

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF IN-SERVICE EXPATRIATE TEACHERS'  
EXPERIENCES WITH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN CHINESE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

by

Sharon Ann Ma

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs (SEN) in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. The study was designed around the following central research question: What are the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools? This study used a theoretical framework of Ajzen's theory of planned behavior by examining the planned behavior of in-service expatriate teachers as influenced by the subjective norms of the surrounding culture and their perceived behavior control for providing differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs. The data collection consisted of physical artifacts, personal interviews, and focus groups. Data were analyzed by deriving and clustering themes into categories to find meaning. Seven themes were derived from the participants' experiences (a) concern for students with SEN; (b) awareness of differentiated instruction; (c) reluctance to accommodate or modify instruction; (d) feelings of inadequate preparation; (e) frustration with cultural differences; (f) overwhelmed with challenges; and (g) learning from experience. The findings of this study are consistent with the research previously conducted on teacher self-efficacy and inclusive education. Interpretations of the themes included three significant interpretations: the cultural dissonance within expatriate teachers in Chinese schools, the need for clearer school policies, and the need to increase teacher self-efficacy for providing differentiated instruction in an inclusive classroom.

*Keywords:* inclusive education, special educational needs, theory of planned behavior, teacher efficacy, mainland China

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, my children, and the students.

Ma Qing, you started me on this by suggesting I get my doctorate. Then you supported and encouraged me throughout the whole journey. I would never have finished this without you by my side. You cooked countless meals, listened to endless doctoral discussions, allowed me hours to write, and cheered me on every step of the way. I am so grateful we are together.

My dear children, Isaac and Naomi, you watched me struggle, worry, and work through returning to school as a student. Thank you for the many little ways you supported me as I studied. I pray that you learned grit and perseverance from watching me achieve this dream and that your hard work results in the attainment of your own dreams.

To the students who have ever struggled in my classes or in others' classes, may we teachers continually learn and look for ways to meet you where you are and, as educators, serve you better.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

International Baccalaureate Programme (IB)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC)

professional development (PD)

science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)

special educational needs (SEN)

Sub-Question One (SQ1)

Sub-Question Two (SQ2)

Sub-Question Three (SQ3)

theory of planned behavior (TPB)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Despite the widespread global recognition that inclusive education addresses the issues that learners with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities encounter (United Nations, 2015), students are at risk of the marginalization of their academic, social, and emotional needs (O'Connor & McNabb, 2021). Children with SEN in mainland China are especially vulnerable as opportunities to study in inclusive educational settings remain extremely limited (Cheng et al., 2021). The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. Chapter One examines the historical context of the 1994 Chinese Learning in Regular Classrooms policy (Wang & Qi, 2020; Zhu & Mu, 2019), examines the social and cultural contexts impacting inclusive education in mainland China, and discusses the theoretical context surrounding inclusive education. The insights gained from this study can provide a new understanding of how children with SEN can be included in regular Chinese classrooms by providing insights for improving professional development for teachers and increasing systematic support for student care that can enhance successful academic outcomes and teacher efficacy in mainland China for differentiated instruction. Chapter One develops the problem statement of student marginalization, the purpose statement, and the significance of the study, then provides the central research question, three sub-research questions, and definitions. The chapter concludes with a summary.

## Background

With the implementation of the People's Republic of China's 1994 Learning in Regular Classroom (LRC) initiative, the Chinese education system outlined a policy to increase the number of students with special educational needs (SEN) allowed to attend regular classrooms (Wang & Qi, 2020; Zhu & Mu, 2019). This initiative tasked regular classroom teachers with educating learners of mixed abilities, including SEN, within the same classroom (Xie et al., 2021). However, a long history of societal disregard for people with SEN and disabilities, combined with the inconsistent implementation of the LRC legislation, has meant that LRC has had limited success in providing effective inclusive education for students with SEN and disabilities in Chinese classrooms, despite mainland China's attempt to promote inclusive education (Qu, 2022c; Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2022). Teacher attitudes toward SEN and differentiation, combined with the surrounding cultural perceptions, determine how teachers treat students with SEN in their classrooms and how they make decisions to accommodate different student needs (Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Scarparolo & Subban, 2021). Therefore, it is beneficial to examine the historical background of the LRC policy, the cultural and societal attitudes in mainland China towards disabilities and SEN, and the theoretical background underlying inclusive education.

### Historical Context

Influenced by the global trend of inclusiveness implemented by developed countries (United Nations, 2015), the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China announced after the 1988 National Conference on Special Education that *sui ban jiudu* (Qu, 2019) or the Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) initiative would develop measures for integrating students with some disabilities and special educational needs (SEN) into regular

schools and support the education of students with SEN in regular classrooms (Deng & Manset, 2000; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Li et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018). Despite intending to address the limited educational opportunities for students with disabilities who attended specialized schools in mainland China, the LRC policy indicated that separate schools for students with disabilities would remain operational (An et al., 2018). By increasing educational opportunities for children with SEN in regular classrooms at neighborhood schools already operating (Qu, 2019), early LRC policy intended to meet a domestic need for increasing special education programs (Deng & Manset, 2000; Deng & Pei, 2009; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). However, the LRC policy did not actually promote full inclusion (An et al., 2018).

Additional educational reform for people with disabilities and SEN was passed in mainland China throughout the 1990s to address special educational needs (Chao et al., 2017; Lee, 2015; Qu, 2019; Xu et al., 2018). In 2001, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Education started five pilot programs for inclusive education, and by 2008 mainland China had established a total of 18 pilot schools (Hu & Roberts, 2011). China passed two significant revisions mandating and expanding LRC in 2006 and 2008, respectively (Hu & Roberts, 2011; Xu et al., 2018), that explicitly mentioned accepting children with SEN into regular schools. Since 2008, the integration of SEN students into regular Chinese schools has slowly increased, and some students with SEN have attended general education classes at regular public and private schools (Wang & Qi, 2020; Zhu & Mu, 2019). Recent evidence suggests, however, that the number of students attending separate specialized schools for students with SEN and disabilities is increasing, and the number of students with SEN attending regular primary school inclusion programs is decreasing (Qu, 2022b).



The various pieces of legislation that constitute LRC still stand as the primary policy for the education of students with disabilities and SEN in Chinese schools (Li & Li, 2020; Xu et al., 2018). Additional policies since 2006 have modified and reinforced different aspects of the LRC nationwide and province-wide (An et al., 2018; Faragher et al., 2021; Zhu & Mu, 2019). The 2014-2016 Promotion Plan of Special Education was the first officially released governmental statement to address openly and promote inclusive education (Jia et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2021). The following year, the 2017 Persons with Disabilities Education Ordinance guaranteed educational rights to all people in theory by stating that some students with SEN, not previously recognized as having a legal disability, would gain access to schooling (Faragher et al., 2021; Li & Li, 2020). The Ministry of Education further established guidelines that all schools should develop resource rooms if more than five students with disabilities or SEN attended (An et al., 2018; Faragher et al., 2021). However, the availability of resource rooms and special education support remain severely limited due to resource allocation (Xie et al., 2021).

Since the creation of LRC, the legislation has struggled to provide a clear definition of the policy and direction for its implementation (An et al., 2018; Deng & Manset, 2000; Deng & Pei, 2009; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Xie et al., 2021). Even after incorporating the LRC policy into Chinese legislation in 2006, LRC was not considered mandatory for schools (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Xu et al., 2018). The governmental policy affirms a commitment to inclusion. However, without clear implementation guidelines, LRC policy is not compulsory, and no legal penalties are imposed on schools for failure to follow the policy (An et al., 2018). Even current researchers have continued to refer to LRC as an initiative and noted an unclear implementation of the policy (Lu et al., 2022). With no overarching educational law that dictates inclusive education, school systems have been allowed to pick and choose which parts of the

LRC policy to adopt and implement (Zhu & Mu, 2019). Schools often exclude children with SEN who do not meet the school's academic standards from school admittance (Yuan et al., 2022). The resistance to admitting children with SEN into regular schools is due mainly to the prevailing view among primary and secondary school leaders that students with SEN and disabilities are hindrances to quality educational experiences and achieving high test scores (Chao et al., 2018; Lui et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2021). The support children with SEN receive in the classroom is often limited or inappropriate (Li et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2022). For example, very few educational opportunities exist for children with autism to receive meaningful academic support, even though the number of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses is rising in China (Han & Cumming, 2022). Although students with learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or ASD are becoming more common in regular school enrollment in China (Mu, 2019; Xie et al., 2022), mainland China does not legally affirm these diagnoses and lacks diagnostic and legal procedures for evaluation and placement of suspected SEN diagnoses (Yuan et al., 2022). Several provisions of the legal ordinance allow schools to deem students with these diagnoses as uneducable and to refuse them admittance (Li & Li, 2020; Yuan et al., 2022). Additionally, until 2015, the Chinese educational system did not consider students with SEN eligible to take the high-stakes university entrance exam known as the *Gaokao* (Qu, 2022c).

Successful implementation of inclusive education relies on educators understanding and following educational best practices, which Chinese education systems have yet to achieve (An et al., 2018). Numerous studies affirm that the Chinese educational system has provided schools and teachers with few practical guidelines for modification or differentiation strategies in structuring curriculum and instruction to support LRC policy (Deng & Pei, 2009; Li & Li, 2020;

Lu et al., 2022; Qu, 2022c; Xie et al., 2021; Xu & Cooper, 2020). Although the 2017 legislation seemed to protect educational access for all people (Yuan et al., 2022), unclear policy implementation has left teachers, administrators, and school systems to determine how inclusive classrooms should operate (Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018).

The successful inclusion of students with SEN in regular classes in mainland China will be challenging unless modifications to the traditional lecture style of teacher-centered instruction, which is still characteristic of most Chinese classrooms, occur (Gao et al., 2020; Xu & Cooper, 2020; Zhu, 2017). Unlike Western school systems that typically create Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students with SEN who attend classes in regular classrooms, the Chinese system has rarely utilized best practices like IEPs to support the inclusion of Chinese students (Huang et al., 2013; Li & Li, 2020). Other elements of inclusive education, such as the concept of the least restrictive environment and identification criteria for placement of students with SEN, are not included in Chinese law (Yuan et al., 2022).

The stated goals of the LRC policy allowed students with SEN to be educated with non-disabled peers in neighborhood schools (Deng & Manset, 2000; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Wang & Feng, 2014; Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018). However, implementation, especially in rural China, has been minimal, and inclusive education remains unavailable for the vast majority of children with SEN in mainland China, even in most urban city centers (Cheng et al., 2021; Li & Li, 2020; Mu, 2021a; Yuan et al., 2022). Legally, schools can request students with suspected SEN diagnoses transfer to another school, so schools will often discontinue services and support to students with SEN (Yuan et al., 2022). Critics of the LRC policies (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Qu, 2022c) have claimed that the Chinese legislation amounts to little more than a tokenistic response to international pressure and Western

influence and appears to have been a pragmatic solution of allowing students to integrate into regular classes rather than a genuine attempt to provide systematic support to address and meet the needs of students with SEN. The LRC ostensibly does very little to address the problematic issues at the core of effective differentiated instruction in the real-world classroom (Li & Li, 2020; Qu, 2022a, 2022b; Szeto et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2022). Even the phrasing of the LRC policy suggests that the concept is little more than a recommendation (Zhang & Rosen, 2018). Contemporary critics (An et al., 2018, Mu, 2021a; Qu, 2019) claim that LRC policies hinder governmental support for inclusive education rather than promote it. Mu (2021a) characterized the ineffective implementation of Chinese LRC policies as “lazy inclusivism” (p. 735), a system that allows students with SEN to attend classes in regular schools physically yet provides little help or support to improve student academic or social development. Consequently, many schools which claim to be inclusive offer only tokenistic inclusion for students with SEN, which results in the continued marginalization and stigmatization of learners with minimal academic support or adjustments for learning (Cheng et al., 2021). Many authors have concluded that mainland China must address significant challenges in the implementation of inclusive education before an effective inclusive system can be attained (An et al., 2018; Chao et al., 2018; Deng & Manset, 2000; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Faragher et al., 2021; Li & Li, 2020; Monteiro et al., 2019; Szetzo et al., 2020; Wang & Feng, 2014; Wang et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018).

Experience from other countries suggests that continual changes in society and education will result in increasing numbers of learners with SEN who will seek to be included in regular classrooms (Landrum et al., 2019). Given that more children in China with SEN may enter the regular classroom under the official LRC policy, it is inevitable that more and more regular

classroom teachers will face the responsibility and challenge of providing differentiated instruction for learners with SEN (Xie et al., 2021). If inclusion is to be successful, teachers will require more versatility and preparation to teach inclusive classes (Landrum et al., 2019). Therefore, it is vital for all regular classroom teachers to understand the need for inclusive classrooms and to develop strategies for adapting classroom philosophies and best teaching practices for students with SEN (An et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2021).

### **Social Context**

Before inclusive education in China can be effectively established, Chinese schools need to address the issue of societal perceptions and attitudes towards disabilities and children with SEN on the part of parents, administrators, teachers, and students (Jia et al., 2022; Kritzer, 2012; Lui et al., 2017; Qu, 2022c; Xu et al., 2018). The slow acceptance of inclusive education in mainland China stems from a long-held bias against people with disabilities that strongly influences general perceptions and attitudes (Jia et al., 2022). Asian societies have historically viewed disabilities as shameful, and traditional Confucian heritage and beliefs have, in many ways, created elitist attitudes that have long undervalued people with disabilities (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Qu, 2022c; Yuan et al., 2022; Zhang & Rosen, 2018). Chinese Confucian society has traditionally regarded people with special needs or disabilities as socially lower and often ostracized them from society (Deng & Pei, 2009; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Qu, 2022c). Although traditional Confucian philosophy encourages helping people with disabilities, disabilities are viewed as a punishment in life and are shameful to a family, creating an unequal status between the disabled and non-disabled (Zhang & Rosen, 2018). Collectivistic cultures, such as in mainland China, place significantly greater emphasis on the collective educational

experience of learners than on individual student experiences (Qu, 2022c; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). This lack of focus on individuality is especially noticeable in cases of students with SEN.

Despite attempts to foster social equality in modern mainland China, inequality and low regard for special needs remain (Qu, 2022b). There is a prevalent tendency in contemporary mainland Chinese society to regard disability and special needs as a permanent medical condition that ruins a life (Jia et al., 2022; Qu, 2022a, 2022b; Yuan et al., 2022). The general public in mainland China often views learning disabilities as medical deficiencies that need to be treated medically or fixed before a person has worth, an attitude that has inevitably influenced perceptions of inclusive education and how educational programs are structured (Qu, 2022a). Rather than viewing learners with SEN holistically from academic, social, or emotional perspectives, in mainland China, the prevailing view continues to be almost exclusively medical, which results in students with SEN being dismissed as defective and unacceptable (Jia et al., 2022; Qu, 2022a, 2022b; Yuan et al., 2022). For example, in current Chinese policy, autism is considered a psychiatric disability and is not recognized as SEN; attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are not regarded as legal disabilities in mainland China and are not recognized by the educational system (Faragher et al., 2021; Li & Li, 2020). As a result, no academic accommodations are regularly available for learners with these educational needs.

The stigma of having a physical disability or SEN continues to impede educational attainment and the progression of adequate education for such students in Chinese society (Hu et al., 2011; Jia et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020; Xu & Cooper, 2020; Xu et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2022). Confucian traditions view disabilities and learning difficulties as heavenly punishment enacted on the family for some wrongdoing (Zhang & Rosen, 2018). Consequently,

many Asian parents have tended to delay seeking a proper diagnosis for their child with learning issues and have even dismissed symptoms of potential special needs due to the societal stigma of labeling a child with learning disabilities or special needs (Huang et al., 2013; Li & Li, 2020; Li et al., 2022; Qu, 2022c). These negative social perceptions of disabilities have hindered early effective diagnoses of children exhibiting characteristics of SEN in classrooms (Hu et al., 2011). Chinese educational policy does not provide non-discriminatory evaluation of students with potential SEN (Yuan et al., 2022).

Societal stigma often characterizes students struggling with intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities as lazy (Mu, 2021a). Educators and parents consider poor academic performance evidence of a learner's lack of internal motivation or effort (Xu & Cooper, 2020). Parents of children without SEN often claim that the inclusion of students with SEN in the classroom will impede instruction (Li & Li, 2020). The prevailing negative perceptions of students with SEN in terms of their intelligence, their behavior, and the disruption to classrooms are significant obstacles to total acceptance and adoption of effective inclusive education in China (Jia et al., 2022; Li & Li, 2020). These negative attitudes about inclusion are perhaps the most significant barrier to successful inclusion (Sharma & Sokal, 2016). These societal perceptions also directly influence teachers' treatment of and instruction of students with SEN (Monteiro et al., 2019).

An increasing number of developed countries have embraced inclusive education, and western countries provided pre-service and in-service training on special education topics (Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Expatriate teachers who teach in Chinese schools may have previous experience in differentiated instruction and inclusive education and encounter a social climate and perception of disabilities from the collective Chinese society that may differ from their

previous experiences (Jia et al., 2022; Li & Li, 2020). No previous study has examined the impact a societal and cultural context like the one in mainland China has on expatriate teachers who have been previously trained in programs to support inclusive education.

### **Theoretical Context**

Since the mid-1980s, social constructivist learning theories have become increasingly influential in terms of approaches to classroom instruction (Parkay et al., 2014). Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development in which a learner is guided by a more knowledgeable person, typically a teacher, to complete learning tasks that the learner could not accomplish without assistance has been particularly significant in terms of prevailing pedagogical philosophies (Parkay et al., 2014; Schunk, 2020). Social constructivist learning theories advocate providing support and scaffolding to learners at their given level of understanding and providing support for increased growth (Al-Shammari et al., 2019; Parkay et al., 2014).

Within the field of social constructivist learning theories, the contributions of Gardner (1996), Kolb (2014), and Tomlinson (2014) have been particularly influential. Gardner's (1996) multiple intelligences theory posited that people have different intelligences. The theory has encouraged educators to use a learner's intelligence to engage each learner more actively in more lessons through differentiated activities. Gardner advocated using multiple intelligences to involve more students in multiple learning styles and proposed alternative personalized assessment methods to allow students to demonstrate the knowledge gained. As evidenced by the name, Kolb's (2014) experiential learning theory emphasized a holistic learning approach based on experiences and individual learning styles. Kolb's theory provided a constructivist basis to promote accessible learning for traditionally marginalized populations, including students with



SEN. A study by Kolb (Joy & Kolb, 2008) had examined the influence of culture on learning styles and found that culture significantly affects learning experiences. Tomlinson's (2014) philosophy of differentiated instruction proposed conceptual changes in how teachers structure instruction, the content of lessons, and the product that students create to demonstrate understanding and mastery. Differentiated instruction focuses on meeting the educational needs of students who learn differently from the norm and utilizes ongoing assessment of student learning and instruction assessment. Teachers who adopt the best teaching practices of differentiated instruction realize that learning and understanding are demonstrated in many different forms and processes (Tomlinson, 2014).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that students with special educational needs and disabilities are routinely marginalized in Chinese classrooms and provided with inadequate and ineffective educational experiences (Cheng et al., 2021; Mu, 2021a; Qu, 2022c). The underlying cultural disregard for SEN in mainland China, combined with the ineffective implementation of LRC policies, has led to a situation where students with SEN continue to experience difficulties learning in regular classrooms and achieve unsatisfactory academic achievement, if they are fortunate enough to be accepted into a regular classroom (Qu, 2022c). Many learners with SEN and disabilities in mainland China are denied the human right to access equal educational opportunities that their peers experience (Faragher et al., 2021; O'Connor & McNabb, 2021; United Nations, 2015). As learners with SEN already face challenges they must overcome in learning, it is imperative to ensure that they are not doubly disadvantaged by encountering educational inequality (Qu, 2022b).

The disadvantages children with SEN encounter due to the stereotypes and prejudices about SEN in China negatively impact individual education experiences (Li & Li, 2020). Unsatisfactory student achievement for students with SEN leads to cycles that reinforce existing stereotypes, generate more significant stigma, and increase the marginalization of students with learning disabilities (Huang et al., 2013). A high number of teachers in regular classrooms in mainland China have shown indifference to the academic outcomes of students with SEN in their classes (Li & Li, 2020). The obsession with high test scores (Yuan et al., 2021) and academic excellence in Chinese schools has made children with SEN especially particularly vulnerable to being overlooked (Li et al., 2022), undervalued (Zhang & Rosen, 2018), stigmatized (Qu, 2022c), or excluded from classroom activities (Faragher et al., 2021; Han & Cumming, 2022; Li & Li, 2020), provided that students with SEN are even allowed admittance into regular classes in the first place.

Teacher attitudes and perceptions are essential in successful inclusive classrooms where learners with SEN feel welcomed and accepted and are provided with an environment where they can prosper socially and academically (Desombre et al., 2019; Savolainen et al., 2020). Although inclusive education has been routinely examined and implemented in the West for many decades, scholarly literature has only recently studied inclusive education in mainland China (Han & Cumming, 2022; Qu, 2022s). Inclusive education and teacher perceptions of inclusion have been studied in the Hong Kong special administrative region (Chao et al., 2017, 2018), the Macau special administrative region (Davies et al., 2018; Monteiro et al., 2019), and some of the more urban cities like Shanghai and Beijing (Hu et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2021; Xu & Cooper, 2020), but there is a scarcity of practical research on the effectiveness of Chinese inclusive implementation in the mainland (An et al., 2018, Ge & Zhang, 2019). In addition, there

is little research examining the perspectives of expatriate teachers working in China for inclusive education (Han & Cumming, 2022). The perceptions of expatriate teachers hired by Chinese schools in mainland China who have likely trained for and practiced inclusive education in their home countries merit examination. Teacher behaviors in the classroom and their ability to provide differentiated instruction for students in the class is another critical determinant of the successful inclusion of students with SEN (Mu, 2019; Nichols et al., 2020). Despite the importance of teacher perception and behavior, little research has examined the experiences of expatriate teachers and their ability to maintain self-efficacy for differentiated instruction in educational environments in mainland Chinese schools.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. Differentiated instruction is generally defined as a pedagogical approach that adopts teaching strategies that provide individualized student support and accommodations based on consideration of students' personal feelings, interests, achievements, and learning abilities (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). Teacher positive attitudes toward people with disabilities and SEN correlates with their ability to implement the appropriate behaviors and best practices strategies that make a classroom an effective and supportive academic environment (Sharma & Sokal, 2016; You et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding the perspectives and beliefs of educators responsible for providing inclusive education is essential (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019). In-service teachers currently in the classroom have valuable perspectives that can contribute to the discussion of what will benefit inclusive education in Chinese classrooms (Qu, 2021). By describing the social and pedagogical

experiences of expatriate teachers actively attempting to provide inclusive educational situations in mainland Chinese private schools, this study aims to describe teacher perception of societal pressure and experience influencing their behavior in creating effective inclusive environments. Teachers with expertise in effectively utilizing differentiated instruction and who demonstrate an ability to adopt a wide range of strategies to support meaningful academic and social/emotional outcomes for students with SEN, especially those familiar with the Chinese educational environment, can offer invaluable insights into effective implementation of inclusive education programs in mainland China (Monteiro et al., 2019; Schalock et al., 2018).

### **Significance of Study**

In light of the published commitment of the Chinese education system to rely on the established LRC policies, teachers in the People's Republic of China must be prepared to handle inclusive classrooms and work with students who have SEN (Monteiro et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018). Understanding the challenges teachers face in differentiating instruction and in accommodating courses will provide topics for training in-service teachers for more effective inclusive education and enable schools to learn from effective models who are attempting to provide increased support for students with SEN (Chao et al., 2017; Monteiro et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018; Wang & Zhang, 2021). There are several important areas where this study will make an original contribution to the field of inclusive education, especially in mainland China.

### **Empirical Significance**

This study will contribute to the growing knowledge about inclusive education currently provided in mainland China and the support provided to students with SEN in regular classrooms at Chinese private schools. The development of inclusive education in China and the challenges faced in implementing LRC policies require further research and continued examination (Xu et

al., 2018). Nearly all previous research has examined the relationship between teacher perception of inclusive education and teacher-perceived self-efficacy (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). As researchers and scholars continue to grapple with the implications of LRC policies for education in mainland China, further examination of student rights and the practical challenge of implementing an inclusive educational environment has obvious importance (Mu, 2021b; Strogilos, 2018; Yuan et al., 2022). The results of this study can provide strong suggestions for creating effective inclusive education in mainland Chinese schools and providing support for LRC policies (Xie et al., 2021).

### **Practical Significance**

For an inclusive education program to be truly successful and meaningful, teachers and administrators must first support the concepts of accessible education and actively implement LRC legislation (Hu & Roberts, 2011). Since many Chinese educators seem unfamiliar with the concept of evidence-based practices for inclusion (An et al., 2018), this research can provide important insights and examples of high-quality lessons and differentiation strategies that will be useful for expanding best practices in the classroom. The insights gained from this study can provide topics for effectively training in-service teachers and increase systematic support for inclusive education (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Qu, 2021; Schalock et al., 2018; Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2021). Learning from the experience of teachers who have successfully created effective inclusive classrooms can provide policymakers and educational administrators with an increased understanding of the importance and impact of pedagogical strategies like differentiating and accommodating students with SEN in inclusive classrooms (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2021). Results from this study will help in planning professional development for teachers by targeting areas where teachers perceive

themselves as inadequately prepared for teaching students with SEN (George et al., 2018). Learning how expatriate teachers provide differentiated instruction and develop personal efficacy to assist students with SEN in their classes can enhance peer collaboration and improve the classroom environment for students with SEN, thereby increasing student academic, emotional, and social achievement (Lui et al., 2017; Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). The results can provide models for in-service teachers who prepare differentiated lessons and attempt to increase student support in the classroom (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Monteiro et al., 2019). By focusing on the importance of describing teacher attitudes and perspectives toward students with SEN and learning how some teachers build self-efficacy for inclusive education, this study will benefit the entire school staff and provide modeling for peer teachers (Jia et al., 2022; Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020).

### **Theoretical Significance**

Changes in teachers' perspectives and behaviors throughout the educational system are necessary if schools are to provide improved support for learners with SEN in the classroom (Jia et al., 2022; Monteiro et al., 2019; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Drawing attention to positive educator perspectives toward SEN and highlighting existing teacher attitudes will lead to meaningful discussions about inclusive education and empower teachers with the necessary skills to provide differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms (Qu, 2019). This study will seek to link the perceptions of teachers of inclusive classes and the cultural influences on their intentions that shape their attitudes and current practice with the intended behaviors they utilize for inclusive education (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). The application of Ajzen's (1991, 2020) theory of planned behavior will give a better understanding of teacher preconceptions and attitudes about students with SEN in regular classrooms, the societal norms that influence

perceptions of inclusive education, and the amount of perceived behavior control teachers feel for using differentiated instruction (Opoku et al., 2021a). Since there is limited knowledge about the types and quality of differentiation strategies used by teachers in mainland Chinese classrooms (Strogilos, 2018), this study will advance understanding of expatriate teachers' perceptions of SEN and how these perceptions shape experiences and teachers' perceived behavior control in terms of inclusive teaching. This study will benefit schools attempting to provide inclusive instruction and add to the existing theoretical research (Monteiro et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018).

### **Research Questions**

This study used one central research question and three sub-questions to explore the phenomenon. The central research question was designed to elicit the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. Each subsequent sub-question examined an aspect of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and was related to the topic broadly seen in the central research question.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools?

This central research question provided the framework for the entire study and asked teachers to describe their various experiences providing inclusive education in regular Chinese classrooms. Teachers in regular classrooms are responsible for creating the necessary accommodations for students with SEN and implementing differentiated lessons so their

experiences in the classroom merited study. Since the LRC policy will most likely continue to provide the legislative framework for educational policy in mainland China, regular classroom teachers must become accustomed to potentially having students with SEN join their classes and to developing practical, effective strategies for instruction (Wang et al., 2017). Past and current research studies reveal a pattern of erratic implementation of inclusive learning policies in mainland China (Xie et al., 2021), so it is beneficial to examine the perspectives of expatriate teachers tasked with supporting inclusive education in mainland Chinese private school classrooms.

### **Sub-Question One**

What perceptions and attitudes do in-service expatriate teachers have towards students with special educational needs in their regular classrooms?

This sub-question was designed to extend the central research question by focusing on the personal perspectives that expatriate teachers have regarding students with SEN and inclusive education. Sub-question one was derived from the central research question and incorporated the first component of perception of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior. Since personal perceptions influence performance and accomplishment of challenging tasks (Park et al., 2016), it is crucial to examine and allow teachers to describe their perspectives on the topic. Many researchers (Hu et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020; Werner et al., 2021; Xu & Cooper, 2020) have noted that general education teachers in inclusive classrooms tend to have negative perceptions of inclusion, SEN in general, and even the students with SEN. The open-ended question allowed expatriate teachers to share their perspectives of inclusive education from their home countries, professional experiences, personal backgrounds, and perspectives developed while teaching in Chinese educational systems.



### **Sub-Question Two**

What subjective norms (societal expectations) do in-service expatriate teachers experience in dealing with students who have special educational needs in their regular classrooms?

Sub-question two extended the central research question and incorporated the second component of perceived social pressure or subjective norm of the external environment of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior. Long-held cultural disregard for students with SEN has influenced perceptions of learners who struggle in the classroom (Jia et al., 2022) and continues to pervade perceptions today (Mu, 2021a). Many subjective norms, both internal and external, can influence teacher perceptions of inclusive education (Chao et al., 2017; Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Monteiro et al., 2019; Qu, 2019; Wang et al., 2017). This question aimed to address the impact that subjective norms of the surrounding Chinese culture and the teachers' cultural backgrounds have in shaping perspectives for inclusive education and students with SEN.

### **Sub-Question Three**

What perceived behavior control (teacher self-efficacy) do in-service expatriate teachers express for differentiated instruction and inclusive education?

Sub-question three examined the third aspect of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior, which is the perceived behavior control individuals feel for intended behavior. Favorable attitudes and conducive subjective norms lead people to believe that they can effectively perform intended behaviors; therefore, people act on the behaviors they feel they can control (Ajzen, 2020). Perceptions of incompetence or inability to achieve success may decrease individuals' self-efficacy as they encounter challenges or obstacles (Carew et al., 2019; Subban

et al., 2021). Poor support and inadequate preparation for including students with SEN in regular classrooms have decreased self-efficacy for many teachers in such programs (Monteiro et al., 2019; Werner et al., 2021). Conversely, teacher self-efficacy has increased for teachers in inclusive education programs with adequate administrative support (Wang & Zhang, 2021) and professional in-service training (Sokal & Sharma, 2017; You et al., 2019). Describing teacher perceptions of self-efficacy and perceived behavior control can offer ideas for improving classroom instruction, school culture, and school climate (Wang & Zhang, 2021).

### **Definitions**

Key terms that are pertinent to the discussion are listed below.

1. *Differentiation*– Rather than provide identical instruction for all students in a single classroom, differentiation as an instructional best practice seeks to create classrooms that support students who learn differently and who have a variety of talents and interests by providing instructional support and assessments that match the student’s ability and interests (Tomlinson, 2014).
2. *Differentiated Instruction*– As used in this study, differentiated instruction will be generally defined as a pedagogical approach that adopts teaching strategies that provide individualized student support and accommodations based on consideration of students’ personal feelings, interests, achievements, and learning abilities for all children, especially students with SEN (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020).
3. *Expatriate teachers*– Teachers who teach and reside in a country other than their birth country or their currently held passport country (Soong & Stahl, 2021).

4. *Inclusive Education*– Inclusive education denotes an education program where students with disabilities, special educational needs, or learning disabilities learn alongside typically developing peers in the same classrooms (Alzahrani, 2020).
5. *Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC)*– Learning in Regular Classrooms refers to the policy initiatives of the People’s Republic of China governing inclusive education and the intent to allow children with disabilities and special educational needs, who might have previously been sent to schools specifically for special needs, to attend regular, non-separate schools and attend regular, non-separate classes (Xu et al., 2018).
6. *Self-efficacy*– Self-efficacy is an individual’s personal belief of being capable of making a positive impact or achieving a behavior (Bandura, 1977).
7. *Special Educational Needs (SEN)*– Special educational needs refer to learning difficulties for students who experience physical or intellectual differences (Alzahrani, 2020).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. The Chinese government has enacted policies aimed at including students with disabilities and SEN in regular classrooms, but successful implementation of the LRC policies in mainland China has been limited in both scope and efficiency (Li & Li, 2020; Qu, 2022a, 2022b; Szeto et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2022). The problem of students with SEN continuing to struggle academically or being marginalized due to inadequate inclusion in Chinese schools is a concern for all school stakeholders (Qu, 2022c). To adequately implement the policy goals outlined in the existing LRC policy (Xie et al., 2021), administrators and educators must understand the cultural

factors that influence the perceptions and behaviors of the teachers tasked with educating students with SEN placed in their classes. Examining teacher attitudes and perceived behavior control in instructing students with SEN can offer insight into the importance of teacher intentionality in teaching effective lessons and incorporating differentiated instruction strategies.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

Social stigmas and faulty implementation of Chinese Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) policies have routinely marginalized students with special educational needs in Chinese classrooms (Cheng et al., 2021; Mu, 2021a; Qu, 2022c). Therefore, significant changes in teacher attitude toward inclusion and teacher behavior in providing differentiated instruction are needed before Chinese regular classrooms are truly inclusive (An et al., 2018; Deng & Manset, 2000; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Faragher et al., 2021; Li & Li, 2020; Monteiro et al., 2019; Wang & Feng, 2014; Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018). A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the relationship between general education teachers' perceptions of students with special educational needs (SEN) who are placed in regular classrooms and teachers' perceived behavior control and self-efficacy for teaching students with SEN in regular classrooms. This chapter will review the current literature related to the topic of study. In the first section, Ajzen's (1991, 2002, 2020) theory of planned behavior will be examined. Then teachers' perceptions of inclusive education and students with SEN will be discussed, especially in the context of cultural perceptions and social pressure of mainland Chinese society. A synthesis of literature examining the factors influencing teachers' perceived behavior control and self-efficacy for inclusive education follows. Challenges that teachers face in adjusting for students with SEN into regular classrooms will be identified, and recent literature regarding the impact that perception and self-efficacy have on teachers tasked with providing lessons for students with SEN in regular classrooms will be addressed. Finally, the need for more extensive research on inclusive education in mainland China (Ge & Zhang, 2019), especially in English (Han & Cumming, 2022), will be addressed. The lack of literature available regarding

expatriate teachers' perceptions and perceived behavior control for inclusive education in schools in mainland China presents a viable need for the current study. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the chapter.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In recent years, an increasing amount of research has shown that a prerequisite for successful inclusive education is for regular classroom teachers to modify and differentiate classroom instruction according to the different learning needs of the students in the class (Tomlinson, 2014). A better understanding of regular classroom teachers' experiences and perceptions that guide and influence teacher behavior is essential in creating more effective inclusive classrooms (Wilson et al., 2016). Because teacher perceptions directly influence intentions and behaviors (Park et al., 2016), a theoretical framework that makes verifiable connections between intentions and behaviors supports this research (Wilson et al., 2016). Application of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2020) provides a link between perception and intended individual behavior and has obvious value for any examination of inclusive pedagogical practices in class.

#### **Theory of Planned Behavior**

Ajzen's (1991, 2002, 2020) theory of planned behavior (TPB) provides a framework for examining inclusive education and general education teachers' perceptions of students with SEN in regular classrooms. Ajzen's (1991) TPB examined individuals' intentions to behave in particular manners (Ajzen, 2011, 2020). The TPB developed from the theory of reasoned action previously proposed by Ajzen and Fishbein (Ajzen, 2020), which determined that people's behavior is, to a significant extent, determined by their perceptions and attitudes about the intended behavior. Additionally, the TPB found that intentions are influenced by subjective

norms that define an individual's evaluation of the importance of the behavior based on their personal beliefs and the perceptions of others (Trafimow, 2009). Later, the component of perceived behavior control for individuals was added to the theory of reasoned action, and the theory was renamed the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 2020).

The theory of planned behavior consists of three main factors: the attitude towards or perception of the behavior; the perceived social pressure or subjective norm that contributes to the behavior; and individuals' perceptions of their ability to control or perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). These elements combine to predict individuals' intentions and behaviors (Ajzen, 1991, 2020). The TPB posits that when given sufficient behavioral control, people act on their intentions and carry out the behavior (Ajzen, 2011). Building stronger intentions, influenced by internal and external subjective norms, indicates that behaviors are more likely to occur (Ajzen, 2020). Therefore, according to the theory of planned behavior, individuals' attitudes determine their intentions and perceived behavior control (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019).

Recent studies have expanded the theory of planned behavior into what is known as two-component TPB (Wilson et al., 2016) by delineating subsets of each of the three factors. Ajzen (2002) delineated differences between levels of perceived behavioral control in his discussion of self-efficacy and locus of control. The two-component TPB distinguishes between types of attitudes, norms, and perceived behavior control, with affective attitudes, descriptive norms, and self-efficacy being strong predictors of intentions to complete behaviors (Wilson et al., 2016). Ajzen's (1991) concept of perceived behavior control seemed to relate closely to Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) proposed that an individual's ideas about behavior rested on beliefs about whether the behavior was achievable or not as well as individual personal expectations of accomplishing tasks. Despite first claiming that perceived behavior

control was dissimilar to Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy, Ajzen (2020) later noted that the concept had been derived from ideas of self-efficacy and conceded that there was little difference in the definitions of perceived behavioral control and Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy.

Using Ajzen's (1991, 2020) TPB allows researchers to understand teacher preconceptions and beliefs about students with SEN in inclusive classrooms, the subjective or societal norms that influence those perceptions, and the confidence teachers feel and exhibit when implementing differentiated instruction (Opoku et al., 2021a). Recent studies have begun using the theory of planned behavior to examine the relationship between societal norms and attitudes toward inclusion; for example, studies have recently been conducted in Spain (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019), Ghana (Opoku et al., 2021a, 2021b), and Austria (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). This study will use the TPB theoretical framework in examining teacher perceptions of including students with SEN in regular classrooms, the cultural influences surrounding teachers at Chinese private schools, and educators' perceived behavior control for providing differentiated instruction.

### **Related Literature**

In the field of education, one key concept that defines inclusion is that regular classroom teachers provide educational support to all learners, including those with SEN, rather than sending children who exhibit learning difficulties out of the regular classroom or to a separate school to receive support (Ancil, 2006; Gaitas & Martins, 2017). Educators concur that utilizing best instructional practices such as differentiated instruction to increase the participation of students with SEN improves the quality of instruction for all students (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019; Strogilos, 2018). As inclusive classrooms become the norm rather than the exception, more and more regular classroom teachers will be expected to meet the individual needs of learners (Wilson et al., 2016). Regular classroom teachers are instrumental in creating



classrooms where students with SEN feel comfortable and accepted (Li & Ruppap, 2021; McGarrigle et al., 2021; Opoku et al., 2021a; Werner et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). Many countries, including the United States and mainland China, have struggled to implement inclusive education practices (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019; Opoku et al., 2021a; Qu, 2022b). The implementation of the Chinese policy Learning in Regular Classroom made provisions for students with SEN to attend regular classes in Chinese schools, yet it has proven to be ineffective (An et al., 2018; Deng & Manset, 2000; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Faragher et al., 2021; Li & Li, 2020; Monteiro et al., 2019; Wang & Feng, 2014; Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018). Therefore, to implement better educational practices, it is essential to understand the perspectives and behaviors of teachers tasked with providing effective differentiated instruction for students with SEN in regular classrooms (Opoku et al., 2021a).

Inclusion is often defined as all students' social participation and learning regardless of learning prerequisites (Nilholm, 2021; Opoku et al., 2021a). Terminology and perception of inclusive education have shifted in the last 50 years (Alzahrani, 2020). Integration, just allowing students to attend class, and inclusion, allowing students with SEN to participate fully in the educational experience, are considered two different concepts. Inclusion is more than just placing students with SEN into regular classrooms and hoping they succeed; for inclusive education to be effective, teachers' practices and ways of thinking about supporting students with SEN need to change (Alzahrani, 2020; Nilholm, 2021). However, in Chinese schools, many teachers view the mere physical presence of students with SEN in regular classrooms as inclusion (Liu et al., 2020; Qu, 2019). The attitude of integration rather than inclusion is a major stumbling block to proper inclusive education as it fails to appreciate the importance of creating a truly inclusive

learning environment that uses differentiated teaching practices for students with SEN (Alzahrani, 2020; Mu, 2021a, 2021b; Qu, 2019, 2022a).

### **Characteristics of Differentiated Instruction**

Differentiated instruction is a method where teachers proactively prepare and purposefully design lessons by responding to the learning differences exhibited by the students in the classroom (Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Scarparolo & Subban, 2020; Strogilos, 2018). Tomlinson (2014) advocated for using differentiated instruction for learners with SEN, especially those placed in regular classes. In most school systems worldwide, current expectations are that teachers are required or recommended to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of the learners with SEN in their classrooms (Scarparolo & Subban, 2020; Whitley et al., 2019). Differentiated instruction is student focused and aims to exclude no child from learning (Gibbs & McKay, 2021). Best practices support pedagogical changes in the presentation of instructional materials, adjustments to the classroom environment, and teacher responses to student interaction (Tomlinson, 2014). Differentiation can include simple modifications to instruction, classroom organization, or assessments (Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Commonly used examples of differentiation include providing some students extended time to complete work or varying the number and complexity of exercises required of different students (Tomlinson, 2014). Modifying a curriculum to increase the number of learning outcomes, adjusting resources or assessment requirements, and adjusting the pace of instruction are common elements of an educational program focused on differentiation (Wilson et al., 2016). Most western countries have introduced the use of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to establish a framework for how teachers provide differentiated instruction to students with SEN in regular classrooms (Fu et al., 2018).

Differentiated instruction benefits students in many ways (Strogilos, 2018; Taylor, 2017). Differentiated instruction assists educators in dealing with learners who exhibit a wide range of abilities in typical classrooms by offering lessons and assessments that respond to the individual needs of the learners (Scarparolo & Subban, 2021; Taylor, 2017). Research indicates that differentiated instruction allows learners to progress at their own pace (Gibbs & McKay, 2021) and provides opportunities for growth that may not have been available in a standardized instruction format (Gaitas & Martins, 2017). Instructors who use differentiated instruction aim to create environments where students feel supported and respected (Gibbs & McKay, 2021; Scarparolo & Subban, 2021). Recent evidence suggests that effective differentiated instruction increases learner motivation, stimulates greater collaboration among students, boosts academic engagement, and reduces problematic behavior in students with SEN (Scarparolo & Subban, 2021; Strogilos, 2018; Taylor, 2017). Student literacy achievement increases when differentiation strategies are used in classrooms (Puzio et al., 2020). Because it is imperative that educators continuously pursue strategies and practices to increase diversity and inclusion (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019), it is essential to comprehend the attitudes and behavior of teachers who effectively differentiate instruction and provide an inclusive classroom environment (Wilson et al., 2016).

Differentiated instruction produces academic gains for all students, not only those with SEN, but also for typical students working at or above grade level (Gibbs & McKay, 2021). Some opponents to differentiated instruction worry that teachers who practice differentiated instruction will neglect or ignore the typical students in the classroom while supporting students with SEN; however, recent research has refuted those claims (Qu, 2022b). Differentiated instruction not only supports students with SEN but benefits all students in the learning

environment; therefore, schools are encouraged to develop differentiated instruction as the primary strategy for instruction for all students with SEN (Qu, 2022b; Strogilos, 2018).

Even though teachers may recognize the need for learner support and perceive the importance of differentiated instruction, the actual implementation of differentiated instruction does not always occur (Wilson et al., 2016). The use of differentiation as best practice instruction is new to the Chinese educational system as some teachers in mainland China claim to have never heard of differentiation (Li & Li, 2020). Similarly, since predominately only special schools for children with special needs use individualized educational programs (IEPs), some regular classroom teachers in mainland China schools, claiming to provide inclusive education in Chinese regular schools, reported that they are unfamiliar with the concept of IEPs for students with SEN (Fu et al., 2018; Li & Li, 2020). This lack of knowledge for accommodating indicates a need to understand the various perceptions that teachers, who are required to provide inclusive educational experiences for students with SEN, hold for differentiation, especially in mainland China. Additionally, little research has examined expatriate teachers' experiences of the social pressures surrounding the inclusion of students with SEN in regular classrooms in China.

### **Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education and SEN**

Professionals involved in designing an inclusive classroom structure must have a clear vision of the goals and aims of the inclusive environment they wish to foster and the respective roles of all involved in conceiving and implementing that environment (Nilholm, 2021). The perception of teachers toward inclusive education determines their willingness to implement differentiated teaching practices and accommodate lessons for students with SEN to create a learning environment that accepts students with learning disabilities in a regular classroom (Monteiro et al., 2019; Mu, 2019; Xie et al., 2021). Surveys of teachers in Hong Kong (Chao et

al., 2018), Chile (San Martin et al., 2021), and China (Hu et al., 2017; Qu, 2019; Xie et al., 2021) have attempted to measure teacher perceptions for inclusive education. Research finds that while general classroom teachers often express generally positive attitudes toward inclusion in theory, when required to accept students with SEN into their classes, there was much more resistance to inclusive education (Carew et al., 2019; Lozano et al., 2021; Savolainen et al., 2020). Teachers in Chilean (San Martin et al., 2021), Japanese and Finnish (Yada & Savolainen, 2017), Chinese (Hu et al., 2017), and French (Desombre et al., 2019) studies expressed high positive sentiment for inclusive education as a generalized concept. However, they indicated low acceptance of having a student with SEN in their own classrooms. Similarly, many general classroom teachers in Chinese schools also show reticence in accepting students with SEN into their classrooms (Huang et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2022; Mu, 2021a; Xie et al., 2022). These responses suggest that even when a teacher claims to hold positive attitudes toward inclusion in a theoretical sense, effective inclusive teaching practice is not guaranteed (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Desombre et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018). This widespread dichotomy between attitude and acceptance (Wilson et al., 2016) illustrates many teachers' struggle with inclusive education.

Examination of teachers' perceptions of inclusion and students with SEN is essential because these attitudes impact the effectiveness of inclusive classrooms and often determine whether teachers differentiate in the classroom and how they provide best-practice instruction and lessons for students with SEN (Desombre et al., 2019; Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019; Nichols et al., 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020). When teachers question the appropriateness of inclusive education (Nilhom, 2021) or base their perceptions of inclusive education solely on the type and severity of disability of the students (Yada & Savolainen, 2019), teacher expectations of students

can decline, the instructional rigor is weakened, simplistic materials are offered, and teachers' instructional discussion becomes demotivating (Tomlinson, 2014).

Some teachers openly express negative perceptions toward including students with SEN in their regular classrooms (Werner et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that teachers unwilling to have students with SEN in their classroom may not adequately scaffold lessons or provide effective differentiated activities for students with SEN (Desombre et al., 2019; Xu & Cooper, 2020). Teachers may be unwilling to include a student with SEN in their classroom activities (Desombre et al., 2019) due to inexperience with best-practices for differentiated instruction (Xu & Cooper, 2020). Perhaps teachers do not fully comprehend or embrace inclusive education or lack experience, causing some teachers to feel hesitant in incorporating inclusive practices or accepting students with SEN into their classrooms (Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Xie et al., 2021). Teachers may not recognize students' learning difficulties or understand the nature of students' learning challenges (Xu & Cooper, 2020). Teachers who perceived themselves as capable and prepared to implement differentiation have tended to be more willing to implement the necessary changes in pedagogical approaches to create an effective inclusive classroom; in contrast, teachers who have questioned their abilities to carry out differentiation have showed a much greater reluctance to accept students with SEN in their classrooms (Subban et al., 2021). Teachers who perceive that they cannot adjust to students with SEN in the classroom are more likely to choose non-inclusive options (Monteiro et al., 2019).

Negative perceptions of SEN may lead to inappropriate responses from teachers to student behavior which might cause further marginalization of a child with SEN in class (Qu, 2022c). Teachers may view the educational struggle that students with SEN experience as the result of students' poor motivational problems and poor student effort (Su et al., 2020). Some

teachers in Chinese classrooms expressed negative views of children with SEN, suggesting that these students were lazy, unmotivated, and underachieving academically because of lack of effort rather than anything to do with disability or special needs (Xu & Cooper, 2020). These teachers, posited Xu and Cooper (2020), made moral judgments about the students' differences in learning rather than looking for academic causes. Emotional and behavioral difficulties and more severe or multiple learning difficulties are often perceived as more challenging (Desombre et al., 2019). Regular classroom teachers sometimes express opinions that students with SEN learn best in special school settings or isolated classrooms (Saloviita, 2020; Yada & Savolainen, 2017) and find fault with inclusive education (Huang et al., 2021).

### **Cultural Influences on Attitudes towards Inclusion**

Perceptions of inclusive education often differ by country (McGarrigle et al., 2021; Saloviita, 2020; Yada & Savolainen, 2017; Yada & Savolainen, 2019). Teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in non-Western, developing countries are sometimes less accepting than in Western countries with a long history of inclusive education (Faragher et al., 2021; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Different educational systems and cultural perceptions of inclusion have confounded attempts to generalize views of inclusive education across country boundaries (Nilholm, 2020). Two broad strategies tend to characterize approaches to inclusive education: an intent to radically restructure the existing educational system or introducing special programs to provide inclusive education alongside the existing education systems (Strogilos, 2018). The implementation of inclusive policies heavily depends on local values and the surrounding culture's understanding and acceptance of inclusion (Opoku et al., 2021a; Strogilos, 2018; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). At the core of the debate is the definition and understanding of equality in education for students with SEN and disabilities (Qu, 2022b). Cross-cultural studies of

inclusive education have found that teacher attitudes differ according to the country where teachers work (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020).

### ***Global Views of Inclusion***

Developed countries have studied inclusive education and teacher perception for many years (Alzahrani, 2020; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). Teacher perceptions regarding inclusive education have been investigated globally (Carew et al., 2019; Chao et al., 2018; Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Desombre et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2017; Lozano et al., 2021; Monteiro et al., 2019; Mu, 2019; Qu, 2019; San Martin et al., 2021; Savolainen et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Despite challenges still faced with the implementation of inclusive education in many developed countries, studies from developed countries tend to report positive teacher perception and overall acceptance of inclusive education (George et al., 2018; Jia et al., 2022; Lozano et al., 2021; McGarrigle et al., 2021; O'Connor & McNabb, 2021; San Martin et al., 2021; Sokal & Sharma, 2017; Subban et al., 2021; You et al., 2019). The relationship of the cultural impact on teacher perception of inclusive education has continually examined cross-cultural views in a general sense (Faragher et al., 2021; Yada & Savolainen, 2017, 2019; Yada et al., 2019). Generally, teachers in Western countries express positive attitudes toward inclusion (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020), yet findings indicate that culture and demographic factors can influence perceptions of inclusive education. A comparison of Italian, Finnish, and German teachers' attitudes toward inclusion revealed that the context of the respective country's laws and bureaucratic and management structures governing special education influenced teacher attitudes in the respective countries (Saloviita, 2020). The level of support each country provides for inclusive education tends to influence teachers directly; countries with adequate support for inclusive education are likely to have a much more positive



reception from teachers, while countries with less support reported less positive reception of inclusion (Saloviita, 2020; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020).

Western and European countries embraced inclusive education earlier than some Asian countries and have a long history of systematic inclusion (Faragher et al., 2021; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Developed countries tend to give more benefits to disadvantaged people and provide more support for learners (Qu, 2022b). Western and European concepts of equality in education view the school and classroom as a place to provide learning that suits individual learners' needs as educators attempt to make education accessible for all students as outlined by global initiatives (Qu, 2022b; United Nations, 2015; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020).

### ***Chinese Views of Inclusion***

Comparative studies of teacher perception of inclusive education in Asian countries compared to Western countries are still somewhat limited (Yada & Savolainen, 2019). In 2021 the People's Republic of China participated in an Asian cross-regional review for the first time, although, admittedly, in-country reviews had previously occurred (Faragher et al., 2021). Most of the previous studies of inclusive education were conducted predominately in special administrative regions like Hong Kong and Macau (Chao et al., 2017, 2018; Davies et al., 2018; Monteiro et al., 2019) and Taiwan (Yuan et al., 2022) rather than in the mainland.

In the years since mainland China established the LRC policy, students with autism (Mu, 2019; Xie et al., 2022), learning and physical disabilities, such as visual and hearing impairments (Mu, 2019), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and emotional and behavioral disorders (Xie et al., 2022), have become increasingly visible in regular classrooms in China. However, current data on accurate numbers or percentages of students with SEN in regular classrooms in mainland Chinese schools are lacking (Faragher et al., 2021). The latest official

data available, the 2006 Chinese national survey on disability, reported that around 2.46 million Chinese school-aged children had disabilities, with 63.19% receiving compulsory education at regular or special schools (Faragher et al., 2021). Of the 63% reported in the survey, only 54% of the students reportedly attended regular schools in programs such as LRC (An et al., 2018). Current surveys show a decline in students attending LRC classrooms (Lu et al., 2022; Qu, 2022b; Xie et al., 2022). In 2016, only 54.6% of school-aged children with SEN and disabilities attended regular schools (Qu, 2022b), and in 2019 the percentage had dropped to 49.15% (Xie et al., 2022). Mainland China has reported a 10.85% increase in students with SEN enrolled in special schools in the past several years (Lu et al., 2022), which seems to suggest that students are leaving regular classrooms and returning to special education schools. One item of note is that in 2016 more than 80% of China's students with disabilities lived in rural areas with limited access to adequate schooling (Faragher et al., 2021). Additionally, since China does not legally affirm some disabilities, such as learning disabilities, autism, and ADHD, students with these specific special educational needs may potential be undiagnosed or unidentified SEN and may not be included in figures reported on national surveys (Yuan et al., 2022).

Previous research has postulated that the collectivist and Confucian heritage culture that has in many ways shaped Chinese society has contributed to negative perceptions towards inclusive education and students with SEN (Xu et al., 2018; Zhang & Rosen, 2018). The subordination of individuals and their needs and aspirations for perceived critical collective needs continues to exert a powerful influence in 21st-century China despite the staggering social and economic developments of the last four decades (Steele & Lynch, 2013). The strict social hierarchy supported by Confucianism views learners with SEN or disabilities in lower social positions and unequal social relationships with peers (Qu, 2022b). While it is expected that

collectivist cultures might be more inclusive (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020), in actuality, collectivist educational equality exhibited in Chinese schools is viewed as treating all students equally and providing identical support for every student (Qu, 2019, 2022b; Su et al., 2020). To achieve this collective equality, teachers do not view learners as individuals; therefore, they may not provide additional support for learners with SEN nor provide curriculum adjustments and activities that benefit student learning abilities (Qu, 2019, 2022b; Su et al., 2020). Teachers in mainland Chinese schools tend to regard inclusion as simply physically allowing learners with SEN in the classroom without extending any special accommodations in terms of the actual teaching or classroom management for these learners to prosper in the classroom (Liu et al., 2020; Qu, 2019). Consequently, the poor academic performance of learners with SEN is attributed to students' ineffective effort and lack of ability rather than poor educational support (Mu, 2021a; Qu, 2022b; Xu & Cooper, 2020). The cultural and institutional practice of forcing children into one-size-fits-all programs without differentiation or accommodations hinders individual teachers from considering the differing needs of the learners in the classroom, often forcing teachers to adapt curriculum on a discretionary basis with little systematic support or to ignore students' differences altogether (Jia et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2018).

For inclusion to be effective in Chinese schools, a more expansive view of social and human rights for learners with SEN must be adopted (Qu, 2022c). The accepted Chinese mentality is that students have a fixed ability for learning (Huang et al., 2021) and that disabilities or SEN are medical problems needing to be cured or fixed (Jia et al., 2022). These traditional viewpoints continue to exclude students with SEN from educational opportunities (Zhang & Rosen, 2018) and isolate people with disabilities from the typically developing society. The tendency to view learners as two separate entities, socially dividing children with

SEN from their typical peers even in a regular classroom, underscores the deep assumption that people with special needs or SEN are inherently flawed and need fixing (Qu, 2022b).

The Chinese culture tends to view regular education as more valuable than special education (Huang et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2021; Zhang & Rosen, 2018), which leads to an educational system that sometimes dismisses and often ignores special educational needs of struggling learners (An et al., 2018; Mu, 2021a; Xie et al., 2022). The prevailing belief in the Chinese educational system seems to be that no special accommodations should be provided for students with disabilities under the persistent misconception that allowing accommodations would impede the education of the typical children in the class (Qu, 2022b; Strogilos, 2018). Rather than creating provisions for all children to receive access to education, current policies view learners with SEN with prohibitive sympathy and concern, perpetuating the inequality of student groups, negative social perceptions of SEN, and further stigmatizing children (Mu, 2021b; Yan et al., 2021; Zhang & Rosen, 2018).

Faced with an inclusive classroom, a few Chinese teachers exhibited unprofessional behaviors, such as excluding students with SEN from classroom instruction (Wang & Qi, 2020) or using insulting language when speaking to children with SEN in the classroom (Xu & Cooper, 2020). Teacher behaviors in a few inclusive classrooms in Chinese schools seemed discriminatory and prejudiced against students with SEN, even though the staff had previously expressed support for inclusive education (Xu et al., 2018). Part of the antagonism towards inclusion at many Chinese schools may be that teachers' salaries are often directly linked to the academic performance and scores of the students on standardized tests (Li & Li, 2020). To avoid low average test scores, schools often have an unspoken rule of not including scores from students with SEN in the reports of overall academic performance, which gives regular

classroom teachers little incentive to provide educational support to students with SEN (Li & Li, 2020). Overall, these studies of teacher perceptions and behaviors toward students with SEN in Chinese regular classrooms highlight the need for more scholarly attention and description of inclusive education in mainland China.

### **Teacher Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Education**

Previous research identified a relationship between teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education and their self-efficacy in teaching students with SEN (Chao et al., 2017; Keppens et al., 2021; Sokal & Sharma, 2017; Yada & Savolainen, 2017; You et al., 2019). Teacher self-efficacy is having self-confidence in one's ability to achieve the goals of classroom instruction or having a belief of being able to influence student behavior and make positive changes in the classroom and in student learning (Embry et al., 2019; Keppens et al., 2021; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Self-efficacy involves not only belief about oneself but also the perceived behavior control and the ability to organize and take the actions necessary for success (Nichols et al., 2020). Teacher self-efficacy is a belief in one's capabilities to discern how students process information and a conviction that one's teaching style can influence student learning, even with students who may have difficulty comprehending or exhibit behavior problems (Chao et al., 2017; You et al., 2019). Self-efficacy for teaching influences all teacher decisions for planning, organization, adaptability, and performance in the classroom (Davies et al., 2018).

Some literature finds the link between teachers' perception and self-efficacy for inclusion inconclusive (Werner et al., 2021); however, other researchers have concluded that teacher self-efficacy is fundamental to successful inclusion (Savolainen et al., 2020). Teacher self-efficacy can provide a strong prediction of inclusive behavior and is often the deciding factor in gauging intention to provide differentiated instruction (Wilson et al., 2016). Numerous studies have

linked teacher self-efficacy to successful differentiated instruction (Carew et al., 2019; Nichols et al., 2020; Park et al., 2016; Subban et al., 2021; Werner et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020).

### ***The Impact of High Self-Efficacy***

Teachers make daily decisions regarding learners' ability and teaching methods to meet student needs based on teacher self-efficacy (You et al., 2019). Teachers' self-efficacy and beliefs about their students' eventual success impact how often teachers utilize new strategies and inclusive pedagogies in class, how they work with students who struggle academically, and how they modify lessons for learners (Nichols et al., 2020). Teachers with high self-efficacy believe they can provide quality instruction and cultivate classroom environments where all students progress (Wilson et al., 2020). Educators who profess high self-efficacy often accept students with SEN into their regular classrooms more willingly (Savolainen et al., 2020) and advocate for inclusive classrooms (Kiel et al., 2020). Teachers with high self-efficacy for inclusive teaching recognize the needs of the students in the classroom and actively work to design curricula for diverse students (Ancil, 2006). Teachers who exhibit high efficacy show more flexibility in planning lessons (George et al., 2018; San Martin et al., 2021; You et al., 2019), exhibit more work motivation (Xie et al., 2022), and show increased effort and persistence in meeting students' differences (Park et al., 2016). Higher self-efficacy leads teachers to use a broader range of strategies and more effective pedagogy for differentiated instruction (Chao et al., 2017; George et al., 2018; Kiel et al., 2020; Nichols et al., 2020; Park et al., 2016) as well as approaching differences in the classroom as opportunities for growth and differentiation in the curriculum (George et al., 2018). Teachers who increase their self-efficacy may also provide more scaffolding for students (Parkay et al., 2014). Even in schools where resources are lacking or students exhibit lower ability, self-efficacy often influences whether

teachers will adapt the curriculum based on learners' needs or choose instructional strategies that maximize student learning (Chao et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2020).

Higher self-efficacy in a teacher can impact the overall classroom, student achievement, and the teachers themselves (Chao et al., 2017; Nichols et al., 2020; Park et al., 2016; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Teacher self-efficacy can positively influence a teacher's attitude towards students, which can impact student achievement and student behavior in the classroom (Embry et al., 2019; Nichols et al., 2020; Park et al., 2016). High self-efficacy results in teachers using improved instructional behaviors and more adaptive strategies in their classroom management skills (George et al., 2018; Monteiro et al., 2019; Park et al., 2016). The use of these instructional behaviors can increase student achievement (Chao et al., 2017; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Teachers who feel they can positively influence students or who see increased student efficacy for classwork potentially increase their self-efficacy as well (Nichols et al., 2020). There seems to be a reciprocal relationship between an increase in student efficacy and an increase in teacher efficacy (Nichols et al., 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020; Subban et al., 2021).

High efficacy for teaching leads to persistence in overcoming challenges (Chao et al., 2017), greater collaboration with parents and colleagues (Keppens et al., 2021), and positive job satisfaction (George et al., 2018). Ultimately, teachers with higher efficacy may have higher professional achievements and remain longer in the profession (Embry et al., 2019; George et al., 2018), which may mean less burnout and reduced job stress.

### ***The Impact of Low Self-Efficacy***

An increasing amount of literature has investigated the impact of low self-efficacy in teachers for inclusive education and the effects of teachers' low self-efficacy on inclusive classrooms (Chao et al., 2017, 2018; Jia et al., 2022; Li & Li, 2020; Monteiro et al., 2019;

Subban et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2022). Despite many teachers expressing positive opinions about the idea of inclusive education, they also express low self-efficacy for teaching students with disabilities and indicate concern about their ability to provide adequate support for such learners (Subban et al., 2021). Lower self-efficacy in teachers often results in lower confidence in overcoming the challenges of teaching students with SEN in an inclusive classroom (Carew et al., 2019). Teachers with low self-efficacy in this area tend to be more hesitant to adjust the curriculum, they become more easily frustrated with teaching demands or student behavior, and they may feel uncertainty about their ability to effect significant change in student achievement and progress (Monteiro et al., 2019). Assuming that they are helpless to effect meaningful change in students, teachers may develop lower self-efficacy and show less effort in their teaching in the belief that they lack the skills or resources to impact students (Park et al., 2016).

Teachers with low self-efficacy may persist with non-inclusive strategies when providing instruction or assessments to students with SEN (Davies et al., 2018; Monteiro et al., 2019). Studies have found that teachers may be less willing to accommodate learning activities and are less likely to scaffold lessons differently or offer adequate support to students with SEN (Park et al., 2016; Werner et al., 2021). Teachers may not include students with SEN in all classroom activities. They might be overwhelmed by their perceived inability to provide adequate support for struggling learners' needs which, in turn, may exacerbate the negativity teachers already feel about inclusive teaching and further lower their sense of self-efficacy in this area (Subban et al., 2021). Teachers with lower efficacy for inclusion may impede student learning (San Martin et al., 2021; You et al., 2019) by claiming that learning difficulties result from the learner's work ethic or motivation (Werner et al., 2021). If managing the behaviors of students with SEN proves difficult, teachers with lower self-efficacy are more likely to think that a better option for these



students would be attending special schools rather than inclusive classrooms, which often lowers teacher motivation to support these learners (Xie et al., 2022). Several research studies have demonstrated that Chinese teachers have expressed low self-efficacy for teaching students with SEN in their regular classrooms (Chao et al., 2017, 2018; Jia et al., 2022; Li & Li, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Monteiro et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2022).

### **Positive Influences on Self-Efficacy**

An extensive body of literature has shown a strong connection between teachers' high self-efficacy and effective learning environments that provide inclusive support to all children, especially those with SEN (You et al., 2019). Stronger teacher self-efficacy will lead to greater acceptance of students with SEN and their needs (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Therefore, examining the factors that impact self-efficacy and agency is beneficial (Kefallinou et al., 2020; Subban et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). Ajzen (2011) recognized that age, gender, educational level, past experiences, and training could influence individual behaviors. A teacher's knowledge of the subject material in the course and experience with behavioral management strategies for students with SEN can influence individual teacher self-efficacy for inclusive education (Nichols et al., 2020). Factors such as teachers' prior experience (Subban et al., 2021), age and years of teaching (Lozano et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2022), teacher training (Werner et al., 2021), leadership (Wang & Zhang, 2021), and school culture and environment (Werner et al., 2021) can create a higher sense of self-efficacy for teachers in inclusive classrooms.

### ***Adequate Pre-Service Training and Preparation***

Training for inclusive education has increased teacher self-efficacy (Li & Ruppar, 2021). The quality of pre-service preparation programs is a vital factor in influencing teacher perception of inclusive education and the sense of self-efficacy they feel for implementing an effective

inclusive learning environment (Gaitas & Martins, 2017). The perception of inclusive education teachers trained in Western education systems in special education sharply contrasts with those who have not received special education training (Hu et al., 2017). Taking coursework in special education, regardless of a person's major course of study, positively impacts teachers' perceptions and beliefs about inclusion. A large number of studies have acknowledged that teacher training programs and universities in Western countries have increasingly attempted to provide adequate preparation and training for regular classroom teachers to manage lessons in an inclusive setting (Cheung et al., 2018; Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Davies et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2017; Qu, 2022c; Yan & Deng, 2019; You et al., 2019). However, conflicting research examining the impact of inclusive training or preparation and the effect of increased confidence in pre-service teachers for teaching students with SEN has questioned the effectiveness of changing pre-service teachers' perceptions about inclusive education (Sokal & Sharma, 2017), even in Western countries. The discrepancies are attributed to the differences in teacher preparation programs worldwide.

Pre-service teachers trained to work with disabilities who have gained experience working with people with SEN expressed more positivity toward including students with SEN in regular classes (Werner et al., 2021). Teachers with prior experiences with family members or friends with a disability have tended to have more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Sokal & Sharma, 2017). Australian teachers have reported higher perceptions of inclusion partly due to the country's focus on pre-service and in-service training for teachers (Lozano et al., 2021).

### ***Adequate In-Service Professional Training and Experience***

Ongoing professional training for in-service teachers has been beneficial in countering teachers' low perception of SEN and increasing teacher efficacy (Sokal & Sharma, 2017).

Ongoing professional development is vital in reinforcing teachers' familiarity and ease with the concept of inclusion and offers ongoing practical support for teaching in inclusive educational environments (Chao et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2021). Professional development sessions like providing teaching staff and support staff with information about learning differences and teaching differentiation strategies support students with SEN in the classroom and all students (Boroson, 2017). An essential element in training for inclusive teaching is providing educators with professional knowledge of inclusion policies for local and national educational systems (Werner et al., 2021).

Teachers who report having had prior interaction with students with SEN tend to have more positive perceptions of inclusive education and internalize the belief that inclusive education can benefit all students (You et al., 2019). In-service teachers with experience working in inclusive classrooms reported more positive attitudes than pre-service teachers who had received training but had no direct experience (Sokal & Sharma, 2017). Prior experience working with students with SEN leads to higher self-efficacy in acclimating teachers to students who learn differently (Subban et al., 2021). Bandura (1989) stressed that positive experiences and positive social interactions could build an individual's self-efficacy; therefore, providing increased opportunities for teachers to experience positive interactions with students in inclusive educational settings is vital (Subban et al., 2021).

### ***Influence of Teachers' Age, Experience, and Gender***

Age, educational level, and professional qualifications impact teachers' self-efficacy (Monteiro et al., 2019; Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019; Nichols et al., 2020; You et al., 2019). Previous teaching experience with SEN and people with disabilities also increases teacher self-efficacy (Li & Ruppap, 2021; Xie et al., 2022). Older teachers (above 40 years of age) generally

reported higher self-efficacy scores than younger teachers (25-30 years of age, Subban et al., 2021). Teachers with prior experience making accommodations in their teaching and lessons for students with SEN seem to have more positive perceptions toward struggling students and tend to be more accepting of inclusive education (Monteiro et al., 2019; You et al., 2019). Teaching experience influences self-efficacy as teachers with more than 20 years of teaching experience generally reported higher self-efficacy than teachers with less than five years of experience (Subban et al., 2021; You et al., 2019)). However, a study in the Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region of China found that more experienced teachers there tended to adopt a more traditional teacher-centered teaching style, making these experienced teachers less accepting of inclusion (Hu et al., 2017). Generally, research supports findings that gaining teaching experience results in more positive attitudes toward inclusive education in teachers and leads to a greater willingness on the part of teachers, including students with SEN, increasing teachers' self-efficacy (Lozano et al., 2021; Subban et al., 2021). Other factors, like the level of classes being taught, such as primary or secondary level, may influence teacher self-efficacy even with experienced teachers (Chao et al., 2018). Additionally, some studies have suggested that gender influences teacher perception of inclusive education, with female teachers more accepting of inclusion than male teachers (Chao et al., 2018; Lozano et al., 2021; Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019).

### ***Supportive Administration and School Collaboration***

The surrounding school culture influences teacher efficacy (Wilson et al., 2020). Environments for successful inclusive education and positive teacher beliefs are influenced primarily by having a supportive administration, positive school culture, and supportive relationships between colleagues (Werner et al., 2021). Principals, especially, play a vital role in leading an initiative for inclusion and creating an inclusive environment in schools by overseeing

curriculum management and fostering a positive, supportive culture (Wang & Zhang, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). Principals who implement mechanisms and structures to enhance their staff's professional development and teaching practices will make teachers feel validated, resulting in effective, inclusive learning environments (Wang & Zhang, 2021; Werner et al., 2021). Supportive administrators who establish high expectations and positive school cultures increase teacher self-efficacy and agency through their direct (Nichols et al., 2020) and indirect actions (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Strong school leadership ensures that teachers are well-prepared and trained to differentiate instruction and adjust instruction and assessment (Gibbs & McKay, 2021). Increasing teachers' confidence in the school increases teacher perception of their abilities for inclusive education (Wilson et al., 2020).

Collaboration with parents and colleagues on lessons and curriculum can increase positive perceptions of inclusion and teacher self-efficacy (Keppens et al., 2021; Monteiro et al., 2019). When teachers see their teaching colleagues providing effective differentiated instruction as a matter of routine school behavior, they show a much greater willingness to differentiate instruction and create inclusive learning environments in their classes (Wilson et al., 2016). A school culture of teacher mentoring and acceptance of differentiation increases staff collaboration and motivation for working with students with SEN (Gibbs & McKay, 2021). Recent evidence implies that collaboration is the strongest predictor of higher motivation and self-efficacy (Xie et al., 2022). Chinese teachers in LRC classrooms who sought resources and help both from within and outside of school support systems became more knowledgeable and proficient in providing differentiated instruction (Wang et al., 2017).

### **Negative Influences on Self-Efficacy**

Although most teachers will support the concept of inclusive education, it is common for teachers to simultaneously express low self-efficacy for implementing inclusive education in the classroom (Werner et al., 2021). Regular classroom teachers often feel anxious about inclusion and express concern over their ability to adjust lessons for students with SEN (Monteiro et al., 2019). Several factors contribute to teachers holding negative perceptions and feeling unprepared for the inclusion of students with SEN in regular classrooms (Chao et al., 2017; Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Monteiro et al., 2019; Nichols et al., 2020; Qu, 2019; Wang et al., 2017; Werner et al., 2021). Teachers sometimes anticipate that it will be challenging to include students with SEN in regular classrooms and question their ability to adequately teach a child having SEN (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Desombre et al., 2019). A lack of teaching experience often leads to lower efficacy (Nichols et al., 2020). However, structural problems in the school system usually impact teacher self-efficacy the most (Xie et al., 2022). School factors such as the level or grade taught (Chao et al., 2017), availability of curriculum and resources for inclusion (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Li & Li, 2020; Wang et al., 2017; Xie et al., 2021), and the support of instructional leaders and administration (Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018), impact teachers' perceptions and self-efficacy for inclusive education.

### ***Heavy Teacher Workloads***

Inclusive education and working with students with SEN can be overwhelming for teachers (Ancil, 2006). Teachers fear increased workloads, additional stress, and classroom management difficulties (Li & Li, 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020). A common argument against inclusion is that the placement of a student with SEN in regular classrooms might overload the instructors and increase already high student-teacher ratios (Saloviita, 2020; Xie et al., 2021). Implementing inclusive teaching successfully takes time as teachers will need to analyze, plan,

and modify their teaching approaches to effectively differentiate (Chao et al., 2017; Schunk, 2020). Insufficient planning time and intrusions on instructional time are challenges for teachers attempting to implement differentiated instruction (Whitley et al., 2019). Teachers' feelings of overwork and increased workloads can often lead to lowered self-efficacy, which can lead to teacher burnout, anxiety, and depression (Nichols et al., 2020).

In Chinese schools, large class sizes of 50-60 students or more as well as the pressures to prepare students for the high-stakes, standardized exams increase the demands placed on teachers and make it very difficult to require teachers to implement inclusive instruction (An et al., 2018; Li & Li, 2020; Monteiro et al., 2019; Qu, 2022c; Xie et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018). Teachers have expressed concern that planning, modifying, and assessing students with SEN would be time-consuming, overwhelming, and increase their workload (Monteiro et al., 2019). Teachers in mainland China report lacking time and energy for inclusive teaching due to their heavy workloads (Xie et al., 2021) and revealed that their workloads had increased with the inclusion of students with SEN in their regular classrooms (Liu et al., 2020). Another critical consideration is remuneration for the extra work required for creating differentiated classrooms. Although some schools had previously promised to compensate teachers financially for their labor, teachers have claimed that schools had not paid for the additional workload and duties required in dealing with students with SEN in their regular classrooms (Li & Li, 2020; Liu et al., 2020).

### ***Low School Support and Administrative Support***

Inadequate school support for including students with SEN in regular classrooms often leads to lowered teacher self-efficacy, especially with novice teachers (Savolainen et al., 2020). Teachers who feel unsupported by the school system report negative perceptions about inclusive

education (Monteiro et al., 2019). Many schools in China are understaffed and lack resources (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Chinese teachers involved in inclusive education have reported feeling helpless, exhausted, and unsupported (Liu et al., 2020). Chinese schools often lack special education professionals, and parental support from parents of students with and without SEN is insufficient to support regular classroom teachers (Li & Li, 2020). Lack of cooperation between different sections of school systems is a practical problem with the Learning in Regular Classrooms policy (Xu et al., 2018). With little support from administration, service providers, or colleagues, teachers in Chinese schools often must solve problems involved in supporting students with SEN by themselves (Liu et al., 2020).

Effective inclusive education relies on firm support from administrators and principals; however, many principals at Chinese schools cannot directly help the teachers create differentiated programs or oversee the implementation of inclusive programs because of their own busy schedules and overwhelming responsibilities (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Teachers from schools in Shanghai have reported asking for support from administrators, but the instructors felt they were not fully supported (Liu et al., 2020). Some educational leaders at Chinese schools have been criticized for not supporting inclusive education, which fostered a lack of cooperation between teachers and paraprofessionals that proved detrimental to effective inclusion (Xu et al., 2018). The attitude and training of school administrators who are needed to support teachers in the classroom are of concern when the staff is not provided support (Lee, 2015). To counteract negative teacher perception of administrative support, it is advisable for school principals to establish a positive and open environment for inclusive education and to improve teacher perception (Wang & Zhang, 2021; Wang et al., 2022).



### *Inadequate Resources and Insufficient Curriculum*

Teachers can experience lowered self-efficacy when faced with a lack of resource centers or professional special education support (Liu et al., 2020; Monteiro et al., 2019; Wang & Zhang, 2021). Teachers report lacking curriculum standards, teaching materials, and adaptive assessment procedures for creating differentiated lessons (Liu et al., 2020). While many teachers have learned general strategies for instruction, differentiating lessons for students who struggle with class material is still challenging (Hedrick, 2012). Teachers need to know how to accommodate for learning differences and consider students' diversity (Boroson, 2017; Hedrick, 2012; Miller, 2014; Whitley et al., 2019). Poor communication and minimal collaboration among teaching peers often undermine the effective implementation of inclusive classrooms (Kefallinou et al., 2020).

The curriculum support system for inclusive education in China is still inconsistent, and few viable resources are available to teachers (Wang et al., 2017). There seems to be limited official curriculum available for classrooms that follow LRC policies, and the sanctioned curriculum offered by local education bureaus tends to lump all SEN students (and teacher training) into one category (Monteiro et al., 2019; Qu, 2019). With unclear guidelines for modifying the standardized curriculum offered to all typical students, teachers are left to create their own curricula for the students with SEN in their classrooms or to modify existing curricula with little support or oversight (Wang et al., 2017). Teachers in Chinese schools are often unfamiliar with ways to differentiate lessons and usually do not modify or adapt curricula for SEN (Davies et al., 2018). Under existing Chinese educational policy, students with SEN in regular classrooms are expected to use the same curricula as all other learners (Liu et al., 2020). Although schools in the United States are legally mandated to create an Individualized Education

Program (IEP) for individual students with SEN (Miller, 2014), in China, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are usually only used in specialized schools (Fu et al., 2018). Since regular schools have no such system, any accommodation of curricula or materials is often left to the teacher's discretion (Liu et al., 2020). When teachers do choose to adjust curricula to accommodate learners' differences, the lack of prepared differentiated curricula for special educational needs and differentiation often forces Chinese teachers to use their initiative, their time, and their finances to find resources since the Chinese Educational Bureau has not provided adequate support for teachers (Mu, 2019).

### ***Inadequate Professional Development and Training***

Teachers in many countries and regions, such as Hong Kong (Chao et al., 2017, 2018), Macau (Monteiro et al., 2019), Japan (Yada & Savolainen, 2017), mainland China (Su et al., 2020), Canada (Sokal & Sharma, 2017), Portugal (Gaitas & Martins, 2017), Finland (Yada & Savolainen, 2017), Korea (You et al., 2019), Australia (McGarrigle et al., 2021), Israel (Werner et al., 2021), Ghana (Opoku et al., 2021a), and Chile (San Martin et al., 2021) have reported a lack of special education training and teaching techniques for in-service teacher professional development. Although teacher training programs and universities worldwide attempt to provide training for regular classroom teachers to effectively prepare them to manage in an inclusive classroom, in-service teachers, especially in China, often report that preparation is inefficient and ineffective (Cheung et al., 2018; Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Davies et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2017; Qu, 2022c; Yan & Deng, 2019; You et al., 2019). Researchers have posited that insufficient teacher training has decreased teachers' self-efficacy (Carew et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020; Werner et al., 2021). One argument is that the separation between special education and regular education certification tracks at universities inadequately prepares most

teachers who do not major in special education for potentially teaching in inclusive classrooms (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021). Swiss teachers reported more negative perceptions of inclusion partly due to that country's continued practice of providing separate training for general and special education teachers (Lozano et al., 2021).

Pre-service general education teachers report receiving few inclusive classroom teaching opportunities during pre-service teacher training (Al-Shammari et al., 2019; Savolainen et al., 2020). The scarcity of opportunities for collaboration between pre-service teachers and in-service teachers in inclusive classrooms during pre-service training has often left pre-service teachers unprepared (Savolainen et al., 2020). Recent studies (Scarparolo & Subban, 2021; Gibbs & McKay, 2021) have identified the need for increased opportunities for pre-service teachers to experience differentiating lessons, working with mentors to learn techniques, and watching model teachers. Similarly, inadequate training of pre-service teachers has led to poor understanding of inclusive approaches and insufficient preparation for providing differentiated instruction (Al-Shammari et al., 2019). Teacher coursework during pre-service training and study often does not focus on the ability to create differentiated student assessments for students with SEN (Miller, 2014), leaving novice teachers unprepared when entering the classroom and lacking the knowledge of how to make accommodations for individual students in learning and on exams or assessments (Liu et al., 2020). The lack of opportunities for pre-service teachers to work with students with SEN during their student teaching experience may cause teachers to feel less optimistic about inclusive education when they start their teaching careers (Sokal & Sharma, 2017).

With the number of students with SEN attending regular classrooms increasing, regular education teachers who might have been inadequately trained for special education in their pre-

service education programs have been thrust into the role of inclusion teachers (Xie et al., 2021). Lack of prior experience with learning disabilities and SEN often creates anxiety in teachers (Sokal & Sharma, 2017), and inadequately trained in-service teachers feel unqualified to teach children with SEN (Park et al., 2016). A lack of preparation and training for instructing an inclusive classroom lowers teacher self-efficacy (Saloviita, 2020). In-service teachers in inclusive classrooms have repeatedly reported low self-efficacy (Chao et al., 2017; Davies et al., 2018; Desombre et al., 2019; Keppens et al., 2021; McGarrigle et al., 2021; Saloviita, 2020; San Martin et al., 2021; You et al., 2019). Perhaps poor professional training has resulted from school systems assuming that teachers already have the skills and strategies for effective inclusive training, yet teachers without experience teaching children with SEN feel undertrained in differentiation strategies and classroom management skills (Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Monteiro et al., 2019; Sokal & Sharma, 2017; Tomlinson, 2014). In-service professional development sessions for teachers have attempted to increase teacher self-efficacy; however, these are often sporadic and have a limited impact on long-term teacher perception and practice leaving teachers to express the need for more systematic training sessions (Liu et al., 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020). In-service teachers report feeling they have been left to devise strategies for inclusion on their own (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021).

In Chinese schools, little professional assistance or training in accommodating for the needs of students with SEN has been provided (An et al., 2018; Li & Li, 2020; Liu et al., 2020) because current training programs primarily function haphazardly and tend to lump all teachers together into one broad category for training (Wang et al., 2017). Teachers have called for China to strengthen its pre-service educational system by including special education-related training for general education teachers (Li & Li, 2020). Pre-service education programs in China rarely

include inclusive education curricula, relying on future in-service training for general education teachers (Xie et al., 2022).

Teachers in Chinese schools reported feeling untrained in ways to differentiate for SEN and inadequate for effectively teaching students with SEN (Jia et al., 2022; Monteiro et al., 2019; Yan & Deng, 2019). A study of teachers at Macau private schools that had previously admitted SEN students revealed that only 16% of teachers interviewed felt high confidence in including students with special needs in their classrooms due to a lack of training (Monteiro et al., 2019). Separate training for primary and secondary teachers would also be beneficial due to the differences in schooling structure (Chao et al., 2017). A hands-on practical training program for all teachers in mainland schools and in-service teacher training could be critical to changing negative perceptions about the significance and workability of inclusion (Hu et al., 2017). However, by 2017, still less than half of China's regular classroom teachers had received training in special education or inclusive teaching (Su et al., 2020). Together, these studies highlight the need for training and professional development of regular classroom teachers tasked with offering inclusive education to students with SEN.

### **Summary**

This review of literature has examined the theoretical framework of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior and linked teachers' perceptions and self-efficacy to inclusive education. Although teachers with high efficacy for inclusion show a willingness to differentiate lessons (Park et al., 2016), create more student-centered strategies (George et al., 2018), and engage learners with innovative activities (Yada & Savolainen, 2017), teachers reporting low self-efficacy for inclusion were less willing to adapt the curriculum or to differentiate for learners with SEN in their classrooms (Chao et al., 2017; San Martin et al., 2021). Factors such as prior

experience teaching students with SEN, pre-service teacher training, in-service professional training, availability of resources, age, professional training, principal support, and experience with SEN all impact teacher efficacy and teachers' perceptions of inclusive education (Chao et al., 2017; Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Monteiro et al., 2019; Qu, 2019; Wang et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2022). The current literature examining teacher self-efficacy shows that finding ways to increase teacher self-efficacy for inclusive education is a vital component in any attempt to strengthen inclusive education systems (Li & Ruppap, 2021).

Teacher self-efficacy and the impact of teacher perception on inclusive education have been studied in Western countries, developed Asian countries, and Chinese special administrative regions like Hong Kong and Macau (Carew et al., 2019; Chao et al., 2017; Desombre et al., 2019; Lozano et al., 2021; McGarrigle et al., 2021; Monteiro et al., 2019; San Martin et al., 2021; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Collectively these studies call for more research to describe teacher attitudes and self-efficacy and to understand the influence that the cultural background, age, professional training, instructional leader support, and experience with SEN have on teacher self-efficacy for inclusive education, in educational systems such as mainland Chinese schools. Although quantitative studies attempting to measure teacher perceptions for inclusion and teacher self-efficacy have been conducted, more qualitative research is needed to describe teacher experiences and their perception and self-efficacy for classroom behaviors (Sharma & Sokal, 2016). Studies of how cultural differences may influence general education teachers' perceptions and might cause them to feel lower levels of self-efficacy in teaching in an inclusive situation are missing from the literature (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). There is limited knowledge of the perceived behavior control and the more practical modifications and

accommodations used by expatriate teachers in mainland Chinese schools to differentiate for students with SEN in their classrooms (Strogilos, 2018).

Research on inclusion has predominately focused on developed countries (Faragher et al., 2021), so this study seeks to add to the literature by looking at Asian perspectives in light of expatriate teachers who reside and teach in the country. Considering that few studies are being done in English to describe inclusive education in mainland China (Han & Cumming, 2022), this study will add to the body of knowledge about teachers' experiences in attempting differentiation and inclusion under LRC legislation. In addition, in light of the minimal number of cross-cultural studies being carried out to describe Chinese and international views of inclusion (Faragher et al., 2021), the opportunity to study expatriate teachers working within the Chinese educational system offers a unique opportunity to describe the societal and cultural norms that expatriate teachers experience in providing inclusive education in Chinese private schools.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. The teachers' experiences provided a greater understanding of the perceived behavior control for differentiated instruction of expatriate teachers at Chinese private schools and their perceptions of the surrounding culture's subjective norms of inclusive education. This chapter will provide details on the research design, the central research question and sub-questions, descriptions of the setting and participants, and my positionality as a researcher. Data collection methods and data analysis plans are described, the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the research study are outlined, and the chapter concludes with a summary of the study's methodology.

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological research design to describe the experiences of teachers providing differentiated instruction for students with SEN in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. In seeking to understand the expatriate teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction and their perceived behavior control, this qualitative study captured the constructs individuals make about their experiences and perceptions (Patton, 2015). As a phenomenological study, this research allowed individuals to describe the shared experience of the phenomenon of teaching students with SEN in mainland China (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). I utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological research design in this study due to my background as an educator and my experience with children who have special educational needs. Recognizing my background and common experience with the phenomenon allowed me



to reach a deeper understanding and meaning from the perspectives of the participants (van Manen, 2016). I kept a reflexive journal throughout the process to keep my perceptions from unduly influencing my judgments about the participants' responses (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; van Manen, 2016). This process allowed me to state my personal opinions and assist with reflection and interpretation as I focused on the participants' perspectives to reach new understanding and knowledge (Laverty, 2003).

According to the definition by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research seeks to ascribe meaning to a human or social problem based on the individuals or groups who have experienced the phenomenon. Human experiences and perceptions are often not measurable by quantitative methodology but rather by qualitative methods that expound on the appearance of issues and individual perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, qualitative research allows people to express their stories, voice their perspectives, and collaborate with a researcher to understand the common experience of their shared phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Building on the ideas of Edmund Husserl, Moustakas (1994) developed the philosophy of phenomenological research as the study of individual experiences, the search for meaning from the shared experiences of the individuals involved, and their understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Phenomenological research examines individuals' perspectives of events and allows participants to reflect on shared experiences by examining the experiences holistically (Laverty, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). As a phenomenological study, this study of in-service expatriate teachers in mainland China focused on themes and commonalities that emerged from the participants' responses to give meaning to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Hermeneutic phenomenological research allows a researcher to approach the phenomenon through a common experience (van Manen, 2016). As the researcher, I needed to refrain from making judgments or evaluating the participants' responses because of the subjective understanding that I already had of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I listed my assumptions and reflections of the phenomenon (Laverty, 2003) before starting the study. As a committed Christian and the mother of a child with SEN, I have become an advocate for providing adequate accommodations for students with SEN in regular classrooms. To ensure that my own experiences and convictions did not influence the research, I used epoché in my research methodology to allow teachers to share their perceptions of inclusive education and their experiences of working in regular classrooms that included students with SEN (Moustakas, 1994). I noted my preconceived ideas and minimized bias in collecting and recording data about the participant experiences to maximize the validity of the data collected (Moustakas, 1994). To facilitate this, I kept a personal reflective journal that recorded my thoughts and reactions during the data collection and analysis. I also listened to and focused on the teachers' experiences without allowing my personal feelings to overshadow their voices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Research Questions**

The following central research question and three sub-questions guided this study. All questions stemmed from the theoretical framework of this study and asked participants to describe their experiences of the phenomenon.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools?

**Sub-Question One**

What perceptions and attitudes do in-service expatriate teachers have towards students with special educational needs in their regular classrooms?

**Sub-Question Two**

What subjective norms (societal expectations) do in-service expatriate teachers experience in dealing with students who have special educational needs in their regular classrooms?

**Sub-Question Three**

What perceived behavior control (teacher self-efficacy) do in-service expatriate teachers express for differentiated instruction and inclusive education?

**Setting and Participants**

Qualitative phenomenological studies can be completed at one site or many (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While Moustakas (1994) recognized that there are no set criteria or requirements for participants in a phenomenological study, Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that participants should be individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being examined and have similarities in their experiences. The section below will describe the research design's setting and the participants.

**Setting**

There are three types of school systems in China: privately run, public, and international schools (Che, 2021). For this study, Chinese private schools were differentiated from international schools owned and operated by expatriate entities in China that face different restrictions for operation (Cina, 2022). Chinese private schools in mainland China are seemingly contradictory in a country where the education system of the officially socialistic government is

predominately state-run (OECD, 2016; Schulte, 2017). However, companies or institutions started a limited number of private schools in the early 1990s in major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen (Liberthal, 2022). Since 1997, these schools have operated with government oversight (Schulte, 2017). Chinese private schools are now often Chinese-owned and controlled by the Chinese Public Education Bureau (Cina, 2022; OECD, 2016). Chinese private schools, like Chinese public schools, are under the direct control of the city's Public Education Bureau and are subject to all Chinese educational policies (Cina, 2022; Liang et al., 2016; OECD, 2016; Schulte, 2017).

Due to governmental regulations, Chinese private schools standardly have a Chinese division for local Chinese passport holders and an international division for students who hold expatriate passports or permanent residence cards from places other than the People's Republic of China (Cina, 2022; Liang et al., 2016). Students who have passports from special autonomous regions like Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan are allowed entry into international divisions; however, Chinese passport holders are not officially permitted to enroll in international divisions without a permanent residence card from another country. Chinese private schools are structured differently than in the United States; typical Chinese private schools have a Chancellor or Head of School, Chinese and international division principals, Chinese and international division directors, department heads, and teachers (OECD, 2016). International divisions usually employ expatriate teachers who hold passports from countries other than the People's Republic of China (Cina, 2022).

The participants for this study came from a well-recognized private school in a large urban city in mainland China. As this private school has recently gained national and international recognition, the local Public Education Bureau has taken more active control of the

school, including the English-speaking international division (X School, 2022). Like other private schools, the international division of the school employs expatriate teachers from around the world who teach classes in English and local Chinese teachers who teach Chinese language classes (X School, 2022). Expatriate teachers also teach in English for selected classes in the Chinese division. During the 2021-2022 school year, the student body, holding passports or permanent resident cards from nearly 40 countries and regions, totaled nearly 3,500 students in all divisions of the school. While the school states openly that students with SEN will not receive academic accommodations (X School, 2022), several students with diagnosed and undiagnosed SEN have attended the school, and teacher professional development in the past year has introduced differentiated instruction (X School, 2022).

For the 2021-2022 school year, the school's total teaching staff totaled over 550 kindergarten through grade 12 teachers, including over 150 overseas teachers from 40 different countries (X School, 2022). The school employs both male and female teachers. Governmental regulations require that any teacher hired in the international division must have certification in their subject area and at least two years of certified teaching experience (X School, 2022). Nearly half of the expatriate teachers at this school have earned a master's degree or doctorate. Teachers range in age from their early twenties to late fifties and have various years of experience in classroom teaching.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were expatriate teachers, meaning that they hold a passport other than from the People's Republic of China, and in-service teachers at an English international division of an urban private school in mainland China. For this study, in-service teachers meant participants who were currently teaching in a regular classroom at a Chinese

private school international division. Due to the diversity of expatriate teachers hired at Chinese schools, the participants ranged in age from their mid-twenties to sixty years old, but all participants were fluent in English and all interviews were conducted in English. The participants were selected from a range of nationalities and countries and were teachers with more than two years of experience in classroom teaching. An attempt was made to include participants with a variety of backgrounds and nationalities, a variety of ages, and a variety of teaching experiences with students with SEN.

Collecting the data from in-service teachers working in mainland Chinese private schools allowed the data collection to occur within the participants' context. The study collected data from 12 in-service expatriate teachers in an attempt to collect sufficient data and reach saturation of themes from participants' reflections (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participation in the study was voluntary. Teachers signed an informed consent form and were able to exit the study at any time they desired.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Qualitative research inquiry can be intensely personal for the researchers (Patton, 2015; van Manen, 2016). Since I have lived the phenomenon studied as a teacher in a regular classroom in mainland China, I brought my own lived experiences to the research. Using a hermeneutic approach allowed me to identify my positionality and bias as the researcher and the living instrument (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, it is beneficial to include an explanation of my interpretive framework of social constructivism, a description of the three philosophical assumptions I hold, and my role as a researcher, a teacher, and a mother of a child with SEN.

### **Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework for my research was social constructivism. Social constructivism seeks to develop meaning from individuals' shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and predicts that learners derive meaning through interaction with groups and socio-cultural factors (Schunk, 2020). Social constructivism assumes that people learn about their environment from their experiences (Gall et al., 2003; Schunk, 2020). As people construe meaning from their environments and experiences, they build their realities (Gall et al., 2003). Because teachers who have had students with SEN in their regular classrooms have different perspectives and realities of the experiences, I recognized the different teachers' experiences with inclusive education and their perceived behavior control for working with students with SEN.

My framework stems from my Christian worldview and my belief that all people are made in the image of God (*New International Version*, 1978/1982, Genesis 1:26). In Psalm 139:14, David said that he was "fearfully and wonderfully made" and that God's works in creating people are "wonderful" (*New International Version*, 1978/1982). The Bible is filled with people who had disabilities: Moses stuttered (Exodus 3-4), Mephibosheth was lame (2 Samuel 9), and blind Bartimaeus begged for healing in Mark 10. Throughout the New Testament, Christ set an example for believers in treating people with dignity, not ignoring people as unfit or disregarding them as inferior. Christ never shied away from the disabled, crippled, mute, blind, or chronically ill. He had compassion for them, touched them, and healed them. He met them in their time of need and offered solutions. Believers are told in 1 John 3:18 to love not only "with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (*New International Version*, 1978/1982). With this Christian worldview, teachers are encouraged to support children with special learning needs or

disabilities in their classrooms because all children deserve a learning environment where they are accepted and supported.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

It is important to understand the study and research in light of the researcher's philosophical assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because a researcher always brings personal assumptions to the experience, Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that researchers need to address these assumptions. Researchers hold beliefs about ontology, the views of reality; epistemology, how knowledge is explained and known; axiology, the researcher's values in research; and methodology, the process of conducting research (Creswell, 2013). These beliefs impact the perceptions of the researcher. The following explains my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.

#### ***Ontological Assumption***

Ontological assumptions come from the researcher's position of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I believe that there is an absolute reality in God and that "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (*New International Version*, 1978/1982, Colossians 1:17). Jesus is the "author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrew 12:2), and the Holy Spirit guides people "into all truth" (John 16:12). Because of the triune God, there are absolute truths and absolute morality, and humans can know these as we discern the will of God (Romans 12:2). However, from a social constructivist viewpoint, individuals perceive events and situations differently (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Individual experiences cause multiple realities and different viewpoints of shared experiences (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research studies seek to report these multiple realities and find meaning in the different perspectives of others. Therefore, listening to other people's perspectives is valuable, even if they differ from mine.



### ***Epistemological Assumption***

An epistemological assumption that knowledge can be gained by learning about people's shared experiences undergirded this research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research examines individuals' personal experiences of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In a constructivist epistemological assumption, these personal experiences are influenced by an individual's past and present exposure to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, I accepted that an individual's perceived behavior control and intentions are developed in a process that can be comprehended by understanding the individual's perspective. This study looked into multiple individuals' perspectives regarding assisting students with SEN in inclusive classrooms in China.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

Realizing that all researchers bring personal values to a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994), I acknowledge that my Christian worldview deems all life to be sacred (*New International Version*, 1978/1982, Job 12:10). As a veteran educator, my axiological assumption is that all students are capable of learning (Ancil, 2006). However, not all children learn identically or respond to the same teaching methods (Arwood, 2014; Gardner, 1996; Tomlinson, 2014). Individuals with SEN and disabilities can show growth and improvement when supported by a committed teacher (Arwood, 2014; Tomlinson, 2014). I recognize that other educators may feel differently about students with SEN and inclusive education. All care was taken to value and honor interviewees' responses to the questions addressed in this study and to interpret the participants' perspectives honestly and accurately (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Researcher's Role**

A qualitative study uses the researchers as the instrument for the study (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) noted that the researcher's role was to become the instrument for collecting data, and van Manen (2016) noted that researchers derive meaning from their own experiences. Therefore, as a researcher, I need to clearly describe my relationship with the participants, the setting, and my role at the school. I also need to address my experiences with the phenomenon and the assumptions I brought to the study as a researcher, teacher, and mother.

For the last 15 years, I have taught at the same private school in mainland China. The teachers interviewed for this study teach at the school where I work. However, I had no position of authority over any of the participants, nor did I serve in an administrative role at the school during the data collection. Teachers were free to answer honestly and completely without impact on their teaching assignment or evaluation. Teacher responses were not shared with the administration without prior coding of the participants' names and positions to protect the confidentiality of their answers.

My role as a veteran teacher and a mother influenced my initial perspective on this topic. I taught university-level, concurrent high-school university courses, and Advanced Placement courses for years, and I had developed an elitist attitude about education. Thirteen years ago, I became the mother of a child with Down syndrome. As my daughter aged and I realized there were no viable schooling opportunities in China for an expatriate child with Down Syndrome, I decided to homeschool my daughter. While continuing to work at the Chinese private school, I have been my daughter's homeschool teacher for the past eight years, from kindergarten to the present. Having been a classroom teacher for over 25 years when I started homeschooling, I

thought I knew my craft. I considered myself a qualified teacher, but teaching my daughter has changed my perspective on learning and education.

Although I was an experienced teacher when I began homeschooling, I had to learn new teaching strategies for kindergarten and primary school levels and for teaching a child with SEN. I have spent years reading methodology textbooks, researching best practices for teaching children with special needs, and learning hands-on in our daily homeschool sessions. As my daughter learned, I learned. For the first five years of homeschooling, my daughter's learning was on par with her chronological grade level, and I considered my teaching a great accomplishment. However, as she has grown older, her development growth has leveled, and different strategies are required to help her comprehend information in the lessons. I have had to continue learning and growing as her instructor. While there are developmental delays in her mastery of knowledge and application, she has already far exceeded earlier predictions for her academic growth and learning. As her teacher, I have seen firsthand the accomplishments that a student with SEN can achieve when a caring, trained teacher accommodates curriculum, adapts lessons, and scaffolds activities.

The experience of teaching my daughter showed me gaps in my teaching strategies and methodology for my high school teaching position. I switched from teaching only highly selected students in Advanced Placement courses to teaching general grade nine English classes. The administration claimed that the grade nine learners would be on-level, but I suddenly faced different student learning styles and students with SEN that I had not previously encountered in the classroom. Integrating strategies from my homeschooling lessons and further studying differentiation strategies benefited students in my regular classroom teaching. My school currently has several students with SEN, diagnosed and undiagnosed, but teachers usually have

little support for inclusive teaching in Chinese schools (An et al., 2018; Li & Li, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). My experience at my school has shown me the impact that a lack of support has had on children and families as learners often flounder through school, failing multiple classes and experiencing lowered self-esteem until the parents eventually withdrew them from the school. Through these experiences, I have become an advocate for students with SEN and their needs. Because of my background, I can not separate my shared life experiences from the phenomenon being studied. Using a hermeneutic study allowed me to identify my researcher bias and reflect on my experiences in order to view the participants' perceptions of providing differentiated instruction and accommodating students with SEN in their classrooms from a fresh perspective (van Manen, 2016).

### **Procedures**

The procedures for conducting a phenomenological qualitative study have been described in detail by Creswell and Poth (2018), Moustakas (1994), and Patton (2015). In this section, I will outline the steps I used to conduct the study, including the acquisition of the required permissions and the recruitment plan for participants. Before any research was conducted, I obtained all necessary permissions. Throughout the data collection, I engaged in reflexivity to separate my lived experiences from the participant's experiences (van Manen, 2016).

### **Permissions**

Researchers should obtain permission for the study from the Institutional Review Board before conducting research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). I received consent from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before commencing any research with participants. Appendix A includes the official IRB notification. It is also essential to obtain permission for research from the highest authority of the site location before conducting research

(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). I obtained permission to research with the teachers from the superintendent of the international division of the school site before conducting any research. Appendix B includes the written authorization for site approval. Participants signed an informed consent letter detailing the study's expectations. All participants were over 18 years old and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time they choose.

### **Recruitment Plan**

Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that qualitative research collects data from the sites where participants have experienced the phenomenon. After receiving approval from Liberty's IRB and the school authority, I began recruiting participants. For this research study, a general email with a teacher survey was the initial method for recruiting participants. The participants were recruited from an urban private school in mainland China. After gaining site approval, I sent a recruitment email with a link to a digital screening survey in SurveyMonkey and a consent form to the general teaching staff in the international division of the school. The recruitment email introduced potential participants to the topic of the study by providing information about the intent and purpose of the study. Inclusive education and accepting students with SEN are not always openly discussed in China (Xu et al., 2018), so the recruitment email was designed to put participants at ease with the research intent by providing a general overview of the topic to be studied. Appendix C has the recruitment email, and Appendix D has the screening survey questions from SurveyMonkey. The survey asked teachers to answer nine questions to collect brief demographic information to help screen the respondents according to the criteria for the study. Criteria for inclusion in the study were that participants were in-service teachers, held a passport other than from the People's Republic of China, and were currently teaching at a

Chinese private school. The survey only took about five minutes for each respondent to complete.

From the responses gathered from the survey, I screened respondents for participation by contacting interested parties using a Chinese digital platform called WeChat to communicate with participants. Although Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that phenomenological studies could incorporate five to 25 participants, I included 12 participants because the study reached thematic saturation and the data no longer generated new themes (Patton, 2015). Due to the wide variety of expatriate teachers hired at Chinese schools, the participants had a variety of backgrounds, nationalities, ages, and teaching experiences. As is common in phenomenological research studies, participation was voluntary; teachers signed an informed consent form and had the option to exit the study at any time they desire (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I sent an informed consent form through email and the Chinese application WeChat to people who expressed interest in participating in the study. Appendix E includes the informed consent form.

### **Data Collection Plan**

In a phenomenological study, physical artifacts, individual interviews, and focus groups are methods used to gather data from participants' shared experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Data collection and analysis of a qualitative study enable the researcher to derive themes that reflect the participants' experiences and then synthesize themes into a composite textual and structural description (Moustakas, 1994). This research design followed Moustakas's (1994) approach because of its systematic and organized model for phenomenological study and offered a structured approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I collected physical artifacts from the teachers, conducted personal interviews, and facilitated focus groups to triangulate the data collection process.

The first type of data collection was written artifacts of teachers' lesson plans or assignment sheets showing their intention to differentiate instruction for students. I then conducted interviews with teachers to allow participants to answer questions in a private space before joining a focus group and hopefully to create rapport between the interviewer and respondent (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). I then moderated focus groups by grouping the participants into small groups of diverse backgrounds and disciplines. Open-ended interview and focus group questions allowed participants to share their perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The three focus groups included four participants each to facilitate discussions of teachers' shared experiences providing differentiated instruction for students with SEN in regular classrooms. Data from the physical artifacts, personal interviews, and focus groups were used to cross-validate and triangulate the data (Patton, 2015) and to generate connections between themes or threads of thought from the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Physical Artifacts**

Physical artifacts serve as a physical exemplification of a participant's experience (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) clarified that physical artifacts can serve as a source of discussion. Research has proposed that using artifacts present during interviews leads participants to discuss their experiences more concretely (Abildgaard, 2018). Allowing teachers to reflect on their ability to adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of students who struggle with the material is beneficial (McGarrigle et al., 2021). For this study, teachers provided at least one physical artifact of a lesson plan, assignment sheet, or project for their course that illustrated the teacher's intention to provide differentiated instruction for students with SEN. Participants either emailed a copy of the physical artifact before the interview or shared the artifact during the personal interview. During the interview, participants were asked to explain the artifact and their

perception of using differentiated instruction for their course(s). Teachers were also asked to briefly describe their artifacts during the focus group session to allow teachers to hear differing methods of differentiation. Artifacts such as lesson plans, assignment sheets, or project sheets showed teachers' intention to utilize differentiated instruction in their classes. The information gained from the physical artifacts helped structure and extend interview questions and generated questions for the semi-structured focus groups.

### ***Physical Artifacts Data Analysis Plan***

Data analysis for the physical artifacts first involved asking the participant to describe the artifact during the personal interview. The participants' comments regarding the physical artifact then became part of the interview transcript. Additionally, I manually checked each physical artifact to collect data by coding words and ideas used in the artifact to find commonalities between participants' artifacts and their experiences using differentiated instruction in their courses (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). As I coded the information participants provided for the physical artifacts during the interviews, I used Moustakas' (1994) concept of phenomenological reduction by describing what I saw in the physical artifact in its relationship to the phenomenon. I practiced this for each artifact using horizontalization by highlighting the most significant statements from the artifacts and looking for unlimited possibilities in the data. I incorporated imagination variation by using multiple combinations of the data and perspectives to generate codes that led to textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon and the participants' perceptions.

### **Individual Interviews**

Individual interviews encourage participants to openly share their experiences by describing their perceptions of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In phenomenological



research, one-on-one interviews of informed participants are the primary data collection method (Moustakas, 1994). Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions encourage in-depth responses from people about their feelings, experiences, perceptions, and beliefs regarding the phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

For this study, I interviewed 12 participants who had experienced teaching in a regular classroom at an international division in an urban Chinese private school in mainland China. I informed participants of the study's procedures and the expectations for participation in an informed consent form. Appendix E includes the informed consent form. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the option to discontinue whenever they chose, although no participants chose to discontinue after recruitment. Personal interviews were semi-structured. Most interviews lasted around 30-40 minutes, and I limited longer interviews to an hour. While most traditional interviews are conducted with the participants face-to-face in a room, recent technological developments mean that online interviews are also acceptable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since nonverbal interaction is a vital part of communication, my preference was to conduct interviews on Microsoft Teams or Tencent (a Chinese app similar to Zoom or Teams) in order to have visual and audio recordings of the interviews for future review. All but one interview were taped with Microsoft Teams; one personal interview was taped with the Chinese app Tencent because the person could not use Microsoft Teams that day. I conducted personal interviews at a time that was mutually convenient for each person. Since interviews were conducted online, participants were able to choose a place where the participant felt at ease and had minimal distractions. While conducting the interviews, I kept a reflexive journal to record my impressions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used Microsoft Teams to transcribe the interviews and then completed manual line-by-line checking. For the one interview that used Tencent, I

manually created the transcript by listening to the Tencent recording multiple times. After transcription, I sent the transcript to each participant for a member check to verify the credibility and accuracy of the interview transcript.

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

The following questions were used for interview questions.

1. How has your school year been so far? Icebreaker Q
2. Describe your educational background and general experience as a teacher in China.  
CRQ
3. Describe a time you needed to change a lesson because students were not comprehending the material. How did you feel, think, or react to doing this? SQ1
4. Describe times when you felt comfortable instructing students with special educational needs (SEN) in your classes at this school. SQ1
5. Describe any challenges you have faced providing differentiated instruction to students with SEN in your classroom at this school. SQ1
6. How would you describe the importance of inclusive education in your teaching practice?  
SQ1
7. How have prior personal experiences influenced how you perceive children with SEN in your classroom? SQ2
8. Describe professional or educational experiences that you have had that prepared you to work with children with SEN in your classroom. SQ2
9. How would you describe the school-wide expectations for teachers working with children with SEN? SQ2

10. How do you collaborate with your department and grade-level colleagues to work with students with SEN? SQ2
11. You were to provide a lesson plan or assignment sheet for a lesson you feel offered differentiated instruction for the students in your class. Please describe your artifact and how you used it for your course. SQ3
12. Describe any changes you might make to the lesson or assignment if you were to use it again. SQ3
13. Describe another situation in your class when you have used differentiated instruction or accommodation in your classroom. SQ3
14. What has kept you from using the strategies in instances when you have not used differentiated instruction or accommodation for your student(s)? SQ3
15. What would make you feel more confident in using instructional practices or differentiation strategies when working with students with SEN in your classes? SQ3
16. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with students with SEN students that we have not discussed? CRQ

Question one was an icebreaker question designed to put the participant at ease and establish rapport. Question two was a grand tour question designed to gather general demographic information about the teacher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Questions three through six inquired about the participant's perception of students with SEN. Allowing teachers to share their perceptions of students with SEN is beneficial (McGarrigle et al., 2021). While some studies (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Xie et al., 2021) have reported that teachers have self-reported positive perceptions of students with SEN, many more studies (Desombre et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2017; Saloviita, 2020; Su et al., 2020; Yada & Savolainen, 2017, 2019) have found that

teachers are hesitant to include students with SEN in their regular classrooms. Some teachers in Chinese classrooms have sometimes held negative perceptions of students with SEN (Xu & Cooper, 2020). Questions seven through 10 asked participants to reflect on perceived subjective norms or societal influences for providing differentiated instruction in their classrooms. Teachers have reported being influenced by the surrounding socio-cultural context (Chao et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2017), peer collaboration (Monteiro et al., 2019), administrators (Wang et al., 2022; Wang & Zhang, 2021), and professional training offered for in-service teachers (Wang et al., 2017); therefore, encouraging teachers to discuss factors that may have impacted their perceptions of inclusive schooling and their intentions to differentiate instruction is beneficial. Questions 11 through 15 asked teachers to reflect on teaching behaviors and their self-efficacy when faced with special learners' needs by asking participants to discuss the physical artifact provided for the interview. Some teachers have asked for administrative support and more guidance for including students with SEN in regular classrooms (Monteiro et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018). Teachers often report feeling unable to offer differentiation in regular classrooms for students with SEN, yet accommodation is occurring (Strogilos, 2018). Asking teachers to reflect on and discuss past experiences working with students with SEN is helpful in processing individual performance and perception of their self-efficacy (Wilson et al., 2020). Question 16 returned to the central research question and allowed participants to share additional information they felt was essential for the interview. These interview questions were designed to have teachers describe their experiences in the classroom and their perceptions of inclusive education. I asked experts in the field such as my dissertation committee to provide feedback on these questions. Appendix F includes the interview questions.

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

Data analysis for individual interviews consisted of transcribing the interviews and then analyzing the collected data by coding the interviews to find common themes in the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). After each interview, I transcribed the taped interviews into an initial draft using Microsoft Teams auto transcription. I also manually checked each interview line by line by listening repeatedly to the audio files. Participants were asked to verify the transcripts to ensure that their interview was transcribed correctly and represented their views. Throughout the analysis process, I continually bracketed out my personal responses and bias in order to present the participants' responses as their original intent (Moustakas, 1994). I used memoing while reviewing the transcriptions to begin looking for codes for the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and read the transcripts repeatedly while checking the accuracy to gain immersion in the content. I then imported the written transcripts into Delve Analysis Tool to facilitate exploratory reading and initial coding. In coding the data from the interviews, I used Moustakas' (1994) concept of phenomenological reduction by describing what I saw in the interview texts and formulating experiential statements of relationship to the phenomenon studied. I practiced this for each interview transcript using horizontalization by highlighting the most significant statements and eliminating unnecessary information. I looked for values in coding the transcripts to examine the participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding their perspectives of the phenomenon (Saldana, 2016). The codes were grouped into clusters to look for themes in the responses of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). I incorporated imagination variation by using multiple combinations of data and perspectives to generate codes that led to textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon and the participants' experiences.

### **Focus Groups**

After the interviews, I gathered the participants in focus groups. Focus groups build on personal interviews and create an environment where the interaction between participants provides additional data for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Grouping participants can explore a greater diversity of perspectives, and the interactions between participants can generate additional data for the study (Patton, 2015). The discussions of differing perspectives can lead to a deeper mutual understanding of the phenomenon as participants confirm and expound on themes originally presented in their interviews. Since part of this study intends to examine societal norms that impact behavioral intention, the interaction of participants in focus groups with their peers will hopefully provide additional information about teacher experiences in meeting the needs of students with SEN in regular classrooms in mainland China. I also anticipated that comments made by other focus group members would stimulate comments and responses not offered during the individual interview sessions. I grouped the participants into three focus groups of four people each and grouped the participants determined by the mutual availability of the people participating with a conscious attempt to mix backgrounds, age, experience level of teaching, subject discipline, level of students taught, and perspectives shared during the personal interviews for the most diversity.

The focus groups met online using Microsoft Teams at a time when the participants felt was convenient. I used Microsoft Teams to keep a visual and audio record and an initial transcription of the discussion. Once a mutual time and date was confirmed, invitation and login information for the focus group was emailed and sent by the Chinese app WeChat to the participants. I reiterated the study's intent at the beginning of each focus group session and reminded participants that the session was to be taped. I kept a reflective journal throughout the

focus group session to memo my personal responses. The time frame for the focus group was approximately 45 minutes, but most groups spoke for nearly an hour.

### *Focus Group Questions*

Questions for the semi-structured focus groups were developed from the initial coding and categorizing of the artifact reviews and the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). I asked the following questions to facilitate active discussion among the participants.

1. Please introduce yourself, your teaching position, and your background in teaching.

Icebreaker Question

2. After your individual interview for this study, what thoughts about the topic and the responses you provided occurred to you? CRQ
3. Describe what focus the school should have on accommodating students with SEN or differentiating instruction for students with SEN. SQ1
4. How does inclusive education and students with SEN in China compare with inclusive education and students with SEN in your home country or where you studied teacher education? SQ2
5. Describe any training the school has provided for the teachers in differentiated instruction, and please describe the effectiveness of that training on your practice of differentiated instruction. SQ3
6. Each of you provided a sample lesson or an assignment for differentiation and accommodation during your interview. Please describe your lesson and the intent behind the adaptation of the lesson to the other participants. SQ3

Follow-up question, if needed: Please respond with comments or questions to the other members of the focus group's description of their intent to adjust class instruction for students with SEN. SQ3

7. From our discussion today, what has encouraged you to provide support and accommodation for students with SEN in your classrooms? SQ3

The focus group questions were intended to build on the interview questions by allowing participants to expand on their experiences with students with SEN in the classroom. Question one was an icebreaker question intended to allow participants in the focus group to introduce themselves briefly to the other participants. Question two was a grand tour question designed to make the group members feel comfortable with each other and find common ground by discussing the experiences and topics discussed during their personal interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Question three asked for participant perceptions of students with SEN. Studies have found that perceptions of SEN differ by culture (McGarrigle et al., 2021; Schalock et al., 2018; Yada & Savolainen, 2017, 2019; Yada et al., 2019), so it was beneficial for members of the focus groups, who were from different nationalities and backgrounds, to share their perspectives of inclusive education and students with SEN. Question four asked the participants to reflect on the differences in subjective norms between their home country and China, the host country. Question five asked participants to reflect on the artifacts they provided for the study and allowed other members to hear and discuss different differentiation methods for students (Abildgaard, 2018). The discussion of this question helped uncover factors that have influenced intention and behaviors for inclusive education. Even when teachers have positive perceptions of inclusive education, many factors may hinder the actual differentiation of lessons, such as a lack of school support or resources (Monteiro et al., 2019; Su et al., 2020; Yada et al., 2019), a lack of



professional training (Chao et al., 2017; Monteiro et al., 2019), large class size (An et al., 2018; Qu, 2022c; Su et al., 2020), or a lack of experience with students with SEN (Yan & Deng, 2019). Allowing participants to share their experiences with others allowed each person to reflect on the intention to differentiate instruction in their respective courses. Question six allowed participants to develop new intentions for differentiation and building self-efficacy. To provide effective differentiated instruction, teachers must express self-efficacy and the capability to adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of students who struggle with the material (McGarrigle et al., 2021). Teachers must reflect on instances when they have shown intention and experienced high self-efficacy for working with students with SEN.

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

Similar to the methods used for physical artifacts and interview analysis, the first step of data analysis was to create transcripts from the focus groups by using Microsoft Teams transcription and manual verification of the transcripts. After transcribing the focus group discussion and memoing for initial coding, I uploaded the transcripts into Delve to help organize and code the data. In examining the data from the focus groups, I first openly coded the responses and clustered the codes around similarities with the data gained from the other data collection methods. I used the method of phenomenological reduction developed by Moustakas (1994) to break the data into parts and look for commonalities. Then I linked the codes through imagination variation to create clusters of meaning.

### **Data Synthesis**

The final step in data analysis was synthesizing the raw data collected in the artifacts, interviews, and focus group discussions to generate textural and structural descriptions that linked the phenomenon to themes derived from participant perceptions and responses

(Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Saldana (2016) described synthesis as consolidating meaning. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested gathering data into themes that are then combined into identifiable categories and finally synthesized into similar elements to create invariant meanings within the text. While modern software programs can help organize the data, the synthesis process relies primarily on human intuition (Moustakas, 1994) and is the responsibility of the human researcher (Patton, 2015).

In deriving themes from the data and attempting to understand participants' experiences, I followed the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as outlined by Moustakas (1994) since I have also experienced the phenomenon. With this method, I read the transcripts and reviewed the data repeatedly, linking the codes to other codes to create clusters of meaning. Using the three data collection formats described above, I integrated the data into themes and categories by synthesizing the codes and descriptions that described the essence of the participants' experiences. In reviewing the transcripts and initial coding, I recorded relevant statements and then thematically clustered invariant meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). I used *in vivo* coding where relevant to represent the participants' perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To avoid trying to explore every bit of data, I practiced lean coding and developed a codebook in Delve to limit myself to a manageable number of codes and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Patton (2015) recognized that computer software conducts analysis more quickly and easily, but also acknowledged that the synthesis and interpretation of data occur within the researcher who sifts data from the mundane to identify significant themes. I used a combination of deductive and inductive coding to derive themes from the three forms of data collection by examining the data in light of the theoretical framework of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior and participant responses.

From the data synthesis, I developed and assessed the patterns of the data in order to form interpretations of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Marshall and Rossman (2015) noted that researchers should remain ethical in synthesizing the data from participants. From the textual and structural descriptions, I created a composite, universal description of the phenomenon that focused on the individuals' experiences in their own voices. In chapter four, the data has been presented in a clear account of the findings in written form and visual form where appropriate.

### **Trustworthiness**

Believing that trustworthiness is essential for a qualitative researcher, Shenton (2004) listed four criteria for trustworthiness to clarify a researcher's trustworthiness in research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Qualitative researchers use these criteria to provide validity to the research results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This section describes the methods of member checking, expert reviews, informed consent, and proper storage and identification of data that I used in conducting the study.

### **Credibility**

Credibility is a crucial criterion for researchers to show internal validity (Shenton, 2004). I used triangulation and multiple data collection sources to establish credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Shenton, 2004). I emphasized to the teachers that their participation was voluntary and that I would use pseudonyms to identify the participants and general regions for their home country location in order to keep their identities confidential. Allowing peers or supervisors and participants to review the data strengthens the credibility of the research (Shenton, 2004). I utilized participant member checks by allowing each participant to check the transcripts of the interviews and the focus group transcripts and used expert reviews by my committee members. Focus groups provided credibility as participants could hear each other's

perspectives. The research findings were available to committee members and participants to verify the study's conclusions. Engaging in systematic research and actively looking for patterns and themes in the research also shows researcher credibility (Patton, 2015), so I looked for patterns and themes from participant responses systematically and unbiasedly.

### **Transferability**

Transferability determines whether the study results can be applied to other participants in different contexts (Shenton, 2004). Having participants of various genders, nationalities, countries, ages, and experiences in a study increase transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, this study attempted to utilize maximum variation in recruiting participants. I was conscious of including various demographics of participants by looking for members from a variety of cultures and countries and by including a range of teachers of different ages, backgrounds, experiences, and teaching levels. The judgment of transferability remains the readers' responsibility in applying the findings to other situations and teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004). However, creating deep, rich descriptions of the process and the data increases the readers' understanding and increase transferability (Shenton, 2004).

### **Dependability**

Dependability means that a study could be replicated with similar results if similar participants, locations, and methods were utilized (Shenton, 2004). To prove dependability, I kept extensive logs of the research, data, and memoing so that the study could potentially be duplicated, and similar results reached (Shenton, 2004). I made a log of activities completed during the research, including all the reflexive journals developed during the interviews and focus groups. I kept records of the methods used in transcribing the data and coding the material

and participated in expert reviews of the process by keeping my committee informed about the procedures used during data collection and analysis.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability involves the steps taken by the researcher to ensure that the study reflects the ideas and experiences of the participants rather than the researcher's preferences (Patton, 2015; Shenton, 2004). To ensure confirmability, I reported the data from multiple perspectives using triangulation of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Triangulation involves using a range of methods to collect data and various participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004). I engaged in reflexivity by disclosing researcher positionality throughout the study and continually reflecting on my perspectives and experiences that might have influenced my interpretation of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004; van Manen, 2016). I kept detailed records of the methods I used throughout the study and provided detailed descriptions of the data collected and the process to external auditors to ensure confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Creswell and Poth (2018) identified respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice as ethical considerations that researchers should maintain in conducting research. I obtained all necessary approvals before beginning to research to show respect for the participants. I obtained IRB approval and approval from Liberty University before beginning to research, and I obtained site approval from the superintendent, the top administrator for the international division at the school. I sought consent from all participants by collecting consent forms.

All participants in the study were adults who signed an informed consent form that outlined the methods of data collection, records storage, and data analysis. I let participants know

that their participation was voluntary. Participants were informed about providing artifacts and participating in personal interviews and focus groups and had the option to discontinue participating at any time. Participants were informed beforehand that the interviews and focus groups would be recorded and each participant was reminded of the recording at the beginning of each interview and focus group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Informing participants and creating a rapport between them and the researcher hopefully encouraged participants to be honest and vulnerable in their responses which was vital to the study (Shenton, 2004).

Participants were reminded that all information identifying participants was to be kept confidential; pseudonyms were used for the site name and all participants' names (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To keep the participant's confidentiality, home countries were broadened to a larger geographic region, and subjects taught were generalized. I used member checking of the transcripts and results to involve participants in the data interpretation and to facilitate collaboration between the researcher and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Where needed, I consolidated the study's findings so that no single participant could be identified from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). No information was provided to the school's administration without concealing the identity of participants and their responses.

Maintaining data security is an ethical practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I kept all artifacts, recordings of the interviews and focus groups, and all transcripts of the data and electronic files on a password-protected personal computer that no participant had access to. The access information to Delve was not shared with anyone else. All paper material generated from the study was kept locked in a personal residence to protect the data. At the end of the study, if there is no further need for the data, all information will be deleted within three years. If I plan to

use the data to extend research on inclusive education in China, I will keep the data locked and protected in a private location.

Ethical considerations also dictate that researchers should not have any influence or authority over the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004). I had no supervisory position at the site and no authority over the participants for this study. All participation in the study was voluntary. There was not any sensitive information asked in the research questions; if needed, I was prepared to include a referral to a professional counselor for participants who needed counseling.

Reciprocity involves what participants will learn from participating and how the researcher may give something back to the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). My hope is that the time spent in focus groups with other teachers in this study created relationships and collaboration for peers to support each other's teaching. Hopefully, this study benefited not only the students with SEN in Chinese schools but also encouraged and supported the participating teachers to provide differentiated instruction. My goal is that the information from this study encouraged increased professional development for teachers and collaboration between teachers who encounter students with SEN in their regular classrooms.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided the details of the methods used for this qualitative research design. As a hermeneutic phenomenological design, this study intended to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide instruction in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese schools that may include students with SEN. All participants had experienced the phenomenon explored in this study (Moustakas, 1994). The study consisted of one central research question and three sub-questions. Participants were recruited by purposeful sampling within a setting of a

mainland Chinese private school international division in a large urban city. The researcher's positionality and role as a parent of a special needs child and a veteran teacher was openly acknowledged throughout the research (Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 2016). The researcher's interpretive framework of a biblical worldview was explained. The procedures for conducting the research through artifacts, interviews, and focus groups and the questions used in each type of data collection were outlined along with the methods of data analysis. The ways I followed Moustakas's (1994) data analysis method, including phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, imagination variation, and coding of themes into textual and structural descriptions were outlined. The researcher's trustworthiness was supported by explanations of the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. Chapter Four discusses the findings from the data collection. The chapter begins with descriptions of the participants, a discussion of the themes and sub-themes generated by the artifact collection, personal interviews, and focus group discussions. Responses to each research question and sub-question are examined. A summarization of the findings of the study concludes the chapter.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were in-service expatriate teachers who teach in regular classrooms at an urban mainland Chinese private school. All of the participants were expected to provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs (SEN) who had been admitted into the regular classroom. The participants were recruited for this study by purposeful sampling and were contacted through email. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, and all participation was voluntary. The participants signed and submitted informed consent forms. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of the participants, and general geographical regions were used instead of specific home country locations in order to maintain participant confidentiality.

All participants met the parameters of the purposeful sampling. Participants were required to hold a passport other than from the People's Republic of China, be a current in-service teacher at a private school in mainland China, teach in an international division of a private school in mainland China, and speak English proficiently enough to conduct an interview

and participate in a focus group. Twelve teachers were recruited for this study. Participants came from three different geographic regions of the world and held passports from six different countries. None of the participants held passports from the People’s Republic of China. The participant pool included seven males (58%) and five females (42%). Three of the participants have bachelor’s degrees, eight participants have master’s degrees, and one participant has a doctorate. All participants had experience teaching in their home counties. Five participants also had experience teaching in a country besides China and their home country. All participants currently teach in mainland China. The median teaching experience for participants was 13 years. The median teaching experience in mainland China was six and a half years. The participants teach in different levels of the K-12 school and included four high school teachers, six middle school teachers, and two elementary school teachers. Seven participants (58%) taught science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, and five participants (42%) taught humanities subjects. Several of the participants have experience working with the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB) in addition to the American curriculum currently used at the school site. The participant demographics are listed below in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Teacher Participant Demographics*

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Years Taught in China	Home Country Region	Highest Degree Earned	Content Area	Grade Level
Adam	14	9	North America	Doctorate	STEM	High school
Brenda	6.5	6.5	Asia	Masters	STEM	High school
Darrien	3.5	3.5	Asia	Masters	STEM	Middle school

Carla	33	12	Asia	Masters	STEM	Middle school
Deborah	10	7	North America	Masters	Humanities	High school
Robert	12	7	North America	Bachelors	STEM	High school
Franklin	16	6	North America	Masters	STEM	Elementary school
Greg	16	11	North America	Masters	Humanities	Middle school
Jason	5	4	North America	Bachelors	Humanities	Middle school
Edwin	16	9	North America	Masters	Humanities	Middle school
Maria	15	3	Latin America	Masters	STEM	Elementary school
Hillary	9	3	North America	Bachelors	Humanities	Middle school

### **Adam**

Adam has been teaching for a total of 14 years and has taught nine years in the international division at a Chinese private school. Adam earned his master's degree and his doctorate degree in STEM subjects from prestigious, well-known universities in North America. After teaching at the university level for several years, he began teaching in mainland China. Coming to Asia was his first time teaching high school students, yet he has now taught for nine years in China. He has children that attend a Chinese private school.

### **Brenda**

Brenda has been teaching for a total of six and a half years in mainland China and has taught one and a half year in the international division at a Chinese private school. Brenda holds

two master's degrees. Teaching is her second career. After some years of teaching business and management at university level, Brenda joined the full-time teaching staff at a high school last school year. She holds a passport from an Asian country. She has children who attend an international school in China that uses the IB curriculum.

### **Darrien**

Darrien has been teaching for a total of three and a half years solely in mainland China at an international division of a Chinese private school. His home country and passport are from an Asian country. He earned a bachelor's degree in his home country, then earned a second bachelor's degree and a graduate degree from a North American university. Teaching is Darrien's second career. After moving to mainland China with his family, Darrien started teaching in local learning centers and four years ago decided to earn teacher certification to teach full-time. He claims he is still "pretty new as a teacher." He has children that attend a Chinese private school.

### **Carla**

Carla is a veteran teacher with 33 years of experience in the classroom, yet she has only taught in four different schools. Carla taught for 13 years in her Asian home country before teaching in the Middle East and North America. She has taught in mainland China for 12 years in the international division of a Chinese private school and holds a master's degree in education. While her preference is to teach high school and Advanced Placement level classes, she currently teaches middle school STEM classes. With her international experience, Carla also has experience with the IB educational system.

### **Deborah**

Deborah has been teaching for a total of 10 years with seven of those years in mainland China. She has taught at several schools in China as well as in another country in Asia. For three years she has been teaching in the international division of a Chinese private school. She has experience teaching at university, middle school, and high school levels and has also taught at IB schools. She has earned a master's degree and continues to take classes to increase her development as an educator. Her child attends a Chinese private school.

### **Robert**

Robert has been teaching for a total of 12 years and has taught for seven years in the international division at a Chinese private school. He says that he has always wanted to be a teacher. At university, he began with the teacher education program but then switched to simply focusing on his discipline topic. After earning his degree, he returned to school for postbaccalaureate work to earn his teaching license. He spent five years teaching in North America before moving to China, where he has taught at the same school for the last seven years.

### **Franklin**

Franklin has 16 years of experience teaching. He taught in several schools and universities in another Asian country before moving with his family to China. While working in that other country he also had the opportunity to work as a counselor at a camp geared for people with vision impairments. He has taught in mainland China for the past six years in the international division of a Chinese private school. Franklin has held several different roles at the school and is currently teaching in the upper elementary division. He has two master's degrees and has begun working towards a doctorate degree. Franklin has a child that attends a Chinese private school.

### **Greg**

Greg has 16 years of experience teaching with 11 of those years in mainland China in the international division of a Chinese private school. His experience as a teacher includes three years teaching in another Asian country and two years teaching in North American public schools. He majored in humanities and has a master's degree in humanities. Greg has always taught humanities classes. In China, he has remained exclusively at the same school for all 11 years. Greg has children that attend a Chinese private school.

### **Jason**

Jason is only in his fourth year of teaching. After one year of practicum teaching experience in another Asian country, Jason began teaching in China three years ago in the international division of a Chinese private school. Although a younger teacher, his contribution to the school has already been recognized, and he has moved into leadership positions at the school.

### **Edwin**

Edwin has been teaching for 16 years. Nine of those years have been in an international division of a Chinese private school. Edwin commented that his teaching philosophy came from "the traditional school of thought." Describing his first years of teaching in his home country in North America, Edwin said that he "didn't have any teaching background" and he "was not certified at the time." Eventually, after teaching for about seven and a half years, he returned to university and earned his master's degree in teaching from a prestigious private school in North America. After graduation, he moved to China where he has been teaching at the same school for nine years. His child attends a Chinese private school.

### **Maria**

Maria has 15 years of teaching experience with three years of experience in an international division of a Chinese private school. She has taught a multitude of STEM subjects at the elementary, middle/high school, and university levels. She has worked with her home country's national curriculum and with IB education before teaching internationally. As a volunteer teacher at a community college in North America, Maria worked with bilingual students in a literacy program. Three years ago, she moved to China after accepting a position in a high school; however, when she arrived the school no longer had a high school position available, so she accepted a position in upper elementary. Maria has a master's degree from her home country. During her interview for this study, Maria revealed that later in life she had been diagnosed with dyslexia, and she spoke openly about the impact of her diagnosis.

### **Hillary**

Hillary has been a classroom teacher for nine years and has three years of experience teaching in an international division of a Chinese private school. She has a bachelor's degree in a humanities subject. She has been living in China off and on since 2006. During that time, she has taught at the university level, in high school, in a kindergarten briefly, and provided after-school tutoring classes to elementary students. Due to family circumstances, Hillary took a hiatus from classroom teaching for many years and this year returned to full-time classroom teaching. In her personal interview, Hillary discussed her own diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and her daughter's diagnosis of ADHD. Her daughter currently attends a Chinese private school.

## **Results**

Using a hermeneutic phenomenological design, this study intended to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide instruction in regular classrooms at

mainland Chinese schools that may include students with special educational needs (SEN). Methods of data collection included artifact collection, personal interviews, and focus group discussions. From the data, seven primary themes and several sub-themes were derived after data analysis and an extensive review of the transcripts. The seven primary themes and the sub-themes identified are presented visually in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*Primary Themes and Sub-Themes*

Primary Themes	Sub-Themes
Concern for Students with SEN	
Awareness of Differentiated Instruction	
Reluctance to Accommodate or Modify Instruction	
Feelings of Inadequate Preparation	
Frustration with Cultural Differences	
Overwhelmed with Challenges	Large Class Sizes Limited Resources and Support Insufficient In-Service Training Time Pressures Inconsistent Supervision
Learning from Experience	Learned From Personal Contact Learning from Colleagues

**Concern for Students with SEN**



All participants expressed positive perceptions about the general concept of inclusive education and expressed positive perceptions of students with SEN. The participants all stated that they cared about the students in their classes and desired to help them reach their full potential. The desire to help each child succeed drove the teachers in their classroom instruction. Carla expressed her attitude toward students with suspected SEN who struggle in her classes by saying, “I spend most of my time thinking of how I can help these students.” Deborah expressed many of the participant’s feelings when she commented, “We value these kids and we’re going to unlock their potential.” True concern to support the students and provide classroom instruction driven by best-practices pedagogy was evident.

Each participant shared anecdotal reports of students with clear symptoms of SEN, some diagnosed and others undiagnosed, who had been in their regular classrooms. Adam and Franklin mentioned having had students in class who had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Tourette’s, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and intellectual disabilities. All participants spoke of students who they suspected had SEN and needed diagnosis, such as a student that showed signs of oppositional defiant disorder or students who showed symptoms of ASD, ADD, or ADHD. Adam said, “Every year you might get one or two kids with special educational needs.” He offered an example of one student he had in class several years ago with an intellectual disability, “She would have benefited from a specialized institution, but her father insisted on enrolling her here [in the Chinese private school]. She was the sweetest, nicest girl but [had] very severe learning disabilities.” In one of the focus groups, Greg and Jason discussed a student with autism who had attended the school last year who, as Jason commented, “had major behavioral issues.” Franklin shared about the elementary students he’s encountered, “I mean, we’ve had students who have been diagnosed with ADHD and autism and things like

that.” Several participants shared experiences of having students with autism in their classes. Edwin commented, “So in the past, I have had two students whose parents, I’m sorry, three students, whose parents informed me that they were on prescribed medication [for ADHD] to enable them to function better at school.” Other participants mentioned former students in their classes with suspected SEN. In these cases, the parents had often not reported a diagnosis or had not yet taken the child to be tested for SEN.

Despite a recently published policy by the school that the school does not admit students “who require special education services in order to meet grade level expectations in academic performance and social adjustment” (*Staff Handbook*, 2021, p. 45), the participants noted that their current classes continue to include students with SEN. Brenda observed, “I have a student who very openly, he’s very public about it, that he has ADHD, and he finds it very difficult to concentrate even in class.” Hillary also pointed out that this school year “at least probably eight of my students would qualify in that class as special needs. I know at least three, no, four. I know at least four are officially diagnosed with ADHD, autism, and autism with selective mutism.” Greg talked about an elementary student “in first grade and they [the teachers] can’t figure out a way to even, like, try to work with this kid because he has severe ADHD, and it really hasn’t been addressed.” These anecdotal reports all indicate that students with SEN, diagnosed and possibly undiagnosed, are enrolled at the Chinese private school where these participants work. All the participants are regular teachers, not special education specialists. Therefore, with the presence of students with these types of SEN in their classes, these teachers are expected to provide inclusive education.

In each discussion of the students, former or current, who had exhibited SEN or learning disabilities in class, all participants spoke of the concern they had for helping the students

succeed. All participants cared about the academic and the social-emotional needs presented by the students. Edwin said the goal of a teacher of a class with some students who have SEN is “being able to help the special needs student feel comfortable with their teacher so ... I can reach them on a more effective level.” The aspiration of each participant to meet students’ needs and support them was evident throughout the interviews and focus group discussions.

Participants talked about having empathy for struggling students and understanding the challenges that students with SEN often face academically, socially, and emotionally. Two participants openly shared that they themselves had been diagnosed with a special educational need, namely, dyslexia and ADHD. Maria felt that being diagnosed with dyslexia gave her deeper empathy for struggling students. Hillary, who was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult, also felt a deeper level of understanding for students with SEN. She said, “It’s important for us to understand, even as teachers, our students who have diagnoses and have medication ... You know, there’s so many things that are going on, but as someone with ADHD, I understand.” The participants’ experiences with their own diagnoses influenced how they perceive the students with SEN in their classes.

### **Awareness of Differentiated Instruction**

Each participant was able to produce and discuss artifacts of classroom instruction, formative activities, or student project assignments that they believed showed their intent to differentiate instruction for all students in the classroom. The artifacts that participants provided for the study showed creativity and sensitivity to students. The predominant types of differentiation instruction used in the artifacts were student grouping and student choice. Edwin commented, “I try to have a variety of activities geared towards different interests.” Maria’s and Carla’s artifacts also described summative assignments that allowed students to choose different

activities to complete the assignment. Franklin, Jason, and Greg spoke about grouping struggling students and students with SEN with partners who could help them, either with the content or with language acquisition. Hillary provided an artifact that described a formative assignment that used three different reading levels [grade levels] of text; however, all students were eventually required to read and respond to the highest, on grade level text to earn full marks on the summative assignment.

All participants expressed positive support for differentiated instruction in general. Hillary described differentiated instruction as “being able to find that sweet spot in differentiation where those who are high level are being challenged, but those who are still, like, in that kind of English language learner category are able to understand what’s going on and are able to comprehend the class as a whole.” Brenda expressed the importance of creating lessons that show empathy for learners,

I guess the most important thing is to be able to understand how the children process things and try to look at, you know, try to look at the lessons, even the lesson plan from their point of view. So yeah, I think that that was the main thing. You know, trying to put ourselves in the children’s shoes and then when we are developing the lesson plans or even the class activities to try and try to cater to possible modifications based on our students.

Greg emphasized the importance of pacing the curriculum and teacher-student contact in providing differentiated instruction. He observed, “So I think it’s just beneficial for us to just slow down a little bit. Make sure that we’re talking to every kid. Make sure we’re just trying to make sure the kids aren’t slipping through the cracks.” All lessons and assignments provided by

the participants showed strategies to differentiate instruction for learners. Participants responded that they all had attempted to utilize some type of differentiation within the past year.

Only two of the participants offered fully differentiated homework assignments or test/assessment options for individual needs. Robert explained that he teaches a course that has two levels concurrently in one classroom which means he has to differentiate unit tests for students. He explained, “I give them the same test that that the other students would get. With making modifications, I basically take out a few questions.” However, this accommodation is due to two different courses being taught concurrently within the same classroom rather a decision on the teacher’s part to modify content to accommodate for learners’ SEN. One of the participants offered differentiated material to challenge students who might find the regular grade level material not challenging enough. Darrien explained how he offers two completely different daily sets of homework and daily class activities. “One set of homework is at grade level ... the material is the same level as my class and the textbook,” Darrien explained. The other set of homework is a “challenge homework packet” that has assignments that are the same concepts but are a grade level above the textbook. Students in Darrien’s classes can choose which level of class practice and which level of homework packet they want to complete. The benefit, Darrien says, is that students need to “do challenging problems to really grow, so I encourage them to take [the] challenge.” When asked if he felt he would make any changes to this practice in the future, he replied that he was quite satisfied with providing opportunities for students to choose which level of homework they desire to complete each night and during classroom practice. Darrien did point out that all students were required to take the same exams/summative assessments. These adjustments to instructional methodology, however, showed an effective use of differentiated instruction.

### **Reluctance to Accommodate or Modify Instruction**

Beyond general strategies of student grouping or allowing student choice for projects and summative assignments, there was limited evidence of common accommodations or modifications for individual students with SEN like extended time for taking tests, oral testing, or modified homework assignments or expectations. In fact, several of the participants expressed a reluctance to provide individualized differentiated instruction in their classrooms. Edwin felt that “differentiated instruction is pretty challenging, and it’s hard to identify areas where you are truly giving differentiation.” One of the focus groups had an extensive discussion on whether accommodations or modifications such as extended time for testing or modified expectations for homework were “fair” to the students without SEN in the class. In this focus group and in another, a few participants supported the conclusion that accommodations or modifications were not “real life” and allowing accommodations or modifications for students would eventually be harmful for them. One participant expressed her opinion this way,

I’m sorry for this sentence, but I think that our life is not differentiated. At the end when we are on the street everybody is the same. Everybody wants to feel the same. You know, normally you must follow the same rules. You know, our life is not differentiated.

Another participant commented that providing students with SEN with accommodations or modifications was “doing them no favors” even going as far as comparing modifications for SEN with the short story *Harrison Bergeron* [a short story that describes a dystopian government forcing people with exceptional traits or abilities to wear handicaps to make all society equal (Harrison bergeron – summary, 2023)]. The participant suggested that students who were allowed accommodations in school would “be in for a rude awakening” when they leave school and enter “the real world.” Comments such as these showed a reluctance in some participants to utilize

best practices for instructional activities in individualized instruction. The reliance on student grouping and student choice as a whole class strategy for differentiated instruction was common for all participants.

These reluctant attitudes towards differentiation were also evident when participants discussed expectations for assignments and summative assessments. Nearly all of the participants expressed the opinion that while formative assessments could be differentiated, summative assessments, especially exams, must be identical for all students. Adam explained, “The differentiation isn’t the assessments; it’s how you prepare the students for the assessments. Or you now offer some variety in the assignments; when it comes to assessments, everyone gets the same.” Many other participants agreed. Maria stated, “When you differentiate instruction, you will continue with the same test.” Darrien administered the same summative assessment to all students in his class, even though the more accelerated students might have consistently completed the challenge homework packets. Hillary was frustrated by the idea of making all her students take identical tests, but she felt that the school’s expectation was for her to do so. She commented that she had to test students with SEN in class “on grade level texts” because “they’re expected to walk out of my classroom with the same experience as the other students.” Most of the participants concurred that keeping the same standards for all students was more “fair.”

### **Feelings of Inadequate Preparation**

Teacher participants were able to identify students with SEN in their classes; however, most participants noted that they felt unprepared to deal with the special educational needs presented in their classrooms. Participants expressed frustration about trying to develop strategies for helping the struggling students. However, they felt inadequately prepared to

provide differentiated instruction or accommodations. Hillary said, “Sometimes I feel incompetent at supporting” the students. Carla, the most experienced teacher of the participants, frequently mentioned feeling inadequate in her interview saying, “I feel helpless, to be honest. I feel helpless because I really don’t know how to help them.” Another time she commented, “I honestly say that I’m not really prepared for these kinds of students.” This idea of not being trained or not knowing how to effectively help students with SEN was common with all participants.

Participants show intention to differentiate instruction for their classes, but nearly all expressed uncertainty as to whether they were doing it correctly or were properly following school policy. Participants spoke of their experience working with students with SEN at previous schools that had support systems for struggling students. Even participants who had had experience with SEN students at previous schools expressed that they felt unprepared with strategies to support students in their current positions. Deborah commented that she felt unsure about which accommodations she should use for different student needs saying, “For me, it is really tough at the lack of the formal accommodations because I am delighted to help a student with that kind of thing but I don’t feel qualified.” Later in the interview, she clarified, “In terms of those really big formal accommodations, especially for assessment, I am ridiculously uncomfortable. I think my biggest discomfort is feeling like I’m not qualified to know what’s gonna help.” It was clear that all the teacher participants desired to help the students who struggled with their classes due to SEN; however, all participants but one expressed feeling unprepared to adjust lessons for students with SEN.

### **Frustration with Cultural Differences**



All participants were asked how their experiences teaching in Chinese schools differed from inclusive education in their home countries. The differences between their home countries' educational systems and the system and attitudes they have experienced in China were apparent. Participants from North and Latin America and one Asian country shared about well-established support systems for inclusive education and modifications for learners with SEN in other countries. In describing their home countries' inclusive education, participants used descriptions like "very focused and targeted on individual students" and "super prepared." Participants described their prior experiences as "great," "very rich," and "awesome." Participants recalled positive experiences of inclusive education in their home countries.

The paradigm difference between cultures in approaching inclusive education and supporting students with SEN was apparent. All of the participants expressed frustration with the cultural environment in Chinese society in the area of inclusive education. Robert remarked that the lack of recognizing SEN is "an Asian culture thing. That there's a stigma around special education that is damaging to students." The participants commented on what they viewed as unwillingness in Chinese society to accept or acknowledge SEN. One participant compared the cultural environment in China to what she had experienced at a school in the Middle East, "just like in China, they're in denial or they don't actually like acknowledge, you know, their kids having special needs problems." Maria commented, "I feel inclusion is not a main thing here." Jason remarked "most of the time, there is no room for special educational needs." Robert explained the surrounding culture by noting the impact of the collective mindset, "I would say that it just kind of the mindset of the individual versus the collective. China is very much - they embrace collectivism." This collectivism, he perceived, led to unacceptance of individualism and especially individual instruction in the classroom.

While a couple of participants noted China's recent attempt to increase cultural awareness of special needs, overall participants expressed that the cultural environment seemed unwelcoming to students with SEN. Hillary noted the difference between her home country's educational system and Chinese education by saying,

I'll speak as someone who's like both a teacher and the parent who would benefit, honestly, from being in my home country's education system in the sense of I have a kid who if in the US she would absolutely be on an IEP.

However, the Chinese private school where Hillary teaches and where Hillary's child attends does not have a special education department, nor does it provide special accommodations for the SEN needs and ADHD with which her daughter has been diagnosed. All participants remarked on the Chinese stigmatization of SEN that contrasted with the experiences in their home countries or other countries where they had worked.

Because of the cultural stigma of SEN, many participants noted that there was a parental disinclination to seek diagnosis or treatment or to report a diagnosis to the school. Participants shared numerous experiences of parents of past and current students who resisted seeking a diagnosis for their child due to the cultural stigma toward learning disabilities. Participants described experiences of mentioning the possibility of a child having SEN or learning disabilities to parents. Often the parents were unwilling to seek out diagnoses for their child or were unwilling to report a diagnosis to the school, when one had been made, in an effort to avoid labeling the child with SEN. Jason explained the frustrations many teachers experienced at this refusal to acknowledge SEN,

so I feel like in China in particular, parents are very- they don't want to admit that their child might have a learning difficulty, which puts a lot of bind on teachers. That's like,

OK, instead of us getting the proper help for your student, instead of admitting your student might have ADHD or some type of help that they need, they just totally want you to treat them normal. So it ends up hurting the student instead of helping them.

The parental refusal to acknowledge SEN frustrated all the participants who shared that this refusal to report special needs created classroom environments where teachers felt they had to guess what the students' needs were and how to support learning.

The cultural impact is apparent in school policy where the participants teach. Robert noted, "I would say that [in] our school currently there's too much of a stigma around special education." Franklin spoke of the school's resistance to officially recognize SEN, "And so a lot of cases, they either just, uh, you know, sweep it under the carpet or they ignore it or they make other excuses. But overall it still, it is a stigma." One participant from North America bluntly stated, "Our school's not designed for it [inclusion]. They [students with SEN] need to go to a school that is." This participant further commented, "And when a special needs student comes in, though there's differentiation, they are a wrench in the machinery." As expatriate teachers, the participants viewed Chinese attitudes toward inclusion to be non-accepting of inclusive education and averse to accepting SEN. Despite the fact that all participants expressed general acceptance of the basic concepts of special needs education and differentiation in the classroom, participants also made isolated negative comments about SEN in the context of talking about students with SEN in Chinese schools.

All participants expressed frustration with their current school's unwillingness to acknowledge that students with SEN are currently enrolled and the school's repeated claims that students with SEN have not been admitted to the school or placed in regular classes. In describing the school's policy for accommodating students with SEN, participants used words

like “unarticulated,” “vastly underwhelming,” “not, not adequate,” and “very unprepared.” Franklin commented, “It’s quite heartbreaking when you see our students [struggle].” The participants spoke of different ways in which they felt the school was unprepared to include students with SEN into regular classrooms. Carla, who has been teaching at the school the longest of all the participants, commented on the changes she has experienced in the student body, “For the longest time at [school name redacted] we didn’t have problems of students like these, but recently for the past two or three years we have increasing number of students that, you know, that show this kind of behavior.” Hillary acknowledged, “There’s not really room. Like we don’t have IEPs [Individualized Education Programs] and we don’t have that kind of support.” Adam agreed, “This system here that we have here is so unprepared for that [inclusion].” Deborah claimed that the school’s lack of acknowledgment of the presence of students with SEN in the classrooms and the need for additional support for these students had caused considerable frustration among the staff. Deborah explained,

If you have a school that kind of ignores them [students with SEN] like, yeah, we have some kids, but we don’t talk or think about it. That can be detrimental if you have a school that doesn’t have the institutional support. So we know the kids are falling through the cracks, but we can’t do anything about it. That creates a lot of cognitive dissonance. That’s really tough for teachers.

This type of cultural dissonance was apparent in all participants’ responses.

Many participants spoke of the teachers’ efforts to help struggling students by tutoring after school, trying to reteach material, and providing scaffolding; however, all of the participants were disheartened at the school’s reluctance to recognize or provide a clear policy for providing accommodations for students with SEN. “There are no school policies,”

commented Adam. Robert remarked that the school needed to think about inclusion more “because it’s really easy to brush this stuff under the rug and there’s kind of a culture of doing so.” The unclear policy at the school of whether teachers can or cannot provide accommodations and what accommodations are acceptable has created a tension in the participants.

### **Overwhelmed with Challenges**

Although all the participants expressed concern for students who struggled academically and who clearly had special educational needs that differed from the majority of students in the classroom, as Franklin noted, sometimes “meeting those needs is a little bit challenging.” All the participants noted that they faced a number of challenges in providing inclusive instruction to students. Greg commented, “I think it’s [inclusive education] important, but I don’t think I can always achieve it, given institutional constraints and the expectations.” Participants stated that the major hindrances to providing effective support in the classroom were large class size, limited available resources and support staff, insufficient in-service training, time pressures, and inconsistent administrative supervision.

### ***Large Class Sizes***

Nearly all participants expressed frustration with the number of students in their classes. They almost all mentioned that reducing the number of students in each classroom would enable them to provide more individualized instruction for all students, especially the ones with SEN. Having taught at the school for many years, Greg has noticed a steady increase in class sizes and remarked, “We have so many kids now. We have so many bodies in that space. Easy for kids to be forgotten.” Greg clarified, “I think it’s increasingly challenging or it’s more difficult now that we have 30 kids in a class.” Hillary also commented on the large class sizes, “My most challenging class has 30 students. And so with a class that size and with such varied needs, it is

difficult to support all of those different students.” Many participants observed that it was hard for teachers to meet the students’ needs in such large classes. Maria explained, “So you know that you need to split your class, have more attention with that one [student], but it’s unfair with the other ones because they want to have your guidance too.” Hillary added, “The tricky thing is when you have a class that size and a lot of kids who struggle to manage themselves independently, that obviously doing one-on-one conferences is very, very slow because it requires so much intervention.” The increased number of students in classes created an obstacle for individualized instruction and one-on-one conferencing between the students and the teacher.

In addition to the large number of students in each class, the physical space demanded by so many students challenged the teachers. Maria observed, “It’s difficult. I know it’s impossible for the amount of teachers, amount of classrooms and space and furniture and, yes, a huge logistic.” Adam supported this observation by saying, “In our particular school, we are kind of maxed out on physical space.” The participants all felt that the demands on the teacher’s attention and the physical space constraints that came with the increased class sizes made attempting to provide differentiated instruction extremely challenging.

### ***Limited Resources and Support***

Many participants thought that access to resources and support were more limited for them in China than in their home countries. Jason explained that many of his students needed differentiated reading material due to their language acquisition struggles. He reported that he found it very difficult to find those types of resources in China, as compared to his home country that would have had a resource teacher who would provide materials to support the teachers and the students. He further clarified that in China “finding those resources, I feel, has become more difficult because I wasn’t necessarily taught where to look” for resources to differentiate

instruction for his students. Many participants mentioned having inadequate resources for class instruction. “I don’t have the resources or manipulatives,” Maria pointed out.

Additionally, participants compared the provision of support staff in their own countries’ educational system to the Chinese schools where they taught. “We don’t really have that support team or support department teachers as well,” Carla observed. The lack of support staff has impacted classroom instruction when teachers have been required to learn strategies for accommodating instruction without support staff or an on-site resource teacher. As Carla pointed out, “It’s like you swim on your own; you do your own thing. You come up with your own method or way of dealing with this kind of problem.” The necessity of having to find their own resources without support seemed to increase the feelings of inadequate preparation that the participants expressed.

Many participants mentioned a desire for specific support staff and dedicated professionals to work with individual student educational needs. “I think it’s high time that we have like a support team for, you know, for some of our students ... now especially there are like, you know, increasing number of them,” said Carla. Robert also requested additional support staff saying, “We can’t just brush things under the rug and say things aren’t a problem. We need people. Need support. Students need support.” Robert clarified, “We have the student body that could support a special ed department.” Maria explained the need for support in the elementary division, “In elementary, we always need to have somebody else and, unfortunately, we don’t have somebody else to try to support that specific kid.” The teachers shared that having additional teaching staff could offer targeted support to the teachers for inclusive education. The lack of resources for learners with SEN frustrated teachers and resulted in them feeling unsupported in their classrooms.

### *Insufficient In-Service Training*

Feelings of inadequacy in the participants who had students with SEN in their classes were often reinforced by what the participants viewed as insufficient in-service training. During individual interviews, all participants in the study specifically raised the lack of in-service training or professional development in differentiated instruction for teachers. The topic was further discussed in each of the focus groups. In describing the training provided by the school, the participants used phrases like “sporadic,” “lecture-based,” and “good-natured, good intended, but not helpful” to describe the school’s professional development for differentiated learning. In commenting about her experience at the school, Brenda stated, “I’ve not really seen any help at all. I mean we do get, I think, PD [professional development] sometimes, but those last four, you know how it is. I think it doesn’t go deep enough.” The participants all expressed a desire for more training and more instruction in the best practices of differentiated instruction.

All participants agreed that the school had attempted to provide some training on general differentiated instruction and special educational needs. Franklin confirmed that in the elementary division that “there’s a lot of initiative for that because almost every year we have a workshop on differentiation.” However, most participants seemed to feel the PD sessions offered by the school were insufficient for their personal growth as an educator. Deborah commented, “My impression after walking out of several of those PDs is that that’s information that is useful to have if you’re kind of at like ground zero with understanding neurodiversity and how to differentiate assessment and think about assessment practices in an inclusive way.” Since the participants in this study were predominately more experienced teachers, this type of introductory training felt inadequate for preparing them to utilize actual best practices in their classrooms. Participants indicated a desire for more direct instruction from trained professionals



in differentiated instruction and strategies in how to actually accommodate for students with SEN. Robert remarked, “Our trainings here on differentiation have been practically nonexistent, in my opinion.” The participants’ perception that the in-service professional development offered by the school had not trained them for instructing students with SEN led to feelings of inadequacy and incompetence, even in the experienced teachers.

### *Time Pressures*

Every participant highlighted time as the greatest hindrance to providing differentiated instruction. Teachers mentioned needing more class time, more teacher preparation time, and more individual instruction time with struggling students. When asked what has kept him from using differentiation more frequently, Franklin responded, “I think that the number one reason/excuse is time. A lot of time and a lot of effort is actually used to support those students ... They require additional time and energy and things like that.” Greg commented on the limited class time available, “I don’t know where we have the time. I don’t know, but the school has to dedicate a time and a place and a grown-up to help them [students with SEN], to give them the academic support.”

The biggest concern regarding the time pressures involved having adequate teacher preparation time. Most participants shared the view that offering differentiated instruction took too much time to prepare lessons. Carla spoke about the preparation needed,

If I have more time to really sit down and, you know, I think you understand me when I say, when I plan a unit, when I plan a lesson plan, I really would want it to be the best, you know, and it’s not like so-so. And so time for me is the enemy. If I don’t have that much time to really come up with a very good differentiated lesson, then I will just like, OK, this is the most that I can do in differentiation, something like that.

Maria also addressed the need for more time to prepare for class. When asked what her greatest need was, she answered, “Prep time! Because you need to figure out resources. This time during class. It’s time after that because you need to do your grading and time to have the feedback with parents.” As a newer teacher, Jason shared that his first year at the school had been overwhelming with learning the school system, the students, and the class material. He noted,

You never really get the time to fully engage with your subject material. So you’re learning what you should be teaching or what’s expected of you. And then, by the time you’ve learned that, you have left [the school]. And so you never really get to focus on being able to differentiate your lessons because you’re so overwhelmed with the aspect of learning the new material that you’re being asked to teach.

Finding time during the school day or at home to prepare was the biggest concern for the participants.

Participants were also concerned about the time available for class instruction. Feeling overwhelmed with the amount of material to be covered in each curriculum, participants felt they did not have class time to offer differentiated lessons. Robert’s concerns on this topic were quite representative of the participants,

I would say that one [issue] particularly is time, and it’s a sense of like putting forth that much effort for two students, and it’s like it [differentiated instruction] just falls by the wayside. And it’s like, they can do the same thing. I’ll just; I’ll just lower the expectation [for the work those students do] rather than truly modify.

Edwin, who perceived differentiated instruction as offering two different assignments to students on the same topic said the planning “took a lot of time ‘cause now, you know, I had to grade two

things. Almost every assignment I had to grade two.” Darrien, who offers additional hours of tutoring after school for students who need academic support, commented,

[Students] really need kind of one-to-one interaction, and in elementary school the schedule is so tight I really couldn’t find the time other than after school, which students are already tired, and I don’t wanna keep them after school too much either.

Participants shared that the amount of material they needed to cover for class often kept them from slowing down or adjusting for the learning needs of students with SEN.

### ***Inconsistent Supervision***

In addition to insufficient training and the lack of time to prepare, another frequently mentioned topic was the participants’ desire for administrators and supervisors to “follow through” in implementing a program that could support teachers in the area of differentiated instruction. Participants suggested that greater oversight from grade-level leaders, department heads, administration, and even top management would benefit the structural support systems for teachers. Deborah remarked that “it’s hard to carry on with something when you don’t have positive feedback” and expressed a desire for administrators to be “really intentional” in supervising teachers’ use of differentiation. Hillary contended that providing effective support “requires ongoing checking in and ongoing conversation.” Franklin was discouraged at the fact that the team leads “don’t collaborate a lot when it comes to that [identifying students who struggle] as it is, and especially not when it comes to our students who have special needs.”

Part of the administrative oversight requested by the participants was for the school to focus on classroom instruction and strategies for differentiation in addition to focusing on student behavior. Participants requested help in consistently implementing best practices for

helping struggling students throughout the school. Jason suggested that differentiation be part of the improvement plan to help students struggling academically He clarified,

We can go to PDs [professional development sessions] about how to differentiate, but when it comes down to it, if a kid's failing a class- or not even a class- if the kid's failing multiple classes, it's not usually one of the conversations of what, how have we differentiated?

Maria explained that she attempts to create consistency at her level with the other teachers on her team, but she suggested that school management should set clear expectations for teachers.

Since the beginning say, OK, for your lesson plan, remember that you need to have this, this, this and not just the basic structure. So in that way, we'll be like, yeah, have it in our school to have the differentiation always on. It's not [that] this is something new. No. We are doing this, and we will continue. And our kids, they will, they will feel that that's normal for them.

Each participant spoke of their desire to see greater oversight from supervisors and administration. Jason expanded on this point, explaining the necessity of supervision by admitting that if there was no accountability then "I feel like we let it slide under the- we kind of just push it off. So if we're not held accountable to it, then how can we really say that we have high standards of that?" The desire to see differentiated learning occur consistently in all levels of the school is apparent in the participants' calls for greater direction from school administration.

### **Learning from Experience**

Despite reporting that they often feel inadequate in offering differentiated instruction, participants acknowledged that they had grown as teachers and had learned strategies for dealing

with students with SEN. Carla summed up the growth that many of the participants had experienced by saying, “when you are new in the teaching, you panic if that happens [having a student with SEN in a regular class].” However, having opportunities to interact with students with SEN, watching more experienced teachers conduct classes, and learning from colleagues helped participants grow and develop as teachers.

### ***Learning From Personal Contact***

Participants mentioned positive experiences with extended family members, high school peers, or children of family friends. Brenda shared about her cousin who has Down Syndrome, and other participants told of instances where they had taught or seen other students with SEN in colleagues’ classes. These experiences increased their understanding of SEN and people with learning differences. Robert shared how his experiences as a student in an inclusive high school impacted his perceptions. “I found it very rich,” he shared, “my high school definitely was a very inclusive model, and we not only had a kind of a rich special education department but wherever possible our special education students were still placed in the regular classroom.” He continued, “That’s what we grew up with. It wasn’t looked at as strange.” Positive experiences with inclusive education and students with SEN helped increase positive perceptions of inclusion.

Some participants reflected on their early years of teaching and how unprepared they had felt for inclusive education. Maria said that her first few years were “super difficult for me. I think I did a really bad job ... So they [colleagues] tried to give me some ideas. But for me [it] was like super, super, super tough.” Other participants also felt uncomfortable with inclusive education at first. Franklin remembered when he had his first autistic student in class a couple of years ago that “at the very beginning, it was very new to me.” Franklin went on to share how he managed by “leaning on the admins and leaning on the counselors for prior experience and other

suggestions of what to do.” This experience was beneficial, he said, because he had “tried all my other tricks before. None of it worked as they were for like regular, you know, typical students.” Having opportunities to interact with students with SEN provided many of the participants with valuable practical experiences and allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of such students. Even after some challenging early experiences as teachers, all participants highlighted the positive experiences they had enjoyed with students with SEN in previous classes or general interactions. For all participants, this led to more positive perceptions and improved pedagogy. Participants mentioned that the longer they were in the classroom and the more they interacted with students with SEN, the more their confidence increased in terms of providing inclusive instruction.

### *Learning from Colleagues*

Many participants shared stories of how working with colleagues at different times in their teaching careers had helped them learn about differentiated instruction and accommodation. Deborah spoke of working closely with a special education resource teacher at her previous school and about how her colleagues had helped teach her strategies, like changing the background colors of class PowerPoint presentations to help one of her students with SEN. Jason remarked that in his home country, a resource teacher had always been available to locate resources and support classroom instruction, and he knew that when he needed support he could ask her for help. Participants shared instances when they had been able to watch other classes and learn from more experienced teachers. Hillary said that the most beneficial experiences for her had been “other teachers’ lessons that they’ve done that included differentiation. I really love to be able to visualize how to successfully do this and to hear about how others have successfully

done it.” The lessons and strategies learned from other teachers were valuable to the participants and subsequently helped them in their current instructional practices.

All the participants emphasized that interaction with their current co-workers continued to improve their teaching. Participants commented how communication with teachers in different grade levels was vital for learning strategies and information about the students. Edwin claimed that “the most valuable collaboration is with the previous year’s teachers.” The participants spoke of collaboration with their colleagues as a positive part of teaching. Maria asserted, “communication is key, and we use our prep time to talk.” In describing a successful intervention for a student this year, Brenda reported how the teachers had collaborated and “worked as a team to come up with a plan.” Teams of teachers support each other by discussing strategies and ideas for differentiated instruction and working with students with SEN. Carla confided, “We talk about the students, you know, because we want to help the students.” Other participants spoke about the grade-level and department-level discussions that occur. “All the teachers do work together to help these kids. We identify them as early as possible,” commented Adam. Jason shared agenda items from the grade-level meetings he has attended, “Behavior usually is the most time where we’re talking about what works and what doesn’t work with that stuff. And then academic[s] would be the second longest where we talk about, ohh, I’m doing pull-outs with this kid.” Teacher collaboration and communication with colleagues was mentioned as the greatest influences in learning strategies for individual students and in influencing teachers’ practices for inclusive instruction.

Unlike the weekly team meetings that Jason has been able to attend, most participants noted that the collaboration they experienced was more *ad-hoc* in nature and had been predominantly driven by teacher initiative as they looked for ways to help students. “These

conversations just kind of happen more organically and you kind of know the abilities of students throughout the high school, even before they're actually in your class," remarked Robert. He clarified,

[A discussion] starts with somebody bringing up a student that they're frustrated with in some way, and then teachers that have taught them previously say, like, oh yeah, I had that student too. This is what I did or this is the problem that I had and, yeah, that kind of is how it would go.

Regardless of the nature of the meetings, all participants regarded the time spent talking with colleagues as an essential part of learning ways to improve differentiation and deal with student issues.

### **Research Question Responses**

The research questions provided the framework for this qualitative study. This study was created around one central research question and three sub-questions that aligned with the theoretical framework guiding this study. Table 3 below visually describes the alignment of the central research question and each sub-question to the themes. This section provides a narrative summation of participant responses to the central research question and each sub-question with supporting descriptions of the findings.

**Table 3**

*Thematic Alignment with Research Questions*

<b>Primary Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Research Question</b>
Concern for Students with SEN		CRQ
Awareness of Differentiated Instruction		SQ1



Reluctance to Accommodate or Modify	SQ1
Instruction	
Feelings of Inadequate Preparation	SQ1
Frustrated with Cultural Differences	SQ2
Overwhelmed with Challenges	SQ3
Large Class Sizes	SQ3
Limited Resources and Support	SQ3
Insufficient In-Service Training	SQ3
Time Pressures	SQ3
Inconsistent Supervision	SQ3
Learning from Experience	SQ3
Learned from Personal Contact	SQ3
Learning from Colleagues	SQ3

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### Central Research Question

What are the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools?

In-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with SEN in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools all shared feelings of concern for including students with SEN in their classrooms. Participants care deeply about meeting students' needs and desire to help learners improve academically. Yet, all participants have experienced frustration with the school's lack of support for learners with SEN and the absence

of an official policy for accommodating classroom instruction. Participants sometimes felt inadequately prepared to provide a quality educational experience for students with SEN. The participants felt unprepared to handle the issues caused by students with SEN in their classrooms. They expressed feelings of discouragement as a result of school and cultural values that sometimes avoid recognizing the needs of students with SEN placed in ineffectively inclusive environments. Jason shared the frustration he felt when faced with these situations, “We’ve had meetings. The parent has known this kid has some type of issue, but they’re not willing to accept it. If they’re not willing to accept it, what can I do?” With resignation, Brenda shared, “I guess overall, you know, as teachers, we make do” without school support. All participants expressed a desire to see improved experiences with inclusive education in China.

### **Sub-Question One**

What perceptions and attitudes do in-service expatriate teachers have towards students with special educational needs in their regular classrooms?

The intention of this sub-question was to encourage participants to describe their general perceptions of students with SEN and their perceptions of having students with SEN in their classrooms. Overall, the majority of in-service expatriate teachers participating in the study have positive perceptions of students with SEN; participants expressed concern and empathy for the students in their classrooms. “Our role is actually to help those who need our help and to make sure that they are successful,” stated Carla. In general, the participants expressed positive perceptions of inclusive education, students with SEN, and differentiated instruction.

However, subtle negative perceptions were evident in the participants’ responses when discussing accommodating classroom instruction and modifying expectations for student work. Participants shared that the inclusion of students with SEN in their regular classrooms had added

to their workload, created new challenges for teaching, and often led to a dissonance between expectations and actual classroom experiences for teachers and students. As Franklin pointed out, “A lot of time and a lot of effort is actually used to support those students.” Participants seemed to feel that they needed to focus on the class as a whole rather than differentiate or modify curriculum for individual students. While the majority of the comments regarding SEN and inclusion were positive, there were some instances where participants expressed negative perceptions.

### **Sub-Question Two**

What subjective norms (societal expectations) do in-service expatriate teachers experience in dealing with students who have special educational needs in their regular classrooms?

This sub-question was designed to allow participants to describe any differences between the educational systems in their home countries and the Chinese school system they were experiencing. Although the intention initially was to explore this sub-question during focus groups, nearly all participants volunteered their experiences in their interviews without being asked. Some participants have taught in Chinese schools for over a decade. However, the experiences of teaching students with SEN in their home countries and in other countries remain with them. Often their experiences in other schools contrasted with their experience teaching in China. All participants noted the influence of the prevalent negative cultural stigma associated with SEN in China on their own teaching efficacy for providing effective inclusive and differentiated instruction. Deborah summarized the frustration expatriate teachers often experience trying to differentiate their classroom instruction in China,

It's a really hard balance to strike, but I think that is a very important element as well because teachers- like you absorb that stuff [cultural norms] by osmosis. And if you're in a place, if you're in a place that doesn't value that kind of thing, you will over time, find yourself with the best of intentions taking in some of that.

Robert also commented on the cultural pressure he has felt, "I definitely embrace, like, an inclusive model but kind of the nature of our school [is] we don't [embrace an inclusive model]."

Jason commented that he feels cultural pressure from parents and the school culture which diminishes the importance or even the existence of SEN. He observed that the attitude "in general in China" seems to be "if we put it on the back burner, if we ignore it, it will go away."

He continued by saying,

And so I think as teachers, when we, we're kind of told this, we kind of have this understanding that this is the culture and this is the society we are living in. Uh, we start to also believe that and kind of go with that function as well, [thinking] you know, I tried. The parents [are] ignoring it. What else do you want me to do?

Participants also remarked on the importance of school culture in regard to the school's current approach to students with SEN. Brenda said she desired for the school to "finally realize that we have many more students like this than what the administrators think." The participants expressed a desire for the school to destigmatize SEN, clarify the usage of accommodations in class, and implement policies that would support teachers and students. Robert noted,

I wish it [the school] would be more honest with [us], with the students that we accept and that we have lowered the bar for students that we accept at our school and sure, maybe 10 years ago, maybe five years ago, our school didn't have a need for a special

education department of any sort. And I would say that now there is, and we're not, our school is not being honest about that.

Participants expressed their perceptions that societal expectations resulted in demotivation and discouragement in teachers and sometimes increased a sense of apathy when it came to providing differentiated instruction for students with SEN in their classrooms.

### **Sub-Question Three**

What perceived behavior control (teacher self-efficacy) do in-service expatriate teachers express for differentiated instruction and inclusive education?

Low efficacy for providing differentiated instruction to students in the class was apparent in nearly every participant in this study. Most of the participants had to be encouraged to provide an artifact of differentiated instruction because many claimed that they didn't regularly differentiate lessons for their classes. Despite having attended a variety of professional development sessions provided by the school to train teachers in differentiated instruction, most of the teachers claimed that their ability to implement differentiated instruction into their curriculum and to use differentiated strategies in class was weak. However, throughout the interviews and discussion, participants could all describe times in their classes when they had provided whole-class adjustments for students. Overall, the participants expressed low self-efficacy for using differentiated instruction as individualized instruction for students with SEN.

Participants described hindrances they had experienced in developing self-efficacy for differentiating instruction and providing accommodations. The challenges discussed by participants included the increased number of students in classes, limited available resources and support staff, insufficient professional development, lack of preparation and grading time, and inconsistent administrative supervision. These hurdles often seemed insurmountable to the

participants. In the end, most participants felt time was one of the greatest obstacles preventing teachers from utilizing differentiated instruction. Jason explained, “I think if most of us are honest with ourselves, it’s just that time-consuming process is the only reason why we wouldn’t differentiate every single time.”

Teacher collaboration and teacher experience appeared to be the most important influences in increasing self-efficacy for differentiating lessons and assignments. Participants spoke of meeting with current grade-level teachers and with students’ previous teachers to discuss strategies and behavior management ideas for their classrooms. Franklin shared that his self-efficacy “comes from learning from other teachers and kind of experiencing different grades and kind of listening to, you know, our team leads and giving, getting suggestions from them as well.” Each participant mentioned these types of collaboration as beneficial in increasing their self-efficacy and intention to differentiate instruction.

### **Summary**

Chapter Four provided the study results of the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. The use of *in-vivo* quotations allowed participants to voice their experiences. Data analyses in this hermeneutical study identified seven themes from the participants’ experiences. The themes were (a) concern for students with SEN; (b) awareness of differentiated instruction; (c) reluctance to accommodate or modify instruction; (d) feelings of inadequate preparation; (e) frustration with cultural differences; (f) overwhelmed with challenges, which was the most significant theme with five sub-themes of large class sizes, limited resources and support, insufficient in-service training, time pressures, and inconsistent supervision; and (g) learning from experience, which produced two sub-themes learned from

personal contact and learning from colleagues. The central research question and the three sub-questions were analyzed using the themes derived from the data collection. All findings were in line with the research questions and described the phenomenon studied.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

This hermeneutic phenomenological study described the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs (SEN) in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. The goal of this study was to describe teachers' usage of differentiated instruction and the impact of the surrounding subjective norms on the teachers' self-efficacy for providing inclusive education to students with SEN. Chapter Five offers interpretations derived from the findings and discusses implications for policy and practice based on the findings. The chapter discusses theoretical and methodological implications in light of the findings and includes the limitations and delimitations of the study. The chapter ends with my recommendations for future research and my conclusions from the study.

### **Discussion**

This section presents the interpretations of findings from the hermeneutic phenomenological study by discussing the themes that emerged during data collection. I will discuss the interpretation of the findings, the implications of the study for policy and practice, and the theoretical and empirical implications of the results. The discussion will conclude by discussing the limitations and delimitations of the study.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The following section describes three main interpretations derived from the three data collection methods and the findings discussed in Chapter Four. The findings align with current literature on the self-efficacy of teachers who provide inclusive education for students with SEN. Previous research has examined influences on teacher self-efficacy (Chao et al., 2017; George et



al., 2018; Monteiro et al., 2019), yet only a few studies (Opoku et al., 2021a; Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020) have discussed the impact of the surrounding culture or subjective norms on teacher self-efficacy.

### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

Data analysis for this hermeneutical study identified seven themes from the participants' experiences. The themes were (a) concern for students with SEN; (b) awareness of differentiated instruction; (c) reluctance to accommodate or modify instruction; (d) feelings of inadequate preparation; (e) frustration with cultural differences; (f) overwhelmed with challenges, which included five sub-themes of large class sizes, limited resources and support, insufficient in-service training, time pressures, and inconsistent supervision; and (g) learning from experience, which included two sub-themes of learned from personal contact and learning from colleagues. This study's findings are consistent with previous research on teacher self-efficacy in inclusive education. This section includes three significant interpretations of the themes, which are the cultural dissonance created by subjective norms, the need for clearer school policies, and the importance of teacher self-efficacy. These interpretations provide insights into how the quality of differentiated instruction in an inclusive classroom could be enhanced.

**Cultural Dissonance.** The first interpretation of the themes is that there is a cultural dissonance between expatriate teachers and the surrounding culture encountered while working in mainland China. Previous studies (Jia et al., 2022; Li & Li, 2020) have found that expatriate teachers often have experience teaching in school systems where inclusive education was the norm and was supported by school-wide policy. Many participants shared their experiences working at schools in other countries where there were extensive support systems for teachers who provided inclusive education. Previous experiences with learners with SEN and inclusive

education had created positive impressions of inclusive education in the participants. Many of the participant's home countries had structured educational systems with special education teachers helping regular classroom teachers find resources and supplementing class instruction. Teachers' experiences included co-teaching with special education specialists or resource teachers, which greatly facilitated the implementation of effective differentiated instruction and teacher collaboration.

In contrast, in China, the participants have encountered negative perceptions of learning disabilities from the collective Chinese society that often continues to stigmatize students with SEN. This subjective norm differs from many of the participants' previous experiences in their home countries. The cultural perception of SEN in China has also been identified by other researchers (Jia et al., 2022; Kritzer, 2012; Qu, 2022c; Xu et al., 2018). Students with SEN in Chinese society still face discrimination and marginalization (Alduais & Deng, 2022a; Jia et al., 2022; Qu, 2022a, 2022b; Yuan et al., 2022). Because of the stigma, many parents sometimes dismiss their children's academic problems as a lack of focus or poor motivation (Li & Li, 2020; Li et al., 2022; Qu, 2022c). Parents hesitate to seek diagnoses for their children with learning disabilities or special educational needs due to social pressure (Huang et al., 2013). Learners' diagnoses or suspected cases of SEN often are not disclosed during the enrollment process so that their children are not refused admittance to private schools or labeled by teachers (Jia et al., 2022; Li & Li, 2020). Learners' unreported learning difficulties and special educational/behavior needs often become apparent after a child has gained admittance to school.

Additionally, this cultural stigma impacts the instruction in the classroom. Parental refusal to seek a diagnosis for suspected SEN or disclose diagnoses with the school creates undue pressure on the teacher and the school. Teachers feel pressured by parents and the school

to provide the same instruction for all students and to keep academics “equal,” regardless of the challenges a child with SEN or learning differences might encounter in a regular classroom. The collective attitude in China that all students should be treated equally has even influenced some of the participants who felt that offering accommodations to a student with SEN was “unfair.” However, Maria noted that some learners do “need extra support.” She noted that the lack of accommodations is what is “not fair. And that is not inclusion. Because I am trying to pressure” the students with learning differences to be like every other student. The societal expectation of having every child learn equally without accommodations or additional support unduly burdens students with SEN who often struggle through classes. The expectation of equality creates a dissonance in teachers between their previous experiences and the surrounding cultural environment in Chinese private schools. The pressure often leads to frustration and sometimes apathy, as evidenced by the participants’ comments. One participant revealed his frustration with the culture by stating,

Even though there might be small things, like giving a different reading or doing the group or different small techniques, [that] you can do to differentiate with just that student to try to help them, we kind of ignore it because if the parents are unwilling to help or unwilling to accept it then why should we do anything?

In describing the focus the school should have for allowing accommodations in academic content and requirements for students with SEN, one participant commented that the school is “not set up for special education students. When the special education student comes along, they don’t fit in with the program here and suck up so much of the teachers’ time and resources.” While statements like this were uncommon throughout the study, their presence reveals a subtle prejudice against students with SEN included in regular classes. The continued marginalization

of learners with SEN increases the problem of ineffective inclusive education and disheartens teachers who attempt to change the status quo.

**Need for Clearer School Policies.** One indication of the cultural stigma around SEN can be seen in the fact that the school refuses to publicly acknowledge that students with SEN are enrolled. The school needs to address the presence of diagnosed and undiagnosed students with SEN in the classroom and support students and teachers. Robert remarked, “The need comes from what the students need. And our students have needs that we’re not fully acknowledging. Yeah, I feel like there is a calling there to do more.” Student needs are not being met, and teachers are increasingly frustrated by the inclusion of SEN students without support from the overall educational system.

In addition, the study’s findings make clear that there is a lack of clarity from school administration and leadership regarding whether teachers should make accommodations in their lesson planning and should implement fully differentiated instruction beyond simple measures like student grouping and providing student choice for assignment topics and summative projects. As a result, teachers feel hesitant and discouraged from fully implementing a systematic program that provides individualized instruction for students with SEN. As Maria observed,

First of all, I think the school must do a huge research about our community and about what are the special needs that we have because I feel that we have a lot of kids with special needs in our classrooms and we are trying to have like everybody with the same. I know that we are doing differentiation and some stuff, but at the end all the assessments and everything are all the same.”

There is an obvious need for accommodations like extended testing time, oral testing, modified homework and summative assignments, flexible seating, differentiated reading levels for texts,

and pull-out sessions for academic help. However, without clear policies, teachers feel uncertain about the extent to which they should adopt such strategies in their classes, or even if they are allowed to utilize them at all. The lack of these types of accommodations continues to impede student progress. “It’s just doing a disservice to them [students] because they’re not learning and they’re getting frustrated. It’s a disservice to their classmates because they, you know, get squirrely and off-topic. And who wouldn’t, honestly?” said Deborah when speaking about school policy. Generally, a clear policy is needed to provide guidance and training on the provision of differentiated instruction and accommodations and modifications allowed in the classroom for students with SEN.

Current school policy lacks a support system for learners with SEN. Consequently, most families with children with SEN eventually seem to choose to withdraw their children from school when the student cannot adapt to the educational environment. Greg noted the differences in school policy when he shared how the international division/track in which he teaches planned to handle a young student with SEN who was struggling. “They’re going to kick the kid out, but the Chinese track, they can’t do that. And so [the Chinese track] is figuring out ways to work with it.” These incidents are typical. With unclear implementation of the country’s Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC), schools often follow their own interpretation of the LRC legislation (An et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2021). Policies at the school level need to be implemented and clarified.

Participants in this study recognized that the school where they taught was slowly adjusting for students with SEN, perhaps more so in the elementary division, where they have hired an additional school counselor to work with struggling students and to support the students’ social-emotional needs. However, the provision of differentiated instruction in the classroom

must be supported by school administrators who put into place structures and policies that make it clear that there is an expectation for teachers to provide differentiated lessons, assignments, and even summative exams in all classes in the school. Schools need to standardize inclusive curricula and inclusive practices so that all teachers are differentiating equally and consistently (Alduais & Deng, 2022b).

Provincial and national policies need to be refined. Unless the country's educational policy is changed so that schools consistently recognize students with SEN and are legally held responsible for educating all students that they admit, schools will continue to withhold services and support for students with SEN (Yuan et al., 2022). Ultimately, the cultural environment can and does impact student achievement (Qu, 2022c) and teacher efficacy (Opoku et al., 2021a, 2021b; Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). Therefore, changes in provincial and national school policies are essential. Clear school policies for differentiated instruction and accommodation and coherent national policies that consistently provide for learners with SEN in regular classes would form the foundation for a truly inclusive education system.

**Teacher Self-Efficacy.** The findings in this study show a direct connection between the preparation and support teachers receive in the area of inclusive education and their self-efficacy. Participants were quite open about the challenges they faced in providing differentiated instruction in their classrooms. Teachers need more time to prepare lessons. They advocated for smaller-sized classes and more frequent supervision and feedback from the administration and department leaders. The continued commitment of a number of the participants to implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms without systematic support is evidence of their resilience and their desire to assist struggling students. In spite of all the challenges, participants offered examples of creative and innovative differentiated lessons they were using in their

classes. The teachers shared success stories of students who had prospered after receiving some form of differentiated instruction and individual attention from the teacher, such as a student with selective mutism and autism who had worked with peers this year to complete a video presentation for a class assignment by offering to be the video editor and artistic designer. Teachers also spoke about the learning and growth they themselves had gained from working within the system while trying to meet students' needs. The determination to overcome constraints indicated the teachers' commitment to increasing the learning of each child under their care.

Despite attempts by the school to offer training for teachers in differentiated instruction, teachers reported feeling unprepared for inclusive education and ill-equipped. Past teacher training was considered too general and too simplistic to effectively prepare the teachers to implement differentiated lessons that could meet the needs of the current students. All participants mentioned needing more support with effective strategies for differentiated instruction to help students with SEN in their regular classrooms. The lack of professional support staff, lack of resources, and insufficient training made the teachers feel unprepared for the classroom. Deborah called the lack of training "a disservice to the teachers" and then clarified her comment by saying,

Because you know, they [teachers] aren't necessarily having the information or the support of the resources that they need to reach those kids. And a lot of it is just they need targeted acquisition practice and instruction, and we don't currently have an infrastructure.

Creating lessons and providing instruction is more challenging when teachers have not been adequately trained or mentored in differentiated instruction. Learning opportunities exist for schools to increase professional development for in-service teachers.

Teachers are overcoming what they perceive as minimal training with teacher-initiated learning and collaboration. Teachers are finding resources for themselves and discovering ways to better prepare for inclusive teaching. Recognizing the essential need for information and strategies to help students, teachers meet in grade-level teams, *ad-hoc* discussions, and “organic” department meetings to seek help from colleagues. One participant explained that she seeks help from her daughter living in another country because her daughter has a special education degree. Teachers are seeking answers and attempting to prepare lessons and curricula that meet student needs, even without an official school policy on differentiated instruction. These teachers spoke of their attempts to encourage their colleagues to also collaborate and work together to find solutions, rather than just ignoring the various needs of the students.

Teacher self-efficacy is essential for successful inclusion (Savolainen et al., 2020) and indicates a strong prediction of teacher behavior in providing differentiated instruction (Wilson et al., 2016). Increased self-efficacy in teachers benefits many facets of the educational system, including student progress, the classroom environment, and pedagogy (Chao et al., 2017; Nichols et al., 2020; Park et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2022; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). The actions of the participants to seek out help from colleagues and outside sources shows their efforts to increase their self-efficacy. Prior positive experiences with students with SEN and support staff in their home countries increased participants’ perceptions of students with SEN. These interactions and practical experiences increased self-efficacy in teachers for inclusive education.

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**



The following section includes discussions of the implications for policy and practice to improve expatriate teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms at Chinese private schools. The recommendations are based on the findings from the data collected. The implications for policy found in this section offer recommendations for cultural awareness of SEN and policy changes for K-12 schools. Implications for practice include clarification of acceptable classroom academic accommodations and modifications, revamped in-service teacher professional development, and increased peer collaboration and mentoring.

### ***Implications for Policy***

The implications for policy in this section focus on the need for greater cultural awareness and acceptance of SEN and the need for policy changes in K-12 schools regarding inclusive education. This study's findings agree with previous research that the cultural stigma toward SEN has hindered acceptance and adoption of inclusive education in China (Li et al., 2022; Schalock et al., 2018). This study's findings support a need for greater cultural awareness to improve the general perception of students with SEN in the regular classroom environment (Alduais & Deng, 2022a), especially in Chinese private schools. Parents need awareness of ways they can support their children with SEN (Alduais & Deng, 2022b; Li et al., 2022) and a willingness to seek and acknowledge diagnoses of learning disabilities and SEN.

In the Chinese school system, the argument continues over whether students with SEN should attend special education schools or remain in regular classes (Alduais & Deng, 2022a). The passage and revision of the Chinese inclusive education policy, Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC), has provided policies for teachers in regular classrooms to adjust for students with SEN when they are enrolled in regular schools (Xu & Cooper, 2020). Laws, policies, and regulations for inclusive education do exist; however, they need to be accurately implemented

(Alduais & Deng, 2022b). With LRC a legal initiative for Chinese schools, schools should implement and follow the policy (Li & Li, 2020; Lu et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2018). Guidelines require that all schools with more than five students with disabilities or SEN enrolled should develop resource rooms (An et al., 2018; Faragher et al., 2021) and provide support for students with SEN in regular classrooms. However, few schools have followed those guidelines (Xie et al., 2021), nor have all private schools been required to implement these policies.

The lack of implementation is evident at the local level, the provincial level, and the national level (Lu et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022). Policy changes are essential. Systematic support for inclusive education in K-12 schools and acknowledgment of the presence of students with SEN enrolled in their programs must occur (An et al., 2018). Policymakers and educational administrators need to understand the importance of inclusive education and pedagogical strategies like differentiated instruction and accommodations for students with SEN in inclusive classrooms (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2021). Supporting regular classroom teachers would change the learning environment and ultimately benefit all students and teachers.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Analysis of the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers teaching students with SEN in regular classes has revealed some important implications for practice. The first implication for practice derived from the findings is that redesigning in-service teacher professional development could more adequately prepare teachers. Numerous studies have emphasized the need for improved in-service teacher training for inclusive teaching (Alduais & Deng, 2022b; Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Qu, 2021; Schalock et al., 2018; Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020; Wang & Zhang, 2021; Zhang, 2022). This study found that in-service training might be more beneficial to teachers if the content targeted practical strategies and resources for teachers

in differentiated instruction. Training teachers with strategies to educate SEN students in the regular classroom using best practice differentiation methodologies and approaches can greatly enhance the quality of instruction and the general classroom environment (Boroson, 2017).

Training in differentiated instruction should be consistent, and the administration should establish follow up mechanisms that actually monitor teachers' practices to ensure implementation. Teachers' training should be differentiated to meet the needs of a large variety of staff with varying levels of experience.

In general, educators in China have appeared to be unfamiliar with the concepts of differentiated instruction and other evidence-based practices for inclusive education (An et al., 2018). Teachers who experience inadequate training in providing inclusive education may sometimes feel incompetent and inadequate when faced with the challenge of teaching students with SEN in the regular classroom (Carew et al., 2019; Subban et al., 2021). Feelings of inadequacy sometimes lead to low confidence levels and a hesitancy to attempt differentiated instruction. Lack of training compounds feelings of incompetence and may lower teacher self-efficacy when educators are faced with the challenge of providing adequate instruction for students with SEN. Low self-efficacy affects instructional choices and general teacher perceptions of students with SEN (Davies et al., 2018; Monteiro et al., 2019; Park et al., 2016; Werner et al., 2021). Research has shown that effective, ongoing training for in-service teachers increases teacher efficacy (Chao et al., 2018; Sokal & Sharma, 2017; Xie et al., 2021). Therefore, improved in-service professional development may increase teacher efficacy for inclusive education.

An additional implication of this study is the need for increased peer collaboration and peer mentoring. Schools need to provide teachers with consistent, regular time set aside

specifically for teacher collaboration to facilitate the sharing of strategies and management plans for the students in their classrooms. For the participants, teacher collaboration and experience seemed to be the most important influences in increasing self-efficacy and behavior for differentiating lessons and assignments. Meeting with current grade-level teachers to discuss strategies and behavior management for the students in their classrooms increased participants' self-efficacy for inclusive education. Discussions should occur interdepartmentally to facilitate best practices in all aspects of differentiation. Experienced teachers should model effective methods and techniques for colleagues and be available to coach novice and younger teachers. Coaching and peer training have proved effective strategies for improving teachers' use of evidence-based instructional activities for inclusion (Gibbs & McKay, 2021; Wilson et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2022). Teachers are invariably willing to share ideas. In her interview, Maria said, "One thing that I will love to do if I have the opportunity is try to show other teachers some resources and some strategies." Schools could look for ways to develop professional learning communities to foster discussion and collaboration. Ultimately, improved pedagogy and instruction will benefit students with SEN who may be currently struggling in classrooms (Monteiro et al., 2019).

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This section discusses the theoretical and empirical implications related to this research study. The theoretical implications used Ajzen's (1991, 2020) theory of planned behavior (TPB). TPB examined an individual's preconceptions and beliefs about a topic and/or planned behavior, the subjective or societal norms that influence the individual's perceptions, and the level of control the individual might feel for the planned behavior. The empirical implications are drawn

from the participants' experiences and this study's findings. This study's themes were derived from the participants' experiences and corroborated the findings in previous studies in the field.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The study's findings add to the emerging literature on Ajzen's (1991, 2020) theory of planned behavior and inclusive education (Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019; Opoku et al., 2021a, 2021b; Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). The descriptions of in-service expatriate teachers' experiences with the surrounding subjective norms have theoretical implications. While most teachers generally expressed positive perspectives of inclusive education and indicated a desire to provide differentiated instruction, the impact of the surrounding culture and the ongoing stigma attached to SEN in the country may impact teachers' self-efficacy and eventually influence teacher intentions, attitudes, and practice for inclusive education (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). This study's findings match previous studies that found internal and external subjective norms influence teacher perceptions of inclusive education and teacher self-efficacy (Chao et al., 2017; Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Monteiro et al., 2019; Qu, 2019; Wang et al., 2017).

### ***Empirical Implications***

In recent years, there has been an increased focus in the literature on the importance of using differentiated instruction in the classroom to improve the educational experience for students of SEN (Scarparolo & Subban, 2020; Whitley et al., 2019). This research study aimed to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers teaching students with SEN in regular classes. Using differentiated instruction, teachers purposefully design lessons that suit the learning differences of the individual students in the class (Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Scarparolo & Subban, 2021; Strogilos, 2018). Commonly used examples of differentiation include student grouping, student choice, and student autonomy in learning (Tomlinson, 2014). This study found

that expatriate teachers teaching students with SEN in China used predominately basic types of differentiated instruction in their courses, such as student grouping and student choice for assignments. They have not yet implemented more specific and personalized accommodations for learners with SEN, such as extended test time, leveled reading assignments, or individualized assessments of learning. Research indicates that individualized accommodations allow students with SEN to learn at a pace that suits their acquisition of knowledge (Gibbs & McKay, 2021) and provide academic gains not always supported by standardized instruction and assessment (Gaitas & Martins, 2017).

**Teacher Perceptions.** Current literature has also examined the importance of the relationship between teacher perception of SEN and self-efficacy in developing a classroom environment that accepts students with SEN (Monteiro et al., 2019; Mu, 2019; Xie et al., 2021). Cross-cultural research has found that attitudes can be influenced by the surrounding cultural norms where the teachers work (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). This study fills a gap in the literature by exploring the Asian perspective of students with SEN in light of expatriate teachers who reside and teach in the country. The thematic findings of the study indicated that expatriate teachers held generally positive perspectives of learners with SEN and a deep concern for these students to succeed academically, even when they felt unprepared and unqualified to implement differentiated instruction into their instruction. These findings are consistent with current literature examining teacher perceptions of SEN and inclusive education.

**Cultural Environment.** Unsupportive school culture can lower self-efficacy for inclusive education (Opoku et al., 2021b). Since local values and the surrounding culture's view and acceptance of inclusion can determine the effectiveness of inclusive policies (Opoku et al., 2021a; Strogilos, 2018; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020), this study sought to describe the

participants' perceptions of their experiences with inclusive education in their home countries and in China. The cultural environment in China still shows a hesitancy to embrace inclusive education (Huang et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2022; Mu, 2021a; Xie et al., 2022). However, this cultural disregard for SEN created a dissonance in participants, many of whom had experienced effective inclusive education in former schools in their home countries. While previous studies have examined the cultural environment surrounding the Chinese acceptance of inclusion and the remaining stigma in receiving a diagnosis of SEN, little research has described the clash of cultures expatriates often feel while teaching in a country unlike their own. This study fills a gap in the literature by describing the participants' experiences. Additionally, having been conducted in English, this study is unique in that very few international studies have been conducted in English in mainland China to describe the country's implementation of inclusive education (Fragher et al., 2021; Han & Cumming, 2022) making it accessible to a wider global audience.

**Teacher Self-Efficacy.** The study's findings confirmed that teachers' attitudes (Desombre et al., 2019; Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019; Nichols et al., 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020) and societal and cultural norms (Opoku et al., 2021a; Strogilos, 2018; Van Steen & Wilson, 2020) can influence teacher self-efficacy for providing inclusive education in Chinese private school classrooms. Unclear school policies and lack of administrative oversight resulted in a negative experience for the participants and minimal differentiated instruction. Feelings of inadequacy and lack of preparation caused teachers to doubt their ability to differentiate instruction effectively. Teachers struggled to develop self-efficacy for implementing differentiated lessons and assignments for individual students with SEN. The findings of the factors that could lead to lowered teachers' self-efficacy for inclusive education are congruent

with the current literature (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021; Desombre et al., 2019; Monteiro et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2022).

A supportive environment can create a higher sense of self-efficacy for teachers in inclusive classrooms (Opoku et al., 2021b). The connections among teacher training, peer collaboration, and increased self-efficacy align with other studies (Li & Ruppap, 2021) and are confirmed in this study. The study's findings suggest that increased peer collaboration and peer-to-peer mentoring can increase teacher self-efficacy for inclusive education. The participants' experiences corroborated previous literature that had examined influences that increased teacher self-efficacy for providing differentiated instruction (Lozano et al., 2021; Subban et al., 2021; Werner et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2022).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This hermeneutic phenomenological study described the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. The following section will list the limitations of this study, which were aspects of the study that were outside of the study's control (Patton, 2015). The delimitations of this study to limit the criterion of the participants and the boundaries of the study will also be discussed as these decisions were made by the researcher.

#### ***Limitations***

This study's limitations should be acknowledged. First, there were only 12 participants, which is a relatively small sample of expatriate teachers in mainland China. This study occurred at a single K-12 school in one urban city in mainland China due to finding suitable participants easily. Secondly, many factors and variables, such as the teachers' prior experiences and



education level, can influence teacher self-efficacy for differentiated instruction in inclusive environments. The participant experience and knowledge variables were outside of the study's control. All participation was voluntary, which could mean that participants who held definitive views on the research topic and had available time for participating were more likely to volunteer.

### ***Delimitations***

The most significant delimitation for the study was that participants were expatriate teachers who held passports other than those from the People's Republic of China. This delimitation was so that the study could examine the impact of cultural norms on teacher efficacy; therefore, participants were limited to expatriate teachers who were regular classroom teachers employed in mainland Chinese private schools not offering special education classes for students with SEN. Participants were limited to English-speaking teachers because of the researcher's language abilities. The participation of Chinese-speaking teachers might have given more variety of responses. Finally, the choice of hermeneutic phenomenology over transcendental phenomenology was due to the researcher's prior experience with inclusive education and students with SEN.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In light of the thematic findings of this study, this section recommends potential future research for administrators and researchers who may wish to develop this topic. Due to the small sample size, further research on expatriate teachers working in Chinese schools in other cities would be beneficial. Research that includes more teachers and additional locations would be advisable to generate more representative findings. The examination of school systems in more rural areas and smaller cities is needed to gather more comprehensive data. Quantitative studies

using measurable surveys such as the *Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices* scale (Park et al., 2016) would generate data with more participants. Most of the participants in this study were experienced teachers who had taught for more than five years and lived in China for several years. I recommend further qualitative studies to describe the experiences of more teachers, perhaps in their first or second year of teaching in mainland China, to broaden the perspective of the experiences of expatriate teachers. Further research, if language ability allowed, could include Chinese-speaking teachers from the Chinese division of the school to compare their experiences and perceptions with the experiences of the expatriate teachers. Examining the attitudes of administrators, supervising teachers, and school management would also generate research on school-wide impressions of SEN and inclusive education.

Another recommendation for future research is to conduct a more systematic examination of the issues that potentially increase and decrease teacher self-efficacy for inclusive education. Further qualitative research could examine how students' academic and social needs change and how teachers adapt to these changes. Additional research could describe how adjustments in school support can influence teacher efficacy and the overall environment for inclusive education. Continued examination of these issues will lead to a greater understanding of school improvements needed to develop learning environments that meet all students' needs.

A final recommendation is to research the educational experiences of students with SEN and their parents' experiences with the Chinese system. A qualitative study of these stakeholders would allow students and parents to describe their experiences of different schooling environments. A comparison between the attitudes towards and experiences of SEN in the classroom between expatriate learners and their parents and Chinese passport holders and their parents could provide valuable insights into cultural obstacles to inclusive education. Participants

could be students with SEN who are currently enrolled or alums who previously studied at schools that did not provide LRC or special education support. What are these learners' experiences with education in China? As Chinese society embraces SEN more, discovering the changing perspectives of children and adults with special education needs is important. Qualitative studies allowing parents/caregivers and students to voice their perspectives and experiences could ultimately benefit the educational system as researchers gain insight into what students actually experienced during their years at school. Learning from the students and parents can create a partnership with the school and teachers which could result in enhanced educational and support practices in areas like classroom activities, potential curriculum, and related policies.

### **Conclusion**

This hermeneutic phenomenological research study described the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers in providing differentiated instruction to students with SEN in Chinese private school classrooms. Using Ajzen's (1991, 2020) theory of planned behavior as a theoretical framework, this study examined the impact perception and cultural norms had on self-efficacy and planned behavior for inclusive education. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, and 12 expatriate teachers participated. Data collection involved interviews, teacher artifacts, and focus groups in providing triangulation of the results. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) methods of coding and by grouping data into themes and commonalities that emerged from the participants' responses. The findings revealed seven themes. Analysis of the themes revealed three significant interpretations: the cultural dissonance created by subjective norms, a need for clearer school policies, and increased teacher self-efficacy for providing differentiated instruction in an inclusive classroom. Further research is

suggested to discover the experiences of a more diverse group of educators, administrators, parents, and learners with SEN.

The days of excluding people with educational or social differences are quickly fading. The latest pedagogical learning theories encourage differentiated instruction to meet individual student learning needs. Best practices for inclusive classrooms use varied instructional strategies for students' learning abilities, such as student grouping, student choice, and individualized instruction. While current Chinese educational law shows an increased desire for inclusivity and acceptance of SEN, many improvements are still needed before effective inclusion is achieved. In China, the societal reluctance to diagnose or recognize SEN continues to marginalize students and deprive learners of quality educational environments. Educational and school policies must be adjusted to accept that students with SEN, diagnosed and undiagnosed, will most likely increase in number in the coming years. Administrators and educators must adapt and recognize the continual need for a conducive learning environment for students with SEN, and all students, in Chinese classrooms. Teachers, parents, and specialists must collaborate to develop comprehensive plans that develop individualized learning that suits the needs of each child. With proper training in pedagogy, increased school support, and more peer collaboration, teachers can increase self-efficacy and show greater flexibility and confidence in adapting curriculum and teaching lessons that benefit and support student learning. Hopefully, more classrooms and school systems will adopt policies to boost teacher self-efficacy and training so that more students with SEN will be helped.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval Letter

#### LIBERTY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 13, 2022

Sharon Ma  
[REDACTED]

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-453 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF IN-SERVICE EXPATRIATE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN CHINESE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Dear Sharon Ma, [REDACTED]

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:  
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

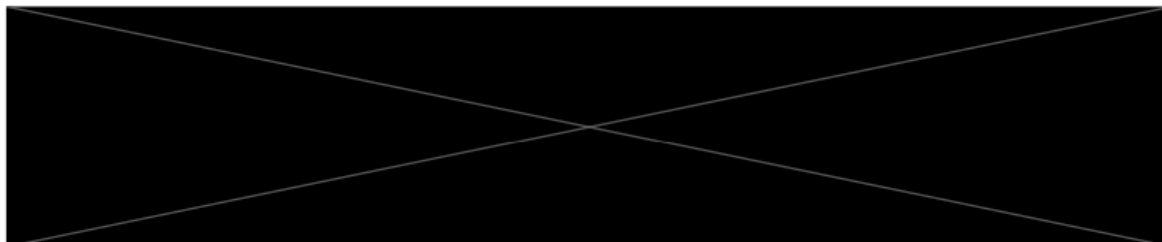
Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix B

## Site Permission Approval Letter



November 3, 2022

Sharon Ma  
Doctoral Candidate  
Liberty University

Dear Sharon Ma:

After a careful review of your research proposal entitled *A Phenomenological Study of In-Service Expatriate Teachers' Experiences with Inclusive Education in Chinese Private Schools*, [REDACTED] has decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [REDACTED].

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

We will provide our membership list to Sharon Ma, and Sharon Ma may use the list to contact our members to invite them to participate in her research study.

We grant permission for Sharon Ma to contact expatriate teachers to invite them to participate in her research study provided that the school and the participants will only be identified by pseudonyms in anything written or presented about what comes from the research.

Sincerely,



## Appendix C

### Recruitment Email

Dear [Name]:

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

To participate, you must fit the following requirements:

- Hold a passport other than from the People's Republic of China.
- Be an in-service teacher. For this study, in-service will mean participants who are currently teaching or who have been employed within the last school year at a Chinese private school.
- Teach in an international division of a private school in mainland China.
- Speak English proficiently enough to conduct an interview and participate in a focus group.

What will you be asked to do?

- Provide a physical or digital artifact of lesson plans or assignment sheets that shows your intent to offer differentiated instruction. This should take no longer than 10 minutes.
- Participate in a 45-60 minute individual interview and a 45-minute focus group. Both will be audio- and video-recorded. All procedures will be virtual.
- Check the transcript of your interview to ensure that I have represented your experiences accurately.

To participate, please click here to complete a screening survey:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/KZBQNBC>

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me before the start of presenting your artifact.

Sincerely,

Sharon Ann Ma

Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

WeChat ID [redacted]

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Screening

1. Do you hold a passport other than from the People's Republic of China? If so, what is your passport?
2. Are you an in-service teacher (you are currently teaching or have been employed within the last school year at a private school in mainland China)?
3. Do you teach in an international division of a private school in mainland China?
4. Do you speak English proficiently enough to conduct an interview and participate in a focus group?
5. What is your name?
6. What division/grade level do you teach?
7. What subject do you teach?
8. How many years have you been teaching?
9. Please provide contact information where you can be contacted such as your email or WeChat ID.

Below is the link to the Survey Monkey  
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/KZBQNBC>

## Appendix E

### Consent Form for Participants

**Title of the Project:** A Phenomenological Study of In-Service Expatriate Teachers' Experiences with Inclusive Education in Chinese Private Schools

**Principal Investigator:** Sharon Ma, Doctoral Candidate for a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, United States

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be over 18 years and must be an expatriate teacher, meaning that you hold a passport other than from the People's Republic of China. You should be an in-service teacher or in-service assistant teacher in an English international division of an urban private school in mainland China. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The study aims to describe the experiences of in-service expatriate teachers who provide differentiated instruction for students with special educational needs in regular classrooms at mainland Chinese private schools. This study intends to allow teachers to describe the successes and challenges of differentiating course material for students of mixed ability. Teachers will be asked to reflect on how their experience impacts their behavior in providing differentiated instruction.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Provide a physical or digital artifact of lesson plans or assignment sheets that shows your intent to offer differentiated instruction in your course. This will take about 10 minutes to complete.
2. Participate in a 45-60 minute individual interview. This will be audio- and video-recorded. This will be virtual.
3. Participate in a 45-minute focus group. This will be audio- and video-recorded. This will be virtual.
4. Check the transcript of your interview to ensure that I have represented your experiences accurately.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect from participating in this study include increased professional development for teachers and collaboration between teachers who encounter students with SEN in their regular classrooms. Hopefully, the information from this study will encourage teachers to create relationships and cooperation to support each other's teaching by training and supporting teachers in providing differentiated instruction.

Benefits to society include benefits for students with SEN in Chinese schools and will also train and support participating teachers in providing differentiated instruction.

#### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject or school. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer, and hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet. While data may be used in future presentations, no personal information will be shared. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and hard-copies will be shredded.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and research committee will have access to these recordings.
- Please note that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. Members of the focus group will be discouraged from sharing information. Still, participation in a focus group may result in others sharing what was discussed with persons outside the group.

#### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or [*school name redacted*]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Sharon Ann Ma. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at Wechat ID [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, [redacted] at [redacted].

### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

### Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

## Appendix F

### Interview Questions

The following questions were used for interview questions.

1. How has your school year been so far? Icebreaker Q
2. Describe your educational background and general experience as a teacher in China.  
CRQ
3. Describe a time you needed to change a lesson because students were not comprehending the material. How did you feel, think, or react to doing this? SQ1
4. Describe times when you felt comfortable instructing students with special educational needs (SEN) in your classes at this school. SQ1
5. Describe any challenges you have faced providing differentiated instruction to students with SEN in your classroom at this school. SQ1
6. How would you describe the importance of inclusive education in your teaching practice?  
SQ1
7. How have prior personal experiences influenced how you perceive children with SEN in your classroom? SQ2
8. Describe professional or educational experiences that you have had that prepared you to work with children with SEN in your classroom. SQ2
9. How would you describe the school-wide expectations for teachers working with children with SEN? SQ2
10. How do you collaborate with your department and grade-level colleagues to work with students with SEN? SQ2



11. You were to provide a lesson plan or assignment sheet for a lesson you feel offered differentiated instruction for the students in your class. Please describe your artifact and how you used it for your course. SQ3
12. Describe any changes you might make to the lesson or assignment if you were to use it again. SQ3
13. Describe another situation in your class when you have used differentiated instruction or accommodation in your classroom. SQ3
14. What has kept you from using the strategies in instances when you have not used differentiated instruction or accommodation for your student(s)? SQ3
15. What would make you feel more confident in using instructional practices or differentiation strategies when working with students with SEN in your classes? SQ3
16. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with students with SEN students that we have not discussed? CRQ

## Appendix G

### Focus Group Questions

Questions for the semi-structured focus groups were developed from the initial coding and categorizing of the artifact reviews and the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). I asked the following questions to facilitate active discussion among the members.

1. Please introduce yourself, your teaching position, and your background in teaching.

Icebreaker Question

2. After your individual interview for this study, what thoughts about the topic and the responses you provided occurred to you? CRQ
3. Describe what focus the school should have on accommodating students with SEN or differentiating instruction for students with SEN. SQ1
4. How does inclusive education and students with SEN in China compare with inclusive education and students with SEN in your home country or where you studied teacher education? SQ2
5. Describe any training the school has provided for the teachers in differentiated instruction and please describe the effectiveness of that training on your practice of differentiated instruction. SQ3
6. Each of you provided a sample lesson for differentiation and accommodation during your interview. Please describe your lesson and the intent behind the adaptation of the lesson to the other participants. SQ3

Follow-up question: Please respond with comments or questions to the other members of the focus group's description of their intent to adjust class instruction for students with SEN. SQ3

7. From our discussion today, what has encouraged you to provide support and accommodation for students with SEN in your classrooms? SQ3