. Next, I filtered the codes through the overarching theoretical framework to sort negative, positive, neutral, and emotional codes (Saldaña, 2013). After sorting the codes through filtration, I identified categories by combining like words and subjects. Upon completing the categorization of each transcript, I combined all of the codes and categories in a master document and examined them for axial categories. I then created axial categories by combining similar categories and then identifying categories that represented all of the participants. I completed a further analysis of themes to illustrate the structure of the relationship between themes that “clearly evoke the content of the material within them, and the meanings that are attached to that content by the participants” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 111).

Additional analysis included member checking at the point of transcription, initial coding, and thematic analysis to ensure validity, transferability, and trustworthiness. Before I began the coding, I also reviewed and bracketed the transcripts through narrative notes so that I could identify bias. In addition, I kept an overarching theme notebook during coding and categorization process to track repeated words and subjects. In the following presentation of results and findings, pronouns for the participants were gender neutral to protect the identity of
the participants at the site. Four axial categories emerged that represented four themes and three subthemes of the participants’ collective experience:

1. Challenging management with subthemes of (a) teachers as experienced managers, (b) models of management, and (c) additional positive and negative factors;
2. Customization and learner identity vs grade-level standards and exclusion;
3. Time pressures; and

Figure 1 showed themes as they pertained to this study.

**Figure 1**

*Summary of Themes*
Presentation of Results and Findings

Theme 1: Challenging Management

Although the teachers identified managing the expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support as extremely difficult, all eight participants were able to describe their experiences of successfully managing both. Three participants actively identified the challenge as desirable. Robin stated, “I like a challenge, and I think I chose Ross School because I like the challenge of all the diversity and all of the different levels.” Seven participants noted the pleasure they take when the management goes well, and they see their students learning. Nell stated, “That is the reason why I think any teacher does what they do. Like, that feeling is why I teach. When you see that light bulb go on, there’s nothing like that.”

However, that positive feeling came from a great deal of effort and expertise during instruction and in preparation. The participants in this study identified this management in the moment as difficult and used the repeated phrases “constant vigilance” and “struggle,” and Jamie stated, “Like, your brain is on fire.” Elliot stated, “I think it just requires holding 10,000 things in your brain at the same time and deciding which one you’re going to focus on.” This sense of vigilance was also described as exhausting. Elliot followed up with, “I feel like I’ve run a marathon every day.” One participant simply described this management as “impossible,” citing their students’ wide academic range from Kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12).

All of the participants experienced as significant the amount of preparation time that goes into each lesson, especially when designing lessons to customize instruction. The participants in this study wanted to ensure that all of their students’ needs were considered in planning—academically, culturally, and socially–emotionally. Ashley noted that, if teachers truly planned to meet all of their students’ needs, each lesson would take 12 hours to
really consider where, what level the kids are at and what they individually need. And then, you know, group all of those kids who need those things together and give them that piece of paper or that activity. And then you have to consider, okay, the other three kids who are at this level or at this share this language. And you have to plan a sheet or an activity for them and you have to repeat that process for me, nine times.

**Models of Management**

The participants described their experiences of managing this challenge, using similar yet distinct models. Seven out of eight of the participants described a model in which grade-level standards “lifted all boats” and standards from multiple grade levels provided a scope and sequence for customization. I named this model the “general model.” In the general model, the participants held student productive struggle at the center of the balance, fluidly moving students in and out of small groups or one-on-one consultation, according to assessment, observation, language needs, and student work. The participants identified grade-level standards as a “high bar” that they wanted all students to achieve and that drove both their instruction and the students’ learning. Figure 2 represents this general model.

**Figure 2**

*General Model of Grade-Level Instruction and Customized Support*
Dee described grade-level standards as particularly powerful for students who are learning English: “If everyone has the same grade-level standards, they feel that they’re big kids. They feel like they can do big important work, that we trust them with big ideas. We value their thinking.”

However, all of the participants also noted that not all students achieve grade-level standards and that some students have already achieved grade-level standards. At those times, grade-level standards (for K–5) became a progression or scope and sequence that helped the participants understand the steps that a student must take to achieve or extend grade-level standards. Chris described this sequence as follows:

So, whether you have a special ed need, if you have trauma, if you’ve never been in a school before, and this is your first learning experience . . . I’ve never thought of it as a gift before, but it is a gift. Like, your teacher knows this standard, “I’m gonna help you get there. You can get there; we will get there. . . . You then carry that with you, even the next grade levels, and that standard is still there, and your teachers and support staff are still working with you to make that happen for you.”

These experienced teacher participants felt they had a deep understanding of grade-level standards across many grade levels and they effectively used this knowledge base to customize instruction for children who were achieving above and below grade level.

All of the participants valued customization because they saw their students as individuals who had personal strengths and needs. When describing customization, the participants often echoed a theme of “one size does not fit all.” Robin stated, “I think when we’re customizing it means we’re adjusting the curriculum to meet our students’ needs, instead of
having a top down of ‘This is how you need to teach it.’” Customization ensured that all students experienced productive struggle regardless of their academic level. Elliot explained,

I mean, you can’t expect a kid to go from zero to 60 in a day . . . . Like, anybody, people learn a little bit at a time. Like, you practice it, you learn a little bit more, you do what’s next. And so, if you’re not customizing support, you’re either expecting way too much or not enough of most of your students.

Three distinct and more specific classroom models of management emerged from participants’ experiences: I named them multiple entry content, “meet them where they are” grouping, and class wide instruction. Four of the participants identified science and social studies content curriculum with designed multiple levels of student entry as preferred ways to deliver grade-level standards and to customize support. This model is represented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Multiple Entry Content Model of Grade-Level Instruction and Customized Support*

The participants found that students were engaged by the content and that the common learning experiences built background knowledge and community cohesion. Jamie described,
The kids had to make a chain reaction . . . using some different items in a bag and magnets. And they had to decide what forces were being used in their reaction and label them in a drawing later and also try to name it with a text . . . . It was really engaging, the materials they had, like, balls that were magnets . . . and there was a lot of failure. There was a lot of trial and error. But at the end, they had to come up with something that was successful, and they worked together to do that . . . . Some other kids that weren’t able to write about it were at least able to draw about it and point it out and be able to talk about it.

The participants who detailed this method of management noted that, although all students could participate at grade-level content standards, some students’ production (writing or speaking) was not yet at grade-level. They used the more intensive one-on-one coaching or the small group model to build students’ production skills.

Although all of the participants used grouping, the four participants that primarily described grouping students for management began with careful analysis of how to “meet students where they are.” I named this model the “Meet students where they are” grouping model (Figure 4). These participants taught grade-level standards, but they also made time to customize within their day.
Considerations for grouping included formal classroom assessments, standardized assessments, formal and informal observation, input from staff specialists (e.g., English language teachers, language facilitators [translators], occupational therapists, physical therapists, and special educators). Groupings were not solely made according to academics; the participants also considered student interest, homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of first language speakers and cultural affiliations, and homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of students with regulated and unregulated behaviors. Supports for these groups included additional visual aids, translation, and extension activities for further challenge. For the participants who described this model, customized support usually addressed literacy skills (e.g., phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development and comprehension questions that built a self-to-text relationship. Alex described their decision making for what students needed, starting with the grade-level standard.

We’re working on vowel teams in (grade level), we’re working on silent E and all of those diagraphs, but some of these kids are working on basic letter sounds, one-to-one correspondence, sounding out words, stretching out words, whether that’s in reading or
that’s in writing. That’s something you definitely need to do. And just basic questions about the text and basic questions relating themselves to the text. Like if I’m reading a book and you know, I can play with just basic questions of what else could we add to that book? . . . It’s such a different, such a different level . . . than like grade-level comprehension questions . . . I understand exposure (to grade-level standards), but it can’t all be exposure and introduction.

These participants noted that meeting with all groups was often hard to achieve. A supportive classroom community of students helping other students and additional staff in the classroom facilitated the participants’ ability to meet with all groups.

One participant described managing the need to deliver grade-level standards and to customize support while teaching class wide. The class-wide model is represented in Figure 5. This participant heavily guided whole group instruction for a grade-level standard and pitched instruction towards the general level of the whole class by providing anchor visual charts and multiple opportunities to practice and share as a class before moving to independent work. They said that they monitored student engagement to determine whether the class needed to return together for reteaching and monitored individual student’s on-task behaviors to determine whether they needed one-on-one coaching or an extension of learning. Finally, the participant described that they stopped the class to call everyone’s attention to a student’s work, carefully selecting a student who had experienced struggle and worked through a problem. Calling attention to a student’s work built engagement for the student and classroom community. This participant noted that they had consistent adult support in their classroom and that this model would more challenging if they had less adult support or a larger class size. In addition, this
participant taught in a lower elementary grade and might not have had as wide a range of student academic levels as the participants who taught in upper elementary grades.

**Figure 5**

*Class-wide Model of Grade-Level Instruction and Customized Support*

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**Additional Positive and Negative Factors**

Additional factors that positively affected the participants’ ability to manage delivering grade-level instruction and customizing support were staff support, equity work, some newly arrived students, and curriculum quality. Six out of eight participants noted that, particularly during times of customization, consistent, in-class staff support to run groups and provide English language instruction helped them to reach all students. In class support included paraprofessionals, but also included the expertise of occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, special educators, English language teachers, language facilitators, and
mathematics and literacy coaches. The outside expertise built the participants’ own practice and provided guidance in the moment that they tailored to the individual participants and their students. Dee described their experiences of gratitude for supervision from coaches that helped them prioritize: “The teacher is torn in so many different directions all day long . . . . It’s hard to know what to pay attention to when and how much attention you pay to something.”

Four out of eight participants noted that the district’s emphasis on equity facilitated their classroom management because students were engaged in curriculum and a community that acknowledged and honored their identities. Nell described district policy: “They’ve always had the child in mind . . . so there are those windows and mirrors across their day and in all schools.” Jamie stated, “We're helping kids feel like they’re a part of the district and valued.”

Four participants noted that some of the newly arrived immigrant students themselves were an asset to managing their classrooms. This was particularly true for newly arrived students who had experienced formal education in their home countries. These students brought into the classroom their eagerness and determination to pursue an American education. This drive helped to power all classroom learning. Dee characterized these students by “their strong desire to learn and . . . to master English.” Nell described these students from a position of strength: “Some of them know two, three languages, and English might be a third or fourth. So that’s such a strong, you know, a strong skill.” Having a diverse student body also contributed to building their classroom communities. Chris stated,

We all have something to contribute that we’re all learning in different ways and we all can teach each other. So, that to me is how it would feel . . . is when students are recognizing that in themselves in each other. And then it creates that momentum for learning.
Five out of eight participants noted that curriculum quality facilitated their management. They noted that having grade-level standards and multiple entry points embedded in the curriculum were areas of strength. In addition, the social–emotional curriculum Second Step, was highlighted as an effective tool for students to learn emotional regulation and for participants to embed those tools in classroom management. Wallender et al. (2020) defined the Second Step curriculum as “a research-based elementary and middle school program that includes explicit curriculum for the classroom and tools to build a supportive learning environment” (p. 35). The participants also appreciated having the curriculum easily available or “at our fingertips.”

Additional factors that negatively affected the participants’ ability to manage delivering grade-level instruction and customizing support were a large class size and academic range, as well as emotionally dysregulated or traumatized students. Some grade levels experienced historically large class sizes and an historic influx of new English learners. Four out of eight participants noted that class size and student academic range had become increasingly challenging to manage effectively, even though participants felt they had the knowledge base to serve all students. Chris noted, “I find after a certain enrollment, it just is more about safety and classroom management techniques versus being able to differentiate and address each individual student’s needs, as the numbers increased.”

Meeting the needs of students with emotional dysregulation and trauma also affected the participants’ ability to manage instruction effectively for all. Six out of eight participants noted that they experienced an increase in students’ social–emotional needs because of COVID-19 isolation and trauma, as well as trauma from immigration. The participants explained that one dysregulated student could stop learning for the whole classroom and, although participants
recognized that supports were in place, the damage was often done to instruction before support arrived. Dee described,

One student exploded with a whole different, just a set of issues that have been going on.

Then another student followed suit, and pretty much the whole atmosphere disintegrated.

So, I put out as many fires as I could, while still encouraging students to read. They were practicing their Second Step lesson of ignoring distractions, taking deep breaths. They were using all the tools that they could use, but pretty much, the lesson was sabotaged and all that planning and hoping and helping to differentiate for the kids went down the tubes today.

Four participants noted that some new English learners had experienced trauma during immigration. This trauma did not always appear in the form of acting out but in the form of withdrawal. The participants recognized that these students sometimes needed time to feel safe before they would engage in learning. Alex described one student:

I had a student who I know walked for 2 months from Brazil. I know that. And he didn’t speak very much. And then, after a week, he was starting to speak Portuguese to his buddies . . . . The next week, he participated in morning meeting; he said, “Good morning,” to the person next to him, and then answered the child, and then asked the next person. And I was like, we cheered, and that’s not gonna show (academic achievement) on a graph.

Addressing student trauma that manifested as either acting out or withdrawal made effective classroom management increasingly difficult.

In general, the participants experienced managing the delivery of grade-level instruction and customized support as a difficult but an essential aspect of their job. Some enjoyed the
challenge, most felt skilled, and all described successful implementation. An overarching model emerged of the participants using grade-level standards to drive teaching and learning, while using customization to meet the needs of individual students on a continuum of grade-level standards. The teachers achieved overall balance through monitoring student productive struggle and employing multiple factors to create fluid groupings of students. Three specific classroom models emerged: multiple entry content, “meet them where they are” grouping, and class wide instruction. Additional supports that some participants noted included extra staff, equity work, newly arrived students, and curriculum quality. Additional challenges that some participants noted included a large class size and academic range, as well as emotionally dysregulated or traumatized students. Dee described the management of grade-level standards and customization as difficult to qualify because it is more an art than a science.

The art of teaching is trying to notice where someone’s engagement is and where their abilities are and try to connect that with another student who’s at a different level of engagement and ability. Or sometimes you put the same groups together. That’s the art of teaching, we all do that.

**Theme 2: Customization and Learner Identity Versus Grade-Level Standards and Exclusion**

In managing grade-level instruction and customized support, regardless of the model used, the participants carefully calibrated their teaching to ensure that students built their identities as learners. All of the participants noted that students must build their identities as learners through productive struggle and that strong learner identities helped to build a community of learners. Seven out of eight participants identified customization as essential to building students’ identities as learners. All of the participants identified overly rigid grade-level standards as difficult to implement because it is more an art than a science.
standards as excluding learners from productive struggle and damaging their identities as learners.

The participants stated that customization helped students to recognize their progress because the goals were clear and attainable. Ashley said that students should “have something in front of them that they can do, that they can accomplish, that they can feel good about at the end . . . After a few days or a week or a month, they can see their progress.” When students had an identity as a learner, built through progress, they were more likely to engage in challenging work. Jamie explained, “You have to have the student buy-in for what you’re doing . . . the ‘I’m gonna be on board with this, with not only the team and the classroom culture, but I’m on board with learning this challenging stuff.’” Dee described their practice as going around and “stirring up the fire,” noticing productive struggle at all academic levels and calling attention to that struggle to build learner identities individually and as a community. In addition, the student had to internalize a strong learner identity. Nell described,

They just share in the excitement of learning. And you can feel it and they’re proud of themselves . . . If they come to ask me to be proud of them, I always ask, “How do YOU feel? How do YOU feel about yourself?” . . . So, just to see that light go on in that pride is . . . it’s an amazing feeling.

The participants were concerned that the district emphasis to teach at grade-level prevented them from customizing instruction and excluded from productive struggle the students who were achieving below grade-level. Alex empathized with their students,

How it must be for them to sit, you know, when they can’t access what you’re doing? . . . So, if I have a kid who doesn’t understand, I’m constantly like, “Sit up, pay attention, stop talking all this.” Like, they’re not gonna like school. They’re not gonna like it there
because why would they? There’s always this (person) who’s telling them, “No, no, no,” or “Do it this way.” And they, you know, they’re not finding that success. And that’s the important part of the differentiation is they have to find success . . . . Like, if it’s all grade-level expectation, it’s all at where they’re supposed to be, how is that child, that’s a grade below, gonna find success and feel good about themselves?

Ashley noted that only teaching grade-level standards was disheartening for new English language readers. Ashley described their students as well aware and embarrassed that they were reading below grade-level, refusing to read with anyone but them. Ashley explained that students were so focused on their low reading level that, “They’re not proud of how ‘I couldn’t read this last week and now I can.’” Robin noted that a district emphasis on grade-level phonics and phonemic awareness kept them from delivering more customized reading instruction in small groups. Robin worried that they had not seen the expected growth in literacy this year, as compared to other years because of this overemphasis on grade-level instruction.

While managing grade-level instruction and customized support, the participants were also monitoring student productive struggle to ensure that their students were building their identities as learners. The participants noted that customization was especially important to ensure that their students experienced success and identified their own learning progress. Strong learner identity ensured increasing engagement in more challenging work and built classroom community. The participants were concerned that, by overemphasizing grade-level instruction, they were excluding students from essential learning experiences (e.g., productive struggle, developing their identities as learners, and actively participating in the classroom learning community).
Theme 3: Time Pressures

Time pressure affected the management of grade-level instruction and customized support in the classroom. All of the participants repeatedly noted that the amount of new curriculum, the pacing needed to cover the curriculum over a year, and the daily lesson pacing to fit all lessons into a day, affected their ability to manage their classrooms effectively. The participants perceived that there simply was not enough time to cover everything and that, by racing through instruction, they were not serving their students. Chris noted,

The tension goes with the speed at which I might be required to have students meet the standard, right? Like, I’m pretty confident I can get people there, but if there’s pressure or a timeline that’s expected, that’s not always realistic.

The amount of new curriculum introduced affected management because the participants felt that they could not adequately learn and customize new curriculum to meet their students’ needs when multiple new curriculums were introduced simultaneously. The participants named new social studies, science, and several new literacy programs that were all introduced this year. Elliot described,

I don’t think curriculum should be just something that you, like, regurgitate. So, it does take a lot more time to (kind of) sift through it and figure out how it’s gonna work for the group of kids that you have.

The participants took pains to note that they valued the new curriculums, but they were overwhelmed by the amount of work that was necessary to prepare them for their classrooms. Robin stated this simply, “There’s too many changes all at once. And you can’t be good at everything when everything is new.”
The pacing of the curriculums across the school year also affected management because all of the participants felt that they did not have adequate time to teach deeply and engage all students. Jamie described this feeling: “The curriculum says we’re ready to move on . . . but there is a swath of kids that don’t have this concept down and we’re supposed to push on and it feels like we’re leaving them behind.” The participants worried that, although they covered curriculum, the instruction was superficial and ineffective. Nell described this rapid pace as a revolving door and noted, “It just never allows me to perfect what I’m doing cause I’m always having to . . . check off the boxes and I never get to do what I do well. We’re doing a lot, but we’re not going deep.”

All of the participants also described a similar time pressure within the school day, noting that lesson times were unrealistic for a single school day. Five participants noted that the newly implemented block scheduling constricted their ability to extend or shorten lessons in response to their students’ needs. Elliot described the daily pacing,

I think the expectations are sometimes unreasonable for especially very young learners. You can’t expect that they’re gonna be a hundred percent focused across their whole day. Especially if you’re asking like more and more and more of them. You’re transitioning very quickly from reading to writing to phonics to this literacy intervention. And then, they come in after recess and lunch and it’s right away like read aloud and math and lit and math groups and all. It’s just the structure of the day feels very militaristic.

For all of the participants, this left them feeling as though they were not able to build conditions for productive struggle in their classrooms.

In addition, the teachers often described as unrealistic the block schedule or publisher estimates for lesson times. Robin stated, “We’ve got a writing curriculum that’s an hour at least.
We’ve got a reading curriculum that’s at least an hour, maybe an hour and a half . . . . And we’ve been given an hour to do all of that and it’s impossible.” These unrealistic lesson times left the participants feeling as though they needed to “steal” time to ensure that students could experience well-managed instruction that built productive struggle. Jamie articulated this feeling: “In order to get something good, you have to also decide what you’re gonna cut out, what you’re gonna not do.”

All of the participants perceived time pressures as negatively affecting their ability to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support effectively. The amount of new curriculums introduced affected their ability to customize the curriculum for their students. The need to cover curriculums over a year, created pacing that “left students behind,” and superficially engaged students in grade-level content. Pressure to include multiple curriculums within a day exacerbated students’ superficial engagement in grade-level standards.

**Theme 4: Grappling with Failure**

Although all of the participants were able to describe success when managing the delivery of grade-level instruction and customized support, a large amount of data from this analysis fell into grappling with failure, Theme 4. All of the participants acknowledged that they frequently experienced feelings of failure, which required them to exert active management. Specifically, they attributed these feelings to the time pressures described in Theme 3 and the inability to provide customized support for all students, as discussed in Theme 2. Five participants also described these feelings as being on the increase because of COVID impacts. When following district expectations clashed with the teacher participant’s professional integrity, these feelings of failure were especially acute.
The time pressures described in Theme 3 affected all of the participants’ sense of efficacy because they felt that they were under intense pressure to cover curriculum, regardless of student achievement or social–emotional well-being. Jamie described the experience of curriculum pacing that left students behind,

I worry sometimes that because . . . It’s balancing that fine line of making sure that kids are getting this part of the curriculum and we also need to make it so that it’s attainable for those that are, that aren’t quite there. And it’s just a lot.

Dee related that the new curriculum expectations this past year have greatly increased their feelings of being under pressure, “This year, I go home every night and I said, I can’t do this anymore. Every single night. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t do this anymore. The pressure is back and it’s more intense than ever.”

Five participants also identified that the pressure to cover academic curriculum made it difficult to address social–emotional learning. These participants struggled with decisions to take time from academic work to focus on students’ social–emotional well-being. Nell described,

It’s overwhelming. It’s overwhelming. This year has been noticeably more overwhelming. I think that kids need more social emotional (instruction) and we are not paying enough attention to that . . . . You can feel it physically, like we feel other people’s feelings all day long . . . . It can feel like a failure. Like, I’m failing these kids or I’m not doing my best . . . . I am not living up to this standard that I’m being asked to. And it can feel, it can feel really, it can feel really bad.

All of the participants noted that their students’ wide academic range or class size forced them to make choices about which students would get what they needed. The district’s emphasis on grade-level standards exacerbated this triage, as outlined in Theme 2. The participants all
characterized their inability to provide productive struggle for all students as painful. Jamie summarized, “Any good teacher’s greatest fear is losing someone.” However, the participants repeatedly described having to make distressful decisions about which students would get what they needed. Chris explained the impact of increasing class size and needing to get the “biggest bang for the buck.”

You almost have to pick and choose which need you’re going to address . . . . So, you have to decide where you’re gonna put your efforts and how you’re gonna get those students to the standard rather than keep moving the ones that have already made the standard or beyond the standard. And that’s an unfortunate call to make as a teacher.

Ashley described their feelings as realizing that they would not be able to reach all students during a lesson, “It’s so tough because, you go into something with the best of intentions and then you realize, ‘Oh, crap, I haven’t done enough for this group of kids.’” Ashley went on to explain that this experience can be immobilizing, “I just can’t do it all. And that feeling leads you to feeling like I can’t do it. So, it’s too overwhelming and you end up doing nothing.”

All of the participants noted particularly painful feelings of conflict and failure when they had to comply with district expectations that pushed against their sense of professional integrity. This feeling occurred when they felt that they were unable to do what was best for students, when they felt set up for failure, or when grade-level standards or data did not fit students. Alex described pushing back against district pacing to be able to serve their students,

It’s what my class needs, where, when am I gonna find time for that? Cause we teach at Ross School [pseudonym]! Keeping up with grade-level standards is like an everyday battle. And it’s that battle of . . . like doing what I’m supposed to be doing, according to grade-level standards and the pacing guide, and then giving my students what they need.
and, as a teacher, how to not walk into that feeling like a failure constantly. . . . and that worries me.

Elliot reflected on how the time pressure set teachers up to feel like failures and how he struggled with the ethics of compliance.

Well, I think it kind of sets you up to feel like a bit of a failure. Like we’re told you’re supposed to do all of these things. Like you have to know these 12 different curriculums and teach them all, every day, all day long, and every minute is accounted for. . . . You can shoot for that, but that’s not actually being responsive to your students. It’s not being a flexible teacher and it’s not good for kids. So, like, am I just gonna kind of fly under the radar and do what I think is best and then not make a big deal out of it? . . . I feel like I’m breaking the rules by, like, bringing my kids outside.

Additional issues that some participants identified as conflicting with their sense of professional integrity included developmentally inappropriate grade-level standards for younger students and viewing student progress solely through the lens of grade-level achievement. These issues were especially distressing for participants who had a large percentage of students with special needs or new English learners who had experienced trauma. The participants felt judged and found wanting by these standards, even while they encouraged students who were achieving significantly below grade-level to recognize and build on their progress. Six participants noted that tracking student growth over a year was much more informative and descriptive of student capabilities than solely tracking grade-level achievement. Alex described looking at assessment data for their grade level that did not show student growth to grade-level standards.

I always worry for myself if I’m being judged as a teacher by what the percentage is of my students meeting grade-level standards. . . . I think it’s hard. I think personally the
self-reflection and judging of yourself . . . . We run the numbers and I, I love a good graph and I love a good chart and I love to see progression. Absolutely. And you know, my graphs are color coded, but I think it’s hard too, when you look at it and, like, I know half my class will not meet the grade-level standards at the end of the year.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of urban elementary teachers in Maine who face the challenge of balancing both grade-level instruction and customized support. My study involved interviews with eight teacher participants who met the criteria for participation and focusing on their educational experiences in managing this paradoxical tension. I identified four main themes: challenging management, customization and learner identity versus grade-level standards and exclusion, time pressures, and grappling with failure.

Under Theme 1 of challenging management, all of the participants were found to be experienced in delivering grade-level standards while customizing support. Although this management was challenging, the participants identified grade-level standards as a goal to attain. The participants used a scope and sequence of K–5 standards to customize for students who were below or above grade level. In my study, I identified three specific models of management: multiple entry content, “meet them where they are” grouping, and class-wide instruction. The participants also identified additional factors that had both positive and negative impacts on management.

Theme 2, customization and learner identity versus grade-level standards and exclusion, described the participants’ perceptions of grade-level standards. They perceived these standards as excessively rigid, which resulted in the exclusion of students from productive struggle and had a detrimental impact on their identities as learners. This perception was in direct contrast to the
participants’ own desire to have more opportunities for customizing instruction and fostering the development of students’ identities as learners.

Theme 3, time pressures, characterized the participants’ experiences in balancing the school district’s new curriculums and schedule policies with their students’ needs. The participants found the number of new curriculums and the pacing throughout the year and day destabilizing to their management. Theme 4, grappling with failure, outlined participants’ acknowledgment that they often felt as though they “can’t do it all.” The participants actively managed feelings of failure because of time pressures, inability to reach all students, and district expectations that clashed with their personal integrity. I will discuss in Chapter 5 these findings relative to the literature.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The impact of COVID-19 and long-standing barriers to education have resulted in years of unfinished learning for American students (Dorn et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; USDOE, 2021). Engaging and uplifting a diverse student body, while maximizing their academic achievement, requires complex management in which teachers play a central role (Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Naraian, 2019). To reach this goal, classroom teachers have had to maintain grade-level instruction so that students did not fall further behind and to customize support so that students could rise to grade level (Dusseault et al., 2021; Fordham Institute, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Lynch & Hill, 2020; The Education Trust, 2021). Districts moved to assist teachers in this management with new scheduling and curriculum (Fordham Institute, 2021. Louisiana Department of Education, 2021; The Education Trust, 2021). However, beyond sweeping policy changes, the responsibility of classroom management rested primarily on the individual teacher to calibrate a precisely balanced approach for each unique student in their unique classroom (Davis et al., 2022). Although central to effective teaching and learning, researchers do not yet clearly understand individual teacher management of conflicting pedagogies (Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018).

In this phenomenological study, I explored the experiences of urban elementary teachers in Maine who manage the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support. Paradox management theory (Huq et al., 2017; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011) provided a model to explore how teachers experienced the management of delivering grade-level and customizing instruction. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000, 2018; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Paris, 2012, 2021) provided a research
base for understanding the polarity of grade-level instruction. Differentiation pedagogy (Bondie et al., 2019; Griful-Freixenet, 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Magableh & Abdallah, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 1995; van Geel et al., 2019) provided a research base for understanding the polarity of customized support.

The central research question for this study was: How do urban elementary teachers in Maine experience the management of the paradoxical expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize support? To explore the essence or phenomena of teachers’ lived experiences, I chose phenomenological methods (Larkin et al., 2019; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). I conducted eight one-on-one interviews with experienced, elementary teachers to explore their perceptions of paradoxical management. I transcribed and coded the data from these interviews. Four central themes emerged from this analysis: challenging management, customized learner identities versus grade-level exclusion, time pressures, and grappling with failure. These outcomes informed the interpretation, implications and recommendations that follow.

**Interpretation and Importance of Findings**

In this study, I examined the experiences of eight veteran, urban, elementary school teachers as they managed the need to balance grade-level standards with the need to customize instruction for a diverse group of students. During the data analysis process, four themes became apparent which highlighted the crucial role that teachers play in managing this difficult balance. The themes that emerged from the interviews also answered this study’s research question and they were aligned with the literature.

The findings of this study were significant because, although a great deal of research has been done on grade-level instruction and customized support separately, little research has been
conducted to examine how teachers manage delivering both methods of instruction simultaneously (Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). The significance of unfinished learning has been recognized at the national level (Dorn et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; USDOE, 2021). Therefore, balanced classroom management of both methods to address unfinished learning was especially important to understand. The participants in this study described their microcosm of experiences in managing this national issue, as well as managing policy implemented to address it.

To address unfinished learning caused by COVID-19 and historical disparities in student achievement (Dorn et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; USDOE, 2021), the site’s school district recently implemented policies that prioritized grade-level instruction. This mirrors a national trend (The Education Trust, 2021; Fordham Institute, 2021. Louisiana Department of Education, 2021). Although these changes might have helped district teachers improve grade-level instruction (MDOE, 2022), they did not address the pivotal role that only teachers can play in individualizing a balance of instruction for each of their unique students academically and culturally (Hammond, 2020; Ladson-Billings 2021, Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021; Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). This is particularly pertinent for teachers who worked with students with a wide range of academic achievement, English language proficiency, and socio-linguistic backgrounds (Hammond, 2020; Ladson-Billings 2021, Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021; Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). By better understanding teachers’ central role in classroom management, administrators and policy makers might be better able to learn from and to support teachers (Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Valiandes et al., 2018). Conversely, lack of understanding could also add to teachers’ feelings of isolation, making them vulnerable to
ineffective vicious cycles of management (Huq et al., 2017; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

The four central themes identified in Chapter Four included challenging management, customization and learner identity versus grade-level standards and exclusion, time pressures, and grappling with failure. Theme 1, challenging management, identified participants as expert managers and outlined similar but distinct management models. I also outline additional factors that had both positive and negative impacts on management. Theme 2, customization and learner identity versus grade-level standards and exclusion, described participants’ perceptions of grade-level standards as excessively rigid. The participants experienced this rigidity as restricting students from both productive struggle and developing their identities as learners. Theme 3, time pressures, characterized the participants’ experiences in balancing the school district’s new curriculums and schedule policies with their students’ needs. The participants found the number of new curriculums and the pacing throughout the year and day destabilizing to their management. Theme 4, grappling with failure, outlined the participants’ acknowledgment that they often felt as though they “can’t do it all.” The participants actively managed feelings of failure because of time pressures, inability to reach all students, and district expectations that clashed with their personal integrity. I will examine these four themes in relation to the literature.

**Teachers at the Center of Challenging Management**

The findings of this study supported the construct that teachers are important managers in education, calibrating a precisely balanced instructional approach for each unique student in each unique classrooms (Kelly et al., 2021; Hammond, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021; Naraian, 2019; Neophytou et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2017; van Geel et al., 2019). The experienced elementary teachers in this study gave detailed descriptions of
management models simultaneously to deliver grade-level instruction and to customize instruction. This finding shows that veteran teachers will play a pivotal role in the success of any policy that affects the management of grade-level instruction and customized support.

**Teachers as Expert Managers**

The findings of this study also supported teachers embracing the value of delivering grade-level standards and customizing support (Naraian, 2019). Although the participants found this complex management extremely challenging, they also saw both polarities as essential to maximizing student academic gains. The data collected from teachers supported the findings from differentiation pedagogy that customized support can maximize student learning (Puzio et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2019). The participants also supported the findings of culturally informed pedagogy that all students should have access to grade-level content (Gay, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014, 2021; Paris, 2012, 2021). My findings in this study aligned with the research of Endo (2015) and Milner (2011) who identified teachers’ determination to overcome management challenges to serve all students. Although the teachers in this study acknowledged the challenges of managing paradoxical tensions, they also regarded it as a crucial standard to attain.

**Models of Instruction**

Naraian’s (2019) teacher participants described their unique model of management as “real teaching” (p.1599). Similar to Naraian’s findings, my study participants were able to describe their own models of providing grade-level instruction and customized support, suggesting they had considerable expertise and experience with this difficult management. Not only were teachers aligned with the district’s mission of equity, but they were also experienced
and committed teachers who could also offer the district front-line feedback about district policy implementation.

**Customization and Learner Identity Versus Grade-Level Standards and Exclusion**

The participants perceived the district’s emphasis on grade-level instruction as destabilizing to balanced management of grade-level instruction and customized support. The participants found that the emphasis on grade level was inflexible and, at times, excluded students from productive struggle and the opportunity to build positive learner identities. Customization was described as difficult to implement because the participants perceived that all students were mandated to participate in all grade-level instruction, regardless of their English proficiency. This finding is supported primarily by the differentiation pedagogy that suggests that lessons should be tailored to student readiness for difficulty (Greful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Swanson et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, Valiandes et al., 2018; van Geel et.al., 2019; Watts-Taffe et al., 2012).

However, both differentiation and culturally informed pedagogies highlighted student productive struggle as an essential state for learning (Tomlinson et al., 2003; Hammond, 2014). Tomlinson et al. (2003), the founder of differentiation, stated that children must be pushed into “tasks that are slightly more complex than the child can manage alone” (p. 126). Hammond (2014), a culturally informed scholar, noted that students must be within a supportive community, headed by a culturally responsive teacher or “warm demander” (p. 97) to step out of passivity and into independent productive struggle. However, Hammond (2014) also echoed differentiation when she stated that a teacher “develops the skills, tools, and techniques to help students rise to the occasion as she invites them to step out of their comfort zone into the zone of
proximal development” (p. 98). Hammond (2014) acknowledged the necessity of skill development.

The participants found it difficult to develop the skills of certain students, especially those who were new to formal schooling or new to English, using the expected grade-level curriculum. As a result, some participants perceived instructing all students at grade level to be “impossible,” particularly given the time frame expected for achievement. The participants felt their students’ disengagement with grade-level instruction acutely, and described their students as feeling embarrassed or defeated when they were not able to engage with grade-level standards. The participants characterized this experience as further undermining their students’ self-perceptions as learners. The participants’ echoed, Hammond’s (2014) concerns about exclusion when the author warned educators that learners become dependent when the culture around them tells them that academic participation is a threat to their well-being, when they are shamed or are repeatedly unsuccessful. The researchers who studied differentiation and culturally informed pedagogies, as well as the participants in this study, identified this lack of productive struggle as deeply concerning (Hammond, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003).

When the participants described students struggling with grade-level content, the lessons identified consisted primarily of grade-level skills, not lessons involving critical and complex thinking. Examples of grade-level skills that the participants found to exclude students were phonics lessons (e.g., teaching vowel combinations rules to students who did not yet know initial consonant sounds) or computation lessons (e.g., multidigit multiplication to students who did not yet know addition and subtraction). Importantly, participants also noted that students who were able to participate fully in critical and complex grade-level content (e.g., magnet experiments) might still have difficulty with production (i.e., writing or speaking) at grade level. Students’
difficulty with production did not necessarily exclude students from complex or critical thinking. The participants described additional supports (e.g., adult translators, additional staff, translation software, strong student multilingual communicators, and a strong learning community) as scaffolding new English speakers to engage in complex thinking. This finding suggested that students who might have skills below grade level are still able to engage in complex thinking for lessons that move beyond skills. However, it is grade-level skill instruction itself that the participants found to be most exclusionary and damaging to students’ productive struggle and identities as learners.

Naraian’s (2019) teacher participants effectively scaffolded children with small group skill practice that the teachers carefully tailored to the students’ needs, and then they re-entered students into critical and complex grade-level instruction. The teachers did not require the students to be present for grade-level, skill-based instruction, if the teachers determined that the students would not experience productive struggle. The teacher participants in this study also described customization in a similar fashion, pulling quick and flexible groups for instruction, before returning students back to complex grade-level instruction. The participants had extensive familiarity with the scope and sequence of curriculum across all grades and a working knowledge of multiple assessments, which were instrumental in enabling them to customize their teaching with precision. This finding suggests that teachers can use skill grouping fluidly, without excluding students from complex and critical thinking. However, the classroom teacher determined and managed these groupings. The participants experienced the move towards universal grade-level instruction as removing them from decisions about customizing for students. This finding is concerning given that culturally informed researchers have
recommended that individual educators craft extensive and complex local solutions for local conditions (Hammond, 2020; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Upper elementary grade-level mathematics and science were notable exceptions to engaging students in complex and critical thinking beyond skill-based lessons. The participants perceived their students as able to experience productive struggle partially through multilevel entry curriculum. However, they worried that the complex and critical “meat” of a lesson was impossible for students to engage in without basic computation or exposure to foundational science concepts. This concern was particularly true for newly arrived English learners who were experiencing formal schooling for the first time. This finding echoes the statements of Olayemi and DeBoer’s (2021) high school mathematics and science teachers.

The participants perceived a decrease in student productive struggle because of the district’s emphasis on grade-level instruction, which hampered them from following their usual course of customization. However, there could be many reasons for this perceived decrease, beyond a perceived over emphasis on grade-level instruction. Culturally informed scholars identified a teachers’ ability to form strong relationships with students as an essential condition for student productive struggle (Gay, 2000, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014, 2021; Milner, 2011; Olayemi and DeBoer, 2021; Paris 2012, 2021; Ramsay-Jordan, 2021). Latinx teachers had a clear understanding of their own cultural lens, as well as how to identify and embed their Latinx students’ culture into all aspects of relationship building, communication, and curriculum in Narain’s (2019) study. Teachers also identified building cultural consciousness as difficult and vulnerable work (Milner, 2011; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Ramsay-Jordan, 2021). Building cultural consciousness was challenging for teachers who shared the same culture as their students,
but it posed an even greater challenge for teachers who did not share the same cultural background as their students (Milner, 2011; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Ramsay-Jordan, 2021).

Teacher participants in my study were all White, and they served a remarkably diverse student body. All of the teacher participants in my study emphasized the importance of building relationships with students and finding cultural and language partners for the students. Some participants identified equity and identity work as essential to engaging students fully in learning, emphasizing the students’ assets. Some participants also identified a strong and supportive class community as essential to student productive struggle. However, teacher and student identity work were not an axial finding of this study. This partial emphasis on equity might suggest that identity work to build student relationships might increase student productive struggle and achievement of grade-level standards. It is important to note that I did not ask in my study direct questions about how teachers developed their own identity and that of their students to improve the students’ achievement of grade-level standards.

Additionally, culturally informed scholars would support the representation of students within the curriculum and the learning community, further creating a safe space to engage in productive struggle (Gay, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014, 2021; Paris, 2012, 2021). Naraian (2019) noted that the Latinx teachers seamlessly interwove Latinx culture within the curriculum to engage their predominantly Latinx students. However, this begs the question: How can this curriculum development be used with a truly multilingual and multicultural classroom? Although some participants mentioned that the district had provided curriculum with “windows and mirrors” so that students could see themselves and understand others (McIntosh & Style, 1997), culturally informed scholars would say that all students have a “mirror” in the curriculum (Gay, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2018; Hammond, 2014;
Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014, 2021; Paris, 2012, 2021). Paris (2012, 2021) would go further and insist on developing the students’ heritage culture and language as well. This finding might suggest that further representation of students’ cultures and languages in the curriculum could bolster student productive struggle in grade-level curriculum. However, again, it is important to note that direct questions about teachers’ inclusion of students’ cultures in the curriculum, to improve student achievement of grade-level standards, were not part of my study.

The participants found the district’s emphasis on grade-level instruction to be inflexible and, at times, to exclude students from experiencing productive struggle, and building positive learner identities. The participants identified skill-based lessons as being the most exclusionary to students and they demonstrated expertise in fluidly creating skill-based groups that engaged students in productive struggle but did not exclude children from more complex and critical thinking. The participants described this customized learning as “impossible” if they followed the perceived district expectation to have all students attend all grade-level skill lessons. The teachers described upper elementary mathematics and science as extremely difficult to customize adequately so that students could engage in complex and critical thinking. A lack of student productive struggle could also occur because of the need to bolster culturally informed practices (e.g., identity work for teachers and students) and to ensure that all students see themselves as represented in the curriculum. All these considerations take time to address and time is a scarce commodity in the experience of these participants.

**Time Pressures**

Puzio et al. (2020) described the time needed to address the complexity of differentiation as a significant detractor of this pedagogy. Similarly, culturally informed scholars noted that the time needed for teachers to do the identity work and planning necessary to build relationships
with students and to develop multilevel entry curriculum that would reflect student identity was overwhelming (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021). Teachers in this study also identified time constraints as a significant detractor to effective management of grade-level instruction and customized support.

The participants identified district efforts to revamp curriculums and schedules to promote equity as causing frenetic pacing. All of the participants repeatedly noted that the amount of new curriculum, the pacing needed to cover the curriculum over a year, and the daily lesson pacing to fit all lessons into a day, affected their ability to manage effectively grade-level instruction and customized support. These time pressures turned participants’ attentions from carefully balancing customized approaches with grade-level instruction toward racing through grade-level lessons across the year and throughout the day. The participants experienced further stress when they went against district pacing expectations “to buy time” for students’ productive struggle by simply not doing some of the curriculum.

This finding suggests that the district did not achieve its intention of implementing multiple curriculum and pacing changes to promote equity. In fact, the carefully calibrated, challenging, and time-consuming work of managing customized support and grade-level instruction was already overwhelming. The teachers experienced increased time pressures as destabilizing this delicate balance and creating less room for productive struggle. Importantly, the participants did not identify any curriculum as negative, some participants identified the new curriculum as an asset to management. However, all of the participants were overwhelmed by the amount of new curricula and fast pacing throughout the year and day.
Grappling With Failure

Neither differentiation nor culturally informed pedagogies addressed teachers grappling with failure. However, both pedagogies acknowledged the extreme challenge of meeting the needs of all students (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021; Puzio et al., 2020). In this study, teacher participants identified additional pressures that intensified the already challenging task of managing grade-level instruction and customized support. These pressures led to feelings of failure among the participants.

These pressures stemmed from inadequate time, inability to meet all students’ needs, and conflicts between district expectations and their own integrity. The challenges (of managing grade-level instruction and customized support) were particularly acute for the participants who served the most vulnerable students. This group included students with special needs, new ELLs without formal education, and students who had experienced trauma. It is important to note that no participant suggested that they lacked the knowledge to teach these students, but simply that outside pressure to cover curriculum and lack of support left them feeling like failures.

From this finding, I infer that adding more responsibilities to the participants’ already challenging management tasks has had negative consequences. Specifically, it appeared to cause disruption to the management process and increased the participants’ sense of failure. Consequently, the participants felt discouraged, disheartened, and even immobilized. The participants also experienced these pressures as restricting them from valuing student growth and the positive impact of their instruction. I could describe these experiences as burnout (Santoro, 2018), which might be an unforeseen impact of the district’s emphasis on grade-level instruction and new scheduling.
Paradox Theory

Although differentiation and culturally informed pedagogies did not directly address feelings of failure, paradox theory had a clear model that showed the impact of overemphasizing one polarity to the detriment of the other (Lewis & Smith, 2014). This model was known as a vicious cycle. However, paradox theory also offered a description of management that effectively and dynamically balanced polarities. This model was known as a virtuous cycle. By using the lens of paradox theory to explore the management issues that the teacher participants experienced, administrators and teachers could consider steps towards creating a more balanced management. Paradox theory rejected, “Under what conditions should managers emphasize either A or B?” (p. 133) and redirected managers to examine, “How can we engage both A and B simultaneously?” (p. 133).

By following paradox theory guidelines to create virtuous cycles, teachers’ experiences could provide a way forward to improve management. This model is represented in Figure 6.
Step 1 to manage paradoxical tensions was to identify stakeholder perceptions of paradoxes by describing the opposing poles (Huq et al., 2017; Lewis & Smith 2014; Smith et al., 2016). The participants perceived grade-level instruction and customized support as essential to student productive struggle. Step 2 was to assess stakeholder perceptions of the balance or imbalance of poles (Huq et al., 2017; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2016). The participants perceived that curriculum and schedule changes overemphasized grade-level achievement, inhibiting teachers from appropriately customizing for students and creating conditions for productive struggle.

Following an assessment of balance, when an imbalance was identified, the pole with less power would need to be supported (Huq et al., 2017). The participants did not perceive that their experiences were of interest to district policy makers, but they described “breaking the rules” to
serve students. In addition, stakeholders would need to develop a dual understanding of the benefits of both poles through a common focus on mission (Besharov, 2014). The participants described the positive impact that grade-level instruction and customized support had on facilitating a learning environment where students could engage in productive struggle. In this study, I did not claim to understand district or other policy maker perceptions, but I did recognize recent policy that emphasized grade-level instruction and schedule changes to promote student productive struggle.

Finally, strong managerial support for both poles would need to be in place with agreed upon guardrails to protect against future imbalance and formalized communication for constant recalibration (Smith & Besharov, 2019, Smith et al., 2016). When one polarity crossed a guardrail, it signaled that the organization must communicate and recalibrate dynamic management (Smith & Besharov, 2019). Describing mutually agreed upon guardrails could be a way forward for both teachers and administrators to communicate regularly their experiences and recalibrate management. Through this process, grade-level instruction and customized support could be focused on a common mission of student productive struggle.

The participants in this study described guardrails for both polarities. Guardrails for overemphasis of customized support included the exclusion of students from the classroom community and complex and critical thinking, as well as receiving stagnant instruction. Guardrails for overemphasis of grade-level instruction included exclusion of students from participation in curricula, building positive learner identities, and superficial instruction. The teachers described productive struggle as both a mission and bellwether for balanced management of grade-level instruction and customized support. The participants described models of successful management to maximize student productive struggle, as well as the
supports needed to sustain this management. The participants also described district policies (e.g., emphasis on grade-level instruction, increasing curriculum pressures, and other pressures) that contributed to destabilizing this management.

**Implications**

School districts across the country are taking steps to dismantle historic barriers to education and, more recently, COVID-19 pandemic barriers to education (Dorn et al., 2021; Dusseault et al., 2021; Kane & Reardon, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022). As they move towards addressing these profound issues, policies that increase all students access to grade-level curriculum are being put into place (Fordham Institute, 2021. Louisiana Department of Education, 2021; The Education Trust, 2021). This emphasis on grade-level instruction has shown some positive results for some students at this district (MDOE, 2022).

However, results from this phenomenological study suggested that veteran, elementary classroom teachers experienced this policy as an overcorrection. This was true even though the participants valued grade-level instruction. Administrators and teachers should consider these participants’ experiences to examine their overall management pressures, the value of customization, and how to increase support for culturally informed practices to ensure classroom management that will promote student productive struggle.

In this study, I revealed that teachers are at the center of paradoxical management and have developed models to address grade-level instruction and customized support. The participants clearly identified supports and pressures within and outside their school that influenced their classroom management. They were concerned that a lack of customized support and time pressures to cover curriculum was hampering student productive struggle. They experienced this imbalance acutely and grappled with feelings of failure, especially when their
professional integrity conflicted with district expectations. Naraian (2019) stated, “We have very few close descriptions of teachers in urban contexts effectively navigating conflicting educational paradigms . . . to achieve greater academic and social gains” (p. 1583). These veteran teacher participants’ experiences can provide to other teachers and administrators a description from which to start.

**Recommendations for Action**

Paradox theory provided a model to integrate teacher experiences into a dynamic recalibration of classroom management for grade-level instruction and customized support (Huq et al., 2017; Lewis & Smith 2014; Smith & Besharov, 2019, Smith et al., 2016). Classroom management could be stabilized by bringing teachers, administrators, and policy makers together to focus on a common mission, agree upon the value of both polarities, and implement guardrails to prevent the overemphasis of grade-level instruction or customized support. With agreed upon guardrails in place, the mission of productive struggle for all students could be dynamically managed and achieved. Strong managers for both polarities would need to be in place and regular communication for recalibration would be ongoing. The participants have already described guardrails for both polarities and a central mission of student productive struggle. These dovetail well with the district’s policy to increase educational equity for all students. Although I described in this study teacher experiences, administrator and policy maker experiences would need to be incorporated into any paradoxical management model, for all stakeholders must be involved in paradox management (Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011)

In addition to establishing a paradoxical management model, further recommendations follow from the four themes that I identified in this study. I aimed these recommendations to
enhance policies and expectations that support effective classroom management and to facilitate student engagement in productive struggle. They emphasize both learning from and supporting teacher management of grade-level instruction and customized support.

Theme 1, challenging management demonstrates, the detailed models that the participants developed to deliver grade-level instruction and customized support. This expertise shows that classroom teachers are skilled at managing district policies to meet the needs of their students. Therefore, consultation with classroom teachers would be essential to ensure policy success. Other teachers can leverage these teacher-developed models of management to learn from them and to support their colleagues.

Theme 2, customization and learner identity versus grade-level standards and exclusion raises, raises concerns about the current district policy of instructing students at grade level. The participants perceived a decrease in students' productive struggle, which indicated a need for more customized support tailored to individual academic levels. Customization is particularly crucial for new English learners and students without formal schooling. Customized support should focus on skill-based curriculum (e.g., phonics and phonemic awareness and computation) to prevent exclusion from complex and critical thinking.

To enhance student productive struggle, it is crucial to prioritize culturally informed work. This prioritization might require the district to decrease the amount of grade-level curriculum that they expect teachers to cover during a year. The district already supports the Second Step curriculum and the Responsive Classroom curriculum to develop a positive teacher–student relationship and a supportive classroom community. I recommend that the district allocate more time in the daily schedule to these programs. Administrators should also allocate time to ensure that the curriculum reflects the culture of all of the students.
The district’s Department of Equity has taken significant steps in developing teacher cultural identity by offering staff development on the impact of race and bias in public education. Given the complexity of this work, ongoing staff development is essential to ensure that all teachers embrace culturally informed instruction. Additionally, district equity leaders should make themselves available to classroom teachers, offering one-on-one guidance during visiting hours at each school site.

Although recommendations have been outlined to make time for a greater amount of culturally informed work, educators must address the further destabilizing impact of other time pressures. District managers, who are responsible for elementary science, social studies, literacy, and mathematics, along with teacher representatives, should collaborate to decide which parts of the curriculum they can eliminate. In addition, district expectations for daily pacing should allow for more teacher flexibility within larger blocks of time. By creating a more reasonable yearly and daily schedule, teachers will have increased opportunities to foster student productive struggle.

These recommendations are designed to learn from participants’ experiences to increase student productive struggle and to alleviate the participants’ experiences of grappling with failure. To achieve this, district administrators and teacher representatives should work together to increase their direct communication. Policies resulting from this enhanced communication, will help to improve academic instruction and promote teachers’ self-perception as professionals. I summarize my recommendations in Table 2.
Table 2

*Summary of Recommendations to Improve Teacher Management*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenging management</td>
<td>Value teachers as central to policy success and as expert managers.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explore teacher models of paradoxical management to both learn from and support teachers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customization and learner identity vs. grade-level standards and exclusion</td>
<td>Investigate teacher concerns about a decrease in productive struggle and positive learner identity because of exclusionary grade-level standards.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consider more customization for skill building lessons, particularly for new English learners and students without formal schooling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make time (decide what you will take out of the curriculum) for deeper and more vulnerable culturally informed work, particularly during the first six weeks of school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teacher identity for relationship building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student identity for community building (augmented Second Step and Responsive Classroom curriculum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make time (decide what will be taken out of the curriculum) to augment curriculum that includes “mirrors” for all students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implement on-site visiting hours for district equity leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time pressures</td>
<td>Address destabilizing pace of curriculum by gathering district heads of elementary science, social studies, literacy, and mathematics, as well as teachers who teach those subjects, to decide what curriculum the district can eliminate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Give classroom teachers more flexibility within larger blocks of time in daily schedules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grappling with failure</td>
<td>Address teachers’ feelings of failure by both valuing their expertise and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>supporting their practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increase communication between administrators and teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Incorporate teacher expertise into policy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Very little has been written about teachers’ perceptions of the relationship between culturally informed instruction and student productive struggle (Endo, 2015; Milner, 2011; Olayemi & DeBoer, 2021). The teachers in this study named “equity work” and recognizing student identities as important aspects of management to create conditions for productive struggle. The participants also repeatedly referenced the need to provide students with same language friends and a welcoming classroom. However, no participant noted that their own identity work facilitated their relationship building with students and thereby allowed students to feel safe and engage in productive struggle, as Hammond (2014) suggested. Although the participants addressed this topic obliquely, it was not a direct question in this study. Therefore, it is difficult to know truly these participants’ perceptions of culturally informed practices. I recommend that researchers investigate further teacher perceptions of culturally informed instruction, particularly teacher identity work and its impact on student productive struggle.

To implement many of the recommendations made in this study, it is essential that district policymakers, administrators, and teachers establish better communication channels among themselves. Although I examined in this study teacher perceptions of paradoxical management, to facilitate communication, the perceptions of policy makers and administrators must be explored as well. In addition, the experiences of other stakeholders (e.g., parents and
students) could further guide paradoxical management in the classroom. I recommend that researchers investigate further the experiences of other stakeholders in classroom management.

Although I focused this research on veteran teachers to explore their considerable experience and long-term perspective, I hypothesize that new teachers might be considerably more overwhelmed with paradoxical management, for they lack this experience and perspective. Therefore, I recommend that researchers investigate further new teachers’ perceptions of managing both grade-level instruction and customized support.

The individuals responsible for classroom management at this site were White classroom teachers who worked with a diverse group of students that included Black, Black African, Latinx, and White students. It is important to acknowledge that the participants’ biases influenced the perspectives and opinions presented at this site, just as my own biases might have influenced the findings of this research. It would be essential to explore the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and people of color teachers who manage both grade-level instruction and customized support for a diverse student body so that educators can understand a more complete picture of paradoxical management. Therefore, I recommend that researchers investigate further Black, Indigenous, and people of color teachers who work with multicultural and multilingual students.

**Conclusion**

The problem that I addressed in this study was the lack of understanding of urban elementary teachers’ experiences in Maine who manage the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and customize support. This tension had become more pronounced at the research site because of the impact of COVID-19 and recent district equity policies. Teachers had to balance the need to maintain grade-level instruction to prevent students from falling
further behind, while simultaneously customizing support to mitigate unfinished learning. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of urban elementary teachers in Maine who manage the paradoxical tension to deliver grade-level instruction and customize support.

To understand this problem, I drew on three research bases: paradox management theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, and differentiation pedagogy. Paradox management theory (Huq et al., 2017; Smith & Besharov, 2019; Smith & Lewis, 2011) provided a model to explore how teachers experienced the management of delivering both types of instruction. Culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000, 2018; Kelly et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Paris, 2012, 2021) helped to explore the polarity of grade-level instruction. Differentiation pedagogy (Bondie et al., 2019; Griful-Freixenet, 2020; Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Magableh & Abdallah, 2020; Puzio et al., 2020; Thompson, 1995; van Geel et al., 2019) provided a research base for understanding the polarity of customized support. In summary, I aimed to answer the central research question:

How do urban elementary teachers in Maine experience the management of the paradoxical expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and customize support?

The experience of managing the paradoxical expectation to deliver grade-level instruction and customized support was challenging for urban elementary teachers in Maine, but they considered themselves experts in this area. Although the participants found it difficult, they were able to describe their own models of complex management. As Dee put it, “That’s the art of teaching, we all do that.” Although the participants valued both polarities of instruction, they believed that the district’s recent policy shift towards grade-level instruction was an overcorrection. They acknowledged the benefits of engaging all students in grade-level, critical thinking, but they also saw deficits in instructing students far above their academic level,
particularly with skill-based instruction. The participants believed that the overcorrection resulted in teachers excluding students from opportunities for productive struggle and the development of a learner identity. Time pressures from curriculum pacing and new curriculum also made effective management difficult. The participants felt unable to follow their own management models because of district time pressures and grade-level expectations, which led to feelings of failure and concerns about losing students. Some participants identified culturally informed practices as facilitating student achievement of grade-level standards, but this question was not directly asked of participants. Overall, the experience of managing the paradoxical expectation to deliver both types of instruction was complex, challenging, and affected by a range of factors including district policy.

My recommendations focused on a model of paradoxical management that valued teachers’ roles and expertise. This paradoxical management approach involved collaboration among teachers, administrators, and policy makers to manage dynamically both polarities of grade-level instruction and customized support. Mutually agreed upon guardrails for both polarities would guide dynamic paradoxical management and would keep all stakeholders centered on the mission of maximizing student productive struggle.

In addition to adopting a paradoxical management model, three other recommendations emerged. To increase customization without compromising students’ participation in critical thinking, teachers could find opportunities for customization during skill-based instruction. Making time for culturally informed work (e.g., developing identities and curriculum) could also support classroom management. Reducing curriculum pacing over the year and school day would address the destabilizing influence of time pressures and better support teachers in classroom management. In summary, classroom management could better support student
productive struggle by adopting a paradoxical model of management that incorporated teacher expertise and allowed room for customized skill-based support, culturally informed work, and realistic timeframes.
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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

Institutional Review Board
Julie Longua Peterson, Chair
Biddeford Campus
31 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F
Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: January 18, 2023

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Laura Graves
FACULTY ADVISOR: Aniello Trotta, Ed.D.

PROJECT NUMBER: 0123-08
RECORD NUMBER: 0123-08-01
PROJECT TITLE: Urban, Maine, Elementary Teachers’ Experiences Managing the Paradoxical Tension to Both Deliver Grade Level Instruction and Customize Individual Support

SUBMISSION TYPE: Exempt Project
SUBMISSION DATE: 1/8/2023

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: 1/18/2023

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2 (ii)

The UNE Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

Additional IRB review is not required for this project as submitted. However, if any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the protocol, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other IRB-reviewed documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment to the IRB to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

Please feel free to contact me at (207) 602-2244 or irb@une.edu with any questions.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director, Research Integrity
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Printed Paper Mailbox Flyer and Email

Dear Teacher X,

I am conducting research for my dissertation pursuant to earning a Doctor of Education at the University of New England in Biddeford, Maine. I have had previous communication and approval from teacher leaders and the superintendent to conduct this research at your school.

My research focuses on exploring urban, veteran, elementary school teachers’ experiences with managing the paradoxical expectation to both deliver grade-level instruction and customize individual support. As a veteran teacher, working within a teacher-led governance model, as well as serving students with diverse needs and strengths, your experiences are particularly powerful.

I hope to interview up to 10 teachers, with representatives from all grade levels. The four criteria required for participation in this study are: being 18 years of age or over, elementary teaching experience of 10 years or more, teaching experience at this school of five years or more, and presently a general classroom teacher.

Should you choose to participate in this voluntary research, your participation will entail an initial 1-hour interview. This interview will be recorded on Zoom, with or without video. If I need further clarification to understand the initial interview, you may also be invited to participate in a voluntary, 30-minute, recorded, follow-up interview. In addition, you may withdraw from the study without penalty until interviews are complete. Participants will be invited to review their interview transcripts and the initial analysis of their transcripts for accuracy.

The results of this research will be shared with administration with the intent of learning from your experiences to better support teachers with this challenging management task. The names of all participants, this school site, and district collected for this study will remain confidential. Any results shared, will be shared in aggregate, and will contain no identifying information such as gender or grade level taught. At no time during the study process will any individuals, the school, or district be identified. Additionally, no cost will be incurred by the teachers, the school, or the district.

If you are interested in sharing your experiences with managing the need to both maintain grade-level instruction and customize individual support, please contact me by email at lgraves2@une.org or by phone at 207-233-9243. Your Participant Information Sheet is attached with further important information. If you choose to participate in this voluntary study, I will review this information with you before we begin.

If you have any questions, please contact me in person, by email, or phone.

Sincerely,

Laura Graves
Doctoral Student
University of New England
lgraves2@une.edu
xxx-xxx-xxxx
Staff Meeting Announcement

Dear Xxxxx School Staff,

As many of you already know, I have been pursuing a Doctorate in Education from UNE over the last three years. It is now time for me to begin the data collection phase of this degree. My research focuses on exploring urban, veteran, elementary school teachers’ experiences with managing the paradoxical expectation to both deliver grade-level instruction and customize individual support. As veteran teachers, working within a teacher-led governance model, as well as serving students with diverse needs and strengths, your experiences are particularly powerful.

I hope to interview up to 10 teachers, with representatives from all grade levels.

The three criteria required for participation in this study are:

• Elementary teaching experience of 10 years or more.
• Teaching experience at this school of five years or more.
• Presently a general classroom teacher.

Voluntary participation entails an initial 1-hour, recorded Zoom interview, with or without video. If I need further clarification to understand the initial interview, you may also be invited to participate in a voluntary, 30-minute, recorded, follow-up interview. In addition, you may withdraw from the study without penalty until interviews are complete. Participants will be invited to review their interview transcripts and the initial analysis of their transcripts for accuracy.

The results of this research will be shared with administration with the intent of learning from your experiences to better support teachers with this challenging management task. The names of all participants, this school site, and district collected for this study will remain confidential. Any results shared, will be shared in aggregate, and will contain no identifying information such as gender or grade level taught. At no time during the study process will any individuals, the school, or district be identified. Additionally, no cost will be incurred by the teachers, the school, or the district.

If you are interested in sharing your experiences with managing the need to both maintain grade-level instruction and customize individual support, please respond to my email or flyer, or stop by my room to have a conversation.

If you have any questions, please contact me in person, by email at lgraves2@une.org or by phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx.
APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word ‘we’ in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

The general purpose of this research project is to explore the experiences of 10 veteran, elementary teachers, such as yourselves, who are managing the dual expectations to both maintain grade level instruction and individualize support to maximize student learning. The nation is beginning to address the unfinished learning from the impact of COVID-19, as well as the historic impacts of racism in education. As our district moves towards more equitable instruction, teachers must maintain grade-level instruction to ensure that students don’t fall further behind and individualize instruction so students can address unfinished learning. This research hopes to explore teacher management of these dual goals to both learn from and better support teachers. Also, this research is the basis of the principal investigator’s dissertation, in fulfillment of UNE’s Doctor of Educational Leadership program.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because teachers at your school experience this paradoxical management, given the diverse needs and strengths of the student body that you serve. As current classroom teachers, with 10 or more years of experience, and five years of teaching experience at this teacher-led school, you have a strong background in this challenging management. Therefore, your experiences are particularly valuable to this study.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

You will be asked to participate in one semistructured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately one hour over Zoom. You may be invited to participate in a half-hour follow-up interview, should the principal investigator need to further clarify the description of your experiences.

You can choose a pseudonym (alias) to be used in place of your name for the study.

You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be audio or video recorded, according to your preference.
You will be emailed a copy of your interview transcript to review for accuracy. You will have seven business days to respond, or the principal investigator will assume that you have no comments, and the transcript will be assumed to be accurate.

You will also be emailed a copy of the principal investigator’s initial analysis of your transcript to ensure the analysis accurately reflects your experience. You will have seven days to respond, or the principal investigator will assume that you have no comments, and the analysis will be assumed to be accurate.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or loss of confidentiality. You have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

Please see the ‘WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?’ section below for additional steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

There are no likely benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information collected may help further the understanding of teachers’ experiences with classroom management.

**WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

**WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?**

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

Results of the study will be shared with school and district leadership. However, the data to be shared will be de-identified and presented in aggregate.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.
The following additional measures will be taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality:

- Data will only be collected during one-on-one participant interviews using Zoom, no information will be taken without participant consent, and transcribed interviews will be checked by participants for accuracy before they are added to the study.

- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.

- A master list of names, pseudonyms, and emails will be stored separately from study data, on a secure password protected computer, accessible only to the principal investigator. If participants prefer to communicate by phone, their phone numbers will also be included and secured on the master list. This list will be destroyed, after participants have had the opportunity to verify initial analysis for accuracy.

- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear participants’ conversations.

- Participants are given the option to turn off their camera during Zoom interviews.

- Once participants have reviewed the transcription, the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed.

- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.

- All data collected will be stored on a password protected personal computer accessible only to the principal investigator.

**WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?**

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation without penalty or loss of benefits, until the master list is destroyed. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you withdraw from this study before the master list is destroyed, any data collected from you will be destroyed. However, once the master list is destroyed, your data may not be able to be identified and removed.

**WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints, or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.
WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction:

Thank you for volunteering for this interview today.

Your experiences are powerful examples of urban elementary teachers managing the paradoxical tension to both maintain grade-level instruction and customize individual support.

The interview will take approximately 45–60 minutes. You will be provided with a copy of your transcript following the data collection process with the ability to update, change, retract or add to the content. Additionally, you may withdraw from this study at any time.

I am now going to give you a copy of the participant information sheet that outlines your rights as a participant and steps to preserve your privacy and confidentiality. I am happy to read this aloud with you. Do you have any questions?

Do you have a pseudonym you would like to use? ___________________

Do I have your permission to record this interview on Zoom, using my password protected computer? This transcript will be available to you to review.

Questions:

1. Describe your experiences managing instruction of both grade-level standards and customizing individual support for students.
   A. Can you give an example of when this management was challenging?
   B. Can you give an example of when this management was seamless?

2. What do you experience as the value of consistently teaching grade-level standards to maximize student learning?

3. What do you experience as the value of customizing individual support to maximize student learning?
   A. Have you experienced tension between these two objectives?
   C. Have you experienced interdependence between these two objectives?
   D. Have you experienced placing too much emphasis on one of the objectives to the detriment of the other?
If so, how did you experience the overemphasis?

• If so, how did you experience correcting or not correcting for the overemphasis?

4. What district policies or resources have you experienced as helping you to manage these dual objectives to maximize student learning?

5. What district policies or resources have you experienced as impeding you from managing these dual objectives to maximize student learning?

6. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences managing both the delivery of grade-level instruction and customized support to maximize student learning?