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Moving beyond the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment practices in South African Grade 10 classrooms: The case of a Johannesburg based school

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Moving beyond the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to assessment practices in South African Grade 10 classrooms: The case of a Johannesburg based school

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

26 August 2025

Declaration

I, Siobhan Dorrington, a registered student at the University of the Witwatersrand with student number 2246285, declare that this research report is entirely my own, unaided work. I pledge that this research report has not been submitted before for any degree, part degree, or examination at this or any other university.

Signed: *Siobhan Dorrington*

Date: 26 August 2025

Dedication

I dedicate this research report to my late grandfather, George Sainsbury Dorrington, whose memory lives on in my heart. Though you are no longer with us, your memory continues to guide and inspire me. This achievement and study are dedicated to you, Gramps.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to express my deepest gratitude to God, whose unwavering strength has been my constant companion throughout this entire study. His grace, wisdom, and guidance have been my foundation at every step of this project. Without His enduring support, completing this study would not have been possible.

I also want to extend my heartfelt thanks to my remarkable supervisors, Dr Sarah Blessed-Sayah and Dr Beatrice Akala. Your dedication to this study, expertise, and kindness have been a beacon of light throughout this process. You have both been more than just academic mentors to me; you have been constant sources of encouragement, wisdom, and understanding. There were moments when I doubted myself, but your undying belief in me never wavered, and it was your constant guidance that kept me focused and inspired. I am eternally grateful for the time, energy, and thought you invested in helping me grow, not just as a scholar but as a person.

Lastly, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to my incredible parents, Gareth and Chemene Dorrington. From the very beginning, your love and support have been my anchor. You have stood by me through every challenge, offering the emotional support I needed to stay grounded and keep pushing forward. There is no way to fully express the depth of my gratitude for the countless sacrifices you have made for me. Your encouragement and your constant presence have been my strength, and I owe this accomplishment to you and your love.

Abstract

Traditional ‘one-size-fits-all’ assessment approaches remain the predominant assessment methods used in South African classrooms, which is problematic in a country marked by rich cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity. Conventional assessment practices often fail to accurately reflect the full spectrum of learners’ abilities, which in turn poses a barrier to effective teaching and learning. This study explores the use of differentiated assessment strategies as a means to accommodate the diverse needs of learners in Grade 10 classrooms. The overall objective of the study was to explore how differentiated assessment can be utilised to improve learning outcomes and better meet the diverse needs of Grade 10 South African learners at a Johannesburg-based high school. This study focuses on three objectives, which include exploring teachers’ perceptions of differentiated assessment, identifying potential problems faced when implementing differentiated assessment, and investigating and understanding the support required by teachers to make this assessment approach viable in practice.

The study is located within an interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative research approach was adopted, employing a case study design to allow for an in-depth exploration of the issue within its real-world context. Participants were selected using a four-step sampling strategy to ensure a representative sample of Grade 10 teachers. I served as the primary tool for data collection while conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed thematically to identify recurring themes and patterns that shed light on the complexities of assessment practices in the classroom.

Findings from the thematic analysis of the data indicated that teachers at the Johannesburg-based high school recognise the value and potential benefits of differentiated assessment. The findings indicate that although the teachers recognise the value of differentiated assessment, they face significant structural challenges that hinder the practical implementation of differentiated assessment in their Grade 10 classrooms. The barriers faced by the teachers at the Johannesburg-based high school primarily stem from longstanding habits, curriculum pressures, and a reliance on uniform testing methods to meet departmental requirements. Such factors limit the flexibility needed to adapt assessment methods to meet the diverse needs of Grade 10 learners. Although teachers are faced with structural challenges, the study found that with appropriate support and adequate professional development, teachers at the

Johannesburg-based high school were willing and capable of adopting more flexible and inclusive assessment strategies. For differentiated assessment to become a reality in Grade 10 classrooms, it is recommended that the Department of Education reduce rigid assessment mandates and adopt a more learner-centred assessment policy framework.

Teachers, supported by professional development and systemic backing, would need to shift towards context-sensitive assessments that better cater to the diverse abilities, strengths, and experiences of Grade 10 learners. By empowering teachers through targeted professional development training and advocating for policy reforms, educational stakeholders can cultivate a more inclusive and responsive assessment culture that enhances learners' potential. Incorporating differentiated assessment practices into Grade 10 South African classrooms would assist in ensuring that every learner, regardless of their unique strengths or challenges, is provided with the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in ways that are meaningful and reflective of their unique abilities.

Key words: Differentiated assessment, one-size-fits-all assessment, South Africa, Grade 10, assessment practices.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement.
DBE	Department of Basic Education.
FET	Further Education and Training Phase0.
NCS	National Curriculum Statement.
NQF	National Qualification Framework.
OBE	Outcomes-Based Education.
RNCS	Revised National Curriculum Statement.
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The introduction sets the foundation for addressing an important issue in South African education, which is the persistent reliance on 'one-size-fits-all' traditional assessment methods. These conventional approaches fall short of acknowledging and accommodating the diverse capabilities of learners in the South African classroom, who are far from homogenous. As a result, the current assessment practices fail to reflect the true range of learners' abilities, which this study explored.

In this introductory chapter, I provide a comprehensive overview of the study's background, highlighting the critical problem that underscores the need for this research. I present the problem statement, outline the study's objectives, and provide the research questions that guided the study. Additionally, I provide a detailed justification for the study. Finally, definitions of key terminology pertinent to the study are provided. By focusing on these aspects, this chapter lays the groundwork for the exploration of differentiated assessment to address the shortcomings of existing practices and better serve the diverse learner population in South Africa.

1.1 Background of the Study

Within education, assessment has remained a focal point of global discourse, evoking various debates in contemporary times (see Hopfenbeck, 2024). Assessment is defined as any method used to gain insight into the current knowledge and understanding a learner possesses (Dietel et al., 1991). By implication, assessment can be described as the cornerstone of teaching and learning because assessment provides valuable feedback on learner progress, informs instructional decisions, and guides the adaptation of teaching and learning strategies to better meet the needs of learners. The significance of assessment resonates within the educational landscape as the 'zipper' between teaching and learning (Noman & Kaur, 2014). The use of the word 'zipper' serves as a metaphor that indicates the significant role that assessment plays in bridging the gap between imparting knowledge and learning, affirming its crucial position in education.

While a range of innovative and inclusive assessment strategies have been adopted in various international contexts, South Africa's assessment landscape, particularly

within the context of this study, continues to be driven by a measurement-focused approach (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). As of 2024, assessment practices in the country remain largely rooted in traditional standardised methods, which place great emphasis on uniformity, comparability, and high-stakes outcomes. Traditional standardised assessment refers to the use of formal evaluation tools that are administered and scored in a consistent, uniform manner across all learners. Such assessments are typically designed to assess performance against predetermined benchmarks or national standards, as explained by Kanjee and Sayed (2013) and Noman and Kaur (2014). I argue that traditional standardised assessments prioritise objectivity, consistency, and comparability, often valuing efficiency over responsiveness to individual learner differences.

Traditional assessment methods often rely on the memorisation and regurgitation of facts, which hinders meaningful learning by prioritising surface-level understanding over deep comprehension and critical thinking (Ghosh et al., 2020). Such an approach to assessment in the South African context is important to consider because, despite the dismantling of apartheid educational pedagogical and assessment practices, the education system seems to have remained unchanged in certain aspects. For instance, teachers continue to rely on uniform assessment methods. These methods are standardised approaches used to evaluate learner performance across a consistent set of criteria (Kanjee, 2020; Noman & Kaur, 2014). Although uniform assessment methods are problematic due to their inability to cater to learners' diverse learning abilities, I reckon there are some benefits to using this approach. One such benefit is that uniform assessment methods can ensure fairness by applying consistent criteria and standards to all learners undergoing evaluation.

van Staden and Motsamai (2017) identified a persistent emphasis on traditional assessment approaches. The South African curriculum, called the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), continues to favour classroom examinations and standardised national assessments. This has resulted in teachers focusing on seeking numerical evidence to determine where learners are in their learning (Kanjee, 2020; Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). Although the need for standardised national assessments cannot be entirely removed, a *sole* focus on external assessment as the key measurement for reforming teaching practices creates a disconnect between policy and its implementation. Standardised national assessments cannot be entirely

removed, as they play a crucial role in providing equitable and consistent evaluations of learners' learning outcomes (Kane & Wools, 2019).

I argue that the emphasis on uniformity in assessment impedes meaningful learning and reflects a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment that disadvantages learners with diverse abilities and needs. A 'one-size-fits-all' assessment approach refers to the use of identical tasks, formats, and criteria for all learners, irrespective of their individual contexts, learning profiles, or readiness levels. Such an approach assumes that all learners learn and demonstrate understanding in the same way, which is untrue and often disadvantages those who do not conform to the dominant norms of assessment. A lack of flexibility in assessment indicates a broader disregard for learner diversity and assumes a homogeneity that rarely exists in real classroom contexts. As a result, such an approach limits opportunities for all learners to demonstrate their knowledge in equitable and meaningful ways.

The continued use of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach suggests that the transformation of assessment practices in South African education has not been as impactful as envisioned in the post-apartheid era. As explained by Fitzsimons and O'Neill (2024), the 'one-size-fits-all' approach is particularly evident in the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase. Such an assessment approach becomes problematic as this phase is made up of high-stakes assessments that determine learners' eligibility for higher education and future careers. In assessment practices, however, especially towards the end of the FET Phase, a harsh form of individualisation takes precedence, marking learners out as passing or failing through stringent summative tests and the final Grade 12 school examination (Muller & Hoadley, 2019). I argue that such an approach is inadequate because it does not address the diverse needs of the learners in South African classrooms. Learners in South African classrooms differ based on socio-economic backgrounds, race, gender, and physical and intellectual abilities (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Uniform assessment practices are highly problematic; thus, there needs to be a change in assessment methods in South Africa. Differentiated assessment thus emerges as a promising approach to cater to the diverse student body in South Africa.

Differentiated assessment is a learner-centred approach that actively responds to the varied needs, readiness levels, and strengths of individual learners. Rather than

relying on uniform tasks and strict assessment criteria, it involves modifying assessment methods and formats to create multiple and equitable pathways for learners to demonstrate their understanding (Ali, 2015; Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Differentiated assessment stands in contrast to the current traditional, standardised 'one-size-fits-all' assessment models which apply the same tasks to all learners irrespective of their inherent differences. Where traditional assessment methods prioritise consistency, efficiency, and comparability, differentiated assessment emphasises flexibility, inclusivity, and the meaningful demonstration of individual learning. It shifts the focus from merely measuring achievement to supporting and capturing the depth and breadth of each learner's progress in a fair and responsive manner.

At this point, it is crucial to emphasise that this study does not focus on subject-based differentiated assessment. Rather, it explores differentiated assessment as a broader, more inclusive approach to assessment that transcends individual subjects. Differentiated assessment is not tied to a specific subject; rather, it involves tailoring assessment methods and strategies to meet the diverse needs of learners, irrespective of the subject being taught. The objective is to offer multiple ways for learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skills in any subject (Imbeau & Tomlinson, 2013). While the content of assessment and its departmental requirements differ between subjects, the principle of differentiated assessment itself can be applied broadly across all subjects to address the varied needs of learners.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The South African education system faces a significant problem in accommodating the diverse needs of its learners (see Mpu & Adu, 2021). This problem is largely evident in the poor performance outcomes at a national level and the heavy reliance on summative assessments. In the South African education system, summative assessments have become supported in educational policy documents and makes up 25% of learners' assessment marks (DBE, 2011).

Teachers in South African classrooms thus grapple with a fundamental disconnect between the mandated traditional 'one-size-fits-all' assessment approach and the diverse needs of their learners. The country's prevailing assessment policy embraces

a traditional ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, which is ill-suited for the diverse South African educational landscape. Learners are not identical in their academic abilities, which is why this ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is ineffective (Noman & Kaur, 2014). The varying learning abilities of learners call for a differentiated method of assessment in the classroom. Research on differentiated assessment strategies and their benefits does exist (see Ali, 2015; Noman & Kaur, 2014; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013); however, there is limited research on how to meaningfully incorporate differentiated assessment into Grade 10 South African classrooms.

Evidence of the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to assessment in South African education is seen with the country embracing a single assessment policy that is “applicable to all grades within the schooling system, from Grade R to Grade 12” (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013, p. 459). The single assessment policy used in CAPS is ineffective in catering to the diverse needs of learners, potentially hindering their progress and failing to provide an accurate image of their true abilities (Fitzsimons & O’Neill, 2024). It is thus problematic that modern classrooms are driven by uniformity rather than ensuring that the differential abilities of learners are considered. Along these lines, there is an urgent need to explore differentiated assessment practice and how the approach can be implemented within South African FET Phase classrooms.

To reiterate, this study is not subject based. The focus of this study is on the broader concept of differentiated assessment, which is not confined to a particular subject or discipline, as differentiated assessment cannot be reduced to a discipline-specific practice. Rather, differentiated assessment centres on the epistemological understanding of how assessments can be tailored to address the diverse cognitive and contextual needs of learners (Ali, 2015; Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021). Differentiated assessment is fundamentally about accommodating the psychological aspects of individual learners’ innate abilities and the sociological factors of their unique contexts and backgrounds (Aldossari, 2008; Kaur et al., 2019; Moon, 2005; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). In essence, differentiated assessment is centred around adjusting the way learners are assessed to better suit their abilities and the different experiences they bring with them into the classroom. This approach therefore considers how learners naturally learn and their unique backgrounds to ensure they have a fair chance to succeed.

Rather than being a discipline-specific practice, as explained by Kaur et al. (2019), differentiated assessment is focused on providing a flexible framework that can be applied across all subjects to meet the varied needs of learners. Therefore, focusing on a specific subject does not capture the essence of differentiated assessment. In clear terms, differentiated assessment is about customising the assessment process to fit the learners' profile rather than being limited by subject-specific constraints.

1.3 Research Objectives

1.3.1 Main Research Aim

Having highlighted the problem with 'uniform' assessment practices and the need for a differentiated approach to assessment, the overarching aim of this research was to:

> Explore whether, and in what ways, differentiated assessment strategies are being employed in Grade 10 South African classrooms to respond to the diverse learning needs of learners.

1.3.2 Specific Research Objectives

To achieve this, the specific objectives of the study were to:

- Explore Grade 10 teachers' perceptions and understanding of differentiated assessment.
- Identify potential problems Grade 10 teachers experience that could constrain the implementation of differentiated assessment in their classrooms.
- Investigate the types of support strategies needed to assist Grade 10 teachers in facilitating the possible implementation of differentiated assessment strategies.

1.4 Research Questions

1.4.1 Main Research Question

The overall question posed in the study:

To what extent, and in what ways, are differentiated assessment strategies being employed in Grade 10 South African classrooms to address learners' diverse learning needs?

1.4.2 Sub-Research Questions

The following sub-questions were used to clarify and address the need for differentiated assessment practices in Grade 10 classrooms:

- How do Grade 10 teachers perceive and conceptualise differentiated assessment within the context of their teaching practices?
- What are the perceived problems that could impede the implementation of differentiated assessment strategies in Grade 10 classrooms?
- What support strategies do Grade 10 teachers identify as essential to facilitate the effective adoption of differentiated assessment practices into their classrooms?

1.5 Rationale and Justification of the Study

The interest and motivation for this study originated from my background as a trained FET teacher and from extensive experience in this phase. Through personal observations made during practical experience, I recognised the impact that assessment practices have on the academic achievement of Grade 10 learners.

The focus on Grade 10 stems from the fact that the grade is a crucial year of study for South African learners. Grade 10 marks a significant year in which learners' subject choices impact their academic futures, which will shape their university entrance and career trajectories. Moreover, the knowledge and skills acquired during Grade 10 serve as the foundation for success in the National Senior Certificate examinations that take place in Grade 12, which is a prerequisite for matriculation and access to higher education opportunities and certain career paths. This highlights the importance of inclusive and equitable assessment practices for learners.

The use and benefits of differentiated assessment have been documented in educational research. However, the findings have generally been neglected, which is

problematic because assessment is an important aspect of teaching and learning (Dison & Padayachee, 2022; Kanjee & Mthembu, 2015; Noman & Kaur, 2014).

Research on integrating differentiated assessment in Grade 10 classrooms is essential, given that this grade is a significant turning point in a learner's educational journey and marks a decisive stage in shaping the learner's future educational outcomes. Moreover, the South African curriculum emphasises inclusivity as a fundamental principle to accommodate the diverse needs of learners. I make this statement because inclusive assessment practices are one of the general aims of the South African curriculum, as evidenced by the statement that "inclusivity should become a central part of the organisation, planning, and teaching at school" (DBE, 2011, p. 5). Yet, the persistent reliance on traditional 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to assessment fails to align with this objective, thereby compromising the educational experiences and prospects of South African learners.

The significance of this research endeavour lies in its potential to contribute towards bridging this gap by investigating the integration of differentiated assessment practices in Grade 10 classrooms. Additionally, this research aimed to provide new insights into Grade 10 teachers' perceptions of differentiated assessment, potential challenges hindering its use, and effective implementation strategies. Moreover, this research is situated within the broader context of national educational goals and policies, particularly the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) mandate for inclusive education. This study could benefit the DBE by bringing forward key insights into the practical implementation of differentiated assessment. Moreover, the study could offer the DBE actionable recommendations that could be used to inform the country's assessment policy.

By addressing this critical gap in the literature, this study sought to contribute to the realisation of this overarching educational objective. This can be achieved by catalysing positive change within the South African education system to foster an equitable and inclusive learning environment. Additionally, this study sought to contribute to the current body of knowledge and literature in this area of study.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

To ensure clarity and alignment with the focus of this research, the following key terms are defined within the context of the study:

Assessment refers to the systematic process of gathering, interpreting, and evaluating information about learners' knowledge, skills, and progress (Dietel et al., 1991). Assessment informs teaching practices and supports student learning and development.

Assessment practices refer to specific methods, tools, and strategies used by teachers to evaluate a learner's performance and understanding.

Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement refers to the national curriculum framework used in South African schools, which outlines the content to be taught and the assessment standards for each subject and grade. This policy statement provides a structured and uniform guideline for teaching and learning to ensure standardisation across all public schools in the country.

Traditional assessment refers to the use of standardised methods of evaluating learners understanding of content and the development of skills (Kanjee, 2020). Such assessments often focus on measuring content knowledge and cognitive recall.

One-size-fits-all assessment refers to a uniform approach to assessment whereby all learners are evaluated using the same assessment approach, irrespective of their unique backgrounds (Noman & Kaur, 2014). This assessment practice assumes homogeneity among learners.

Differentiated assessment refers to a flexible approach to evaluating learners that considers individual learning needs, abilities, and preferences (Ali, 2015; Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). This approach to assessment aims to

provide multiple pathways for learners to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.

High school refers to the secondary level of formal education, serving learners from Grades 8 to 12 in the South African context. It plays a crucial role in preparing learners for higher education, vocational training, or entry into the workforce.

Grade 10 refers to the tenth year of formal schooling in the South African education system, which forms part of the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase. It is a foundational academic year that prepares learners for subject specialisation and the final years of secondary education.

1.7 Layout of the Research Report

The structure of this report consists of five chapters and is presented as follows:

Chapter One

Chapter One sets the foundation for this report by providing a comprehensive background of some of the key issues that frame the study. In this chapter, I introduce the study's context, outline the problem statement, detail the study's objectives and research questions, and provide a rationale for the study's significance. I conclude the chapter with a detailed outline of the study's layout.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two provides a review of extant literature and is organised and presented as follows:

- Assessment in education.
- Setting the context: Assessment in South Africa.
- Formative and summative assessment.
- Problems associated with the uniform approach to assessment.
- Differentiated assessment.

In addition to the review of extant literature, I discuss the theoretical framework that underpins the study in this chapter.

Chapter Three

In Chapter Three, I provide a detailed explanation of the study's research methods. This chapter begins by identifying and discussing the research paradigm that guided the study. This is followed by an overview of the research design, which includes outlining the structure and strategy for conducting the research. Next, the chapter details the research approach, describing the study population, the sampling methods, and the criteria used for participant selection. This is followed by an explanation of the procedures used for data collection, processing, and analysis. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on the quality criteria employed in the study as well as the ethical considerations addressed throughout the research process.

Chapter Four

Chapter Four presents the research findings, which include the analysis and results derived from the collected data, along with a discussion of the themes that address the research questions. This chapter begins with an introductory section and proceeds with a description of the participants. Subsequently, the themes of the study are systematically presented under major headings in this section. Following the presentation and discussion of these themes, an in-depth analysis of the research findings is reported.

Chapter Five

In Chapter Five, the concluding chapter of this report, I provide a comprehensive conclusion to the study. I begin the chapter with a summary of the study's key findings. The summary then leads into a discussion of the findings of the study. Following this, I highlight the study's contribution to knowledge, outlining how the research adds value to the field and extends our current understanding of differentiated assessment. The implications of these findings are then explored, along with acknowledging the study's

limitations. I conclude the chapter by proposing recommendations for future research into exploring the use of differentiated assessment to move beyond the current 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment in Grade 10 South African classrooms.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

Chapter Two is focused on exploring existing literature related to the practice of differentiated assessment in education. I begin the chapter with an exploration of the concept of assessment in education, differentiating between formative and summative assessment and examining South African classroom and assessment practices. I then explore the limitations of the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment, highlighting its challenges in accommodating diverse learner needs. Central to this review is the introduction of differentiated assessment as a responsive and inclusive strategy. I conclude the chapter with a description of the theoretical framework that was used to guide this study.

2.2 Assessment in Education

Within education, the understanding and interpretation of assessment have remained a focal point of global discourse, evoking various debates in contemporary times (see Berry & Adamson, 2011; Kanjee et al., 2022). Kanjee et al. (2022) argue that "current understandings and interpretations of the concept of assessment is highly contested" (p. 5). As mentioned in the introductory chapter (section 1), assessment is any approach used to gain an understanding of learners' acquired knowledge (Dietel et al., 1991). From this, assessment is considered as the bridge between teaching and learning. Thus, assessment is a fundamental aspect of education because it shapes the teaching and learning process (see Ali, 2015).

Drawing from the above-mentioned, assessment encompasses a process undertaken by teachers and learners, aimed at gathering valuable information to inform instructional decisions and enhance learning outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 2018; Braun et al., 2006; Kanjee & Mthembu, 2015; Letshwene & du Plessis, 2021; Reddy et al., 2015). Such an inclusive perspective highlights assessment's function as a tool for measuring academic achievement and supporting learning through both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The importance of assessment has become central in contemporary education discourse, with assessment scholars recognising its integral role in the business of teaching and learning.

Assessment serves multiple purposes simultaneously and takes a variety of forms. As Boud (2000) asserts, assessment involves “identifying appropriate standards and criteria and making judgements about quality” (p. 151). Assessment thus functions as a tool to gauge learners understanding and progress and to make informed instructional decisions that are tailored to learners’ individual needs. This process is essential for fostering lifelong learning, further highlighting that assessment is an indispensable component of education that extends beyond traditional evaluations. Additionally, assessment can serve to diagnose learning gaps, motivate learners, and monitor progress (Kane & Wools, 2019). Such versatility underscores assessments’ importance and brings to light the challenges associated with ensuring that assessments are effectively designed and implemented.

Given that assessment is a central part of teachers’ classroom practices and its potential to either support or hinder learning, the concept of assessment literacy becomes vital. Assessment literacy is defined as “an individual’s understanding of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational decisions” (Kanjee & Mthembu, 2015, p. 143). Without a solid foundation in assessment literacy, teachers may struggle to interpret and utilise assessment results effectively, which can ultimately hinder their ability to support learners learning and address individual learning needs. However, as studies have shown, “few teachers are well prepared to deal with the realities of interpreting, evaluating, and using test results for a variety of purposes” (Kanjee & Mthembu, 2015, p. 146). Therefore, fostering assessment literacy among teachers is crucial for improving pedagogical practices and enhancing learning outcomes.

Beyond its role in the classroom, assessment serves as a means of communication, providing learners, their parents, and educational stakeholders with valuable feedback on academic progress and areas of improvement for a learner (Ali, 2015). Dison and Padayachee (2022) describe this aspect of assessment as a dynamic, socially situated process that involves multiple stakeholders, each bringing their perspectives to the table. This suggests that assessment is shaped by broader societal, cultural, and policy-driven forces, sometimes creating tensions between the diverse purposes it is intended to serve and the beliefs of those in control. A similar sentiment is shared by Elwood and Murphy (2015), who argue that assessment is an activity that involves “both process and structure that address a societal need located assessment practices

in broader systems of relations and social structures in which they have meaning" (p. 183).

Two key components central to assessment are research rigour and validity. Validity, as explained by Buckley-Walker and Lipscombe (2022), refers to the extent to which assessment outcomes are supported by empirical evidence and sound theoretical rationale. Validity thus ensures that the interpretations and decisions based on the assessment are appropriate and meaningful. On the other hand, research rigour pertains to the consistency of assessment results across different contexts and conditions (Buckley-Walker & Lipscombe, 2022). These two concepts are fundamental in determining the quality and effectiveness of any assessment practice.

As scholars increasingly recognise assessment's pivotal role in education, it becomes evident that well-designed assessment practices are essential components of teaching and can be a driver of learning outcomes (Dison & Padayachee, 2022). As research demonstrates, the impact of high-quality assessment on learner achievement is profound. Effective assessment practices have been linked to significant improvements in academic performance, as found by a study conducted by Kaur et al. (2019). Importantly, within the framework of differentiated instruction, assessment assumes even greater significance (Moon, 2005). By accommodating diverse learning needs, assessment serves as a crucial component for fostering inclusivity and equity in the classroom, ensuring that all learners have equitable opportunities for success. Assessment is therefore a multifaceted process deeply intertwined with teaching, learning, and learner development that plays a crucial role in educational practices.

Developments over the last several years have made it clear that a significant number of countries are moving away from traditional rote-based learning systems towards learning that encourages the development of 21st-century skills (UNESCO, 2014). These skills include critical thinking, creativity, communication, digital literacy, and problem-solving (UNESCO, 2014). Care et al. (2017) found that public education systems in 113 countries across the globe had defined education as being something more than equipping learners with academic or technical skills for work. However, not many were clear about how these skills were to be integrated into national curricula. As a result, there has been tension between existing structures of education systems

and the desire to develop these skills to prepare learners for the complexities of the modern world (Care et al., 2017).

Having noted the significant role of assessment, across the globe, schools employ various assessment practices, which are influenced by prevailing educational philosophies, national contexts, and national educational objectives. For instance, standardised testing dominates assessment practices in countries like the United States of America and South Korea, where high-stakes decisions hinge upon test scores (Song et al., 2021). Such an approach could be problematic because it places immense pressure on learners to perform well in high-stakes assessments. In contrast, European countries such as Finland prioritise holistic assessment approaches, embracing formative assessment to provide learners with meaningful feedback and supporting learner progress over standardised test scores (Franco, 2020). These contrasting approaches highlight the diversity of assessment philosophies, and the varying emphasis placed on different educational outcomes.

Canada has shifted its assessment practices towards evaluating learners' mastery of 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving (Amandi, 2023). The approach used in Canada is beneficial because it equips learners with the tools necessary to navigate the complexities of the modern world. The focus on developing skills to be successful inside and outside school is also evident in Mexico, whereby education has started to focus on the development of socio-emotional skills, both related to the learners and about others, as well as critical thinking skills (Care et al., 2017). 21st-century skills are also fostered in Kenyan education, as observed by Care et al. (2017). In Kenya, the development of these essential skills is crucial in reflecting the country's priority, which is to promote sustainable development and the importance of making meaningful contributions to society (Care et al., 2017). These countries highlight the global trend toward assessment practices that prepare learners for an increasingly interconnected and complex world.

In contrast, many Asian countries continue to prioritise content-heavy assessments that emphasise rote memorisation and the mastery of factual knowledge (Lamichhane, 2018). This approach to assessment is highly problematic because it limits learners' ability to develop higher-order thinking skills and may not fully capture learners' true abilities and prepare them for lifelong learning. Meanwhile, Australia and New Zealand

have started embracing innovative assessment techniques by utilising online assessments and computer-adaptive testing to tailor assessment experiences to individual learners (Cumming et al., 2019). This learner-centred approach to assessment aids in fostering learners' ownership of their learning. These contrasting assessment approaches reflect the evolving nature of assessment as it adapts to the diverse educational needs of learners in different global contexts.

In sum, assessment stands as a multifaceted and indispensable pillar of education, shaping the academic trajectory of learners and the pedagogical practices of teachers. Assessment serves three broad and interconnected functions: it guides and supports learning, certifies learners, and ensures public accountability of teachers and institutions (Black, 1993). Far from being a mere tool for gauging performance, assessment can drive meaningful learning experiences by providing insights into learners' progress, guiding instructional choices, and fostering equity in diverse classrooms. As education systems worldwide evolve, the shift towards embracing 21st-century skills emphasises the need for assessments that go beyond content mastery and toward valuing critical thinking and adaptability (Care et al., 2017). As countries make this move, the challenge remains to craft assessment systems that are as dynamic, inclusive, and forward-thinking as the learners they serve. The global discourse on assessment highlights a need for balance between summative and formative practices, which will be explored below, to ensure that learners are evaluated and empowered to succeed in an increasingly complex world.

2.3 Setting the Context: Assessment in South Africa

The South African education system has undergone numerous reforms since the advent of democracy in 1994, driven by the goal of achieving equity and quality and the democratisation of education. South Africa embarked on a mission to cultivate an inclusive education system centred around redressing historical inequalities through curriculum reform (Jansen, 1998). Central to these reforms have been multiple changes in curriculum policy, which have significantly impacted assessment practices.

Central to this transformative process was the implementation of assessment policies, as evidenced by the increase in policies, acts, and regulations within the South African education system (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). However, concerns about "why, how, and

when to assess learners have been evident in much of the debates surrounding recent South African curriculum reform" (Vandeyar & Killen, 2003, p. 119). By implication, this highlights the ongoing debates in South African curriculum reform regarding the reasons, methods, and timing of assessing learners. This suggests that there are significant concerns and discussions surrounding these aspects within the context of educational changes in South Africa.

The first post-apartheid curriculum reform was the introduction of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) in 1997, a radical shift aimed at democratising education by focusing on learner outcomes rather than content delivery (Bertram et al., 2021). OBE specified the outcomes learners were expected to achieve at various stages of their schooling career. While OBE granted teachers the autonomy to design lessons and learning materials around stipulated learning outcomes, it was criticised for its complexity and failure to adequately account for the realities of South African classrooms where resources and teacher training were lacking at this time (Jansen, 1998). The mismatch between policy intentions and classroom realities exacerbated an already fragile learning environment.

In response to OBE's shortcomings, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) was introduced in 2002. NCS provided clearer guidelines and a more structured approach to teaching and learning across all grades. Jansen (1998) accurately predicted the limitations of OBE, asserting that "my thesis is that OBE will fail" (p. 323). The critique made by Jansen draws our attention to the problematic nature of rigid, 'one-size-fits-all' curricular policies because such systems fail to account for learner diversity. The NCS aimed to simplify assessment by focusing on clearly defined outcomes that would credit learners' achievements at every level, irrespective of their educational pathway (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). However, the lack of alignment between curriculum content and assessment strategies persisted, leading to further curriculum revisions. The Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS), introduced in 2005, emphasised key competencies and skills, maintaining a learner-centred approach with teachers as facilitators of learning. Yet, this curriculum oversimplified assessment procedures (Bertram et al., 2021; Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). This prompted another revision to the curriculum.

The new curriculum, referred to as CAPS, was introduced in 2011. CAPS provided more structured guidelines for both formative and summative assessments and standardised the curriculum across all grades and subjects (Muller & Hoadley, 2019). CAPS suggested that teachers should differentiate and intervene to address barriers to learning and accommodate learner diversity. However, at no point in the document are there any recommendations on the possible forms that the intervention could take. While CAPS addressed some previous gaps in pacing and sequencing, it still left room for improvement, particularly in how to handle diverse learner needs through the practice of differentiation. The development of an effective assessment policy for improving learning and teaching has been one of the major challenges the schooling system has faced in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite these efforts, South African teachers continue to struggle with effectively supporting learners who require additional assistance in meeting curriculum objectives. A study by Kanjee and Mthembu (2015) has shown that many teachers lack the necessary skills or resources required to provide targeted support, underscoring the need for varied and effective assessment practices in South Africa. This finding highlights a broader issue in South African education: while policy reforms emphasise the importance of equity, the practical application of differentiation remains inconsistent (Kanjee & Croft, 2012; Kanjee & Mthembu, 2015).

A significant structural reform in the post-apartheid education landscape was the introduction of the National Qualification Framework (NQF). The NQF aimed to create an integrated system for recognising learning achievements across educational levels and promoting access, mobility, and progression within education (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). NQF allows for the recognition of prior learning, thereby providing more flexibility in obtaining qualifications (Braun et al., 2006; Jansen, 2001). However, like other reforms, NQF reinforced an emphasis on learner performance, where achieving specific outcomes at various levels is the primary measure of success. This outcome-focused approach contributed to a persistent performance-driven ethos in the South African education system. As a result, summative assessments continue to take precedence over formative, developmental approaches (Kanjee, 2020).

The emphasis on high-stakes summative assessments is evident in the FET Phase in the South African schooling system. This phase spans grades 10 to 12, catering to learners aged between 16 and 18. The FET Phase is significant in the educational

journey of a learner because it marks the culmination of South African basic education. The assessments in this phase are predominantly high stakes. Especially matric examinations, which take place at the end of FET, whereby a harsh form of individualisation takes precedence, marking learners out as passing or failing through stringent summative tests and the final school examination (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013; Muller & Hoadley, 2019). These summative assessments are crucial for learners' progression to higher education and serve as a key indicator of school performance (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013; Muller & Hoadley, 2019). These exit examinations are overseen by Umalusi, the council responsible for FET, setting standards for assessment and certification (Letshwene & du Plessis, 2021). While this system provides consistency and fairness in assessing learner outcomes, it also perpetuates a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment that fails to account for individual learner differences, which is problematic, particularly in a diverse and unequal society like South Africa.

Despite some improvements and irrespective of the policy changes since 1994, traditional assessment methods, particularly high-stakes summative assessments, remain dominant in South African schools. As found by Dison and Padayachee (2022), high-stakes assessments have remained the dominant method of assessment in South Africa. There is a continued "primacy of the summative assessment paradigm" (Dison & Padayachee, 2022, p. 158). A similar sentiment is shared by Kanjee et al. (2022), who found that "the current system is strongly dominated by policies and practices that are assessment focused and measurement-driven, citing the dominance of school-based testing and the national matriculation examinations" (p. 2). This issue is not unique to South Africa but reflects a broader global trend in developing countries where standardised assessments are often emphasised due to the diverse requirements of various educational stakeholders. The focus on measurable outcomes can fragment learning into disconnected tasks, undermining deeper engagement with material and fostering critical thinking.

South African assessment practices in 2024 remain bound to a traditional, measurement-focused approach (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013; van Staden & Motsamai, 2017). The approach is evident with CAPS favouring classroom examinations and standardised national assessments. This has resulted in teachers focusing on seeking score-based evidence to determine where learners are in their learning (Kanjee, 2020;

Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). Although the need for standardised national assessments cannot be entirely removed, a *sole* focus on external assessment as the key measurement for reforming teaching practices creates a disconnect between policy and its implementation. Standardised national assessments cannot be entirely removed, as they play a crucial role in providing equitable and consistent evaluations of learners' learning outcomes. This approach to assessment in the South African context is important to consider because, despite the dismantling of apartheid educational pedagogical and assessment practices, the education system seems to have remained unchanged in certain aspects. For instance, teachers continue to rely upon uniform assessment methods. These methods are standardised approaches used to evaluate learner performance across a consistent set of criteria (Kanjee, 2020; Noman & Kaur, 2014).

Uniform assessment practices, while ensuring fairness, disadvantage learners with diverse learning needs and abilities (Care et al., 2017). This is driven by a belief in and commitment to classroom testing and examinations and external national assessments as key criteria for reforming learning and teaching practices (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). The persistence of these methods is evident across all grades, particularly in the FET phase, where high-stakes assessments determine learners' future education and work opportunities. These standardised assessments have become central to classroom practices, perpetuating a measurement-focused approach that prioritises examination results over deeper learning outcomes (Dison & Padayachee, 2022). The reliance on performance-driven 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to assessment limits the potential for differentiated assessment, which is essential for addressing the varied needs of South African learners. Although uniform assessment methods are problematic due to their inability to cater to learners' diverse learning abilities, there are still some benefits to using this approach. Such an approach is beneficial in ensuring fairness by applying consistent criteria and standards to all learners undergoing evaluation. However, what remains a problem is that fairness from the perspective of uniform assessment does not ensure equity, especially considering South Africa's context-based history of apartheid as earlier mentioned (see Care et al., 2017).

Drawing from the aforementioned, it becomes necessary to explore how to effectively assess learners in ways that acknowledge diversity while promoting equity and

inclusion. If not explored through contextualised research approaches, ineffective assessment practices can cause a misalignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment at both classroom and national levels, thus impeding optimal learning outcomes for learners. Hence, addressing effective assessment approaches is critical for the future of South African education, particularly in ensuring that assessment practices are aligned with the broader goals of curriculum reform and are responsive to the diverse realities of learners.

The transformation of assessment practices in post-apartheid South Africa has been acknowledged but not yet fully realised. While policies have evolved to promote equity and inclusion, the dominance of traditional summative assessments and the education system's performance-driven ethos continue to hinder the realisation of these goals. The need for a more flexible, varied, and learner-centred approach to assessment is clear, and this study aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about how to achieve these aims within the complex South African educational landscape. After all, assessment lies at the heart of teaching and learning, highlighting the importance of getting it right (van Staden & Motsamai, 2017). Therefore, the relevance of and timely need for this current study cannot be overemphasised.

2.4 Formative and Summative Assessment

As Black (1993) asserts, the primary aim of schooling is to promote student learning, with assessment serving as a critical component in this process. Assessment manifests in two key forms, namely summative and formative. The distinction between these two forms of assessment first appeared in education studies in the late 1960s and has since been the subject of significant debate and tension within assessment discourse. At the core of this distinction lies the differing purposes and uses of assessment results (Dixson & Worrell, 2016).

Summative assessment, also referred to as assessment *of* learning, remains central to most education systems. Summative assessment is a form of evaluation conducted at the end of an instructional period to measure how much learning has taken place (Dixson & Worrell, 2016). Summative assessment can therefore be defined as an evaluation that provides "systematic evidence to teachers about their students' learning and achievements" (Browne, 2016, p. 2). Summative assessments are

generally associated with formal, high stakes testing that yields quantitative data, which is then used to determine how much knowledge a learner has retained over a course of instruction. Such assessments are usually graded and used to signify completion of learning goals, typically tied to academic progression or certification.

As highlighted by Carless (2011) and Curry et al. (2016), summative assessments often focus heavily on labelling, accountability, eligibility, and learner performance against predetermined standards. These assessments are primarily conducted to certify learners' competence and assess the effectiveness of educational programs. Furthermore, Browne (2016) and Janeth (2019) note that summative assessment aims to measure learning at a fixed point, typically through benchmarking against standardised criteria. This fixed nature of summative assessment can be limiting, as it only captures a snapshot of learner performance and understanding. It is further argued that such assessments are frequently used to monitor institutional effectiveness rather than foster meaningful learning (Kanjee et al., 2022). Such assessment often primarily allows learners to showcase their conceptual understanding, neglecting deeper learning processes, which can be problematic in the long term.

In contrast, formative assessment, also referred to as assessment *for* learning, is recognised as a fundamental aspect of teaching and learning. Black and Wiliam (1998) offer a widely accepted definition, describing formative assessment as encompassing "all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by learners, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (p. 208). Essentially, formative assessment refers to any activity conducted by the teacher during lessons to check learners' understanding and progress. This perspective is echoed by Carless (2011), who emphasises that formative assessments guide future teaching and learning decisions, making them integral to ongoing educational improvement.

Unlike summative assessments, formative assessments are embedded in the day-to-day activities of the classrooms and are designed to provide both teachers and learners with continuous insight into learners learning (Browne, 2016; Curry et al., 2016). These assessments can take various forms, ranging from informal observations to structured formal activities that reveal learners' evolving understanding. Formative

assessments require a close relationship between teacher and learner, which enables both educational stakeholders to modify their approaches in response to the data gathered to enhance the learning process. The value of formative assessment for teachers lies in its ability to provide them with insights into their learners' understanding and use that to adjust their pedagogy to maximise learning (Dixson & Worrell, 2016; Fisher & Frey, 2014; Kanjee, 2020). For learners, the value of formative assessment lies in its ability to improve learning outcomes by providing learners with insight into where they are in their understanding (see Black & Wiliam, 1998). In essence, the goal of formative assessment is not merely to audit but to actively improve learning. Nevertheless, the potential of formative assessment has often been overshadowed by an emphasis on certification and accountability (Black, 1993; Carless, 2005). The focus on high-stakes summative assessments frequently limits the formative function of assessment, which is essential for fostering deeper, more reflective learning.

While the distinction between formative and summative assessments is well established, Black (1993) and Curry et al. (2016) acknowledge that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Formative assessments, when well designed and meaningfully implemented, can serve summative purposes by providing critical insights into learners' progress over time. Similarly, Brookhart (2004) argues that summative assessments can be used formatively, particularly when teachers provide learners with feedback that helps them understand their performance and improve upon it. This integrative approach highlights the need to balance both assessments in the classroom to support comprehensive learning. To effectively navigate this tension, teachers need to develop a nuanced understanding of how both forms of assessment can complement each other (Brookhart, 2004). Recognising the distinct yet interrelated purposes of these assessments will allow teachers to craft more effective assessment practices that foster learning while also fulfilling the necessary accountability functions. Striking this balance is essential for fostering an assessment culture that measures achievement and cultivates learner growth.

Overall, both summative and formative assessments play pivotal yet distinct roles in education, with each serving specific functions that, when balanced, can significantly enhance learning and improve practice. Summative assessments provide a final measure of learner achievement, often serving accountability purposes and guiding decisions on progression or certification (Carless, 2005; Dixson & Worrell, 2016).

However, its limitations in fostering deep, reflective learning make the role of formative assessment critical. Formative assessment, with its emphasis on feedback and ongoing improvement, enables both teachers and learners to adjust their approaches for more effective learning outcomes (Browne, 2016; Curry et al., 2016). The literature highlights the importance of integrating both forms, as doing so will ensure comprehensive evaluation and nurture continuous development to create a more holistic and supportive learning environment. However, Kanjee et al. (2022) remind us that the application and value of these forms of assessment depend heavily upon the specific educational context in which they are enacted and will be influenced by the worldviews, policies, and rationales of the educational context.

2.5 Problems Associated with the Uniform Approach to Assessment

Current assessment practices in South Africa predominantly centre around certification purposes. As a result, a culture of performativity has been fostered in the education system where learners' abilities are closely tied to assessment outcomes (Dison & Padayachee, 2022). However, the increasing diversity within South African classrooms exposes the inadequacies of the 'one-size-fits-all' approach, which falls short of addressing the unique educational needs of learners (Fitzsimons & O'Neill, 2024; Moon, 2005). As found in a study conducted by Noman and Kaur (2014), "teachers are still contingent upon uniform assessment methods for all students in the classroom irrespective of their diverse learning abilities" (p. 1).

Each learner possesses a distinct set of skills, prior knowledge, and understanding, rendering traditional assessment approaches inadequate in capturing and catering to the breadth of learners' capabilities. Classrooms consist of learners with varied educational needs and cognitive development paces, which necessitates a shift in assessment practices and culture (Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021; Moon, 2005; Noman & Kaur, 2014). As argued by Kaur et al. (2019) and Moon (2005), this diversity profoundly impacts the pace at which learners comprehend new content and demonstrate their learning. Moon (2005) similarly articulates, "because students do not progress at the same rate and in the same patterns, it is necessary to use carefully collected data to make adjustments during the instructional sequence for students to better understand and assimilate new material" (p. 229). This perspective underscores

the necessity of considering the academic diversity of learners throughout the teaching, learning, and assessment process.

Yet, modern classrooms often neglect the diversity and are instead driven by uniformity and the expectation that all learners can thrive under identical assessment conditions. Such an oversight is problematic, as it stands to limit learners' opportunities to demonstrate their understanding at levels appropriate for their unique needs. Moreover, it fundamentally undermines the educational experience and outcomes for many learners who fall outside the 'norm'. As Ali (2015) aptly states, "the needs of the students cannot be met in the same way" (p. 29), highlighting the critical flaws in a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment. By enforcing a single method of assessment, educators inadvertently create barriers that restrict learners' opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and capabilities in ways that resonate with their strengths, thus failing to account for the individuality of each learner in the assessment process.

The challenge within the South African education system stems from the wide spectrum of learners' differences and needs. It is thus crucial to acknowledge that learners are not homogenous entities but rather individuals with unique aptitudes, interests, and learning preferences. Ali (2015) and Kaur et al. (2019) further argue that learners differ in interests, readiness, and learning profiles. Such diversity highlights the ineffectiveness of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment, as it is impossible to meet the diverse needs of learners through a singular assessment method (Fitzsimons & O'Neill, 2024). Learners cannot be put through the same educational hoops when they differ so greatly, making it highly ineffective and unjust to attempt to determine the competencies of a diverse learner body by using a single assessment approach.

Compounding the abovementioned issue is the pervasive influence of the standards movement in education, which has entrenched a culture of accountability where assessment is predominantly viewed through the lens of performance metrics (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Hoadley & Muller, 2016). The fixation on standardised performance, which is prioritised in the South African education system, diminishes the intrinsic values of learning and perpetuates inequalities. The fixation occurs due to imposing uniform expectations on learners with diverse backgrounds and capabilities. The

fixation originates from the misconception that standardised assessment offers a holistic evaluation, capable of providing an encompassing snapshot of learners' potential and development. The inherent flaw in this approach lies in its reliance on bell-curve thinking, which fails to acknowledge learner diversity (Noman & Kaur, 2014).

By prioritising standardised assessment, educational systems run the risk of overlooking learners' strengths and contexts, which hinders rather than fosters genuine learning and equitable opportunities. Moreover, the obsession with standardised performance undermines the fundamental principle of equity in education, as learners are expected to achieve uniform levels of proficiency irrespective of their circumstances at the same time (Jansen, 2001). The narrow focus on standardised measures overlooks the multifaceted nature of learners' abilities and diminishes the authenticity of assessment outcomes (Reddy et al., 2015).

The inherent assumption behind the 'one-size-fits-all' approach is that all learners progress through the same stages of understanding at the same time, which is simply not the case. Each learner brings unique backgrounds, experiences, and cognitive processes into the classroom. By standardising assessments, we in turn neglect the rich tapestry of skills and learning modalities that exist within the classroom (Jansen, 2001). When assessments do not accommodate diverse learning needs, they run the risk of perpetuating existing inequalities within the education system. Moreover, standardised assessments can misrepresent a learner's true abilities, leading to misconceptions about their potential.

To truly uphold the principles of equity and inclusivity, it is imperative that assessment practices embrace diversity and provide learners with varied opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. This is highly problematic and results in the central goal of assessment not being achieved, which is to adequately reflect learners' actual performance. Moreover, Noman and Kaur (2014) argue against expecting uniform learning outcomes from all learners due to the adverse psychological effects such expectations may impose. However, I strongly contend that all learners can achieve the same outcomes, albeit at different times. This problematic situation places significant responsibility on teachers to recognise and honour learner diversity in all facets of the teaching and learning process. Therefore, to accommodate learners' varying needs, experiences, knowledge, and abilities, it is essential to move

away from standardised approaches toward individualised assessment practices (Aldossari, 2018; Ali, 2015; Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021). Such an approach would require teachers to tailor assessment strategies to meet the diverse needs of learners and, in turn, ensure equitable opportunities for success.

Considering the discussion that unfolded above, it becomes clear that the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment is impractical and detrimental to learners' holistic development. To truly uphold the principles of equity and inclusivity in education, assessment practices must embrace diversity and provide learners with varied opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. Failing to do so leads to the central goal of assessment, which is to accurately reflect learners' performance being undermined. The shift towards individualised and equitable assessment practices is essential in fostering meaningful learning experiences and promoting educational equity. By moving beyond standardised assessment practices, teachers can create more inclusive and empowering learning environments where every learner can succeed. It is thus essential that teachers and the education department focus on developing and implementing strategies that fit individual learners' needs (de Jager, 2013). The South African curriculum explicitly recognised the diversity of learners, who vary in socio-economic backgrounds, gender, race, and physical and intellectual abilities (DBE, 2011). These differences highlight the problematic nature of the 'one-size-fits-all' assessment approach because it fails to accommodate the diverse needs of learners. Differentiated assessment, therefore, is not just a preferable option; it is a necessary response to learners' diversity, bridging the gap between the South African curriculum's acknowledgement of learners' diversity and the enduring reliance on a 'one-size-fits-all' assessment approach.

2.6 Differentiated Assessment

As highlighted in section 2.4, assessment practices in South Africa are predominantly centred around summative assessments. Hence, a culture of performativity has been fostered in the education system whereby learners' abilities are closely tied to assessment outcomes (Dison & Padayachee, 2022). The overemphasis on summative assessment has created a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that fails to accommodate the diverse educational needs of learners. Each learner brings unique

skills, prior knowledge, and ways of thinking into the classroom, making it essential to shift away from uniform assessment practices. Aldossari (2018) argues that the vast difference in learners' needs and cognitive abilities poses a challenge to the traditional assessment framework, necessitating a more varied and responsive assessment approach from teachers. Consequently, conventional traditional assessment methods prove inadequate for capturing the full range of learners' capabilities and hindering their ability to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding (Kaur et al., 2019; Moon, 2005).

The growing diversity in South African classrooms makes it essential for teachers to employ a broad spectrum of teaching and assessment strategies. Differentiation, which has gained significant attention since 2004, is an essential mindset and philosophy in addressing this unique aspect of South African education. According to Moon (2005), differentiation is concerned with the "recognition, articulation, and commitment to plan for students' differing needs" (p. 227). Differentiation is grounded in sociocultural theory and the principles of inclusion and equity, which propose that developmentally appropriate assessments that consider learners' social and cultural contexts and enable teachers to optimise each learner's potential (Imbeau & Tomlinson, 2013; Kaur et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Essentially, differentiation is centred around fostering a classroom environment in which a broad range of learners can succeed and maximise their potential.

Differentiated assessment lies at the core of effective teaching and learning. Ali (2015) defines differentiated assessment as the intentional adaptation of assessment strategies to address "individual differences between students" (p. 27), providing appropriate avenues for each learner to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. For Kaur et al. (2019), differentiation in assessment is "an approach that enables teachers to create opportunities for students from diverse academic backgrounds to effectively demonstrate their learning" (p. 161). Varsavsky and Rayner (2013) define differentiated assessment as an "educational structure that seeks to address differences among students by providing flexibility in the levels of knowledge acquisition, skills development, and types of assessment items undertaken by students" (p. 790). This proactive process enables ongoing and dynamic assessment that is essential for teachers to support learning and address learners' needs, strengths, and weaknesses (Ali, 2015; Imbeau & Tomlinson, 2013). Differentiated

assessment empowers learners by offering various ways to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and abilities, respecting their unique skills. Moreover, differentiated assessment respects learners' diverse talents and abilities due to being provided with various assessment approaches that enable them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a manner suitable to them. Despite the growing recognition of differentiated assessment as a vital tool in promoting equitable learning, there is a significant gap in the literature. In the South African context research, on practical, context-specific strategies for differentiated assessments implementation in Grade 10 classrooms is notably limited. This gap is particularly concerning because it hinders the development of tailored assessment approaches that are critical for addressing the diverse learning needs of Grade 10 learners. Without research grounded in the local context, teachers are left without the necessary framework to create inclusive and supportive learning environments that honour and nurture the unique potential of each learner.

Differentiated assessment stems from the assumption that assessment approaches need to be diversified and adapted to suit the diversity of learners' needs in the classroom since learners' needs cannot be met in the same way. Learners are diverse in their knowledge, skills, and comprehension rates, highlighting the need for differentiated assessment as these differences impact the pace at which learners comprehend new content and demonstrate their learning (Noman & Kaur, 2014). This suggests that teachers need to adapt their assessment approaches to meet individual learning needs, ensuring that every learner has an opportunity to succeed. Since learners differ in countless aspects, it has become recognised that it is important for teachers to deal with these variations by adapting their assessment approaches (Ali, 2015; Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021; Imbeau & Tomlison, 2013; Mills et al., 2014; Moon, 2005). Designing and adapting assessment approaches that are appropriate for learners is a central aspect of effective assessment. Differentiated assessment is an inclusive approach to assessment because learners' diverse needs are considered and valued in the assessment process instead of being viewed as a burden (de Jager, 2013). Strategies for implementing differentiated assessment have been explored globally. However, in the South African context, despite the evident need for differentiated assessment to accommodate learners' diversity, there is a notable lack of research on practical, context-specific strategies tailored to the unique problems of implementing differentiated assessment in FET Grade 10 classrooms.

For Ali (2015) and Eysink and Schildkamp (2021), selecting the appropriate and reasonable assessment tools and strategies that provide each learner with the best opportunity to demonstrate their learning capabilities is essential in this process. For this to occur, the assessment needs to align with learners' readiness, interests, and backgrounds (Ali, 2015; Laari et al., 2021). Using a variety of assessment tools is recommended as good practice and responds to the critique of the over-reliance on traditional assessment methods. Adopting differentiated assessment is an essential step in educational reform, which is vital to increase and enhance learning as learners are provided with a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning, skills, and knowledge and foster metacognition (Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021). Again, although the importance of differentiated assessment is well-documented and the value of varied strategies in fostering learning and metacognition is widely recognised, there is a glaring lack of research in the South African context that investigates practical, context-specific approaches for implementing differentiated assessment in Grade 10 classrooms.

One point of contention in the literature is whether all learners should be assessed on the same learning outcomes. Noman and Kaur (2014) argue that expecting all learners to achieve the same outcomes is problematic given their varying learning abilities. I find this view problematic because it implies that some learners are inherently unable to obtain the same standards as others. All learners need to work towards obtaining the same learning goals, which is central in assessment practices (Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021). I align more with de Jager (2013) and Moon (2005), who assert that differentiated assessment should still assess learners on the same core content, knowledge, and skills, though with varying degrees of support. This perspective aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasises that learners can achieve success when challenged within their developmental range under the guidance of others who can provide instruction. Differentiated assessment thus pushes learners beyond their current capacity by challenging and supporting them (Imbeau & Tomlinson, 2013). Differentiated assessment thus provides the opportunities necessary for learners to succeed in reaching the same learning outcomes, albeit through different pathways.

Differentiated assessment is about varying assessment tasks and involves the thoughtful, proactive selection of assessment strategies that meet learners where they

are cognitively (Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021). Teachers thus need to develop an understanding of their learners' backgrounds, strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs. This in-depth understanding of learners can be obtained through pre-assessment and ongoing assessment, allowing teachers to tailor instruction and evaluation accordingly (Aldossari, 2018; Kanjee & Mthembu, 2015; Moon, 2005). Effective differentiation involves using multiple entry points for learners to demonstrate their learning, thus ensuring no learner is disadvantaged by the rigid 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Essentially, differentiated assessment aids in creating an evaluation culture that enhances participation and supports the development of learners' understanding of the learning and assessment process (Laari et al., 2021).

As aforementioned, differentiated assessment is centred around adapting assessment approaches to meet the diverse needs of learners, acknowledging that learners vary in all aspects (Tomlinson, 1999). The core idea behind differentiated assessment is that no single assessment method can effectively evaluate all learners, particularly in an education system as diverse as South Africa's. Differentiated assessment ensures that learners are evaluated based on their strengths, allowing for more accurate reflections of their learning. However, the DBE (2011) argues in favour of standardised assessment practices to ensure that assessments are equitable and fair. The standardised assessments stipulated in CAPS are designed to be uniform and is believed to offer a level playing field by assessing all learners the same way. The DBE (2011) maintains that standardised assessments provide a clear benchmark for evaluating learner performance, ensuring consistency and comparability across schools, districts, and even regions. While the argument made by the DBE (2011) for standardised assessment is compelling, the concept of fairness and equity itself is nuanced. Fairness and equity are not about treating everyone the same; instead, it means providing all learners with the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a way that reflects their unique capabilities. In a diverse society like South Africa, the imposition of standardised assessments without differentiation can lead to inequality. Differentiated assessment practices, on the other hand, are inherently more inclusive because they recognise and respond to learners' diverse needs. In fact, the argument for differentiated assessment supports the idea of fairness and equity by acknowledging that not all learners can be assessed in the same way. Both standardised and differentiated assessment practices have their place in the South

African education system; however, for fairness and equity to be achieved, there must be a recognition of the diverse needs of learners.

Drawing from the work of Tomlinson (1999), Tomlinson and Imbeau (2011), and Tomlinson and Moon (2013), differentiated assessment can be structured around four key elements: *when*, *what*, *how*, and *why*. These elements provide a framework for understanding how assessment can be tailored to meet diverse learners' needs effectively. *When* refers to the timing of assessment. For effective differentiation, Tomlinson and Moon (2013) emphasise time, which refers to the occasion when an assessment should be conducted. Assessment should be conducted before, during, and after instruction. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) emphasise that assessments should not only be summative but should be integrated throughout the learning process. For Tomlinson and Moon (2013), pre-assessment, which is conducted at the beginning of teaching a unit, is the most appropriate and effective time to assess learners. The information obtained before teaching a unit serves diagnostic purposes to make amendments in instructional plans to better meet learners' needs (Kaur et al., 2019). Pre-assessment allows teachers to understand learners' prior knowledge, identify gaps, and set differentiated learning pathways accordingly. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) also highlight the importance of ongoing assessment throughout the learning of a unit. This formative approach allows teachers to monitor learners' understanding, learning profiles, and strengths, thus facilitating real-time adjustments to instructional strategies (Kaur et al., 2019). Assessment also needs to occur at the end of a unit, which often takes a summative form. Although this is often a formal process, Tomlinson and Moon (2013) recommend that teachers use a variety of assessment tools and approaches to facilitate differentiation in this process.

What refers to the elements of an assessment that can be differentiated. What can be differentiated includes the process and product. Process refers to the activities through which learners engage with, internalise, and transfer content. For effective differentiation, teachers need to provide multiple ways for learners to explore concepts, apply knowledge, and connect learning to their own lives and experiences (Kaur et al., 2019). By offering a range of activities tailored to learners' unique traits, teachers can make learning more accessible and meaningful. The product, on the other hand, focuses on the outcomes or demonstrations of learning. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2011) emphasise that different product assessments allow learners to

showcase their understanding in diverse manners. This flexibility respects individual learning preferences and strengths while ensuring that assessment remains equitable. This would require teachers to provide learners with clear learning goals and assessment criteria to maintain equity and fairness (Kaur et al., 2019).

How refers to the differentiation based on learners' profiles. Tomlinson (1999) explains that how differentiation occurs depends on three core factors: readiness, interest, and learning profiles. Tomlinson and Moon (2013) describe readiness as the learners' current proximity to specific learning goals, targets, or outcomes. A teacher can then differentiate assessment by attending to learners' readiness needs, through providing tasks with clear instructional guides. Interest is another powerful tool for differentiation that is concerned with a learner's passion for a particular topic they are studying (Kaur et al., 2019). Designing assessments that direct learners towards their area of interest is well known for maintaining learners' engagement and motivation. Teachers can differentiate assessments by providing choices for learners to display their knowledge and skills (Kaur et al., 2019). Learners' profiles are concerned with factors that define an individual's personality, such as gender, race, culture, and language (Kaur et al., 2019). Here, teachers would need to design assessments that facilitate and create a variety of ways for learners to become engaged and demonstrate their learning. This responsiveness to learners' contexts helps foster a more inclusive classroom environment where all learners feel valued and supported.

Why refers to the reasons for differentiation. Tomlinson (1999) identifies three pivotal reasons for embracing differentiated assessment, which include accessibility, motivation, and efficiency for learning. By offering multiple pathways to demonstrate knowledge and understanding in assessment, differentiated assessment ensures that learning remains accessible to all learners (Kaur et al., 2019). Moreover, aligning assessments with learners' interests and learning profiles enhances learner motivation, resulting in learners believing in their capacity to perform (Kaur et al., 2019). Lastly, differentiated assessment yields richer insights into learner progress, which facilitates informed instructional decisions concerning learning progress and teaching approaches.

However, as found in a study conducted by de Jager (2013), teachers play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of differentiated assessment, making their

training and preparation essential. The study revealed that a significant number of teachers are not adequately trained to develop and execute differentiated assessment strategies effectively. It was also found that many teachers lack the assessment literacy necessary to implement differentiated assessment strategies in a meaningful and impactful manner (de Jager, 2013; Kaur et al., 2019). For differentiated assessment to succeed, teachers need to possess a deep understanding of differentiated assessment, an insightful understanding of their learners' diverse backgrounds, be well-versed in the curriculum, and demonstrate a high level of assessment literacy. Additionally, having a positive attitude towards differentiated assessment is critical, as it fosters a willingness to adapt and innovate assessment practices in the classroom.

Furthermore, differentiated assessment is a complex process that presents significant challenges. Teachers need to navigate resource constraints, especially in terms of time and the specialised assessment skills required to cater to heterogeneous classrooms (Laari et al., 2021). Balancing the diverse needs of learners in assessment, alongside the demands of the curriculum, can be overwhelming without proper support and training. This highlights the importance of comprehensive teacher training programs that equip teachers with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to implement differentiated assessment practices effectively in their classrooms. Despite the perceived effectiveness and value of differentiated assessment, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the exploration and investigation of differentiated assessment. More research is needed to address the practical challenges faced by teachers and to provide evidence-based strategies that support the successful integration of differentiated assessment into everyday teaching practices.

Overall, given the increasing diversity in South African classrooms, teachers are continually challenged to meet the wide-ranging educational needs of their learners, each of whom brings unique backgrounds, abilities, and experiences. To effectively address these diverse needs, teachers must engage in thoughtful decision-making regarding their assessment practices. As Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) argue, differentiation is crucial in honouring learner diversity, which is a core objective in South African education. Differentiated assessment thus evidently becomes vital in this context because the curriculum explicitly recognises the varied needs and differences of

learners. By adapting assessment strategies to meet learners' needs, differentiated assessment has the potential to create more equitable opportunities for academic success. This approach moves away from the misconception that fairness in education equates to uniform treatment of all learners. Instead, it focuses on providing each learner with tailored assessments and support necessary for them to thrive. In the South African context, where historical inequalities persist, differentiated assessment serves as a means of promoting inclusivity and fostering a learning environment that caters to the diverse student body. Moreover, differentiated assessment serves as a powerful tool for redressing systemic disparities, offering a pathway for learners from all walks of life to engage meaningfully with the curriculum. Providing diverse assessment formats and enabling learners to demonstrate their understanding in ways that align with their learning profiles helps foster a more inclusive, supportive educational environment.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

In addressing the diverse needs of learners in South African classrooms, it was essential to adopt a theoretical framework that captures the complexity of teaching and learning and the diverse sociocultural contexts in which these processes unfold. The heterogeneity of South African classrooms, shaped by learners' varied backgrounds, abilities, and experiences, necessitated an approach that recognised the individuality of learners while also accounting for broader structural influences, such as policy, inherent in the context under investigation. Moreover, it was crucial to employ a social theory framework that encompassed cognitive developmental explanations of learning. Differentiated assessment, by its very nature, requires a flexible, responsive approach to evaluating learning – one that considers learners' backgrounds, abilities, and experiences. Furthermore, employing a social theory framework supported the exploration of how differentiated assessment strategies are perceived and applied by teachers and how broader systemic factors – such as policy limitations – shape teachers' abilities to implement such a practice. To this end, I employed social constructivism as the guiding theoretical framework to enhance the understanding of the identified problem in the current study.

2.7.1 Social Constructivism

The domain of cognitive development is fundamental in understanding *how* individuals acquire, process, and apply knowledge. Cognitive development is concerned with how children's mental activities are linked to their biology and experiences (Cockcroft, 2009). Cognitive abilities, which transform in both structure and function over time, are at the heart of this process (Cockcroft, 2009). In the field of education, understanding cognitive development is important because it provides valuable insight into how learners construct knowledge and adapt to their learning environments. According to Cockcroft (2009), cognitive development is a constructive process whereby knowledge is actively constructed "based on the information from the environment and in our heads" (p. 326). This perspective aligns with constructivist theories, which emphasise the role of active engagement and interaction in shaping an individual's cognitive growth.

Both Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky are central figures in the development of constructivist theories, although their approaches differ. Piaget's (1964) theory of development is based on the premise that "development is a spontaneous process tied to embryogenesis which concerns the development of the body, nervous system, and the development of mental functions" (p. 20). Piaget (1964) argues that development occurs in distinct stages, with each stage marking a quantitatively different level of cognitive functioning. More so, Piaget (1964) notes that certain factors, including maturation, experience, and social transmission determine the pace at which children move through the stages. However, this process is seemingly viewed as a solitary one, where children actively construct knowledge on their own through exploration and interaction with their environment (see Figure 2.7). In this view, cognitive development is an individual process, and while social interaction is acknowledged, it plays a secondary role in comparison to internal biological and cognitive factors (Cockcroft, 2009).

In contrast, Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory emphasises the primacy of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development (see Figure 2.7). Cockcroft (2009) notes that cognitive abilities in this theory are not only biologically driven but are deeply embedded in socio-cultural environments. Within this perspective, learning is viewed as a social process whereby individuals co-construct knowledge through interactions with others. In this view, children are active

participants in their learning, but their cognitive development is shaped and mediated through cultural tools, language, and interactions with others who are able to provide instruction (Cockcroft, 2009; McKinley, 2015). As a result, learning occurs, and so knowledge develops when learners engage in meaningful social interactions with peers, teachers, and experts. Such interactional processes allow for the development of knowledge and skills, suggesting that social engagement is a catalyst for cognitive development. This understanding aligns with developmentalists who believe that children are active, constructive thinkers and learners (Flavell, 1994). Furthermore, it suggests that learners are not blank slates; they can transform what is presented to them in specific environments according to their cognitive structures (Flavell, 1994). Essentially, social interaction is believed to play an important role in cognitive development for social constructivists. Moreover, social constructivism acknowledges the significant role of cultural and social contexts in shaping learning experiences, recognising that individuals derive meaning within specific cultural and social frameworks (Warnich & Meyer, 2013). Social constructivists thus argue that considering the backgrounds and experiences of learners in all aspects of education is crucial because these factors significantly influence how they interpret and understand content knowledge.

2.7.2 Relevance of the Theory to this Study

To reiterate, social constructivism operates on the fundamental premise that knowledge and understanding evolve through social interactions and shared experiences (Kalina & Powell, 2009). Social constructivism was especially pertinent to this study's focus on differentiated assessment because it emphasises the central role that learners' social and cultural contexts play in their development of knowledge and their cognitive abilities. By acknowledging that learning is deeply situated within these contexts, social constructivism provided an essential framework for recognising and embracing diverse ways in which learners acquire and demonstrate their understanding.

As the framework for this study, social constructivism provides a powerful lens for understanding if and how teachers navigate the complexities of diverse classroom settings in the South African context. According to Bruner (2013), while meanings

reside in the mind, they originate in the cultural contexts in which they are created. Consequently, social constructivism foregrounds the importance of considering learners' varied backgrounds and experiences in all aspects of teaching and learning, including assessment.

Within the realm of differentiated assessment, this approach highlights the need to accommodate learning differences and varying cognitive abilities, which in turn allows learners to express their comprehension in ways that align with their strengths. As Tomlinson et al. (2015) argue, assessments tailored to learners' diversity aid in fostering deeper engagement with content and enhance motivation, ultimately enabling learners to showcase their full potential. This tailoring is essential in classrooms marked by social and cultural diversity, where traditional assessment models often fail to capture the richness of learners' varied experiences. Moreover, assessments that are tailored to learners' developmental stages and social realities empower learners to reach their full potential while cultivating meaningful engagement throughout the learning process (Tomlinson, 1999).

Creswell (2013) elaborates on this by highlighting that social constructivism brings attention to diverse local worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of specific contexts. These factors are crucial for understanding individual perspectives and actions, aligning closely with interpretivism in qualitative research. Social constructivism is particularly valuable for examining the nuances of human understanding, recognising that individuals possess diverse viewpoints shaped by their unique experiences and contexts. This multiplicity enriches discussions and promotes deeper comprehension of concepts through exposure to various perspectives. McKinley (2015) echoes this idea and asserts that social constructivism facilitates qualitative analysis that reveals insights into how people engage with the world, suggesting that our ideas and understandings are inherently tied to our lived experiences.

One concept from Vygotsky's work is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and it is useful for understanding the implementation of differentiated assessment within the framework of social constructivism. The ZPD is the "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance

or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The ZPD thus makes links between *what is known* and *what is unknown* by a child. This concept supports the idea that assessments should challenge learners beyond their current capabilities while still providing appropriate instruction to help them succeed. In practice, identifying each learner's ZPD allows teachers to tailor assessments to challenge and extend learners' capabilities while still promoting cognitive growth (Shabani et al., 2010). Assessments that are followed by clear instructions in this manner will enhance learners' engagement with content and their learning outcomes, making differentiated assessment a powerful tool for addressing diverse learning needs. Thus, integrating and acknowledging the place of ZPD in assessment can ensure that assessments align with learners' developmental readiness and strengthen the effectiveness of differentiated assessment (Shabani et al., 2010).

In the South African context, where classrooms are diverse, the principles of social constructivism are particularly relevant. By recognising the social and cultural dimensions that shape learners' educational experiences and cognitive development, this framework assisted in providing a more nuanced understanding of the various factors that influence learning outcomes. Differentiated assessment, informed by social constructivism, thus promotes inclusive and equitable practices that acknowledge diversity. Such an approach is beneficial for individual learners and enriches the classroom community by fostering a more dynamic and responsive educational environment.

Overall, social constructivism provided a robust and fitting theoretical framework for implementing differentiated assessment practices in Grade 10 classrooms. By revealing and acknowledging the interconnectedness of the social, cultural, and cognitive factors in the learning process, this theoretical framework offered valuable insights into fostering inclusive and equitable assessment practices. In a diverse society like South Africa, cultivating an educational environment that embraces these principles can contribute to building a more just and equitable learning environment (see Figure 2.7). This study used the framework of social constructivism to explore teachers understanding and use of differentiated assessment.

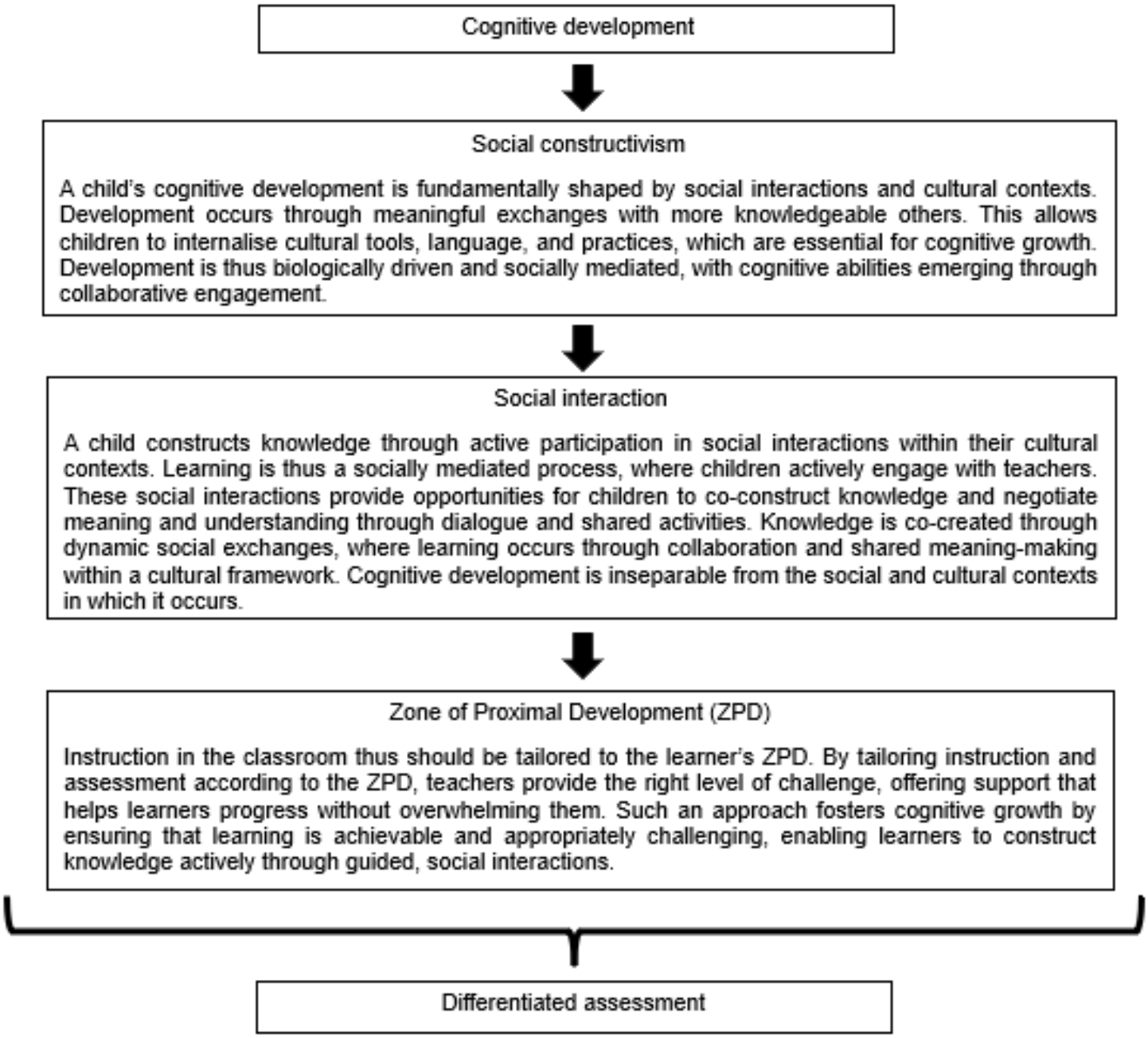

Figure 2.7: Theoretical Framework for the Study

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a review of extant literature on assessment in education, with a specific focus on differentiated assessment. Key distinctions between formative and summative assessment were established, and the unique context and characteristics of South African classrooms and assessment practices

were outlined. Additionally, the limitations of the current ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to assessment were reviewed, emphasising the need for more inclusive and responsive strategies to address the diverse needs of South African learners. Differentiated assessment was then introduced as a suitable approach to achieve this goal. Finally, I concluded the chapter with a discussion of the theoretical framework that underpinned and guided this study. Building on this foundation, in the following chapter I detail the study’s research paradigm and method.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

3.1 Introduction

Having discussed extant literature as well as the study's theoretical framework in the previous chapter, in this chapter, I outline the research methods employed in alignment with the study's objectives. Here, I begin with a description of the ontological and epistemological foundations of the selected research paradigm, followed by an overview of the research design. The study's population, sampling methods, and criteria used for participant selection are then detailed. The chapter then explains the procedures used for data collection, processing, analysis, and research rigour. I then conclude the chapter with a discussion of the ethical considerations integral to the study.

3.2 Research Paradigm

Acknowledging and understanding the paradigm from which a study derives its theoretical approach and methodological design is essential in research. According to Creswell et al. (2007), a paradigm constitutes a set of beliefs and values that guide both the actions and methodologies of a study. A research paradigm provides a foundational perspective through which research is designed, conducted, and interpreted (Krauss, 2005).

In this study, interpretivism was selected as the guiding research paradigm to explore the nuanced and subjective experiences of Grade 10 teachers in their use and perceptions of differentiated assessment. Given the complexity of South African classrooms, shaped by diverse learner backgrounds and varied learning needs, it was essential to employ a paradigm that would allow for an in-depth understanding and exploration of how teachers interpret these challenges and if they respond to these challenges. In the context of this study, interpretivism allowed for a detailed exploration of if and how teachers respond to the diverse sociocultural and educational challenges within a specific Johannesburg-based high school. By focusing on unique, context-specific factors, this paradigm supported me, the researcher, in uncovering the richness and complexities of teachers' insights into differentiated assessment to capture how they navigate the opportunities and constraints in their educational environments.

Epistemology is concerned with “the philosophy of knowledge or how we come to know” (Krauss, 2005, p. 758). From an epistemological perspective, interpretivism emphasises the subjective nature of knowledge, acknowledging that individuals perceive and make sense of the world in diverse ways (Denzi & Lincoln, 2011). This key characteristic of interpretivism highlights the importance of understanding how individuals interpret their social realities, which is fundamental to the study’s aim of exploring teachers’ perspectives of differentiated assessment (Krauss, 2005). As explained by Krauss (2005), meanings are the most fundamental aspect of social settings and are essential to human life. Interpretivism thus facilitates a move beyond superficial explanations to uncover the richer, contextual constructs of the phenomena being studied. Such an epistemological perspective reflects the diversity of perceptions and experiences that inform individuals’ views.

Ontology is concerned with “the philosophy of reality” (Krauss, 2005, p. 758). From an ontological perspective, interpretivists believe that reality is not singular or fixed, but rather constructed through social interactions, individual experiences, and cultural contexts (Ryan, 2018; Krauss, 2005). From this perspective, reality is understood as multiple and subjective, meaning that different individuals or groups perceive and interpret the world in diverse ways based on their unique social, cultural, and historical circumstances. For interpretivists, reality is socially constructed, meaning that it is co-created through ongoing interactions between individuals within their specific environments. Thus, individuals play an active role in shaping their understanding of reality (Ryan, 2018). Social realities are dynamic and continuously evolving as and when individuals engage with their surroundings, interpret meanings, and negotiate understanding with others. Importantly, as noted by Krauss (2005), reality is also context-bound, meaning that how individuals experience and interpret the world is heavily influenced by the conditions of their social and cultural contexts. As a result, what is real for one individual may differ from what is real for another, depending on the distinct factors shaping their environment. In summary, the ontological claim of interpretivists is that reality is multiple, subjective, and context dependent. Interpretivism highlights the importance of understanding human experience as fluid and complex, shaped by the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which individuals live and interact. Reality, from this perspective, is a product of continuous social construction, evolving alongside human interactions and interpretations.

Interpretivism was selected for this study because it recognises and embraces multiple perspectives, which often leads to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of complex educational issues (Klein et al., 1998; Morehouse, 2012). Interpretivism subscribes to qualitative methods, which allowed for gaining an in-depth understanding of Grade 10 teachers' perceptions regarding differentiated assessment (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative approach better enabled the exploration of the diverse understandings and experiences that teachers brought to their practice, aligning closely with the specific research objective of identifying teachers' perceptions and potential challenges in implementing differentiated assessment. Qualitative methods were essential for capturing the richness of human experiences (Creswell, 2013). As noted by Willis (2007), "interpretivists tend to favour qualitative methods such as case studies" (p. 90). This preference is grounded in the understanding that qualitative methods provide the necessary tools to fully comprehend the complexities of the context in which the teachers operate, a central aim of this study. By adopting qualitative approaches, it allowed for the exploration of the relationships between teachers' beliefs, practices, and the various socio-cultural factors at play in the classroom (see Figure 3.2).

Furthermore, qualitative methods, detailed in section 3.3, portray the world as socially constructed, complex, and ever evolving. Interpretivism was particularly effective for developing an understanding of teachers and their environments, as it allowed for the exploration of their lived experiences, challenges, and strategies for implementing differentiated assessment. Creswell et al. (2007) emphasise that "qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). In this study, one aim was to explore teachers' understandings and experiences concerning differentiated assessment, making qualitative methods the most suitable approach to obtain this aim. Moreover, interpretivist methodology emphasises the importance of situating the research subject within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. This acknowledges that actions and meaning-making are context-bound and cannot be fully understood without considering the circumstances surrounding them (Krauss, 2005). The alignment with the social realities of teachers in South African classrooms strengthened the study's capacity to address the research objectives. Interpretivism was beneficial in effectively uncovering and explaining the meanings behind teachers'

behaviours and attitudes toward differentiated assessment, which offered a comprehensive view of how differentiated assessment is perceived and enacted in the classroom. The paradigm's emphasis on contextual understanding and subjective interpretation made it an ideal choice for capturing the rich, complex realities of assessment practices.

3.3 Research Design

In alignment with the study's philosophical lens, I employed a qualitative research approach, particularly utilising a case study design. As explained by Creswell et al. (2007), qualitative research is defined as a "situated activity that located the observer in the world" (p. 36). A case study approach emphasises an interpretive method, aimed at understanding phenomena within their natural contexts (Creswell, 2013). For this study, a qualitative research approach was selected because of its capacity to provide a rich, detailed understanding of specific issues within their unique settings.

The qualitative approach was especially relevant for addressing this study's research questions concerning teachers' perceptions, use, and implementation of differentiated assessment strategies in Grade 10 classrooms. As Creswell (2013) notes, qualitative research allows for the examination of people and phenomena in their natural environments, which in turn facilitates an in-depth interpretation of the meaning individuals attach to their experiences. Examining teachers in their natural environments was crucial for grasping the complexity of teachers' perspectives, use, and implementation of differentiated assessment. Furthermore, the qualitative approach offered a valuable framework for exploring the meaning that teachers ascribe to differentiated assessment strategies. This aligns well with the study's aim to investigate teachers' perceptions, experiences, and understandings of these strategies. Creswell (2013) argues that qualitative research is instrumental in generating a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the topic under investigation, which was a key objective of this study.

Overall, the design of the study was useful in providing an in-depth and insightful understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The case study design was beneficial in providing valuable contextualised insight into the research aims by allowing for an intensive and rich data collection process, thereby enhancing the

research rigour of the findings (Yin, 2014). The case study methodology facilitated a close investigation of teachers' experiences and insights, contributing significantly to attaining the study's objectives. The primary research method employed within this case study was semi-structured individual interviews. A case study approach was selected for its effectiveness in delving deeply into teachers' perceptions, experiences, and understanding of differentiated assessment.

3.4 Case Study and Research Site

A case study, which goes hand in hand with social constructivism, provides a personalised approach involving an in-depth examination of individuals, groups, or phenomena. Starman (2013) defines a case study as "a comprehensive description of an individual case and its analysis" (p. 31). For this research, employing a case study design was purposefully selected to assist in gaining meaningful insights into the real-world practices of Grade 10 teachers, particularly their use of differentiated assessment strategies.

A case study involves gathering data from various sources, such as interviews and documents, and reporting findings through thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013). This study is classified as a case study because it was focused on a single public high school located in the Northern region of Johannesburg, Gauteng (Merriam, 2015). By concentrating on a specific setting, this approach allowed for a detailed exploration of Grade 10 teachers' perspectives on differentiated assessment practices within a clearly defined context. Moreover, this study is classified as a case study because it is focused on providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being investigated, which in this case is the use and perceptions Grade 10 teachers have on differentiated assessment (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2015 & Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Overall, the case study approach was deliberately selected to explore how Grade 10 teachers, within a specific school, navigate the complexities of differentiated assessment within their unique educational environment.

The decision to use a case study approach was strategic and purposeful. The school where the study was conducted is a suburban public quintile 5 high school. On average, the class sizes for Grade 10 range between 15 and 35 learners, depending on the subject. The school was selected for one primary reason, which was the

diversity of the school's teachers and learners. The school has a diverse composition of teachers and learners, which offered a rich pool of perspectives and experiences to be explored. Teachers at this school are diverse in their cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, race, cultural values, qualifications, teaching experience, language proficiency, gender, and age. Learners at this school are diverse in their learning abilities, motivation, geographic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, language proficiency, socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as intergenerational differences. The diversity enhanced the depth and breadth of the research findings, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the phenomena.

Essentially, the case being made in this study revolved around illuminating the intricate ways in which teachers from one Johannesburg high school engage with differentiated assessment. By embedding myself within teachers' natural environments, I was better able to understand and identify the methods teachers employed and the underlying motivations, barriers, and successes they encountered when employing differentiated assessment. The holistic exploration was essential for advancing our understanding of effective educational practices in diverse classroom settings by capturing the intricate realities and practices within a specific educational context.

3.5 Sampling

This study employed Robinson's (2014) four-step strategy for sampling selection, which provided a structured approach to ensuring a well-defined and representative sample. The four-step process involves defining the study's target population, determining the sample size, designing a sample strategy, and sourcing the study's participants. The following section provides a detailed exploration of how these steps were implemented in this study.

3.5.1 Study Population

According to Robinson (2014), a critical first step in a qualitative research study is defining the study population. A study population is defined as "the totality of persons from which cases may legitimately be sampled in an interview study" (Robinson, 2014, p. 26). To accurately determine the study population for this research study, a set of

inclusion criteria was established, which falls in line with the guidelines provided by Robinson (2014). These criteria specify the “attribute that cases must possess to qualify for the study” (Robinson, 2014, p. 27).

In this study, the study population was defined based on the phenomena under investigation and the guiding research questions. Specifically, the study population consisted of Grade 10 teachers from a public high school located in the northern region of Johannesburg, Gauteng.

3.5.2 Sample Size and Selection Criteria

The sample size for this study comprised seven (n=7) Grade 10 teachers. A purposive and convenient sampling approach was employed in this study. Purposive sampling is defined as “the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses” (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2). As noted by Etikan et al. (2016) and Robinson (2014), purposive sampling enables the researcher to select individuals who are particularly well-suited to provide valuable and worthwhile information based on their specialised knowledge or experience relevant to the research question. In this study, purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the research participants possessed specific characteristics aligned with the research focus. This was done to carefully select teachers who could provide rich insights into the practice of differentiated assessment in the context of Grade 10 education.

The study was made up of seven (n=7) teacher participants. The sample size of (n=7) was determined by the willingness of teachers to engage in the study. In qualitative research, participants’ willingness plays a vital role in ensuring the collection of rich, meaningful data. The teachers who volunteered to participate in the study were interested in sharing their experiences and perspectives, which contributed to a deeper understanding of the research topic. Although the sample size was relatively small, the voluntary participation of the teachers allowed for a focused, in-depth exploration of Grade 10 teachers’ perceptions and experiences concerning differentiated assessment. Moreover, the decision to limit the number of participants was because data saturation was reached after interviewing seven (n=7) teacher participants.

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher engaged in continuous analysis, comparison, and abstraction of key information obtained from the interviews. Emerging themes were systematically identified, and all transcripts were revisited to ensure a comprehensive classification of data. The rigorous process resulted in achieving data saturation after interviewing seven (n=7) teacher participants. Data saturation, as defined by Birks and Mills (2015) and Given (2016), occurs when no new themes, patterns, or insights emerge from additional data. Fusch and Ness (2015) further clarify that data saturation is reached when further data collection yields no new information, indicating that the full spectrum of perspectives pertinent to the research questions, within the context being explored, has been captured. In this study, consistency in themes and patterns became evident following the seventh interview, with participants' responses reflecting repeated and coherent insights. Thus, the repetition of themes across multiple interviews thus substantiates the attainment of data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

The inclusion criteria for this study required that the participants be Grade 10 teachers with a range of teaching experience. More specifically, participants were required to have a minimum of three years of experience teaching Grade 10. This criterion was carefully selected to ensure a comprehensive exploration of differentiated assessment practices among South African Grade 10 teachers. Teachers with extensive experience brought valuable insights derived from years of practical application and adaptation in the classroom. Conversely, newly qualified teachers had more current knowledge and perspectives about contemporary ways of assessing that you may not find with teachers who have extensive experience.

By deliberately selecting participants with diverse teaching backgrounds and experience levels, the study could better gather a rich array of perspectives on differentiated assessment for Grade 10 South African teachers. Furthermore, this approach enriched the findings and allowed for a focused investigation of how differentiated assessment is defined within this educational context.

3.5.3 Sample Sourcing

Sample sourcing was a crucial aspect of this study. Sample sourcing, a critical aspect of qualitative research, focuses on identifying and recruiting participants from the real

world (Robinson, 2014). According to Robinson (2014), this stage requires a high degree of ethical sensitivity and skill. For a comprehensive discussion of the ethical considerations relevant to this study, refer to Section 3.9.

In this study, participant recruitment was conducted following the provision of ethical clearance, ensuring that all participation was voluntary and ethically sound. To facilitate efficient recruitment, collaboration with the school principal was pivotal. I requested the principal to distribute an information sheet about the study to all Grade 10 teachers at the school. The information sheet provided a detailed overview of the study, including its objectives and participation requirements (see Appendix C). This method, known as study advertising, involves disseminating information to the target population to inform and invite potential participants to participate in the study (Robinson, 2014). Additionally, the referral process was employed as a supplementary recruitment strategy (Robinson, 2014). The referral strategy involved seeking recommendations from the participants and the school principal to identify additional teachers who met the study's criteria. By leveraging these referrals, the study was able to access a broader network of potential participants.

By using these two approaches, the study ensured a thorough and ethical recruitment process, facilitating the selection of participants who were well-positioned to contribute meaningful perspectives of differentiated assessment in the Grade 10 context.

3.6 Data Collection

In this section, I provide a detailed explanation of the data collection methods employed in the study, along with a justification for their selection. The selected approach is thoroughly explained, demonstrating how it is aligned with the study's objectives.

3.6.1 Method of Data Collection

Data collection in this study involved systematically gathering information from identified participants to explore their perspectives on differentiated assessment. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and beliefs of Grade 10 teachers concerning differentiated assessment, face-to-face semi-

structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method. This approach was particularly effective in capturing the depth of participants' experiences, aligning with the study's objective to uncover the complexities of teachers' views concerning differentiated assessment (Creswell et al., 2007).

Serving as the primary data collection instrument in this study, I was able to establish dynamic, personalised interactions with the participants. As such, I could ensure that interviews were responsive and contextually relevant to my study (Creswell et al., 2007). My direct involvement in the data collection process enhanced the richness of the responses. Conducting interviews within the natural setting of the school also contributed to the authenticity of the data collected. Being physically present in the teachers' work environment allowed me to immerse myself in their context. In so doing, this provided me with valuable insights into how the environment shaped their views and practices on differentiated assessment (Krauss, 2005).

3.6.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative research is a situated activity that transforms the world into a series of representations, with semi-structured interviews being the key method in this study (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were selected for their ability to capture the unique perspectives of participants, which, in this case, focused on differentiated assessment. As Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) explain, this method is particularly well suited for gaining an in-depth understanding of individual perspectives, making it ideal for exploring the varied views of Grade 10 teachers on differentiated assessment.

One of the primary benefits of semi-structured interviews is their balance between structure and flexibility, meaning they allow interviews to be focused while still providing the researcher with autonomy to explore issues that may arise during the interview process (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Semi-structured allowed me to guide the interview with predetermined questions while retaining the freedom to probe further into emerging themes during the interview process (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The adaptability of semi-structured interviews was crucial in enhancing my understanding of the multifaceted nature of differentiated assessment from the teachers' perspectives, allowing me to explore nuances that might otherwise remain

hidden in a more rigid interview format. Moreover, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews provided teachers with the space to express their thoughts comprehensively and on their terms while still permitting the exploration of predetermined or unexpected themes as the conversation unfolded (Krauss, 2005). Semi-structured interviews assisted me in fostering an environment where teachers could reflect on their experiences and provide deeper insights into the phenomena being investigated. Creswell et al. (2007) highlight how semi-structured interviews facilitate engagement, making them particularly effective for investigating complex topics such as differentiated assessment.

Face-to-face interaction was another significant benefit of this approach. As Krauss (2005) asserts, direct interactions enable a researcher to capture the participant's words as well as "the meanings of those words as understood and used by the individuals" (p. 764). This immersive process, which Krauss (2005) refers to as participating "in the mind of another human being" (p. 764), was vital in gaining insightful, context-specific knowledge about teachers' practices and beliefs. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to delve into the 'why' and 'how' behind teachers' behaviours and decision-making processes within their school environment concerning differentiated assessment. By employing semi-structured interviews, I was able to go beyond surface-level responses and uncover the underlying assumptions, challenges, and motivations shaping teachers' perspectives on differentiated assessment. The methods' inherent flexibility, combined with a thoughtful and responsive approach to questioning, ensured that the data collected was comprehensive and reflective of the lived experiences of the participants.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a "systematic process of coding, categorising, and interpreting data to provide explanations of a single phenomena of interest" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 367). In qualitative research, the analysis is concerned with "searching, evaluating, recognising, coding, mapping, exploring, and describing patterns, trends, themes, and categories in the raw data" (Ngulube, 2015, p. 1). This intricate process revolves around uncovering underlying meanings and making sense of the participant's experiences and perceptions.

In this study, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with Grade 10 teachers. Having obtained both written and verbal consent from the teachers, all interviews were audio-recorded using a recording device to capture the depth of the participants' responses. Additionally, field notes were taken throughout each interview to capture verbal and non-verbal gestures that may not have been fully conveyed through audio or transcribed text alone. Furthermore, field notes enabled me to document specific claims or statements made by the participants that warranted further exploration or verification during subsequent phases of the interview. In so doing, the proactive approach taken allowed me to identify key areas for follow-up, ensuring that critical nuances were preserved and available for later reference. Data collected from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure the meaning provided by the participants was retained and to ensure the authenticity and precision of the data were maintained. The process of transcription was followed by multiple readings of the transcripts, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives and facilitating the identification of emerging patterns and themes. Subsequently, the data were thematically analysed.

A thematic analysis is concerned with identifying issues within each interview and searching for common themes that transcend the cases (Creswell et al., 2007). A thematic analysis was selected because it allowed for an in-depth investigation of the data, enabling the researcher to organise complex information into more abstract units of information (Creswell, 2013). The process involved the researcher constantly engaging in the process of analysing, comparing, and abstracting data from the transcriptions.

The justification for using thematic analysis lies in its capacity to illuminate the rich perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2013). By attending to the intricacies of participants' responses and contextual factors, the thematic analysis allowed for a deeper exploration of the teacher's use and perceptions of differentiated assessment and the potential issues surrounding its use, contributing to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. I was then able to identify recurring themes that revealed deeper insights into the phenomena being investigated. This method was suited to the study's aims as it captured the explicit responses of teachers and allowed for the interpretation of more subtle, underlying factors influencing teachers' views and practices of differentiated assessment (Creswell, 2013). By

focusing on both the content of what was said and the context in which it was shared, the thematic analysis provided a comprehensive framework for understanding how teachers perceive and navigate the complexities of differentiated assessment (Creswell et al., 2007). Furthermore, this approach aligns with the broader goals of qualitative research, which seeks to highlight and explain the lived experiences of individuals by providing them with the proper meaning within their specific contexts (Khan, 2014). In this study, thematic analysis facilitated the exploration of how differentiated assessment is understood and implemented by Grade 10 teachers at a specific school, which offered valuable insights into the potential challenges and broader implications for assessment practices.

3.8 Quality Criteria

In qualitative research, ensuring the trustworthiness of findings is important. Trustworthiness reflects “the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study” (Connelly, 2016, p. 435) and serves as a cornerstone for validating the research rigour and integrity of research outcomes. As Merriam (2015) emphasises, establishing trustworthiness is essential to validate the integrity and research rigour of qualitative data. In this study, two key quality criterion methods were employed, namely rich, thick description and peer review. These methods were carefully selected to safeguard the robustness and research rigour of the findings and to ensure that the results are both credible and valid. Such approaches were suitable as they are beneficial in reinforcing the depth and authenticity of the data.

3.8.1 Rich, Thick Description

Rich, thick descriptions are fundamental to qualitative research as they provide the depth necessary to uncover the complexities within data. These descriptions facilitate the development of in-depth and detailed insights into findings, thus making them particularly well-suited for this study by offering the necessary depth and contextual detail to fully comprehend the meaning and complexity behind the data.

As Stake (2010) asserts, rich descriptions provide nuanced and vivid accounts of the context and experiences being studied. In this study, such an approach was purposefully selected to capture the full scope of Grade 10 teachers' perceptions and practices of differentiated assessment. By moving beyond surface-level analysis, the rich description included a wide array of details, which in turn offered a more vivid and immersive portrayal of how differentiated assessment is perceived and practiced in real-world classroom settings (Stake, 2010). Moreover, the richness of the description extended to the broader educational environment, which included contextual depth with the provision of the broader context in which the data is situated (Stake, 2010). The process involved a thorough exploration of the CAPS document as well as the school's context.

Through the inclusion of contextually relevant details, this approach served to enhance the depth of the data analysis and, in turn, the credibility of the study's findings (Stake, 2010). As Stake (2010) argues, thick descriptions move beyond surface-level observations by offering detailed accounts that are deeply embedded in context and scholarly discourse. In this study, this approach was purposefully selected to add both depth and richness to the findings, ensuring that the research was methodologically rigorous and reflective of the lived experiences and realities of Grade 10 South African teachers. Moreover, thick descriptions are critical in qualitative research as they connect extensive detail with theoretical insight, which ultimately strengthens the validity and research rigour of the study (Stake, 2010). In this study, this approach was purposefully selected to ensure that findings were descriptive and theoretically grounded, providing a well-rounded and in-depth portrayal of the research subject. Such an approach was beneficial in positioning the findings within a broader scholarly discourse, thereby reinforcing the data's trustworthiness (Stake, 2010).

By employing rich, thick descriptions, I sought to create a more vivid and immersive portrayal of the phenomena under investigation. This approach allowed me to create and offer a more intimate understanding of the research context while also highlighting the intricacies of participants' perspectives and experiences concerning differentiated assessment (Stake, 2010). Ultimately, rich, thick descriptions played a crucial role in capturing the essence of this research by offering a comprehensive and contextually grounded account that enhances the analytical rigour and the practical relevance of the study.

3.8.2 Peer Review

Peer review is a critical quality assurance mechanism in qualitative research. Peer review serves the primary function of providing an “external check of the research process” (Creswell, 2013, p. 208). The peer review process involved independent external reviewers who assessed the research process and findings to ensure its thoroughness and validity. According to Creswell (2013), peer review contributes to a culture of scholarly rigour and accountability by incorporating an objective evaluation from an external review. Scrutinising the findings enhanced the credibility of the study by providing an unbiased assessment of the research process and the data.

In this study, peer review was integral to ensuring the robustness and credibility of the research findings (Creswell, 2013). The data analysis underwent rigorous examination by my supervisors and me, who conducted independent reviews of the preliminary analysis. The initial scrutiny was followed by collaborative discussions to critically evaluate the data and the preliminary findings together. The rigorous process of peer review was designed to identify and address any discrepancies in the research process, thereby enhancing the research rigour and validity of the study’s outcomes (Creswell, 2013). By engaging in this peer review process, this study benefitted from expert feedback that reinforced adherence to high academic standards and integrity. By subjecting the research process and findings to critical evaluation, the peer review process played a crucial role in strengthening the study’s credibility and ensuring its alignment with scholarly rigour.

In the academic research context, a *peer* is a fellow scholar or professional working within a similar disciplinary field who possesses the relevant expertise and theoretical grounding to contribute meaningfully to the research process (Creswell, 2013). Given the qualitative and interpretative nature of this study, my research supervisors, with academic and professional experience in assessment practices, were purposefully selected to serve in a peer-review capacity. My research supervisors were selected as peer reviewers based on their advanced academic standing, specialised knowledge in educational assessment, and familiarity with qualitative research methodologies. Their expertise and contextual understanding enabled them to provide critical, informed, and methodologically sound feedback during the data analysis process.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

This section provides an overview of the ethical considerations integral to this study. Ethics is concerned with the “norms and values that guide decisions regarding the collection of data and analysis of said data, as well as the dissemination of findings” (Mirza et al., 2023, p. 442). Ethical safeguards are essential in maintaining and upholding the integrity of the research process while ensuring the rights and dignity of all participants are respected. Central to these ethical aspects are obtaining permission from relevant authorities, securing informed consent, and upholding the principles of anonymity and confidentiality for all participants. Ethics is crucial for ensuring good research practices (Corti et al., 2011).

3.9.1 Obtaining Permission from Relevant Authorities

An important ethical consideration in research is obtaining permission from relevant authorities and institutions. Obtaining permission is essential for upholding participants’ rights and ensuring that the research is conducted ethically (Corti et al., 2011). Seeking permission from the appropriate authorities is a fundamental responsibility of the researcher because it ensures that the study respects and protects all individuals involved in the research process (Corti et al., 2011).

Prior to commencing the study, formal approval was sought and obtained from the relevant authorities. The process of seeking formal approval included requesting and obtaining authorisation from the Gauteng Department of Education and from the Non-Medical Human Research Ethics Committee within the Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa (see Appendices G and H respectively).

3.9.2 Informed Consent of the Participants, Anonymity, and Confidentiality

Informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality are foundational ethical principles in research. Informed consent is the voluntary agreement of an individual, based on a comprehensive understanding of a study given without coercion, which protects the rights of participants (Corti et al., 2000).

In this study, informed consent was obtained. Participants were provided with a written consent form that clearly outlined the study’s purpose, methodology, potential risks

and benefits, and their rights as participants (Corti et al., 2011). The form served to inform participants comprehensively, allowing them to make an informed decision about their involvement in the study (see Appendix D). Additionally, participants were informed, both verbally and in writing, of their freedom to participate or withdraw from the study at any point without negative implications (Corti et al., 2000).

To uphold participant privacy and foster candid expression, strict measures were implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. In this study, anonymity was achieved by omitting the name of the school and using pseudonyms for participants in both the data analysis process and the final report. This approach safeguarded participants' identities and ensured their privacy, which was of utmost importance. Privacy and confidentiality were further protected by conducting interviews in a quiet, private space within the school. All data handling procedures adhered to strict ethical standards and confidentiality protocols (Corti et al., 2011). After collection, interview transcriptions were securely stored on a password-protected laptop, accessible only to the primary researcher. Data collected during the study has been securely stored and will be retained for five years, after which it will be appropriately destroyed in accordance with established protocols. These measures have been put in place to ensure the ethical handling of all data, safeguarding the confidentiality and integrity of participants' personal information throughout.

3.10 Conclusion

Overall, in this chapter, I provided detailed explanations of the study's research design and methods. The ontological and epistemological foundations of interpretivism were established, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives. The research design, including the study population, sampling methods, and participant selection criteria was carefully detailed to guarantee a robust approach to data collection. The procedures for data collection and analysis were explained, with particular attention to the strategies used to ensure the research rigour of the data. Finally, the ethical considerations relevant to this study were discussed, highlighting the commitment to conducting research with integrity and respect for participants. Together, these methodological components lay a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis and discussion of the study's findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

Having provided a detailed explanation of the methodological approach employed for this study, in this chapter, I present the study's findings. To reiterate, the study focused on the use of differentiated assessment strategies to meet the diverse needs of Grade 10 learners at a Johannesburg high school (hereafter referred to as JHB School).

I begin the chapter with a presentation of the demographic characteristics of the study's teacher participants to contextualise the findings. This section is followed by the presentation and discussion of the key themes that I identified during data analysis. These themes include teachers' perceptions of the inclusivity of current assessment practices, teachers' perceptions of differentiated assessment, problems related to implementing differentiated assessment, and the strategies to support the implementation of differentiated assessment at JHB school. The themes are discussed respectively. Overall, the themes identified provide evidence for my central argument, which is that 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to assessment are inherently inadequate in meeting the diverse needs of Grade 10 learners, thereby highlighting the necessity of differentiated assessment as a more effective and equitable means of evaluating Grade 10 South African learners.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

The study participants consisted of seven (n=7) Grade 10 teachers from a public high school in Johannesburg. These teachers included one male and six female teachers who collectively teach a range of subjects at the Grade 10 level. The subjects include Mathematics, Geography, Life Sciences, Life Orientation, Afrikaans, and Information Technology. The cohort's teaching experience ranged from 3 to 35 years. Table 4.2 below presents a detailed summary of the participants demographic information.

Table 4.2: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Total Number of Participants (n=7)
Gender	
Female	6

Male	1
Teaching Experience	
1-10 years	2
11-20 years	3
21-30 years	1
≥31 years	1

4.3 Findings from the Study

Following the data analysis procedure adopted for this study, the coding process began with open coding, where initial codes were generated to capture distinct ideas and patterns in the data. This was followed by axial coding, which organised the initial codes into broader categories, representing the central themes of the study. Table 4.3 below provides an overview of the coding stages used in this study.

Table 4.3: The Coding Stages for the Study

Open Coding	Axial Coding
Current assessment practices are exclusive	Teachers' perceptions of assessments' inclusivity
Recognising learners' diverse abilities	Teachers' perceptions of differentiated assessment
Consideration of learners' varying cognitive levels	
Embracing diversity in assessment	
Instruction	
Uncertainty around the meaning of differentiated assessment	
The mindset of a teacher	Problems related to implementing differentiated assessment
Learner buy-in	
The restrictive nature of CAPS	

Learning from experts	Strategies to support the implementation of differentiated assessment
Appropriate training and practical examples	
Reduction of departmental interference	

4.3.1 Finding One: Teachers' Perceptions of Assessments' Inclusivity

In light of the growing recognition of diverse learner needs in contemporary classrooms, the question of whether current assessment practices are inclusive was central to this study. Inclusivity in assessment refers to the ability of assessment methods to accommodate and fairly evaluate the wide range of learning abilities, backgrounds, and experiences present in the learner population. As such, understanding teachers' perceptions of the inclusivity of current assessment practices was essential. The teacher participants in the study were asked to reflect on whether they believed current assessment practices adequately support the diversity of learners in their classrooms. From the data analysed, the teachers noted that:

Current assessment practices are exclusive.

This perspective is discussed in detail below.

Current assessment practices are exclusive

From the data analysis, participants hold the belief that current assessment practices in their classrooms are not inclusive of the diverse needs of learners. The argument made by these teachers aligns with the views of several scholars, such as Care et al. (2017), Fitzsimons and O'Neil (2024), and Mpu and Adu (2021), who argue that traditional assessment methods often overlook the varying abilities, backgrounds, and learning needs of learners. The data shows that the participants in this study assert that current assessment practices fail to accommodate the wide range of learners' abilities. The participants also emphasised that the current standardised approach to assessment often marginalises learners who fall outside the *norm*, highlighting a significant gap between the intended equity of the curriculum and the practical realities of current assessment practices. One teacher articulated this concern, stating:

“I do think that assessment is fundamentally exclusive. Because it creates a boundary between learners and a subject. It creates a boundary between learners and knowledge and tells them that your value is proportional to the degree to which you are able to buy into this thing. I think the reason it's definitely exclusive [is] because it doesn't invite anyone in. So, it has to be either just leaving them outside or leaving them where they are or pushing them out” (Teacher A).

The perceived lack of inclusivity in current assessment practices was echoed by another teacher who highlighted the challenge of accommodating learners with learning barriers and diverse academic backgrounds in assessments. The teacher perceives assessment practices as inherently exclusionary because:

“There are students with learning barriers that are not addressed in assessments. So, it's not even just your learning difficulties and your prior knowledge or that assumed kind of knowledge, cultural knowledge or whatever. They're coming from really diverse academic backgrounds as well” (Teacher D).

Furthermore, a more critical lack of inclusivity in current assessment practices was provided by another teacher who noted:

“No, not at all. It needs to be evolving and not just here. But from speaking to teachers from other schools are losing that interest as well. Things are getting harder where they [teachers] feel that they're doing everything, but they're not looking at doing things differently. We need to find different ways and at the moment it's lacking. So, it's not inclusive” (Teacher F).

Thus, there is a consistent concern among teachers regarding the exclusivity of current assessment practices, particularly their failure to account for the diverse range of learners’ abilities, backgrounds, and needs.

4.3.2 Finding Two: Teachers Perceptions of Differentiated Assessment

A central objective of this study was to explore Grade 10 teachers’ perceptions of differentiated assessment, a concept that I argue plays a pivotal role in addressing the diverse learning needs of learners within contemporary classrooms. From the data, I identified that Grade 10 teachers possess a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of differentiated assessment, with teachers emphasising several key elements that

they believe define its core principles and practices. The teachers in this study believe that differentiated assessment is about:

a. *Recognising learners' diverse abilities.*
b. *Consideration of learners' varying cognitive levels.*
c. *Embracing diversity in assessment.*
d. *Instruction.*
e. *Uncertainty around the meaning of differentiated assessment.*

The varied perceptions are discussed in detail below.

Perception A – Recognising learners' diverse abilities

A most prominent perception identified from the data is that teachers perceive differentiated assessment as a means of acknowledging, addressing, and catering to the diverse abilities of learners. As such, there is a recognition that learners within a classroom possess varying strengths, challenges, and learning needs, thus indirectly acknowledging that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment is inadequate. The limitations of traditional assessment models that fail to account for the individuality of each learner as noted by Ali (2015), who asserts that the needs of learners cannot be met in the same way due to learners being diverse in their abilities. In line with this view, many teachers in this study noted that differentiated assessment is about recognising and embracing learners' diverse abilities in the assessment process. Notably, one teacher understands differentiated assessment as the acknowledgement of the varied abilities and backgrounds of learners, challenging conventional educational norms that often prioritise uniformity over diversity. The teacher reflected on the challenge of differentiating instruction and assessment, stating:

> *"Differentiation is also hard because it necessarily requires you to accept something that schools try to pull a blinker over. Which is that if we need differentiated education, it means that we need to accept that learners come with different levels of ability and it also means that the learner is not the enemy, it means that ignorance is the enemy" (Teacher A).*

The perception that differentiated assessment is about recognising and accepting learners' differences to better support learners' unique learning needs and strengths

aligns with the work of Aldossari (2018). Aldossari (2018) asserts that the vast differences in learners' needs require a shift from traditional 'one-size-fits-all' assessment methods to more flexible and responsive approaches. One teacher highlighted the fundamental principle of differentiated assessment, which is the acknowledgement that learners have diverse abilities and skills and, as a result, require tailored approaches to assessment. The teacher perceives differentiated assessment to be:

> *"Consider learners with different learning abilities. What's effective for one is not effective for the other" (Teacher D).*

The perspective that differentiated assessment is centred around recognising that learners have varied abilities, which need to be considered, was noted by another participant. The acknowledgement of learners' differences is echoed across the literature on differentiated assessment, which stresses the importance of tailoring assessment practices to individual learner needs (Imbeau & Tomlinson, 2013; Kaur et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). The perception that differentiated assessment is centred around acknowledging learners' differences aligns with the principles of sociocultural theory, which underscores the importance of considering learners' socio-cultural backgrounds in assessment, which another teacher brought to light. One teacher's reflective understanding of differentiation captures this concept comprehensively:

> *"To adapt to the different academic abilities and the kinds of children and other things that children are bringing into the classroom. To be more aware of the fact that not everyone's grown up the same way" (Teacher F).*

Perception B – Consideration of learners' varying cognitive levels

Numerous teachers in this study expressed that differentiated assessment is about recognising and accommodating the varying cognitive levels of learners. This perspective of differentiated assessment reflects an understanding that learners learn at different paces, possess unique cognitive strengths and abilities, and engage with assessment tasks in diverse manners. The acknowledgement of learners' cognitive diversity is noted by Kaur et al. (2019) and Moon (2005), who argue that cognitive diversity necessitates assessment methods that account for such differences, a core

component of differentiated assessment. Many teachers noted that differentiated assessment is about designing assessments that are responsive to learners varied cognitive levels. Moon (2005) further elaborates on this principle of differentiated assessment, noting that “because students do not progress at the same rate and in the same patterns, it is necessary to use carefully collected data to make adjustments during the instructional sequence for students to better understand and assimilate new material” (p. 229). One teacher in this study explicitly echoed this sentiment, noting that differentiated assessment is an assessment strategy centred on addressing learners’ varying cognitive abilities:

> *“As a teacher, you have to work out who the kids are, what they want, and how to get it for them. That's inclusive because it recognises the truth of an experience that learners actually have. It means that we need to accept that learners come with different cognitive levels” (Teacher A).*

Numerous teachers acknowledged the diverse cognitive levels of learners, with one teacher notably acknowledging that cognitive development is not linear and is influenced by numerous factors. Ali (2015) reinforces this perception of differentiated assessment, defining it as an assessment strategy that accommodates individual differences between learners by providing appropriate avenues for each learner to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. The acknowledgement that differentiated assessment is about the consideration of learners varied cognitive abilities was noted by another teacher:

> *“Sometimes the learners start school early, which means that their age, they are year behind. Because they've started school early, so their development, according to Piaget’s development stages go according to age. Which means that if they are younger and it's not in a stage where it's inclusive of, for example ages two to seven, or whatever the case is. That learners in a different cognitive stage to the rest of them” (Teacher G).*

Perception C – Embracing diversity in assessment

Another important perception of differentiated assessment identified in this study is that teachers view differentiated assessment as a means of embracing and addressing the diversity of learners within the classroom. Such perception highlights the need for assessment practices that acknowledge and cater to the wide range of differences

learners possess, recognising that learners are not homogenous entities. Perceiving differentiated assessment to be about embracing learners' differences in assessment aligns with the work of Ali (2015) and Kaur et al. (2019), who argue for the use of differentiated assessment on the basis that learners differ in interest, readiness, and learning profiles. One teacher captured this sentiment, emphasising that differentiated assessment is about understanding learners and their diverse contexts:

> *"Teachers also need to know their learners and their contexts. If you look at the kind of school, we have with the learners coming from all over the place. The difference, just even in reading levels and comprehension levels" (Teacher B).*

The above reflection highlights a core component of differentiated assessment, which is that in diverse classrooms, assessments need to be responsive to the various backgrounds and differences of learners, as noted by Moon (2005). For the teachers at JHB School, many believe that differentiated assessment is about acknowledging the rich variety of learners' skills and learning modalities. The perspective that differentiated assessment is about acknowledging diversity was emphasised by another teacher who noted:

> *"Students are also very diverse which you need to consider in your assessment. We do acknowledge that there are real problems. Every child deserves an opportunity" (Teacher F).*

The majority of the teachers in this study believe that differentiated assessment is about recognising learners' diversity. This belief aligns with Moon (2005), who defines differentiation as the "recognition, articulation, and commitment to plan for students' differing needs" (p. 227). In this context, differentiated assessment is framed as an opportunity to ensure all learners, regardless of their differences, can access meaningful and equitable opportunities to demonstrate their learning. This view of differentiated assessment is noted in the work of Kaur et al. (2019), who assert that differentiation is an approach that allows teachers to create opportunities for learners from diverse academic backgrounds to effectively demonstrate their learning. Many of the teachers at JHB School reflect a comprehensive understanding of differentiated assessment that includes social, cultural, and familial contexts that shape learners' learning experiences. The importance of considering these factors when designing assessments is clearly stated in the country's curriculum policy, which explicitly recognises the diversity of learners in terms of socio-economic backgrounds, race,

gender, and physical and intellectual abilities (DBE, 2011). One teacher in this study shares this understanding, noting:

> *"So differentiated assessment in my opinion, would be the methods and the way in which you assess to take into consideration the diversity, to ensure that the assessment is inclusive of all learners who are partaking in it. I mean the background in which learner comes from, they don't all come from the same background. Their family circumstances are different, the way they grew up is different as well" (Teacher G).*

Perception D – Instruction

In the context of this study, teachers referred to the term 'scaffolding' while explaining the need for direct teaching and instruction when discussing the support provided to learners during differentiated assessment. However, it is important to note that in Vygotskyian terms (see Vygotsky, 1978), this concept is more accurately described as 'instruction'. Therefore, throughout the analysis and in reference to Vygotsky (1978), the term 'instruction' is used to maintain consistency with his perspectives.

A prevalent perception among teachers in this study is that differentiated assessment is inherently linked to the use of instruction as a key strategy to support learners. Instruction, in this context, refers to the support provided to learners to help them progress through tasks in a way that accommodates their learning needs (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) asserts that effective instruction occurs when it targets the learners' ZPD, providing the appropriate level of challenge and support. In this study, numerous teachers recognised the importance of such instruction, particularly in the context of assessment. One teacher explained the critical nature of providing the right support and instruction, describing the necessary balance between challenge and accessibility:

> *"Some can and some can't. And those that can, will, and those that can't, never will. So, if you believe that there has to be some support and you have to get learners to just within reach, it has to be fine enough that it's a struggle, but it has to be close enough that it's not impossible. The tension between where you are, where you could be, and as long as you can invest enough in the tension, the pull becomes strong enough to pull you there" (Teacher A).*

Many teachers in the study highlighted the fundamental role of instruction in differentiated assessment, which is centred around providing the right level of support that enables learners to bridge the gap between where they currently are and where they can be, a core idea shared by Shabani et al. (2010). Instruction, in this sense, is about ensuring that assessments are challenging yet achievable. Such support is believed to facilitate cognitive engagement and promote learning outcomes by helping learners navigate difficult content in a way that resonates with their current abilities. The perception that differentiated assessment is centred around the use of instruction was noted by two teachers who highlighted the importance of adjusting the complexity of assessment based on learners' abilities:

> *"So, on a test level, it's having the right levels. So, if we're talking a formal written assessment, it must have a range of questions and must be scaffolded [guided]. It's got to have all the levels that you are testing" (Teacher B).*

> *"To me, it's having questions for your weaker students so you could maybe scaffold [guide] their thinking better [through instruction]. Whereas you can ask a higher order question to your stronger students" (Teacher C).*

Perception E – Uncertainty around the meaning of differentiated assessment

An interesting finding from the data is that some teachers expressed uncertainty about the meaning of differentiated assessment. The lack of clarity suggests a fundamental gap in understanding the principles and practical application of differentiated assessment, which poses a substantial barrier to its effective implementation in Grade 10 classrooms. One teacher captured this uncertainty by questioning the scope and nature of differentiated assessment, noting:

> *"Does it mean different questions based on your strength or does it mean different test techniques or testing styles? Does it mean like a verbal test versus a written test? What does it mean like? But there's definitely issues with the way we assess in one way for across the board, for everyone." (Teacher D).*

Building on this finding, it is evident that some teachers struggle to define what differentiated assessment means and how it can be implemented in classrooms due to insufficient professional development and training on the subject. From the data, it was identified that a lack of formal training or guidance in differentiation and

differentiated assessment contributes to the ambiguity surrounding its meaning, leading to a sense of confusion and frustration among some teachers. The uncertainty about the meaning and implementation of differentiated assessment was explicitly stated by another teacher who expressed frustration with the lack of training in differentiation, noting:

> *"But I've had no training in terms of helping me do differentiation. So that's right from the word go that's off from my teaching" (Teacher C).*

4.3.3 Finding Three: Problems Related to Implementing Differentiated Assessment

One of the objectives guiding this study was to identify the problems Grade 10 teachers face in implementing differentiated assessment in their classrooms. The findings from this study indicate that the effective implementation of differentiated assessment for the teacher participants is hindered by several significant barriers, which include:

a. *The mindset of a teacher.*
b. *Learner buy-in.*
c. *The restrictive nature of CAPS.*

The problems are discussed in detail below.

Problem A – The mindset of a teacher

An interesting finding from the study is the role that the mindset of a teacher plays in either facilitating or hindering the implementation of differentiated assessment in their classrooms. It was identified that teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and preconceived notions about assessment significantly shape their willingness and ability to engage with differentiated assessment practices. As found in a study conducted by de Jager (2013), the teachers' attitudes towards differentiation are pivotal in either fostering or impeding its successful implementation. Similarly, Black and Wiliam (1998) underscore the complex relationship between teachers' mindsets and their capacity to address the diverse needs of learners, which reveals that the struggle to adopt varied approaches to assessment often stems from deeply ingrained attitudes and the reluctance to shift pedagogical practices to meet the dynamic demands of the

classroom. In this study, teachers expressed that their mindset and willingness to change their practices are among the most significant barriers to implementing differentiated assessment. One teacher encapsulated this sentiment by stating:

> *"I don't think all teachers see its value. The amount of content they need to cover and the willingness to plan. I think we just get stuck in a rut. But the learners are changing, everything is changing, surely then you have to change your style? And nobody likes change. So, I think it's a mindset, it's probably the biggest problem, the teachers do not see the value of it. So, if they could see the value, they'd probably do it." (Teacher B).*

The impact of a teacher's mindset on their assessment practices was echoed by another teacher who brought forward a similar concern:

> *"I'm not seeing that open mindedness. These teachers need to implement these things [new ways of assessing learners] and you know, they don't want to give thought to things that need to be evolved or that we need to consider certain things, or it's like, oh, it's a pain and like, you know, we have other things to do" (Teacher F).*

Problem B – Learner buy-in

A second problem identified in this study that hinders the implementation of differentiated assessment is the issue of learner buy-in. While differentiated assessment aims to address the diverse needs of learners, its effectiveness was found to be heavily contingent on how learners perceive and engage with this assessment approach. Intrinsic factors, such as learner motivation and engagement with the assessment method, were found to play a critical role in determining its success. The challenge of learner buy-in aligns with Ali's (2015) findings, which emphasise the importance of learner buy-in for the success of differentiated assessment practices. For differentiated assessment to be effective, it was noted that learners would need to understand its value and be willing to actively participate in the process:

> *"Differentiated assessment is quite difficult because it relies on a measure of self-assessment. That kind of learning requires such an emotional investment on the learner's part. They can't engage in differentiated learning if they don't care. It's also hard to invest them in it. And it's our responsibility to cultivate the buyer, so I have to show them how much this stuff means" (Teacher A).*

Similarly, another teacher underscored the difficulty in fostering learner buy-in. It was found that teachers face a significant challenge of engaging learners in varied assessment approaches. The teacher noted that:

> *"The kids get despondent. Not everyone is open to that, that's the biggest thing for me. Like the biggest thing is that buy in from the kids. So, if you're designing the assessments you know with them in mind, then that's half your battle won, actually" (Teacher F).*

Problem C – The restrictive nature of CAPS

The restrictive nature of the South African curriculum presents a significant challenge to the effective implementation of differentiated assessment in Grade 10 classrooms. While CAPS was designed to standardise and streamline the educational process, the rigidity of its structure, according to teachers in this study, often limits teachers' flexibility in adapting assessment practices to meet the diverse needs of learners. The lack of flexibility thus creates a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment that fails to consider the unique learning needs of individual learners, with one teacher stating that:

> *"CAPS and the DBE expectations make it challenging to implement differentiated assessment. There's a lot to do and so you stress about covering the content. And then we think we can't do things [differentiated assessment] like this. Plus, they tell us we have to assess and how we have to assess. They are incredibly restrictive with assessments. And then we're not developing teachers' abilities to assess" (Teacher B).*

The limitations imposed by CAPS were noted by another teacher who argues that the department sets unrealistic expectations of teachers that overshadow the opportunity to innovate or individualise assessment methods:

> *"The departments' expectations, like regarding all the assessments you need to do places immense pressure on you. I don't believe that the people at the top really know what goes on in the school. They are so prescriptive, and I find that that is so stuffing. Again, they're not looking at the quality of the assessment; they're looking at how many marks do you have. If CAPS was less prescriptive, we could be more creative with our assessments" (Teacher C).*

Many teachers in the study noted that the DBE focuses too heavily on summative assessments and measurable outcomes. One teacher elaborated on how the restrictions of CAPS impact the quality of assessment:

"And I think that's the first problem is they [the Department of Education] put too many restrictions on us. So, we can't actually assess in a valuable way, we are assessing purely for marks" (Teacher B).

4.3.4 Finding Four: Strategies to Support the Implementation of Differentiated Assessment

One of the objectives of this study was to explore the specific types of support that Grade 10 teachers at JHB school need to effectively implement differentiated assessment strategies in their classrooms. From the data, three critical areas in which targeted and strategic support for enhancing the teachers' ability to meet the diverse needs of their Grade 10 learners were identified. These areas include:

a. *Learning from experts.*
b. *Appropriate training and practical examples.*
c. *Reduction of departmental interference.*

The strategies are discussed in detail below.

Strategy A – Learning from experts

The most common strategy identified by the participants for supporting the implementation of differentiated assessment in Grade 10 classrooms is the desire to learn from experts in the field of differentiation. Most of the participants in the study expressed a strong need for guidance from experienced practitioners in the field. Being provided with an opportunity to learn from experts was viewed by most of the participants as essential for enhancing their confidence and competence in applying differentiated assessment into their classrooms. One teacher expressed:

"So, it's who does the training. You know, give me somebody who has lived it, experienced it, so that's why I think [being] given the training is necessary, but you need somebody who understands the context" (Teacher B).

The need for qualified, experienced professionals to guide teachers in implementing differentiated assessment in their Grade 10 classrooms was a consistent theme among the participants, which highlighted the critical role of expert-led support in

empowering teachers to successfully adopt differentiated assessment in their classrooms. The desire for expert guidance was further echoed by another teacher, who emphasised the importance of top-tier professionals with firsthand experience in differentiation, which was evident in the statement:

> *"But perhaps if we got in some guest speakers who are experts in differentiation, who could come in and help you, but you want top people. You want people, you know, who have had experience, who've implemented it, who've done it, who've researched it. So, you're looking at somebody with a master's in differentiation to come and speak to you and to guide you. You're not getting the top people in the field to come and come and talk to you" (Teacher C).*

Strategy B – Appropriate training and practical examples

A second strategy identified by the participants in this study, which is viewed as essential to support the implementation of differentiated assessment in Grade 10 classrooms, is the need for appropriate, contextually relevant training, accompanied by practical, real-world examples of how to differentiate assessment. As noted by de Jager (2013) and Kaur et al. (2019), professional development is essential because it equips teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to enhance their teaching and assessment practices to effectively meet the needs of their learners. The importance and desire for professional development was noted by one teacher:

> *"Professional development would be insightful because once you know the knowledge you yourself are able to apply it" (Teacher G).*

While many teachers acknowledged the importance of theoretical understanding, they emphasised that theory alone is insufficient for the effective implementation of differentiated assessment. Instead, the majority of teachers expressed a strong need for training that covers the theory and principles of differentiation and provides hands-on, actionable guidance that illustrates how differentiated assessment can be applied in diverse classroom settings. The importance of training coupled with practical examples is well supported by existing literature. Studies by Aldossari (2018), Ali (2015), de Jager (2013), Kaur et al. (2019), and Laari et al. (2021) consistently found that across various contexts, teachers view workshops that provide them with practical examples as essential platforms for gaining practical examples and hands-on

strategies as crucial for effectively integrating new practices into their classrooms. It is argued that professional development workshops designed to equip teachers with practical tools and strategies are among the most effective interventions for supporting the successful integration of differentiated assessment practices (Aldossari, 2018; Ali, 2015). The desire for theory and practical training was suggested by three teachers:

> *"So, I think maybe on a practical level if you really want to get going. Don't bombard them with a whole lot of theory. Show them the theory briefly, but make it practical, this is how you would do it. And if possible, give them an example for their subjects as well" (Teacher B).*

> *"I mean, maybe if they could give you like practical tips. So, you know, maybe if we had some examples, how would we actually implement it realistically" (Teacher D).*

> *"I would like the practical implementation, like the nitty gritty down in the class" (Teacher E).*

Building on the importance of professional development, it was found that for professional development to be truly impactful, it must bridge the gap between theoretical ideals and the practical realities teachers face in the classroom, a point highlighted by Laari et al. (2021). However, although the importance of theory was noted by the teachers who expressed frustration with current professional development programs that focus too heavily on abstract theory rather than practical application. The teachers emphasised that when training is overly theoretical, it becomes disconnected from the actual teaching experience, reducing its effectiveness. One teacher observed:

> *"I often find that what they're saying is a very symbolic representation of the thing itself. So inclusive education for example, it's a very symbolic representation of inclusive education" (Teacher A).*

Strategy C – Reduction of departmental interference

The final suggestion identified in the study is the call for a reduction in departmental interference in assessment practices. The teachers expressed a strong desire for greater autonomy in how assessments are designed and implemented in their classrooms. Teachers noted that the rigid policies and prescriptive guidelines

established by the Department of Education and CAPS pose a hindrance to innovation and creativity in assessment. The teachers argued that minimising these constraints would provide them with the flexibility needed to design assessments that are more responsive to the diverse needs of their Grade 10 learners, allowing for more personalised and effective evaluation practices. As two teachers articulated:

> *"We should be developing our own system for what works for us in this context" (Teacher A).*
>
> *"Let us design our own assessments" (Teacher B).*

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the findings under themes that were identified through the data analysis process. These themes include Grade 10 teachers' perceptions of assessments' inclusivity, perceptions of differentiated assessment, the problems related to implementing differentiated assessment, and the strategies required to support Grade 10 teachers in the implementation of differentiated assessment at JHB School.

From the findings, it is worth noting that the findings from the data substantiate the claim that the current 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment is insufficient in addressing the diverse needs of Grade 10 learners at the JHB school, as they fail to accommodate the unique learning needs, abilities, and backgrounds of learners. Traditional assessment methods overlook the complexity of learner differences, resulting in inequities that hinder the accurate evaluation of academic progress. The findings from the data highlight the critical need for differentiated assessment to be implemented in Grade 10 classrooms if we wish to fulfil our promise of providing inclusive, equitable, and effective education to South African learners.

To draw out a deepened explanation of these findings, in the chapter that follows, I discuss the themes from a theoretical perspective of social constructivism and from extant literature.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

I begin this concluding chapter with a synthesis of the study's key findings by providing a visual representation in the form of a mind map (see Figure 5.1). I then delve into a comprehensive and detailed discussion of the study's findings, which is organised around the four primary themes identified from the data. I then state the study's contribution to the existing body of knowledge, with particular emphasis on its significance within the broader discourse on inclusive and responsive assessment practices. A discussion of the implications of the study's findings follows, highlighting their relevance to the broader educational context. The limitations of the study are subsequently addressed, alongside a reflection on the strategies employed that mitigated these limitations. I conclude the chapter by providing recommendations for future research, which are intended to advance the understanding of differentiated assessment implementation in Grade 10 South African classrooms.

The objective of this study was to explore the use of differentiated assessment strategies in Grade 10 classrooms, a year that holds significant academic and future implications for learners. Grade 10 in South Africa serves as a pivotal point in the educational journey, where subject choices directly shape learners academic and career paths. The knowledge and skills acquired during this year are foundational for success in the National Senior Certificate examinations, which are a prerequisite for matriculation and access to higher education.

The call for differentiated assessment strategies to be implemented in Grade 10 classrooms stems from the challenges posed by the country's current 'one-size-fits-all' approach to assessment. From the data, I found that there is a pressing need for the implementation of differentiated assessment practices in South African Grade 10 classrooms. The current uniform assessment approach, I argue, fails to accommodate the diverse academic abilities, backgrounds, and learning needs of learners, ultimately undermining the educational progress of some learners. The data highlights the limitations of traditional, standardised assessment methods, which prioritise uniformity and exclude learners whose strengths, abilities, or backgrounds fall outside the norm. Such exclusion perpetuates inequalities in educational outcomes, hindering some learners from reaching their full potential. In light of the study's' findings, I suggest the

adoption of differentiated assessment practices in Grade 10 classrooms, which would in turn offer a more inclusive and equitable approach to evaluation.

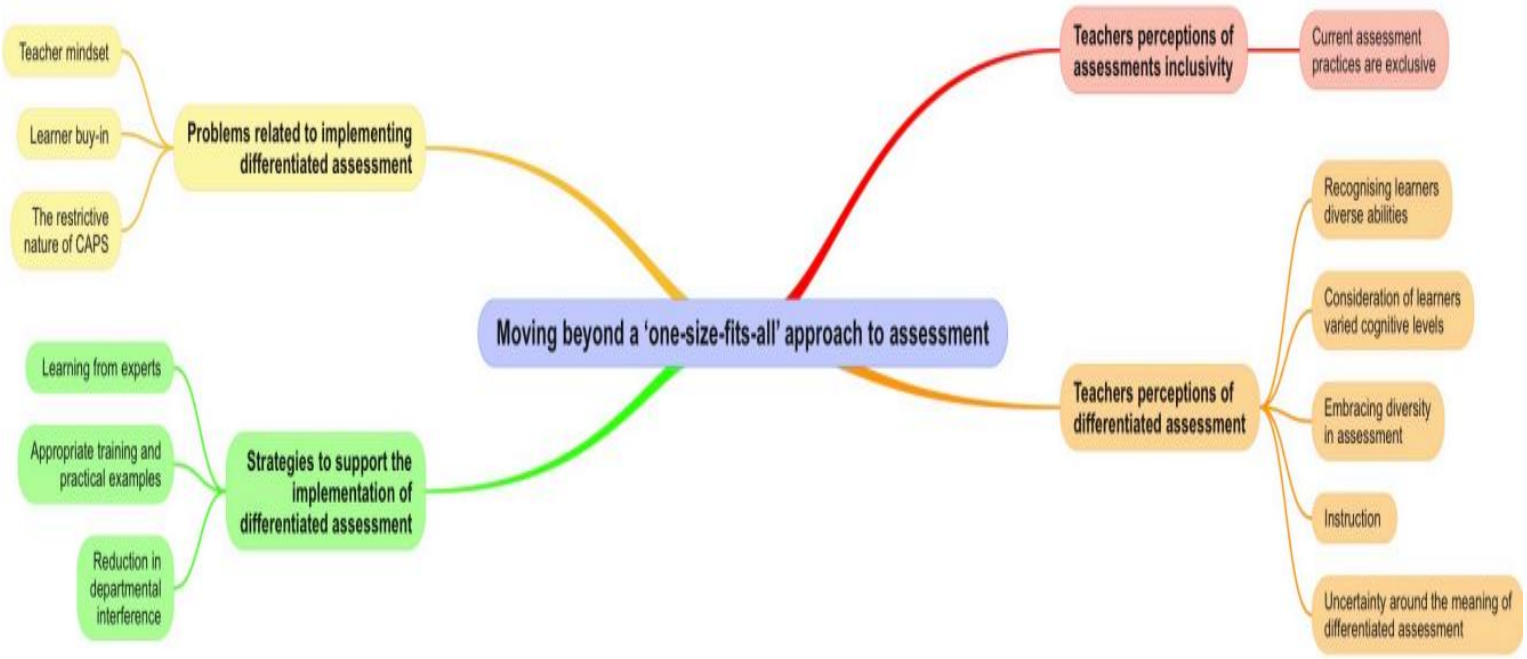

Figure 5.1: Visual Representation of the Study's Findings

5.2 Discussion of the Findings

Finding One: Teachers' perceptions of assessments inclusivity

From the data, I identified that the Grade 10 teachers at JHB School perceive current assessment practices as exclusive, reinforcing barriers to learning for the school's diverse learner body. Their view that current assessment practices exclude many learners aligns with critiques by Kanjee and Sayed (2013), Noman and Kaur (2014), and Tomlinson and Moon (2004), who argue that traditional assessments fail to accommodate the varied needs of South African learners. The teachers highlighted that learners at JHB School possess a wide range of academic abilities, exposing the inherent limitations of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

According to the teachers, assessments based on rigid, standardised frameworks marginalise learners by measuring their capabilities solely against narrow, predefined

criteria. This was said to disadvantage those with different cognitive, cultural, or learning needs. Teachers also observed that this rigidity creates academic and psychological barriers, suggesting to learners that their value depends on conforming to a specific standard. Consequently, learners who deviate from this norm feel excluded. Such an environment, teachers argued, restricts opportunities for learners to showcase the full depth of their knowledge. This belief resonates with scholars like Eysink and Schildkamp (2021), Fitzsimons and O'Neil (2024), and Kanjee and Sayed (2013), who similarly highlight that traditional assessments do not address the cognitive or cultural diversity prevalent in classrooms.

Another concern raised by teachers at JHB School was the inadequacy of current assessment practices in accommodating all learners, especially those facing learning difficulties or coming from marginalised backgrounds. They noted that many assessments presuppose specific cultural knowledge, which can be irrelevant or inaccessible to learners whose experiences differ from mainstream norms. This echoes critiques made by Kanjee and Sayed (2013) regarding the CAPS document, underscoring the importance of designing more inclusive, context-sensitive assessments. Indeed, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach often privileges certain types of knowledge, inadvertently disadvantaging those from diverse cultural or academic contexts. As a result, the teachers emphasised the urgency for adaptive, differentiated assessments that consider learners' social, emotional, and cultural dimensions.

The findings above resonate with the principles of social constructivism, which assert that cognitive development is shaped by meaningful social interactions within specific cultural and contextual environments (Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). When assessment practices ignore the social and cultural realities of learners, they can disrupt the co-construction of knowledge and limit opportunities for learning. This in turn contradicts the core social constructivist claim that knowledge is mediated through interaction, language, and experience (McKinley, 2015; Warnich & Meyer, 2013).

The teachers further expressed frustration at the static nature of these traditional assessments, believing that they fail to evolve alongside the changing needs of Grade 10 learners in South Africa. Feeling bound by an outdated system, teachers observed a disconnect between what assessments measure and how learners actually learn. This critique supports Dison and Padayachee (2022) and Elwood and Murphy (2015),

who argue that assessments must adapt to the complexities of contemporary learners. Teachers also noted that inflexible assessments deny opportunities to vary tasks and formats – an essential element of supporting learners with different abilities (Kanjee, 2020; van Staden & Motsamai, 2017).

Overall, teachers at JHB School believe that existing assessment practices perpetuate exclusion and argue that a shift toward more adaptive, differentiated assessment is necessary. From a social constructivist perspective, as emphasised by Cockroft (2009), learning and cognitive development emerge through active engagement in meaningful experiences. Therefore, when assessment practices fail to accommodate learners' diverse backgrounds and individual development, they undermine the fundamentals of social constructivism. Instead of supporting knowledge construction through interaction and experience, rigid assessments constrain learners' ability to show understanding in contexts that reflect their unique abilities and cultural frameworks.

In keeping with the social constructivist theory, assessment should allow learners multiple ways to demonstrate knowledge, recognising that individual cognitive development is shaped by lived experiences and scaffolded interactions. As teachers in this study suggest, moving beyond a 'one-size-fits-all' approach would foster the inclusivity and equity integral to social constructivist principles. Without this evolution, many learners will continue to be overlooked, reinforcing the need to rethink assessment systems if the South African education sector seeks to provide every learner with a fair chance to exhibit their full potential.

Finding Two: Teachers' perceptions of differentiated assessment

From the data, it was identified that Grade 10 teachers hold various perceptions of differentiated assessment. These perceptions include recognising learners' diverse abilities, addressing learners' varying cognitive levels, embracing diversity in assessment, viewing it as tied to instruction (often confused with scaffolding), and expressing uncertainty about its precise meaning.

Recognising Learners' Diverse Abilities

Grade 10 teachers at JHB School strongly perceive differentiated assessment as a critical approach that recognises and addresses the diverse abilities of learners. They note that learners come into the classroom with distinct capacities, making it essential for assessment methods to reflect this diversity. In doing so, teachers directly challenge the 'one-size-fits-all' approach by arguing that all learners should be evaluated in ways suited to their unique strengths and challenges. This perspective aligns with existing literature, which highlights the need for tailored assessments that consider each learner's prior knowledge, abilities, and readiness (Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021; Moon, 2005; Noman & Kaur, 2014).

Moreover, teachers expressed dissatisfaction with traditional assessment models that assume uniformity. They observed that these models frequently fail to accommodate learners' varied strengths and readiness levels, reinforcing the arguments made by Ali (2015) and Kaur et al. (2019). Consequently, teachers at JHB School view differentiated assessment as a pedagogical strategy that challenges conventional norms and promotes inclusivity. This stance echoes Fitzsimons and O'Neil's (2024) assertion that it is impossible to meet all learners' needs through a single approach. Instead, by offering multiple avenues for learners to demonstrate competence, differentiated assessment is seen as critical to equitable education, a concept also championed by Ali (2015) and Kaur et al. (2019).

One teacher pointed to systemic resistance within education, describing how schools often "pull a blinker over" when acknowledging diverse learner capabilities. This comment reveals a tendency to minimise or dismiss the reality of difference. Rather than attributing blame to learners for academic shortcomings, the teacher argued that ignorance – or a failure to adopt equitable, adaptive practices – is the real obstacle. This outlook aligns with a strengths-based view underpinning differentiated assessment: educators should adapt to learners' varied abilities to foster success. Such a perception also resonates with social constructivist principles, which posit that learners actively build knowledge based on individual experiences (Cockcroft, 2019).

Consideration of Learners' Varying Cognitive Levels

A second central perception of differentiated assessment is that it must address learner's varying cognitive abilities, a key point rooted in the social constructivist framework. Teachers stated that a thorough understanding of each learners' cognitive level would allow them to design tasks that promote meaningful growth. In other words, assessment becomes a dynamic process, calibrated to each learner's stage of development.

This idea aligns closely with research on cognitive diversity, which posits that learners progress at different rates and require varied forms of support (Eysink & Schildkamp, 2021; Moon, 2005; Noman & Kaur, 2014). Teachers at JHB School described the importance of avoiding tasks that are either too simple or too difficult, thus underscoring Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). They emphasised that providing challenges just beyond a learner's current level fosters optimal cognitive growth without inciting frustration. The teachers found that traditional 'one-size-fits-all' approaches ignore the reality that even within one grade level, learners can be at different cognitive stages (Aldossari, 2018).

Teachers also highlighted the need for assessments to evolve over time as learners' cognitive abilities mature. This responsiveness reflects key social constructivist tenets, wherein cognitive development unfolds through ongoing interaction with one's social and learning environment (Cockcroft, 2009). By advocating for assessment practices that adapt to evolving cognitive needs, teachers emphasised the importance of creating equitable conditions in which learners can succeed.

The above-mentioned findings are strongly grounded in social constructivist theory, particularly Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD. Cockroft (2009) and Shabani et al. (2010) argue that learning occurs most effectively when instructional and assessment practices are aligned with each learner's current and potential cognitive capacities. By advocating for adaptive assessments that evolve alongside learners' development, these teachers reflect a core social constructivist belief, which is that knowledge is actively constructed through interaction, context, and guided support (McKinley, 2015; Warnich & Meyer, 2013). In this way, differentiated assessment evaluates what learners know and serves as a pedagogical tool to mediate learning within social and cultural realities.

Embracing Diversity in Assessment

Teachers at JHB School also perceive differentiated assessment as an approach that embraces the broader diversity in their classrooms. Beyond cognitive differences, they believe assessments should account for socio-cultural, emotional, and personal factors that shape learners' experiences. This stance resonates with the CAPS document, which acknowledges differences in socio-economic status, race, gender, and learning abilities (DBE, 2011).

In this view, differentiated assessment serves as a strategy for equity, ensuring every learner can demonstrate understanding in ways suited to their unique contexts. The teachers thus reject uniform standards that disregard learners' individual strengths and backgrounds (Ali, 2015; Imbeau & Tomlinson, 2013). Instead, they argue that inclusive, flexible evaluations are essential for fostering a fair and supportive environment, a viewpoint grounded in social constructivism's emphasis on contextual and experiential learning (Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978).

Using Instruction in Assessment

A recurring theme among teachers is the perception that differentiated assessment is closely tied to the idea of providing support – often described as "scaffolding.". The teachers believe learners should be placed within their ZPD and given tasks that are challenging yet attainable, with enough assistance to ensure progress (Ali, 2015; Mills et al., 2014; Moon, 2005). Many teachers see this support as integral to differentiated assessment, allowing learners to demonstrate their capabilities without undue struggle.

However, the data also revealed confusion between "scaffolding" and "instruction.". From a Vygotskian perspective, instruction is the systematic guidance enabling learners to move through their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding typically refers to temporary support structures rather than the broader instructional strategies required for guiding learners. The conflation suggests a gap in teachers training, wherein Vygotsky's theories have been partially misunderstood. As a result, teachers who conflate scaffolding with instruction may not be fully equipped to tailor assessment

practices appropriately, highlighting the need for more precise professional development in differentiated assessment.

Uncertainty around the Meaning of Differentiated Assessment

Another finding was the uncertainty some teachers expressed about the meaning of differentiated assessment. While most participants grasped its core idea – tailoring assessment to meet diverse needs – detailed knowledge of its practical implementation was inconsistent. They attributed this uncertainty to insufficient training and professional development, resulting in reliance on traditional practices.

This gap in teacher education poses significant challenges for shifting classroom assessment toward a differentiated model. Without guidance and clarity, teachers remain unsure of how to incorporate strategies that effectively address learners' varied profiles. This finding underscores the importance of systemic support, including targeted training programs that clarify conceptual frameworks and offer actionable, context-specific techniques for implementing differentiated assessment.

In conclusion, the Grade 10 teachers at JHB School express a range of perceptions about differentiated assessment. The teachers view differentiated assessment as importance for recognising and accommodating diverse abilities, varying cognitive levels, and broader socio-cultural differences. Teachers also link differentiated assessment to the principles of guided support (though conflated with "scaffolding"), pointing to Vygotsky's (1978) notion of effective instruction within the ZPD. Finally, some teachers revealed uncertainty about its meaning, reflecting inadequate training and support.

Overall, these perceptions challenge the dominance of traditional 'one-size-fits-all' assessment and highlight the need for an inclusive approach that better aligns with social constructivist principles (Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). By advocating for flexible, adaptive strategies that honour learners' diverse backgrounds and cognitive trajectories, teachers underscore the value of differentiated assessment in fostering equitable learning experiences. However, to ensure its effective implementation, more robust teacher education and clear professional development pathways are needed.

Finding Three: Problems related to implementing differentiated assessment

From the data, it was identified that implementing differentiated assessment in Grade 10 classrooms at JHB School is hindered by institutional and pedagogical issues. According to the teachers, major obstacles include the restrictive nature of the CAPS curriculum policy, entrenched teacher mindsets, and the need for learner buy-in. These factors collectively undermine efforts to move beyond traditional 'one-size-fits-all' assessments.

The Mindset of a Teacher

A significant barrier to implementing differentiated assessment at JHB School is the entrenched mindset within the teaching profession. Many teachers resist adopting more inclusive and adaptive assessment methods due to long-standing habits and the familiarity of traditional approaches. This resistance is compounded by the broader pressures of the education system, where curriculum coverage often takes precedence over innovative practices.

Teachers described how their reliance on routine assessment methods perpetuates a 'one-size-fits-all' model, highlighting de Jager's (2013) findings on the pivotal role of teacher beliefs in either facilitating or hindering new assessment practices. Black and Wiliam (1998) similarly note teachers' struggles to balance complex classroom dynamics while addressing diverse learner needs. Although some of the Grade 10 teachers at JHB School recognise evolving learner needs, many remain hesitant to move away from established assessment norms, partly because they are not knowledgeable about specific differentiated strategies (Letshwene & du Plessis, 2021).

Another underlying issue is the emotional toll of teaching. Heightened workloads often lead teachers to focus on survival rather than experimentation, causing them to view differentiated assessment as an added burden. This outlook can erode the motivation essential for professional growth. Hence, teachers may not perceive differentiated approaches as valuable unless they are shown clear, tangible benefits. Addressing this mindset challenge requires a supportive environment – one that offers resources, professional development, and practical examples demonstrating how differentiated

assessment can enhance learning for diverse learners, thus aligning with social constructivist ideals of active, learner-centred engagement (Vygotsky, 1978).

The ‘teacher mindset barrier’ resonates with Warnich and Meyer’s (2013) discussion on the social and cognitive dimensions shaping teachers’ receptivity to change. Their theoretical framework explains that entrenched beliefs and emotional responses to increased workload constrain teachers’ agency to adopt innovative practices. The resistance to differentiated assessment is therefore not merely a procedural issue but is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural environment of the classroom and school community (Cockcroft, 2009).

Learner Buy-In

Another identified challenge was securing learner buy-in. The teachers highlighted that differentiated assessment depends on learners actively participating in and valuing non-traditional assessment methods. However, learners often struggle to see how these new approaches benefit them academically, undermining their motivation to engage.

As Ali (2015) notes, a lack of intrinsic motivation can be a significant barrier to innovative assessment. Grade 10 teachers at JHB School observed that encouraging learner ownership and emotional investment requires continuous effort. From a social constructivist perspective, meaningful knowledge construction is most effective when learners see the relevance of learning activities (Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). However, many learners are accustomed to uniform, summative-focused assessments, making them reluctant to embrace new practices. Teachers noted that building enthusiasm for differentiated tasks entails demonstrating their value for personal growth and academic success, a process that can be time-consuming and difficult. Nonetheless, overcoming learner scepticism is crucial for ensuring that varied assessments become meaningful tools for capturing a wide range of learner abilities and fostering deeper engagement in Grade 10 classrooms.

Learner buy-in aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) emphasis on learner agency within the ZPD, where active participation and social interaction are critical for their cognitive development. Cockcroft (2009) reinforces that motivation and engagement emerge

from learners perceiving their learning as relevant and culturally meaningful. Thus, fostering learner buy-in is integral to social constructivist pedagogy, which views learning as co-constructed through dialogue and authentic tasks. Without this engagement, differentiated assessment risks becoming a superficial exercise rather than a transformative pedagogical tool.

The Restrictive Nature of CAPS

A key finding is that CAPS' prescriptive assessment guidelines hinder teachers' ability to implement differentiated assessment. Originally intended to standardise curriculum delivery (Muller & Hoadley, 2019), CAPS often leaves little room for adapting tasks to diverse learner needs. Instead, its rigid structure compels teachers to prioritise the efficient coverage of content and the reporting of results.

Teachers at JHB School expressed frustration that the policy's stringent timelines and emphasis on standardisation marginalise more personalised forms of evaluation. The requirement to adhere to uniform guidelines conflicts with the social constructivist principle of tailoring instruction and assessment to learners' unique developmental trajectories (Vygotsky, 1978). Consequently, many teachers feel unable to customise assessments in ways that acknowledge learners varied cognitive and cultural backgrounds.

The gap between policy and practice further perpetuates the 'one-size-fits-all' approach because teachers are pressured to meet standard benchmarks at the expense of flexibility and deeper learning opportunities. The result is a system in which marks, rather than adaptive teaching or socio-cultural understanding, become the focal measure of success. At JHB School, teachers call for greater autonomy in designing assessments that capture the complexities of their learners' profiles, affirming the need for policy reforms that balance accountability with creativity and equity.

The above-mentioned tension reflects broader critiques of standardisation within education, where top-down policies restrict teachers' professional agency. From a social constructivist perspective, such constraints undermine the core principle that learning and assessment must be contextually responsive and culturally mediated

(Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Warnich and Meyer (2013) argue that effective educational reforms require policies that empower teachers to enact contextually relevant pedagogy rather than enforcing rigid compliance. The CAPS framework, while ensuring equity at a macro-level, ironically may be inhibiting equitable learning experiences by limiting differentiated approaches that attend to learner diversity.

Overall, the implementation of differentiated assessment in Grade 10 classrooms at JHB School is impeded by multiple challenges. Teachers cite workload pressures and entrenched mindsets, coupled with insufficient training in innovative approaches, as significant hurdles. Learner buy-in also emerges as a key concern; without learners' active engagement, differentiation cannot achieve its intended purpose of inclusive and meaningful evaluation. In addition, the rigid structure of CAPS further restricts teacher autonomy, favouring uniformity over tailored support.

The findings highlight a broader need for more flexible, supportive, and adaptive assessment frameworks, ones that align with social constructivism by recognising learners' unique developmental paths and cultural backgrounds (Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Addressing these barriers requires systemic reforms, including well-structured professional development, policy adjustments to grant teachers' greater latitude in assessment design, and explicit strategies for motivating and engaging learners. Without such measures, differentiated assessment will remain an aspirational concept rather than a transformative tool for improving Grade 10 learner outcomes at JHB School.

Finding Four: Strategies to support the implementation of differentiated assessment

From the data, I identified three main strategies proposed by Grade 10 teachers at JHB School to enhance the effective implementation of differentiated assessment in their classrooms: learning from experts, receiving appropriate training with practical examples, and reducing departmental interference in assessment design. These strategies collectively underscore the teachers' desire to move beyond the 'one-size-fits-all' assessment approach to meet the diverse needs of their learners.

Learning from Experts

A prominent suggestion was the need for expert-led professional development. Teachers at JHB School believe that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should involve specialists who have extensive theoretical understanding and practical experience with differentiation. The teachers emphasised that expert-led training bridges the gap between theory and the realities of classroom implementation, aligning with Cockroft's (2009) assertion that effective learning is rooted in contextualised application.

The call for expert-led, contextually relevant training aligns closely with the social constructivist framework, which emphasises meaningful interactions within authentic social and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). As such, teachers argued that specialists who understand the South African education system would ensure the content speaks directly to the socio-cultural realities of their classrooms. This perspective resonates with Ali (2015), Aldossari (2018), and Hoadley and Muller (2016), who highlight the importance of situating professional development within teachers' real-world problems.

The teachers further critiqued current DBE workshops for lacking practical relevance, stressing that facilitators should have tangible expertise in differentiated assessment. The teachers believe this expert guidance would give them the tools and confidence needed to move beyond the uniform norms of assessment. In essence, teachers see expert-led training as essential for transforming traditional practices into more adaptive and inclusive approaches.

Such a strategy reflects the social constructivist emphasis on mediated learning, where teacher development must occur through expert support within a community of practice, an idea brought forward by Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the ZPD applies to learners as well as teachers; teachers would benefit from instructional guidance to acquire new assessment skills. Through collaboration with others who can provide such guidance, teachers can move away from reliance on rigid, standardised assessments towards more dynamic and differentiated strategies, grounded in authentic teaching contexts.

Appropriate Training and Practical Examples

The second key suggestion was the need for targeted professional development that merges theoretical knowledge with concrete, classroom-based examples. Teachers consistently pointed out that training often remains too abstract, leaving them without the practical strategies needed to implement differentiated assessment.

This concern echoes Aldossari (2018), Ali (2015), de Jager (2013), and Kaur et al. (2019), all of whom emphasise the importance of bridging theory and practice when it comes to differentiated assessment. According to Grade 10 teachers at JHB School, professional development programs should explicitly address the complexities of their classrooms and give actionable techniques for tailoring assessments. They argued that without practical, context-specific examples, theoretical frameworks remain disconnected from the daily realities of teaching diverse learners.

Teachers thus advocate for workshops that combine conceptual understanding – such as the principles of social constructivism (Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978) – with hands-on exercises and illustrative case studies. Such an approach, they believe, would bolster their confidence in adapting assessments to different cognitive, socio-economic, and cultural contexts. In this way, professional development can guide teachers to replace symbolic or generic representations of differentiation with strategies that are fully aligned with Grade 10 learners' needs.

The above-mentioned recommendation resonates with social constructivism's focus on contextualised, experiential learning, where knowledge is believed to be more effectively acquired through meaningful activity (Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Just as learners require concrete, scaffolded learning tasks within their ZPD, teachers too need modelling and guided application to transform abstract assessment theories into functional classroom tools. Without this practical engagement, the potential of differentiated assessment to support equitable learning is unlikely to be realised.

Reduction in Departmental Interference

Finally, the teachers at JHB School called for reduced departmental interference in assessment design, arguing for greater professional autonomy. The teachers believe that top-down mandates reinforce a rigid, uniform approach and undermines their

capacity to address the rich diversity of their learners. In contrast to the assumption that stronger departmental control ensures consistency, teachers argued that more flexibility would allow them to design assessments relevant to their learners' unique backgrounds and academic levels. The teachers emphasised that, as daily practitioners, they are best positioned to craft assessment methods that foster learner engagement and accommodate varying cognitive stages – key tenets of social constructivism, which highlights the importance of tailoring instruction to learners' developmental paths (Vygotsky, 1978).

However, the teachers noted that current policy frameworks often leave little room for creative assessment, steering them instead toward rigid benchmarks. This tension mirrors broader critiques of standardised education systems, where uniformity is pursued at the expense of localised, meaningful assessment practices (Muller & Hoadley, 2019). For the Grade 10 teachers at JHB School, professional agency and autonomy are essential for realising the inclusive promise of differentiated assessment. Again, this concern reflects social constructivism's core rejection of decontextualised, top-down instruction, favouring instead learner-and teacher-centred practices grounded in authentic environments (Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). When teachers are empowered to act as autonomous, reflective practitioners, they can design assessments that recognise the individual development pathways of their learners. Excessive departmental control limits this agency and contradicts the constructivist view that knowledge and skills should emerge through interaction, experimentation, and relevance to real-world contexts.

In conclusion, Grade 10 teachers at JHB School identified three strategies crucial to adapting more inclusive and responsive assessment practices, including expert-led professional development that provides both theoretical grounding and practical demonstrations of differentiation; contextualised training and practical examples to bridge the gap between abstract theory and the realities of classroom implementation; and reduced departmental interference to grant teachers greater autonomy in designing assessments that address their learners' diverse needs. These strategies reflect the teachers' drive to create classrooms that move beyond 'one-size-fits-all' assessments, consistent with the social constructivist principle that knowledge is constructed through active, context-specific engagement (Cockcroft, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978).

While the teachers at JHB School show a strong commitment to meeting the varied strengths and weaknesses of their learners, systemic barriers – such as lack of training, insufficient expert support, and rigid policy mandates – currently limit their capacity to implement differentiated assessment fully in their Grade 10 classrooms. Ultimately, enabling teachers to integrate expert guidance, receive practical, context-aware training, and exercise meaningful professional autonomy would promote a more equitable and transformative learning environment for Grade 10 learners at JHB School.

5.3 The Study's Contribution to Knowledge

The study contributes to the limited body of research on differentiated assessment practices within South African Grade 10 classrooms. Extant literature on differentiation focuses predominantly on instructional approaches aimed at ensuring that all learners can access and engage with content effectively. The study extends the discourse by exploring how the principles of differentiation can be applied to assessment practices, thereby addressing an under-examined dimension of inclusive education. By examining teachers' perceptions, the problems they face and the support they require, the study offers valuable empirical insights into how assessments can be adapted to accommodate the diverse learning needs of learners within the same educational environment. In doing so, the study fills a critical gap in the literature and contributes to the broader discourse on differentiation, offering context-specific implications for policy, teacher development, and curriculum reform in South Africa.

5.4 Implications of the Findings

The study's findings have significant implications for key stakeholders in the South African education system, particularly the Department of Basic Education (DBE), teachers, and curriculum developers. These implications stem from the study's earlier discussions about teacher perceptions (section 5.2) and systemic constraints (findings one, two, and three), underscoring the need for substantive changes if the overall research objective – using differentiated assessment to meet learners' diverse learning needs, exploring teachers' perceptions of differentiated assessment, identifying implementation barriers, and proposing support strategies – is to be realised.

Implications for the DBE

A central implication of this study concerns reducing departmental interference in assessment practices. It would therefore be meaningful for the DBE to provide policy flexibility for context-responsive assessment design. Many teachers in the study revealed that rigid policies and an overemphasis on uniformity clash with the diverse realities of their classrooms, thereby limiting the teachers' capacity to implement context-sensitive, differentiated assessments. Aligning with earlier findings on the need for greater autonomy (see finding four, section 4 and section 5), which suggests that the DBE should revise current assessment policies to allow for greater professional autonomy for teachers in designing context-sensitive assessments. Instead of rigid, standardised assessment frameworks, national policy should support adaptable guidelines that enable teachers to tailor assessment methods to their learners' needs. Such an approach would align assessment practice with the realities of South African classrooms, as called for by social constructivist theory (see chapter two, section 2.7), which emphasises contextualised and active knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Additionally, the DBE would benefit from shifting its policy to be learning-centred rather than marks-centred. To enable the effective implementation of differentiated assessment, the DBE must move away from its current purely performance-driven system that prioritises standardised outcomes. Instead, the DBE should promote a learning-focused framework that values formative assessment, learner growth, and individual progress. This would encourage assessment practices that support inclusive and equitable learning, especially for learners whose needs are not currently being met by traditional summative assessment tools.

Finally, the findings of the study highlight the need for the DBE to invest in scalable professional development programmes. The DBE should fund and coordinate a national-level training initiative focused on differentiated assessment. The programmes need to go beyond theoretical workshops to include classroom-based modelling, mentoring, and follow-up support that enables its practical application. Such an investment would bridge the gap between policy intent and classroom implementation.

Implications for Teachers

The findings of this study bring forward the critical role that teachers play in enabling or constraining the implementation of differentiated assessment practices in South African classrooms. While many teachers in the study acknowledge the value of responsive assessment, long-standing habits, curriculum pressures, and a reliance on standardised methods often inhibit innovation. However, the data also reveal that with appropriate support and resources, teachers are willing and capable of adapting their assessment practices. The following proposals offer actionable, research-based recommendations aimed at equipping teachers to implement differentiated assessment.

I propose that teachers engage in ongoing professional learning focused on differentiated assessment. Teachers should be supported and encouraged by both the DBE and the school community to participate in continuous professional development that provides the theoretical foundations and practical tools needed for differentiated assessment. Such training should cover diverse assessment methods, the adaptation of assessment criteria, and the use of multiple modalities through which learners can demonstrate understanding. Professional development that is practical, sustained, and context-specific can build teacher confidence and capacity to design inclusive assessments that reflect learner diversity (as emphasised in finding two: see sections 4 and 5), thus contributing to a more inclusive learning environment aligned with the study's social constructivist framework.

Additionally, the findings of the study highlight the need for teachers to cultivate reflective assessment practices. Teachers should be encouraged to adopt a reflective stance toward their assessment practices, regularly evaluating their effectiveness in meeting diverse learner needs. Reflective practices could involve asking critical questions such as: Who benefits from this assessment method? Who is disadvantaged? How can I adapt this task to allow all learners to demonstrate understanding? By continuously interrogating one's assessment approaches, teachers can develop more inclusive, responsive practices that align with the core principles of differentiated assessment and, in turn, honour the varied strengths and experiences of Grade 10 learners.

Implications for Curriculum Developers

An important implication of this study is the clear need for curriculum developers to embed greater flexibility and clearer guidance on differentiated assessment within the CAPS document. The findings from the study highlight that the current rigidity of curriculum pacing and assessment expectations and guidelines limits teachers' abilities to adapt their assessment practices to meet diverse learner needs. To address this, I recommend that curriculum developers revise the assessment policy to explicitly allow for variation in how learning outcomes can be assessed. Additionally, the inclusion of a practical toolkit and exemplar assessments would equip teachers with concrete strategies for implementing differentiated assessment in Grade 10 classrooms. Furthermore, reducing rigid pacing requirements would create space for more learner-centred assessment practices. By operationalising differentiated assessment within curriculum policy, curriculum developers can play a transformative role in supporting inclusive and equitable learning environments across South African schools.

These implications are linked to the research objectives articulated in this study. Equipping teachers with autonomy and practical strategies (Objective 3) can lead to more equitable, learner-focused assessments (Objective 2), provided there is sustained advocacy for policy reforms that acknowledge the diverse realities in South African classrooms (Objective 1). When the aforementioned are considered, stakeholders can better foster an assessment culture that is inclusive, responsive, and firmly orientated toward enhancing learners' potential.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

The first limitation was the study's one-year timeframe, which may have constrained the depth and breadth of the data collected due to the fluid nature of classroom dynamics and assessment practices. However, I addressed this limitation by employing rich, thick description (see section 3.8.1). Employing rich, thick description enabled me to capture and convey the complexities and nuances of the data. Such an approach provided a detailed and contextualised understanding of teachers' experiences and perspectives regarding differentiated assessment in their Grade 10 classrooms, thus compensating for the temporal constraints of the study.

The second limitation was the small-scale nature of the study, which involved a limited number of participants. While a small-scale study facilitated an in-depth exploration of assessment practices within a specific context, it inherently restricted the generalisability of the findings beyond the classrooms and contexts that were investigated. However, to mitigate this limitation, I utilised rich, thick description and in-person interviews with the participants to situate the findings within the specific context of JHB School. By seeking and providing comprehensive portrayals of the school environment and the teacher participants, I was able to ensure a nuanced understanding of the context being explored. Although I overcame this limitation, it is important to acknowledge that the goal of qualitative research is not to produce generalised conclusions but rather to understand specific phenomena within defined contexts.

Finally, I acknowledge that as the primary instrument of data collection, my philosophy and values may have introduced bias into the reporting of the findings. However, to mitigate the potential bias, I engaged in regular meetings and discussions with my supervisors throughout the data collection and analysis process. The feedback provided by my supervisors assisted in ensuring a more objective and balanced interpretation of the data.

5.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, the following are recommendations for future research on ‘moving beyond a one-size-fits-all’ approach to assessment practices in Grade 10 South African classrooms. Firstly, expanding the scope and engaging in multi-case studies with larger sample sizes. Future research could involve multiple case studies across a variety of schools and regions. A broader dataset would allow for a more comprehensive exploration of differentiated assessment practices across Grade 10 South African classrooms, which would be more representative of the national education landscape.

Secondly, it is recommended that there be an investigation into the role of formative assessment in differentiated assessment practices. Future research could focus on the role of formative assessment as a key mechanism for supporting differentiated assessment in South African classrooms. Examining the practical implementation of

formative assessments would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of these tools in fostering an inclusive learning environment.

The final recommendation for future research is conducting a longitudinal study on the impact of differentiated assessment. There is a need for longitudinal research that tracks the long-term effects of differentiated assessment practices on learners' academic performance and personal development.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: WITS APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
POSTGRADUATE OFFICE

27 June 2024
Student Number: 2246285

Siobhan Dorrington
29 Grampian Road
The Hill
Johannesburg 2197
Gauteng South Africa
By Email: 2246285@students.wits.ac.za
Cc: Supervisors

Dear Ms. Dorrington,

RESULTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION PROPOSAL

I am pleased to be able to advise you that the readers of the Graduate Studies Committee have reviewed the proposal entitled ***"Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of Two Johannesburg Based Schools"*** and recommended that the research proposal pass.

I confirm that **Drs. Sarah Blessed-Sayah and Beatrice Akala** have been appointed your supervisors in the School of Education.

The research report is usually submitted to the Faculty Office by 15 February if you have started at the beginning of the year, and for mid-year, the deadline is 31 July. All students are required to RE-REGISTER at the beginning of each year

Please note that should you miss the deadline of 15 February or 31 July, you will be required to apply for an extension of time and register for the research report extension. Any candidate who misses the deadline of 15 February will be charged fees for the research report.

Please keep us informed of any changes of address during the year.

Note: All MA and PhD candidates who intend to graduate shortly must meet your ETD requirements at least six weeks after your supervisor has received the examiner's reports. **A student must remain registered at the Faculty Office until graduation.**

Yours Sincerely
Faith Herbert
Faith Herbert
Senior Faculty Officer
Faculty of Humanities
Tel: +27 11 717 3018
Email: Faith.Herbert@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Title: Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of One Johannesburg Based School.

Biographic questions

1. How many years have you been teaching for?
2. What made you become a teacher?
3. What do you look forward to most when you enter the classroom?

Understanding perceptions about assessment

4. What does assessment mean to you? What is the purpose of assessment?
5. Can you describe your approach to determining how students are assessed?
6. What makes an assessment effective?
7. How do you balance formative and summative assessments?
8. How important are formative and summative assessments to both you and your students? Please elaborate.
9. Do you think current prescribed assessment practices are inclusive for the diverse student body found in your school? Please elaborate.

Understanding perceptions about differentiated assessment

10. Do you adjust your assessments according to different student needs? If so, how and why?
11. What does differentiated assessment mean to you? What is your understanding of it?
12. Do you think differentiated assessment affects how students experience learning?
13. Do you think there are any benefits for both teachers and students when using differentiated assessment strategies? If so, what are the benefits? If not, why do you believe that?

Identifying problems

14. What are some roadblocks/difficulties you face when trying to use differentiated assessment in your classroom?
15. Does CAPS and the department of education's expectations of you make it challenging to implement differentiated assessment practices? If so, in what ways?

Exploring strategies for successful implementation

16. Have you received any training or support related to implementing differentiated assessment practices? If so, how helpful was it?
17. Based on your experience, do you think it is possible to implement differentiated assessment strategies on a regular basis into Grade 10 classrooms? Please elaborate.
18. What resources or support do you think would be most helpful for you to successfully implement differentiated assessment into Grade 10 classrooms?
19. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience with differentiated assessment strategies or assessment practices in general?

APPENDIX C: TEACHER PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Siobhan Dorrington. I am a master's student in Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project. My research project is a study about differentiated assessment strategies to address the diverse learner needs of Grade 10 pupils in South African classrooms. The title of the study is "Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of One Johannesburg Based School".

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an interview. This will involve a single in-person semi-structured interview that will take around 60 minutes. The interview will take place in person at your workplace after working hours. The interview will be recorded with your permission to ensure accuracy when capturing your responses. The recordings will be transcribed anonymously, meaning your name and any other identifying information will be removed.

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this research, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for not participating. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The interview will be confidential and anonymous. Information you provide will be held securely in a password locked laptop and not disclosed to anyone else. I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report. If you experience any distress or discomfort at any point in this process, we will stop the interview or resume at another time. There are no risks involved in participating in this study.

If you have any questions at any time during the research process, feel free to contact me or my supervisors using the details provided below. This study will be written up as a research report. If you wish to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), by telephone at 011 717-1408. Email hrecnon-mdeical@wits.ac.za

Your sincerely

Researcher: Siobhan Dorrington

2246285@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisors: Dr Sarah Blessed-Sayah

sarah.blessed-sayah@wits.ac.za

Dr Beatrice Akala

beatrice.akala@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX D: TEACHER CONSENT FORM

Title of project: Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of One Johannesburg Based School

Researcher: Siobhan Dorrington

Statement of Consent

I ……. agree to participate in the research project titled "Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of One Johannesburg Based School". The research has been explained to me, I understand what this study is about and what my participation will involve.

I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary.	YES	NO	(please circle)
I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in her research report).	YES	NO	
I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in her research report.	YES	NO	
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded.	YES	NO	

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet and agree to participate in this research project.

Signature: …….

Date: …….

APPENDIX E: PRINCIPAL REQUEST LETTER



Dear Principal,

My name is Siobhan Dorrington, and I am a master's student in the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am researching the effectiveness of implementing differentiated assessment strategies to address the diverse learner needs of Grade 10 learners in South African classrooms. My research involves investigating teachers' perceptions of differentiated assessment strategies and the problems they experience that constrain the implementation of the use of differentiated assessment practices in their classrooms. The title of my research is: Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of One Johannesburg Based School.

I would like to invite four teachers from the school to participate in this study. If they agree, they will be interviewed. The interviews will be semi-structured and will be held for 60 minutes on an individual basis to ensure that confidentiality and privacy are maintained. Data collection will take place on the school premises after work hours. The participants' responses will be audio recorded. Data collection for this research is expected to take place over one week between 15 July and 19 July at your convenience.

Participants will be asked to give their written consent before the research begins. Their responses will be treated confidentially, and identities (their names and the name of the school) will be anonymous. Individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study. The results will be communicated in a research project. The research participants will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. They will be reassured that they can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There are no foreseeable risks in participating in the study. The participants will not be paid for this study.

Please let me know if you require any further information. I look forward to your response as soon as is convenient.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher: Siobhan Dorrington

2246285@students.wits.ac.za

27 St. Andrews Road, Wits School of Education, Parktown, Johannesburg.

Supervisors: Dr Sarah Blessed-Sayah

sarah.blessed-sayah@wits.ac.za

Dr Beatrice Akala

beatrice.akala@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX F: PRINCIPAL CONSENT FORM

Title of project: Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of One Johannesburg Based School

Researcher: Siobhan Dorrington

Statement of Consent

I …….. agree to grant permission for the research project titled "Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of One Johannesburg Based School" to be conducted at ……..…

The purpose and nature of the research have been explained to me, and I understand the scope of the study.	YES NO (please circle)
I understand that my participation in the study is limited to providing consent for the research to take place at the school, and that I will not be directly involved in the research process.	YES NO
I agree that the participation of the school and teachers will remain anonymous, and no identifying information about the school will be disclosed in the research report.	YES NO

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the purpose of the research project and agree to grant permission for it to be conducted at ……..

Signature: ……

Date: ……..

APPENDIX G: GDE APPROVAL LETTER

GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	20 May 2024
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2024– 30 September 2024 2024/102
Name of Researcher:	Dorrington S
Address of Researcher:	29 Grampian Road
	The Hill, Johannesburg
Telephone Number:	078 421-2338
Email address:	2246285@students.wits.ac.za
Research Topic:	Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of Two Johannesburg Based Schools
Name of University:	Wits
Type of qualification	Masters
Number and type of schools:	2 Secondary Schools
District/s/HO	Johannesburg North

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

20/05/2024

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management
7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001
Tel: (011) 355 0488
Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za
Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

1. *Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.*
2. *The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.*
3. ***Because of the relaxation of COVID 19 regulations researchers can collect data online, telephonically, physically access schools or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.***
4. ***The Researchers are advised to wear a mask at all times, Social distance at all times, Provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and Sanitise frequently.***
5. *A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.*
6. *A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.*
7. *The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.*
8. *Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.*
9. *Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.*
10. *Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.*
11. *It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.*
12. *The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.*
13. *The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.*
14. *On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.*
15. *The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.*
16. *Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.*

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards

.....

Dr Nkumani Mukatuni
DCES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 30/05/2024

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management
7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001
Tel: (011) 355 0488
Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za
Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

APPENDIX H: WITS ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG | WSoE Wits School of Education

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER:** 2024ECE024M
PROJECT TITLE	Moving Beyond the 'One-Size-Fits-All' Approach to Assessment Practices in South African Grade 10 Classrooms: A Case of Two Johannesburg Based Schools
INVESTIGATOR	Dorrington, Siobhan
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	WSoE
DATE CONSIDERED	10 June 2024
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Minimal Risk
EXPIRY DATE	Date of submission of the Research Report
ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE	15 July 2024
CHAIRPERSON	Dr. Lawan Abdulhamid

cc: Dr. Sarah Blessed-Sayer

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

S. Dorrington
Signature

16 / 07 / 2024
Date