Abstract
The purpose of the research in this mixed method, within-group, quasi-experimental study was to investigate the impact that the personalized form of professional development available through the use of learning contracts had on teacher efficacy. The study also examined how teacher efficacy translated into the implementation of a variety of differentiated instructional strategies targeted to provide academic challenge to gifted students clustered within general education classrooms for gifted services. The participants, Norfolk Public Schools Title I novice gifted cluster teachers in grades 1-5, self-selected innovative instructional strategies for inclusion on their personalized learning contracts. The Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale provided a baseline and a postintervention measure of teacher efficacy. The William and Mary Classroom Observation Scales Revised (Part 2) was used to provide a baseline measure of instructional practices and to record postintervention observations of the implementation of various differentiated strategies. The overall $t$ test analyses for teacher efficacy were not quantitatively significant; however, significant increases in teacher efficacy were shown for seven participating teachers. Findings regarding the overall implementation of the self-selected differentiated strategies on the learning contracts reflected a significant increase in general and differentiated teaching behaviors. $T$ test analyses of overall and individual pre- and postintervention observation ratings revealed an increased manifestation of differentiated teaching behaviors that accommodated for students’ academic differences and provided more opportunities for problem solving, independent research, and creative thinking. The culminating face-to-face interviews
and teachers’ entries in reflective journals provided qualitative data that refined the quantitative results and supported the use of the learning contract as an effective means of job-embedded, relevant professional development. Concurring with the literature on highly efficacious teachers, participants in this study expressed personal enthusiasm for working within the framework of the learning contract to engage in self-directed learning activities that increased their capacity to tailor instruction for their gifted learners.