TEACHER COGNITION AND PRACTICES IN A LOW-SES SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY OF FOUR TEACHERS

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Teacher Cognition and Practices in a Low-SES School: A Case Study of Four Teachers

Synopsis:

This study examined the cognition and practices of four teachers in low–SES schools. The study explored how the teachers' schooling, professional coursework, classroom practices, and contextual factors affected their teaching. The conceptual framework for the study came from Borg's (2003) representation of cognition for language teachers. The findings showed the teachers' cognition was influenced by schooling, classroom practices, and contextual factors, but not professional coursework.

TEACHER COGNITION:

FOUR CASE STUDIES OF TEACHERS IN LOW-SES SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT/SYNOPSIS

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This qualitative study examined the cognition and practices of four teachers teaching in low –SES schools. The four case studies were comprised of three elementary teachers and one middle school teachers in the state of Columbia*.   The study explored how the teachers' schooling, professional coursework, classroom practices, and contextual factors affected their teaching practices. The conceptual framework for the study came from Borg's (2003) representation of teacher cognition for language teachers.

Data were triangulated and collected from interviews, documents, and classroom observations. The four teachers were interviewed three times each. The documents collected were professional correspondence, pertinent papers, homework, or other artifacts that demonstrated the teachers' cognition.

The findings of the study showed the teachers' cognition was primarily influenced by schooling, classroom practices, and contextual factors, but not professional coursework. The findings also suggest that the teachers in the study found relationships with students and a student reflexive curriculum to be paramount in their classroom practice in a low-SES school. In addition, three of the teachers all regarded the contextual factor of equity in their schools to be of paramount importance in their cognition of teaching.

*pseudonyms

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, 45% of all children under the age of 18 come from low-income families and that number is expected to rise in the next decade. (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2014) Not only for children in poverty, but for all children, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates that students be assessed on their learning in school, regardless of the quality of their schools, their background, their race, their home life, the quality of their teachers, or any other variable that would influence academic achievement. The data they receive on their state tests will produce a composite score of a school's academic progress. If that school does not perform to standard, the school administration has the responsibility to examine the data and make instructional decisions, which range from minimal to extreme measures.

In the current high-stakes testing climate, standardized test scores weigh heavily on the futures of schools. Lawmakers, the public, and school professionals all have a stake in keeping abreast of published test scores. Not only do high performing schools reap the benefits of the current system, but underperforming schools have a variety of costly reform measures from which to choose. Not all underperforming schools are high-poverty schools, but many high-poverty schools are underperforming. Empirical research reveals that children from poverty do come less equipped and less prepared on some academic measures than comparison groups from middle and upper class homes (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Sirin; 2005; White, 1982). Exemplary schools across the United States have shown that certain practices are successful with low socioeconomic (SES) students. The research also shows that it is all too easy for educators to adopt a perception that students from low-SES homes are less able to perform than their affluent peers. It is not surprising then,

that the real issue is how these students are perceived in school and how their teachers think about their abilities that make all the difference in the classroom.

The focus of this study was to examine teachers' beliefs and thoughts and how those factors impacted instructional vision and practice. This study sought to reveal patterns in teacher cognition and teacher practices in two low-SES schools. For it is teachers' cognition, or their thoughts and beliefs, that influence their instructional practices (Borg, 2003). This study further sought to explore patterns that existed between cognition and practice in two low-SES schools.

Literature in the field overwhelmingly contends that teachers' experience as learners largely dictates their cognition and instructional vision as practitioners in the future (Borg, 2003; Freeman, 1992; Holt Reynolds, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Nespor, 1987; Numrich, 1996). That would be an asset to the profession if so many learning experiences were not detrimental. Lortie (1975) called this the "apprenticeship of observation" (p. 61) where teacher cognition was shaped early in life, unbeknownst to the learner. Teachers all have the common experience of school and bring those experiences with them to their careers. Of course, cognition might change when new evidence suggests that prior impressions might be false. Changing patterns of cognition are rarer than might be expected (Nisbett and Ross, 1980), but are still possible (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Freeman, 1996).

Teacher cognition is inextricably linked to student learning. The literature supports the theory that the patterns in teacher cognition are formed long before teachers enter their pre-service training or their first classrooms (Freeman, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Holt Reynolds, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Numrich, 1996). With this basis, we accepted as fact that teachers use their long-held beliefs and thinking patterns to create instructional visions. What they think, believe and understand about education affects their instructional vision. Expanding that further, teachers often already have a comfortable set of beliefs about schools and could be

unaware of the incongruence in their practice, or even more detrimental, be resistant to growth through professional development. In contrast, research suggests that when the teachers in a school are learning, student learning increases (Fahey & Glickman, 2012). If teachers can identify patterns in cognition and practice, instruction is strengthened and has a positive effect on student learning. Reflection on one's own cognition gives depth to one's work as an educator. Thus, teacher cognition in a low-SES school is of critical importance because of the myriad issues inherent in the teacher's assignment. An educator's private thoughts about teaching, learning, and children's potential from a low-SES household impact student achievement. This study sought to understand patterns that exist between teacher cognition and practices of four teachers in two low-SES schools.   The following discussion defines terms that are central to this study. The central object of the study remains to be teacher cognition, with low-SES as a peripheral influence.

Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition resides inside the mind of an educator. The literature suggests that teachers' beliefs are formed long before they enter their pre-service training or set foot in a classroom. Teacher cognition is comprised of knowledge, beliefs and thoughts, but cognition also includes a subtler way, the patterns that developed over time that support the current thinking (Borg, 2003; Freeman, 1992; Holt Reynolds, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Nespor 1987; Numrich, 1966). One way, but not the only way that teacher cognition is developed is called the "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975). This theory considers all the personal life experiences of a teacher and their influence on the present.

Lortie's (1975) research examines one way teacher cognition develops--from personal experiences. In other words, the vast experiences that teachers have as learners permanently shape their cognition as professionals (Borg, 2003; Freeman, 1992; Holt Reynolds, 1992; Lortie,

1975; Nisbett and Ross, 1980, Nespor, 1987; Numrich, 1996). This shaping evolves into patterns of thinking called cognition. However, development of teacher cognition also includes professional coursework, classroom practice (clinical practices) and contextual factors (Borg, 2003). Therefore, this study focused on teacher cognition and its interaction with instructional practices.

Borg (2003) describes teacher cognition as the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching—what teachers know, believe, and think" (p. 81). Borg's (2003) conceptual model of factors that influence teacher cognition was central to this study, and will be discussed later. Teachers' knowledge, beliefs, thoughts, and instructional visions were all found to be related. Research in teacher cognition originally borrowed from the literature on teacher socialization, teacher perspective, and classroom practice (Adler, 1984; Goodman and Adler, 1985; Ross, 1987, 1988). Furthermore, the relationship between teacher cognition and classroom practice were corroborated by Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) and Pajares (1992). In addition, Ladson-Billings (2007) explored teacher cognition as it related to the instructional practices in classrooms populated predominantly by poor children of color. Explaining teacher cognition through the lens of deficit thinking, she studied the relationship between the power of teacher thinking and its impact on classroom practice. In another context, Ladson-Billings (2004) conveyed the power of teacher cognition for new teachers and their understanding of culture as a proxy for being different. She contended that how teachers think about their students affects the teacher's practices.

For purposes of this study, teacher cognition was used in the context of teachers' thoughts, beliefs and knowledge about strengths of their students in a low-SES school. Additionally, the study sought to identify patterns within teacher cognition and how those patterns impacted instructional visions and classroom practices.

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Low-SES

As mentioned, 45% of all children under the age of 18 come from low-income families (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2014). Although much discussion exists as to what poverty means, the definition used for this study is twofold: the family's financial means calculated by the government's standard and the access the family has to resources. The literature overwhelmingly shows that a family's socioeconomic status (SES) influences the academic achievement of the children in those families (Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Duncan; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Sirin; 2005; White, 1982). While educational researchers cannot possibly know the income of each student at a low-SES school, an indicator of low-SES is the free and reduced lunch rate of the building. This information is available from the state, where each of the study schools was located, from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand how teachers' cognition in low-SES schools affects their instructional practice. Through classroom observations and interviews, patterns relating teacher cognition and their classroom practice were identified. These patterns, derived from the data, informed future instructional visions and impact student learning. Using case study methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake 1995), this study examined one middle school teacher and three elementary school teachers. I interviewed the teachers and observed them in the classroom in order to document the patterns that were attributable to the relationship between their cognition and their practice. The research questions were created using Borg's (2003) model of factors influencing teacher cognition. The words in bold are terminology from the model.

1. How do teachers describe their history of **schooling?**

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2. What **professional coursework** do teachers describe as central to their practice or vision?

3. How do teachers describe and enact their **classroom practice**?

4. What **contextual factors** influence the classroom practice of each teacher?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although much discussion exists as to what poverty is and is not, the Census Bureau (2014) calculates poverty as a family's income relative to the number of family members. (www.census.gov). With nearly 45% of America's children living in poverty, 45% of children could be perceived as having multiple disadvantages compared to their middle class peers (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2014). Very little is irreversible though; brain science even tells us that neuroplasticity allows specific changes to occur in the brain as a result of experiences, namely in school (Jensen, 2009).

Poverty and Student Achievement

The literature suggests that a family's socioeconomic status (SES) influences the academic achievement of that family's children (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Sirin; 2005; White, 1982) and the best opportunity to create alternatives to living in poverty is through public education (Beegle, 2003). However, poverty is the barrier to success that supersedes any other factor in a child's life (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2003). For all students, but especially for students from poverty the academic expectations teachers communicate to students in poverty need to be high—and carefully maintained (Olmedo, 1997). The research suggests that the consequences of failure are dire: graduation rates are a greater predictor of success than standardized test scores (Machtinger, 2007). If students are academically challenged with high expectations, they are more likely to stay in school. Staying in school means an even greater opportunity for choices in life. Additionally, the research on children from poverty draws conclusions about their performance on high-stakes testing (Cunningham & Sanzo, 2002).

Poverty and Schooling

Prior to Anyon's (1980) qualitative study on social class and schooling, no other researcher had looked at empirical data comparing curricular rigor to curricular relevancy. With the benefit of over thirty years' hindsight, Anyon's (1980) findings are not too difficult to believe. With samples from four schools that catered to specific social groups, working class, middle class, affluent professional, and executive elites, Anyon (1980) found the students' classroom work reflected the expectations of the students' socioeconomic group demographic. In the working class schools, the work teachers assigned to students involved "following steps, rote memorization, and very little in the way of decision making or choice" (p. 73). In the middle class schools, the teachers' focus was on "getting the right answer" (p. 77). Students were instructed to hold onto learning because the rewards would be delayed, but most likely enjoyed in the form of college or a job. In the affluent professional schools, teachers assigned work that was "creative activity carried out independently" (p. 79). Emphasis was placed on the discussion of ideas and decision making responsibilities were expected to be shared between the class and the teacher. Finally, in the executive elite school, Anyon remarked that the intention seemed to be to develop the analytical and intellectual powers of the children (p. 83). In math, for example, it was observed that the children went through problems in the basis of whether they agreed of disagreed with the presented solutions, not whether they were simply right or wrong.

Anyon's (1980) study raised concern about the deep social significance that lies in the relationships between teachers' cognition and instruction that that develop even at the elementary level. The curriculum taught at each school coupled with the teacher's perspective of the students in the class had far reaching effects on the unequal social system itself.

Inequality begins with perspective in thinking. In general, the way people think developed in myriad of ways. French sociologist Bourdieu (1991) characterized the linguistic

practices between people in a revolutionary way. Whereas linguists primarily focused on the

empirical details of language encounters, Bourdieu (1991) "portrays everyday linguistic

exchanges as situated encounters between agents socially endowed with socially structured

resources and competencies" (p. 2). His essays, written within the context of language

acquisition and the French Revolution, detailed how the upper classes had much to gain through

the nationalization of the dominant language. Furthermore, he suggested in *Authorized*

Language that it was naïve to question that the power of words exists in a silo separate from the

social context from which they are being used.

Teacher Cognition, Attitudes, Beliefs and Practices

Given that the preponderance of teachers in are white, middle-income women, (more

prominently in elementary school) (Diffily & Perkins, 2002; Olmedo, 1997) the possibility arises

that behavioral or cultural differences might create misunderstandings and/or missed

opportunities for connecting with students (Diffily & Perkins, 2002; Olmedo, 1997; Ng & Rury,

2006; Zeichner, 2006). Newer teachers might be unfamiliar with their students and could be

tempted to consolidate their observations of them into a catchall category of "cultural"

differences (Ladson-Billings, 2003), a misuse of Michael Harrington's (1997) oft-quoted

"culture of poverty." Illuminating the children's backgrounds for teachers is imperative to the

teachers' understanding of students.

Teacher Cognition: A Theoretical Framework

How teachers respond to the notion of curriculum is greatly affected by their cognition.

The literature suggests that teachers' beliefs are formed long before they enter their pre-service

training or set foot in a classroom (Borg, 2003; Holt Reynolds, 1992; Johnson, 1994). Those

beliefs and thought patterns exist, but are not immutable to change (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000;

Sawyer & Laguardia, 2010, Freeman 1996). In a qualitative study of twenty-one K-12 teachers

participating in professional development on teaching history through a cultural encounters

approach, Sawyer and Laguardia (2010) found that teachers did change their thinking. They

found that the participants reconceptualized their views of teaching. Those views in practice

grew from their "professional knowledge and expertise in the classroom" (p. 2016). Teachers did

change, but they did so by integrating prior thinking and beliefs.

Teacher cognition is comprised of knowledge, beliefs and thoughts, but cognition also

includes in a more subtle way, the patterns that develop over time to support current thinking.

As stated previously, one way that teacher cognition can develop, called the "apprenticeship of

observation," (Lortie, 1975) considers all the personal life experiences of a teacher and their

influence on the present. In other words, the vast experiences that teachers have as learners can

shape part of their cognition as professionals (Borg, 2003; Freeman, 1992; Holt Reynolds, 1992;

Lortie, 1975; Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Nespor, 1987; Numrich, 1996). This shaping evolves into

patterns of thinking called cognition. This study focused on teacher cognition and how it

interacted with instructional practices.

The following figure represents the dimensions of teacher cognition as constructed by

Borg (2003). Borg's model depicts the inputs that influence teachers' cognition and their related

effects on one another. Borg's (2003) model of teacher cognition was chosen as a model for this

research because of the comprehensive nature it provides and the breadth it demonstrates for the

influences in teacher cognition. A matrix was developed to determine the weight of influence on

teachers' cognition in this study, which will be detailed with the following chapter. Although the

model does not isolate for socioeconomic status, its factors situate themselves within the

literature on teachers' beliefs and practices (Adler, 1984; Goodman and Adler, 1985; Ross, 1987,

1988). Other studies have used Borg's (2003) model (Nishino, 2012), but none currently link

this conceptualization of teacher cognition with practices in a low-SES school.
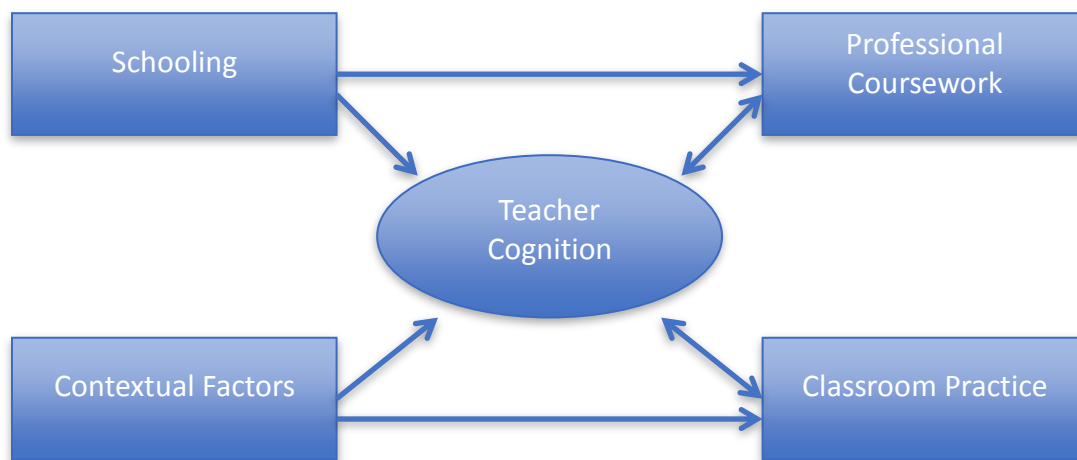
Figure 1. A model showing the relationship between Teacher Cognition, Schooling, Professional Education, and Classroom Practice (Borg, 2003, p. 82).

Borg (2003) describes teacher cognition as the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching—what teachers know, believe, and think" (p. 81). In Figure 1, Borg (2003) describes schooling as the school experiences teachers had as learners themselves, professional coursework as both the pre-service and in-service training teachers receive before certification and after, contextual factors as the pressure in the broad educational landscape such as testing, standards implementation, class size and course load, and lastly, classroom practice as the sum of the experiences teachers have while teaching in the classroom. Studies that complement Borg's (2003) model suggest that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, thoughts, and instructional visions are all related (Burns, 1996; Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005; Pajares, 1992; Woods, 1996). Research in teacher cognition borrows from the literature on teacher socialization, teacher perspective, and classroom practice (Adler, 1984; Goodman and Adler, 1985; Ross, 1987, 1988).

Adding to the body of research, Ladson-Billings (2007) explored teacher cognition as related to the instructional practices of poor children of color. Although Ladson-Billings did not differentiate between children of color and children who come from poverty, she related the power of teacher thinking and its impact on classroom practice. She contended the ways teachers think about their students affects the teacher's practices. For purposes of this study,

teacher cognition is used in the context of teachers' thoughts, beliefs and knowledge about strengths of their students in a low-SES school. Additionally, the study sought to identify patterns within teacher cognition and how it impacted instructional vision and classroom practices.

The enormity of this persistent theme in teachers is couched in the larger idea of the "grammar of schooling," or more commonly, why schools resist change (Cuban and Tyack, 1995). Ask people of differing generations to describe their classroom experiences, and largely they will probably have more in common than not. For centuries schools have been divided into grades, subjects, levels, and classrooms with the purpose of breaking down core knowledge into palatable pieces. In fact, Cuban and Tyack (1995) asserted that the public finds more comfort in a "real" school than they do in accepting changes and ideas that have evolved through decades of research. The reality is that teachers, as part of the public, came to the profession with deeply held beliefs about school and the general public is largely conservative about change. This conclusion has resulted in detrimental effects for children and hopes for reform.

This research conclusion impacts student learning. Fahey and Glickman's (2012) work centered on understanding that the professional development (or teacher learning opportunities) can positively impact student learning, suggesting that the more the teachers learn, the more the students learn. Offering teachers professional development, access to resources, and time to collaborate surely also benefits students; however, their cognition is where it all begins. The beliefs and thoughts of a teacher influence everything, their instructional practices foremost. Understanding the relationship between teacher cognition and teacher practices will provide more insight into effective teaching and appropriately designed professional development. What follows is a discussion of some commonly identified patterns of thinking in the body of research on teacher cognition.

Teacher Attitude, Beliefs, and Actions

Since the 1970s, teacher thinking has been a growing area of research. Teachers began to be described as decision makers during this time and researchers delved into their lives to determine what the underlying beliefs were in their decisions. In a meta-analysis of forty studies on teacher thinking, Clark and Peterson (1986) concluded that many teachers evolve in their thinking in three stages: the undergraduate teacher, the developing teacher, and the experienced teacher. The undergraduate teacher focuses heavily on content mastery; the developing teacher is more focused on making his or her beliefs about learners and theories explicit; the experienced teachers takes in students' cues and feels confident in departing from the lesson. He or she can determine the effects on students and adjust the plan accordingly. Experienced teachers become researchers on their own effectiveness in the classroom (Clark and Peterson, 1986). Effective teaching says Clark (1995), depends just as much on thoughts, plans and decisions as it does on classroom management competence.

Teachers' thoughts have more impact on their practices than known prior to the 1970s. House (1981) describes the three perspectives as technological, political, and cultural. Technological views of change are rather technical, focusing on the logistics of the innovation. Political perspectives adhere to the complex negotiations between stakeholders. Cultural perspectives give credence to the values inherent in change. It is the longest and slowest form of change. House (1981) suggests that effective change includes all three perspectives in the process. These stages of change are corroborated in the literature and are similar processes—especially in educational change (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Lewin, 1961; Clark & Guba, 1965). When faced with new information, the teachers' perspective on change influences their next decisions. Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (1992) state that teachers are curriculum

makers who envision "curriculum as a course a life" (p. 393). They desire this new metaphor as curriculum makers in research, which calls for knowing teachers' stories and their realities.

Rust (1993) suggests that change is not an isolated event in schools. New thinking is complex and engages many people in a school. Acknowledging that many changes can be taking place in a school simultaneously, the day-to-day activities that absorb teacher and administrators' keep the focus off the more important change, lengthening the process even more.

An area of teacher thinking that has been a focus in research has been in the adoption of a culturally responsive approach to instruction. Previously referred to in the literature as multicultural curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogy does more than consider the diversity of students in the classroom. In fact, multicultural curriculum refers to the selection of diverse texts used in instruction. Culturally responsive teaching refers to instruction tailored to the individual student cultures present in the classroom. It also calls into question the teacher thinking and demands they become the kinds of individuals that they want their students to become (Liston and Zeichner, 1996).

Student demographics are changing faster than teacher demographics (Zeichner, 2003). The preponderance of teachers is still white, middle-income women (Diffily & Perkins, 2002; Olmedo, 1997). It is impossible to expect that every teacher can deeply understand every culture in the classroom, but expecting a bicultural understanding where one recognizes that assumptions affect practice, should be common practice (Liston and Zeichner, 1996). A clash in worldview can surface when a middle-class teacher begins a career working with students from a low-SES background. Liston and Zeichner (1996) say that teachers need to understand "the meanings that students bring with them to school and the type of environment that would support a powerful and empowering education" (p. 91). Indeed, because teachers expect that students encompass a culturally-centric worldview, thinking of others in the classroom, teachers should

also practice the same thing. Liston and Zeichner (1996) suggest that the approaches of Ted

Sizer (1992) and Deborah Meier (1995) support practices that include all children. Teachers

should offer a common core of learning and understanding while at the same time approaching

teaching with a sensitivity that conceded they (teachers) "may not have the whole picture in front

of them" (Liston and Zeichner, 1996).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Since this particular study concerned itself with cognition and practices of teachers in low-SES schools, a case study methodology was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake 1995). Specifically, the purpose of the study was to examine the patterns that existed in four classroom teachers' thinking and teaching practices. The following discussion includes a description of the case study methodology used and examines design considerations, my role, participants, data collection, analysis, limitations, and ethical issues that surrounded its use.

Research Design

This study sought to explore the following questions through a qualitative design

1. How do teachers describe their history of **schooling?**

2. What **professional coursework** do teachers describe as central to their practice or vision?

3. How do teachers describe and enact their **classroom practice**?

4. What **contextual factors** influence the classroom practice of each teacher?

Arguably, no other term in qualitative research comes with as many potential misunderstandings as a case study. Likely due to the words "case study" resembling casework, case method, and case studies, case study methodology can be fraught with misconception (Merriam, 2009). However, challenges notwithstanding, a case study methodology can be particularly helpful in describing the process of conducting the research, analyzing the data, and synthesizing the final product (Merriam, 2009). Even so, Hammersley and Gomm (2000) contend that the term case study is not used in any standardized format throughout the literature. Taking that into consideration, multiple researchers choose to define "case study" in many overlapping and similar ways, but perhaps a defining description of case studies is simply in how they are selected. This study used the most accepted definition of a case study, which includes

an understanding of the intentional selection of participants existing as a "bounded system" (Smith, 1978). A "bounded system" means that the boundaries of the case are clearly defined as to what they include and what they do not. Participants in this study were chosen intentionally within the prescribed boundaries, as are described below, with particular attention paid to the work of Thomas (2011) in choosing a "local knowledge case" (p. 5).

Furthermore, case studies can be prone to "methodological limbo" as described by Gerring (2004, p. 341). Although they continue to rise in popularity, the rules governing their methodology continue to be refined. For this study, I sought to be deliberate about identifying the subject and the object of the case study (Thomas, 2011). The four teachers in low-SES schools were the subject in the study. The central object, or the lens through with the researchers analyzed the subjects was their cognition. The cognition was the object to the study and although low-SES influence and teacher practices are peripheral, cognition remained central in the research and the analysis.

Case Study

Case studies are not chosen randomly; they are specifically chosen because their particular characteristics are of great interest to the researcher (Merriam, 2002). In all case studies, the researcher is the "primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (Merriam, 2002, p. 179) and the one who determines which qualitative strategies to use in the study. Such studies are also defined as "bounded systems," (Smith, 1978) with the researcher determining where the bounds are, i.e., who participates in the study and who does not. The boundaries are largely determined by the research questions and what the researcher hopes to answer in the study. This research project was comprised of four distinct case studies. The bounded systems for this research project included four teachers from two low-SES schools. The boundaries were organized around the four research questions. The four teachers working in a low-SES

demographic comprised these four case studies. Three were elementary teachers and one was a middle school teacher. The teachers were selected because of my familiarity with the teachers or in the words of Thomas (2011), a "local knowledge case" (p. 515). Thomas (2011) says that researchers choose a local knowledge case because "there will be intimate knowledge and ample opportunity for informed, in-depth

analysis—ample opportunity for identification and discussion" (p. 515). The teachers had to be willing to have an observer in the classroom, or as Thomas (2011) describes it, "ample opportunity" for the researcher to be present (p. 515). The teachers selected had to be willing to be interviewed and offer their thinking or in the words of Thomas (2011), share "intimate knowledge" and participate in "discussion" (p. 515). Additionally, they were selected for their motivation to reflect on the interaction between their thinking and their classroom practices in a low-SES school. The teachers also had to be willing to supply documents reflective of their thinking. This corroborates with Thomas' (2011) definition of a local case by offering "opportunity for informed, in-depth analysis" (p.515).

Schwandt (2007) explains that in all case studies the case itself is the focus of the research, not the variables involved. Many critics of case study research argue that a single case is not generalizable to the larger population, a result many desire in research. Cited many times in the literature about case study research, Stake (1995) reinforces the understanding that knowledge is found in the single case, or in other words, the general lies in the particular (Erickson, 1986).

Merriam (2009) states that it has a distinct advantage over other methods for answering the "how" and "why" questions—especially if the variables reveal themselves through the study and were not readily apparent in the beginning.

Narrative Research

Another form of qualitative study, narrative research has gained attention from the research community in the last two decades. Evolving from the longstanding practice of storytelling, narrative research found its way into educational research on the premise that humans are storytellers who have experiences to share (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The 1980s witnessed an early form of narrative research in education with the prominence of autobiography and biography. Many research studies in the 1980s produced documents that detailed the stories of teachers from the field and chronicled their work. Still not called narrative, but rather stories, the narrative was quickly approaching its current position in qualitative research. Berk (1980) describes the presence of stories and their eventual decline due to a shift in the kinds of questions that researchers asked in education, mainly moving from *what* questions to *how* questions. These stories provide a rich, deep well of data to a researcher. Analyzed storytelling in practice, or narrative research, includes both the process of documenting the first-person accounts of an experience and the final product that is co-created between researcher and participant.

Merriam (2002) describes three methodological approaches to narrative: biographical, psychological, and linguistic. Although they differ, each methodology examines "how the story is constructed, what linguistic tools are used, and the cultural context of the story" (p. 287). Each approach examines pieces of the narrative with different concentrations. In a biological approach, the life (gender, race, experiences) is emphasized (Denzin, 1989). In a psychological approach, the participant's inner thoughts and feelings are characterized by their disclosed motivation. In a linguistic approach, the language pattern is the focus of analysis, as specific as the pausing, tone, tempo, and pitch of the speaker's voice (Gee, 1991, 1999). In this study I made use of the psychological approach when interviewing participants to bring the inner thoughts and feelings about teaching to the surface. I could not determine prior to the study if

the teachers already understood their cognition or needed to work through discovery during the study. Narrative research aided in that discovery process in the storytelling, assisted by the semi-structured interview process. Additionally, utilizing member checking with the participants by sharing my field notes and memos further developed the rich story that communicates patterns in cognition.

Researcher's Role

The researcher makes all the critical decisions about interviewing, observing, participation, and timeline. Stake (2005) explains that many design decisions have to be made regarding presentation of the findings, too. For example, the researcher has to decide how much of the findings will be a story, how much she will declare versus let the reader infer, how much generalizing will be done, and how much this case will be compared to others.

To prepare for research, Milner (2007) recommends that new researchers begin with a critical examination of self and the self as related to others. From that exercise the researcher determined much of the research on low-SES schools intertwined with race. Undoubtedly, investigating teachers' cognition and practices in a demographic outside my own will call for a culturally responsive approach and awareness of language patterns, thought processes, and assumptions. During an interview, as a researcher I could have been regarded as an insider or an outsider, depending on the amount of disclosure to the participants. As an outsider, researchers are allowed to ask questions that an insider would not. I was allowed to question what might not have been obvious to the participants. If regarded as an insider, the questions and interpretations must be tighter and represent the understandings of the participants.

Participants

This study employed the use of purposeful sampling (Cresswell, 2008), meaning the participants were intentionally chosen for their relevance to the research question and "to

understand the central phenomenon" (p. 214). The four teachers' experiences, as told through the interviews and in observations and by way of documents, were critical to understanding what goes on in schools of poverty. I worked with the building principals to select teachers who met the criteria in the local knowledge case (Thomas, 2011). The principals recommended teachers who had been teaching five+ years in a low-SES school, demonstrated past willingness to grow as educators, and had taken leadership responsibilities in their building. Thus, I selected the teachers because of their current assignment in a low-SES school and meeting the criteria outlined in a local knowledge case (Thomas, 2011).

One teacher came from a low-SES middle school and three came from a low-SES elementary school. In talking with the principals, the local teachers who were chosen had more than five years' of experience for three reasons. The first object was to select teachers who could integrate a researcher into the instructional day with comfort. Teachers with less experience may not yet had the skill to examine their practice in this method yet given the demands of learning the job. The second consideration was that the teachers had to have enough field experience to draw from and reflect on during the study. Finally, the teachers had to have been assigned to a low-SES school for at least five years to have rich experiences to contribute to the study. Each of these criteria supported the definition of a local knowledge case as described by Thomas (2011).

It was suspected that in the process of observing and interviewing these teachers that the stories they shared would be personal and thus somewhat vulnerable. To capture the story as it was intended, the participants had to be part of the authoring of the story in its final form through member checking and offering input on my interpretation of the data. This co-authorship valued the story of the participants and makes them accessible to others in the field. By partnering with

the participants in the creation of the final story, the possibility of focusing on my interests or furthering an agenda were limited (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected by three means: interviews, observations, and documents.

Interviews

The four teachers were interviewed three times each. Twelve interviews total were conducted using a set of semi-structured questions, in which the participants' open-ended responses aided in answering the research questions. This supported narrative research as an opportunity for the participants to share their stories and offer insight into their thinking. The teachers were asked to share their thinking about their instructional practices, which was related to the first research question: How do teachers describe their history of **schooling**? In these interviews I asked teachers about their biographies, their classroom structure and routine, and their curriculum. I interviewed the teachers before and after I observed in their classrooms. Interviews were held in-person in the participants' classrooms at a time convenient for them. Prior to conducting the interviews, the questions were piloted on a colleague. Modifications and improvements were made as needed, keeping in mind that "good interview questions are those that are open-ended and yield descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon" (Merriam, 2009, p. 99). I recorded and had a professional service transcribe the interview data. This part of the methodology was directly related to the all the research questions

1. How do teachers describe their history of **schooling**?

2. What **professional coursework** do teachers describe as central to their practice or vision?

3. How do teachers describe and enact their **classroom practice**?

4. What **contextual factors** influence the classroom practice of each teacher?

Observations

Classroom observations took place in four sessions, between the first interview with the participants and the last interview. The purpose of the observations was to address all four research questions. My role was as a participant observer where "the researcher's observer activities, which are known to the group, are subordinate to the researcher's role as a participant" (Merriam, 2009, p. 124). While it was desirable to be a complete participant and fully take in the classroom experience, more value was offered to the teacher to participate in the activities of the day.

Documents

The study focused on the patterns of teacher cognition and practices of teachers in low-SES schools. Participants were asked to offer any documents they used in class that shared their thinking or communicated classroom practices. The purpose of document analysis in this study was to collect data that provided insight into the research questions under study. Specifically, documents included letters home, notices to students, lesson plans, school-wide publications, and professional correspondence. The documents analysis supported the third research question: How do teachers describe and enact their **classroom practice**? Merriam (2009) suggests using a form of content analysis to analyze the documents for their relevancy to the study. By determining the content of the document, I determined its relevance to the research questions that guided the study.

<center>**Data Analysis**</center>

Data were analyzed by inductive, constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As it was collected, data was read and memos were created. The analysis began with the first set of data collected, versus waiting until the end when all had been collected. As collection continued, similar forms of data were compared to help identify emerging themes.

Initial transcripts from interviews provided an opportunity to understand and create an on-going analysis. Both interview transcripts and field notes were read three times and coded, to receive a "tag or label for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during the study" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). These initial units of meaning helped create the first list of general themes and patterns in teacher cognition. Then, the list of themes was further analyzed until patterns emerged from the data.

Following that, each document was read and coded by creating a document analysis worksheet (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to aid in identifying recurring codes as a constant comparative strategy. I referred to the literature to determine if the findings were consistent with the existing research in teacher cognition. Initial categories emerged from data analysis of the interviews, observations and the documents. Pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used following the initial recognition of categories to group the data into smaller segments. Following that smaller set of data, I memoed to generate the threads that tie the smaller sets together. Glaser (1978) suggests that memoing is a process that allows the researcher to theorize about the relationships between the thread as they are being coded.

Additionally, I developed a four-cell matrix based on the work of Borg's (2003) conceptual understanding of the factors that influence teacher cognition. The teachers' names were recorded in the cells of the factors (schooling, professional coursework, contextual factors and classroom practice) who communicated a high influence in that particular category. Borg's (2003) model provided both literature and an analytical framework to inform the data analysis. The model provided the aforementioned categories of schooling, professional coursework, contextual factors and classroom practice, which I adapted to fit the context of teaching practices in low-SES schools. The semi-structured questions developed for the interviews were also based on Borg's (2003) conceptual model.

According to Merriam (2009), research studies can employ the use of multiple strategies to promote validity and reliability. This study made use of triangulation, which uses multiple sources of data for analysis, member checks, in which participants review the data and themes prior to the article's finalization, and peer review, where the data analysis process and results will be discussed with a colleague to ensure congruency from start to finish.

Limitations

As Merriam (2009) writes, case study research also includes limitations in "reliability, validity, and generalizability" (p. 52). Its lack of empirical evidence gives pause to some readers who are cautious about transferring findings to their own context. Erickson (1986) asserts the reader is the one who can take the pieces that apply to his or her context and omit the extraneous information. Since I was likely to add and omit, the reader is likely to do the same. In fact, the specificity of the case study can be extremely useful in transferring learning to a larger context. Flyvbjerg (2006) implies that the aforementioned misunderstandings of case study research should be restated to be more accurate. For example, instead of stating that, "One can't generalize from a single case so a single case doesn't add to scientific development" instead say, "Formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development; the force of a single example is underestimated" (p. 219). However, Guba and Lincoln (1989) corroborate that statement and posit that generalization needs to be given up as the goal in research, and rather transferability should be prized instead. Since each story has its unique path, it is up to the reader to determine which valuable piece is useful in his or her own context.

Ethical Considerations

Since I was the primary instrument of data collection, every decision was made with ethical considerations. Regardless of the intentional or unintentional nature of decisions, researchers are at risk for making unethical decisions in interviewing, collecting and selecting

data, as well as in interpreting the findings. Thus the final document is what speaks for the case. Selective omission could have been a temptation for a researcher who wants the findings to lean in a particular direction, but a strength of case studies includes the nuance and detail of a case so fully that it can harness findings that may have been missed through strictly quantitative methodology.

To complement that, I reflected on positionality with regard to power and representation (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane & Muhamad, 2001). As I prepared to study the cognition and practices of teachers in low-SES schools I had to consider how I came to the study: as an insider or an outsider. My personal and academic history did not include a childhood or adulthood in poverty and only involved minimal experience teaching students in poverty. I am a middle-income, Euro-American woman, with above average education and access to even more. I was in great danger of inadvertently "othering" when discussing the children in poverty.

Lastly, since I studied the cognition and practices of teachers in low-SES schools, the fallout of those findings may look like blame to teachers in other low-SES schools. Brantlinger (1999) addresses the need for local scholarship, but warns researchers about the risks when findings are made public. She explains that scholars may have research findings that administrators disagree with, and have no intention of implementing. In fact, "critical scholars can be excluded from scholarly discourse and denied perks that accrue from 'neutral' studies" (p. 414). This idea placed status on me as an academic who could possibly be seen as blaming teachers for their students' lack of success, but I was willing to confront that.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This chapter will present a portrait of each teacher represented and organized by headings from Borg's (2003) conceptual framework on teacher cognition: schooling and professional coursework (combined), classroom practice and contextual factors.

Rebecca's Story

Schooling and Professional Coursework

Rebecca came from a family of four—mother, father, sister, and herself. Her parents were married young and decided to have a family early. Her father worked in technology-related fields, and her mother was the bookkeeper for a law firm. Her parents now jointly run a technology consulting firm. Rebecca always had summer employment at the law firm where her mother worked. In describing her parents' decisions about education, Rebecca said:

> Neither of my parents were—went to college with the exception of my mom did a year at Wiser State University…they knew my path would be—that I would go to college, that is where my interests were, that's where my abilities were and it's just a given growing up that yes, you're going to college.

Reflecting on her history of schooling, Rebecca said her parents expected her to go to college early on, and that was good for Rebecca because she said wanted to be a teacher since "probably first or second grade." She said, "I loved school, adored school, idolized my teachers. I was blessed to have some very, very strong teachers early on and a string of them." Rebecca identified with teachers and, as she commented, she could identify strength in her teachers even as a student. This experience was coupled with a family member with whom Rebecca learned from as a child. At the time of the interview, Rebecca's aunt was a professor in special education and was always a mentor to her. She said that her aunt "was a great influence, she was

somebody who knew what my interests were." Rebecca shared that she "identified with her aunt" and still does on some level. Rebecca chose to go to college in the same town as her aunt had for many reasons, mostly to be independent. She commented:

> I knew I needed to kind of be away from my parents to figure out who I would be, because I was very, very sheltered, very close with my parents. I knew I needed to kind of cut apron strings a little bit to figure out who I would be aside from that. I also knew that I would utterly fail if I didn't know somebody there and my aunt and uncle lived in College City.

As much as her parents made college an expectation for Rebecca, they did not have the same expectation for her sister. Rebecca's sister, Karen, disliked school. Rebecca commented, "My parents recognized that my sister had different interests and needs and knew they could push college all they wanted and that wasn't going to happen for her." Rebecca knew then that she was going to take a different path in life than her sister. Rebecca said of her parents and sister,

> It's not like they held her to a lower standard, but they tried to be respectful of her interests and who she was as a person. I think a little bit of it backfired a bit, because I would say she probably isn't happy with her life choices and has a bit of regrets, but I still have respect for my parents trying to honor the differences and not push a square peg through a round hole.

She knew that her parents were trying to assist Karen with her life choices, but their efforts were met with constant resistance. Karen dropped out of high school and never finished. Rebecca mentioned that Karen "tried art school, she tried working down at National Park just kind of 'free spirity' but nothing really seemed to click. She's got five kids now. Lives out in Buchanan State and not a whole lot of direction." Rebecca shared that her sister lacked identity growing up. In sharing more about her sister, Rebecca stated:

> Interestingly, she lives out the lifestyle that a lot of my students at Pierce Harbor

have. Very, very similar, she's on welfare, has no interest in getting off of it [and]

works the system as much as she can for free money, she and her husband.

They are—I wouldn't say they are incredibly successful parents. My

niece, one of my eldest nieces lives with my parents. They're her guardian.

Karen reminded Rebecca of the families at Pierce Harbor Elementary. Rebecca said just meeting

her sister would prove to anyone "it's not always the parents' fault" how kids turn out the way

they do. So often parents can become the sole reason children choose the paths in life that they

do. Rebecca commented multiple times that her parents were supportive and present in the lives

of their children. Still, however, each daughter took a different path. She continued to reflect:

[I am] very aware of that when I see similarities in my students of their

opinions of school. I reflect a lot on my sister's attributes… if I start seeing that

in some of my students I try to think okay, is this truly a dislike of school, is this

a struggle to figure out where they fit in relative to others in the family, is it a

parent, you know, a reflection of parent beliefs? I try not to take it as just face

value. I really try to see what could it be, because I know there were so many

layers to my sister's struggles that I'm fully aware that there are probably many,

many layers to the struggles that my students have.

Rebecca explained her practice of looking under the layers of her students. Just as she did with

her own upbringing, she acknowledged that a family could have myriad explanations for the

choices of the children. Just as she had parents who supported and cared for her, so may her

struggling students have supportive parents. She is careful not to assume poor life choices on the

part of the parents when she is supporting the students in her classroom. She said that is a lesson

from her history of schooling.

She commented:

And so my thinking is where could you intercept that kiddo whose like my sister and say

I can understand and respect that you may not feel that you're four year college material,

but you still need to get yourself on a path for successful life and education is key to that.

I feel like that is the gap that my sister had. She didn't get intercepted, that key point, and

so that's the kind of focus that I keep with kids who are my students.

Rebecca said a teacher must intercept a child at a key point in school to prevent situations

such as Karen's. Rebecca blamed school in part for her sister's wanderlust. Rebecca said she

could not recall a key figure in her sister's life. However, she was able to recall many key

people in her own life. In too many instances, Rebecca felt her sister could have had meaningful

relationships that might have set her on a different path. She never found such mentors, and as a

result lived a life lacking hope or direction.

As a student in the system, Rebecca said she "idolized her teachers" and that she always

had "strong teachers." She participated in an alternative high school experience where she only

minimally attended classes on campus and worked on her own schedule. In the traditional

setting, the curriculum did not work for her, so she found something that was tailored to her

needs as a high school student. She said that good teachers differentiate their instruction to "meet

the needs of the whole child." In contrast, she remembered this about her least favorite teacher,

who

didn't have very engaging methods in class, she was lots of lecture, very abstract if you

didn't understand it she didn't have an alternate form to present it to you or she wouldn't

sit down and try and talk you through it. It was 'it's in the book, it's in the book. Go

back to the book.'

Her least favorite teacher in school did not differentiate curriculum for the class. The teacher

made decisions that were easy for her but often difficult for the children. Rebecca said this

particular teacher "brought her personal problems into class," and even worse, the teacher lost work and reduced Rebecca's scores because of it. She recalled that:

> The teacher was having huge personal issues, had lost massive amounts of our papers.
>
> Wasn't paying attention to things, but was still docking us for it, and wouldn't throw the
>
> flag… The only time I hadn't gotten an A, but I will just remember—I just vividly
>
> remember that. It was the most stressful situation that I had ever been in academically.

During that time, Rebecca's parents started to doubt their daughter's integrity and became suspicious of her falling grades. Rebecca was under tremendous stress since she was at the mercy of the teacher. Her parents put more pressure on her as her grades began to slip. It was only by coincidence that her mother discovered the true problem when visiting the school to pick up work due to her daughter's illness.   Rebecca said she will never forget that situation, and thinks of it often as a teacher herself.

> By contrast, Rebecca described her favorite teacher, Mr. K, in detail. She said Mr. K:
>
> did super engaging things. We were higher-level science class for all years,
>
> but I remember we would do things like instead of just learning about air and
>
> resistance and alternate transportation forms and stuff, we would build the
>
> hovercraft. A working hover craft and take turns on it getting pushed down
>
> the hall on this hover craft and it was out of like plywood and a chair and like
>
> a vacuum and garbage bags and I remember vividly sitting on the hover craft
>
> getting shoved down the hall.

Mr. K was a middle science teacher who was hands on, "before it was even cool to be hands on." He taught his class in a way that you had to participate, had to pay attention, but most of all wanted to. About his relationships, Rebecca reflected that

> He also took time to get to know us as people.   He knew I was a diver, I was

just starting to get into it at the time. He would ask me about it. Would ask me about

what college I wanted to go to and just like it was normal. It wasn't—didn't feel like

pressure, it was just conversation and it felt like very adult conversation, which was very

flattering to 7th and 8th graders. But he would still joke with you.

Rebecca said the students respected him and he knew about their personal interests. He used his

knowledge of their interests and activities to make a connection with the students. His voice in

conversation conveyed that he understood they were growing up, but not too old to have fun.

He knew his content and shared it wholeheartedly with his students. Rebecca recalled her

excitement when she realized that this teacher was going to move up a grade with her class. Her

schedule just said "staff," but when she arrived in September, he walked up to her and said, "I'm

here to make your life miserable for another year." She said he was "hands-down her favorite

teacher." Rebecca made these connections and more during her interviews.

Classroom Practices: Rebecca's Perceptions

Structure and Routine. I interviewed Rebecca on three occasions. During that time she

called herself a "structured, strict teacher with high expectations for her kids." She said in terms

of her classroom that she tries:

to make it engaging and fun. We try to laugh a lot. Kids know my expectation

for behavior and academics...but they also know that as

long as we're abiding by standards for behavior and getting our learning

targets taken care of, we're going to have a lot of fun along the way, too. So I

think I'm pretty relaxed in my style of speaking with the kids.

Rebecca said this about how she speaks with her students:

My tendency is to call them sweetheart or buddy, you know things like that. If they make

a mistake I will say something like 'Oh, did that fall out of your head'? You know things

like that. I'm not so structured and stuffy that I'm like 'no that is incorrect'. They know that I'm a pretty normal person. I'm not some high and lofty sage on the stage kind of thing, but I do have very high expectations, very high expectations.

Talking with her students was part of her routine. Additionally, she commented,

I think they appreciate having the structure and the expectation, too. Feeling like there's someone who believes they can achieve something higher than they think. That we get a lot more smiles and they're pretty ready to trust you. Some other building, some other kids, might take it for granted. Take the relationship with the teacher for granted. Just go, 'Whatever I'm here, checking in, checking out,' but there are kids in here who definitely appreciate and need the relationship they have with me.

She said that she developed relationships with her students over time. Rebecca said that "Once she can pop through their little wall and prove [her] self" she can get to a deeper level of connection with her students.

Rebecca explained she still stuck to "routines and systems" in place at all times. Rebecca shared about the routines in her classroom:

Oh, my gosh. We have a lot of routines. Just the way the kids come in and check in [every] the morning, I mean checking in with sticks to tell me what kind of lunch that they are having and that they are here. They go to their desks, they know that they get their entry task folder out. They start working on that. We always grade it within 20 minutes and then we sit at the carpet and we have classroom meeting. I mean my whole day is classroom routine.

Rebecca said her classroom practices complement the school-wide PBIS system, although it was not Rebecca's idea for school-wide management.

Rebecca reported that part of the structure and routine of her room was feeding her students. Rebecca said she regularly fed them. She also said that 100% of the students ate breakfast at school, so she asked them to save something from that meal to have as a mid-morning snack. She said she had to check often to make sure they were not hungry. Rebecca said hunger and sleep impact student learning. For example, she stated,

> Kids. Number one is kids coming in with a lack of sleep or a lack of food. Biggest, biggest, biggest ones because if they hit the door, either because there's stuff going on at home, or mom or dad came home from work at 2 in the morning and then couldn't get back to sleep, or they had to go along somewhere late at night, or if they don't have food, they just come in and you can tell from the minute they come to the door that they just look disheveled or out of sorts or tired. You know what a tired kid looks like.

From her interviews, she said she that keeping tabs on their hunger within a structure helped make her classroom "a safe, caring community that is predictable." She commented:

> But then again I think a lot of the routines and the expectations that we have here after the first month or two allows the kids even if they've had a really crummy night before or morning of they can within 5 or 10 minutes of hitting the classroom they switched the school persona and they know it's going to be okay. They know they're going to have fun. They're going to have lunch. They're going to have breakfast and so that kind of elevates itself. By virtue, I think of the things that we have in place in the classroom.

An additional structure that Rebecca mentioned in her classroom was that she had clustered the students into ability-based groups. Rebecca said the ability-based groups for math and reading ensured that "their needs were being met" academically, too.

Rebecca said that although she reported her highly structured classroom practices served the purpose she wanted it to she also allowed time for "instant modifications" while teaching.

She said she altered plans if the students were bored or tired and "integrated kinesthetic activities into the lesson to keep the engagement up." She reported the students liked this break from the regular routine of the class.

Curriculum and Instruction. Rebecca began the discussion of curriculum in her district by describing the books that were so to speak, handed to her. With second graders she used *Treasures* for reading, *Envision* for math, Foss for science, and Lucy Calkins for writing. Rebecca said:

> I can go through resources either from things that I've leaned from other teachers, looking online at different blogs, advice I've had from years of mentors-- that type of thing. Things that I've tried in the past that seem like would be engaging and fun for kids. So quite often I do have to delve into that to kind of add to the curriculum, because even though the curriculum we have says it's differentiated, it's maybe not in the ways and methods that I would necessarily do.

> To supplement or use "secondary resources," as she called them, Rebecca sought out

resources on her own.

> When she talked about curriculum, Rebecca explained that she "looked at curriculum

differently than when she was a first-year teacher." Self-described as being "by the book" in her first year of teaching, she explained that her practices have "changed since she started teaching eight years ago." Rebecca said,

> This is how it's supposed to be done and you know do the curriculum as it is. Didn't—I felt more pressured to stay with the pacing guides, and I would say probably half way through my second year I just realized that we're not, we're not a typical school, not a typical demographic, and even if we were, it doesn't mean that your classroom is year to

year and I need to honor the kids in my class more than I need to [follow] a pacing guide that's set by some entity that's never stepped foot in my classroom.

She described her earlier approach to curriculum as being more faithful to the district's expectations. Now, she attended to her students' needs first.

Rebecca stated that her district had set curriculum for every subject (but social studies), but still there were "gaps in the curriculum." For example, she stated that the "curriculum is incomplete" and has a lot of "building to building inconsistency." Rebecca thought she followed the prescribed scope and sequence with fidelity, but said she now "felt free to modify the curriculum to best fit her students" as a "veteran teacher." She described pacing guides as "oppressive and unresponsive to the needs of real kids." To her, pacing guides created disheartened teachers who struggled to respond to the learners in front of them. In fact, she said, "the pacing guides contributed to a bigger problem of pushing kids to the next grade level without the time they needed to master a skill or a concept." Rebecca said she "chose to honor kids over pacing guides." She commented that her school's free and reduced rate of 79% played a part in her students' lack of school readiness, but she said she never let that lower her expectations. She said that in the district curriculum:

The interventions and the differentiation all tend to exist at a worksheet level. And the kids that I have in this demographic here largely need more hands-on activities. They need to make it more concrete. They need to have experience; for example, if we're doing phonics work, they need to be able to physically move sounds around in a word, by having them on cubes or tiles and things like that to actually physically move them around instead of just fill out a worksheet, fill in the blank thing and what word sound would go there. They actually have to have that kinesthetic piece and see it.

Rebecca stated that she modified her curriculum for her classroom in all content areas, with the exception of science and social studies. She taught science and social studies using whole-class methods. She did not find the need to differentiate as heavily in those content areas.

One of her practices she explained was that "she tried new lessons with a focus group first to see how they responded." She then took lessons to the whole class with some of the bugs worked out. She modified writing the most this year and sometimes made changes in the middle of a lesson. She modified lessons "on the fly" on occasion if, in her professional judgment, she needed to slow down. This, she explained, "is a gap in curriculum and not a gap in students." She said:

> I've, you know, taught second grade a few years, and none of the years have been the same as far as the makeup of the kids. You know some might have gaps and really have a hard time in place value or the next year that group just might have these huge gaps in money and time. And so I can make the notes in the teacher's manual, but it doesn't mean that it's going to be the same next year because the kids are so different. This year with 16 boys I've never had that ratio of boys and it's been a completely different set of gaps and learning speeds than I have seen before.

She made notes in her teacher's manual if needed, but also realized that "a note for this year may not even apply to next year's students." When asked about her internal monologue for making modifications, Rebecca stated:

> I tend to run through a few different questions in my head as I am processing the learning tasks I am preparing for kids. I typically think about what I know about the child (strengths, weaknesses, personal goals, learning style, motivations) along with what my objective is for the learning task (my goals for the child, standards, scaffolding for

another lesson, etc.) I then try to merge the two facets together into something that is engaging, relevant, and doable.

She stated that her teaching changed based on the needs of the kids. Rebecca explained,

So I have been to like a hula show and basketball games, and football games and things like that. So I do, do that. I try not to do it super regularly with any one particular kiddo, because it sounds a little bit cold, but if I were to go to every single football game for a kiddo I knew who really needed me to be there every single football game, that gap becomes ginormous when they leave my class. And they fall into almost a deeper pit of 'Now I don't have [anybody] there.

She said that occasionally attending students' outside activities helped her understand their needs even more. Rebecca stated that she worked hard to know her class and   "attend[ing] their extracurricular activities" helped that process.

She sought to identify a student's capabilities and made curricular decisions in the child's best interest. She concluded that kids are different and her curriculum modifications were flexible enough to meet them where they were.

Kari's Story

In an area of town known as Rosemary Valley was Lincoln Middle School and Kari Anderson's classroom. Never having been inside Lincoln, I parked near the building and walked toward the school on the first scheduled day of interviewing. Lincoln had one sign on its field, but nothing indicating where the main entrance was located. I found a side door and let myself in. I bypassed the front office entirely through that door, but ultimately signed in and identified myself with the "visitor" sticker they asked me to wear. I found Kari waiting in a vacant classroom, and I began our first of three total interviews.

Schooling and Professional Coursework

Native to the city of Columbia, teacher Kari Anderson was born and raised in the area. She grew up in a family of four: a mother, father, and a twin sister. She described her family as "pretty stable." Her parents were still married and had never moved from Kari's childhood home. Kari went to school in Columbia, but moved away to the other side of the state for college. She said that, "my family—I have a very small family here and so they—they're important to me. So I wanted to come back and be near them, which has been really important." College took her away; student teaching brought her back to Columbia, and she never left again.

When reflecting on her professional coursework, it intertwined with her history of schooling. Kari spoke about her student teaching experience during the first part of the interview and commented that it "was such a good experience." She grew up on the opposite side of town than where she was placed, so when her first day came, she had to look it up on a map. She called her father for help in finding the school and said, "I don't even know where this is located." She commented to me again that they had never moved in her childhood, so knew there was a big part of her hometown she had never visited.

She met her husband in Columbia and shared, "My husband's family is really big, too, and his family is from here as well so it's nice. We have a lot of family support and stuff like that, which is huge." She was married just one week before she accepted her first teaching job twelve years ago.

Kari became a teacher at age 22 and explained that her childhood experiences in school influenced that decision. She said that when she was a kid in school she learned things quickly, but her work did not matter to her. She commented:

> I didn't always give my best effort and so I was a little chatty, a little bit distracted and so now-a-days I would totally be just fine because the kind of view of learning [we have now]. It's a little bit more individualized approach this day and age, but when I was in

school it was not like that. And so I just had a really—I kind of struggled through it a lot in elementary school. I had a really hard time being successful and just remembered feeling really, really bad.

She described herself as an unconventional kid. She commented, "I was the only girl that would play soccer at recess." She said the other girls in the class took ballet, but she played soccer. Kari felt she did things differently from the other girls. She remembered getting in trouble in school often. She recalled:

I would get in trouble for reading. I would hurry through my work and then read and I remember getting in trouble for reading and it was because, well, I should be taking the same amount of time as everybody else on the work.

Kari's parents intervened on her behalf and talked to her teacher. She remembered the incident:

So my parents would be like, 'Well, is she doing it wrong? '

'No.'

'Is she talking?'

'No.'

'She's reading and she could spend—her numbers could look a little clearer.'

Kari said that not until her sixth grade year did she have a teacher give her a "real chance to break out of" the cycle she was in at school-- getting in trouble and lacking praise for the things she was good at doing. She said:

[I] was not the kid that was going to do it the same way as everybody else, probably just out of a rebellious reason I'm sure. But you know there are a lot of kids who I would see in my classroom that would be in the same boat. They could get to the same endpoint, they just needed a little different road map to do that and that's okay.

She was given that opportunity to do things differently in her sixth grade class and it made a difference in her school life. She said her experience in that classroom shaped her as a future teacher. She commented, "So that was part of my application to education. That was one of my life experiences; I just wanted to be that type of teacher."

That teacher, Mr. Finch, became her favorite elementary teacher. Kari remembered Mr. Finch valued her as a person. He "really kind of helped break my mindset up before I went to junior high, which I think was really important." She recalled another teacher, this time her middle school social studies teacher, as being another favorite. Mrs. Austen helped Kari break up her negative mindset about school. Mrs. Austen had a cooperative learning environment in her classroom. She asked students to teach others often. Kari said:

> You would do the research and present it to the class, which was—so I would basically be in this teaching role which I loved, 'Oh, get up in front of people? That's great.' And so I just—she loved, loved having me get up and do that. It was probably the beginning of my like inkling that I might want to be a teacher.

Furthermore, Kari commented on how that made her feel in the classroom. She said, "That was a really big deal that I had a lot of leadership role for that, which was really great and really good for me at the time." Kari had great success that year in school.

In high school, Kari recalled the influence of Ms. Pfeffer as influential in her schooling. She said, "I thought she walked on water then and I definitely think she walks on water now." Kari responded positively to an English class where multiple answers were acceptable and debate was encouraged. She recalled "really, really loving her [Ms. Pfeffer's] style." Ms. Pfeffer was part of the mentoring program when Kari was hired as a first-year teacher. Kari was able to watch Mrs. Pfeffer teach, this time as a teacher herself and recalled the experience: "She

made everything come alive. She's the reason why it made me want to be an English teacher for sure. She made me want to do that."

Not every teacher in Kari's past aided in her career aspirations. In elementary school, her classroom experiences were fraught with threats and embarrassment. She recalled having a new teacher and perceiving that her "inability to kind of fit in" often threatened the new teacher. Kari said that whenever she misbehaved in elementary school that particular teacher always witnessed it. She felt caught in a cycle of wrongdoing with the teacher. She remembered many punitive responses to her behavior. She commented: "It took a couple of years to kind of get out of that in terms of just really negative [times]." Kari shared that she was a bright student and wanted to try the honors program. However:

> To get into the honors program at the time you needed a teacher recommendation and she
>
> refused to write one for me, and it took me then until I was in high school to get into
>
> honors and that was part of the reason why I was in trouble all the time. I would get done
>
> too soon and not have enough to do.

Kari was in trouble in a "one-size-fits-all classroom at the time." She said, "that's another reason why I try really hard to find the root of the problem because I remember being that kid." Kari explained she dug into problems in class instead of just punishing her students.

Kari has sought to be the teacher that she had envisioned becoming as a child. In her first year of teaching, Kari completed her master's degree in early childhood education (ECE). Her focus was on birth to third grade. She said she used the district curriculum in a resource room. Her master's in ECE complemented her work. She said,

> There's that developmental piece that was broken somewhere along the line in terms of
>
> learning those skills, so remembering that continuum of development so that I could
>
> identify the pieces that were different, to kind of identify where some of those gaps were.

Kari shared that she was a mother to two children, a six-year-old daughter and a four-year-old daughter. She saw sending her oldest to school as "a whole eye-opening experience leaving my child to a teacher." She said, "You start to forget that kids are a part of a bigger picture and so having my own daughter go to school was a real reminder —these are somebody's babies." With that in mind, she started the school year differently. She tried to get to know the students more than she thought she had in the past. She commented, "I am as a person trying to get to know them a little better just out of that empathy of like, 'Oh that's right. You know they're somebody's child' and I know that but it's different when some—you feel the tug on your own heart."

Kari shared a time of her life that "was a real eye-opening experience." Her oldest daughter was diagnosed with cancer just one year prior to this interview. She explained that it was the first time in her life that a whole team of professionals had to help her child, instead of her helping someone else's child. This cancer diagnosis caused Kari to move to a place of trusting professionals. She reflected about that change:

> I realized that I actually didn't trust any of them until I knew that they cared. If I go back and think of my memories of them it wasn't degrees, it wasn't their years of being a doctor, it wasn't where they went to school, it wasn't any of that stuff it was do you view my daughter and do you view us as people?

Kari found herself navigating a system with which she was unfamiliar. When she came back to work, she tried to take a piece of that with her as she resumed working with students and their families. She stated, "And I want to be that type of teacher where you know it reminded me this [school] can look just as big as a hospital system did to me. It was a world I was uncomfortable with." She knew that a lot of her students' parents thought the same thing about schools. She also recalled watching doctors work on her daughter who did not give "warms fuzzies" to her

treatment providers. Kari said her students often acted the same way.   She connected, "That's what a lot of time our kids do here. They're hurting, things aren't going good, they're not warm fuzzies, you're not going to get this." But she kept trying to reach them.

Classroom Practice: Kari's Perceptions

  Structure and Routine. As I stated, I interviewed Kari on three occasions. During that time, she explained that she "had never done the same thing two years in a row, so I've done the—I've always looped with my students" in a unique set of classroom practices. She explained that she had been part of "lots of different delivery models" in her twelve years as a teacher. When she began teaching she said that in special education, "they were just starting to get into more inclusion model and that type of thing, but we were still doing a separate curriculum and then it kind of morphed." After a few years of that system, the district she worked for asked her to use the same curriculum the regular classes used, but to "modify or accommodate for the different kinds of kids." Kari also explained her teaching structure included strict pull out models at times or a support class for ELL students in the building. She said that no matter what model she used that:

> Every year we're trying to do it better. So the idea was just to try and meet the kids'
> needs and I think every year we change, because our population of the kids changes. So
> especially when I did resource, every year you had different kids with different
> disabilities with different goals with different behaviors with different needs, so that
> change was not a—like a thoughtless change. It was intended to best serve the needs of
> our kids.

Kari elaborated on her perceptions about the children she has taught in her classroom practice. The children have had varied needs. She said:

I've had kids of course across the spectrum of disabilities, so I've had kids with learning

disabilities; I've had kids with ADHD; I've had kids with autism; I've had kids with

behavior disorders; I've had kids with you know all different kinds of disabilities of

course, but then I've also worked with kids at risk. I've worked with underperforming

kids who were more capable. I'm working with honors kids. I've had kind of a bunch of

different challenging situations that the kids have been in. So just all different you know.

Every kid is unique so that always stands out to me.

Kari discussed her perceptions on kids in crisis and how that affected the structure of her

teaching. She noted:

A lot of my students are stronger than I would probably have been in that situation. And

so we have some really tough kids that are able to do really well despite their life

circumstances, and home life, and that type of thing. And so there's some really tough

kids and really resilient kids, and sometimes you don't know the things that are going on

in their lives and sometimes you won't find it out until the end of the year when they say,

"Oh by the way…" And I'm like what? I had no idea.

Kari shared that her students maintained well in her class all year even if they were in crisis. For

example, if students forgot their books, she reminded them to solve the   problem. She does "use

a class set for the kids or if they lose their books…they can't say they don't have it because it's

on the back counter." She stated that keeping track of materials was difficult for her students, so

she worked on that all year with them. She said there were always ways to solve problems, but

the solution, "will look a little different but there shouldn't be an interruption in the learning

process whether you brought a pencil, didn't bring a pencil, brought your book, didn't bring a

book, because we all know where those resources are." Kari said she gets the kids to take

ownership of their learning and will not allow them to say, for example:

"I can't do my assignment because I don't have a pencil." I'm like, "Ah you don't have a

pencil, what are you going to do to solve that?" "I don't know." "You don't know? Ask

your neighbor, because they look like they have a pencil. What did you do to bring a

pencil?" You know because it's like you're sitting at a table with four kids and I ask

them, 'look on the floor.'

In fact, Kari shared that she used to have a poster in her room that said, "What do you do when

you don't have a pencil?"

However, even if the students were different, Kari has determined her style within her

structure tended to stay the same. She told me that she made adjustments from period to period.

She stated:

There are some of my classes that can't do group work very well. They just can't do some

things and some that do have to do it independently because it just—so that does just differ in

terms of how we're going to run it, it will look different.

Part of looking different in each class was homework. Kari worked with her grade-level

team to communicate expectations clearly to the students. The team perceived they had a

"culture of homework" because "they think it's important." For example:

Our whole team assigns homework and we have homework nights and we just communicate

that out to parents. Monday night is homework for English. Tuesday night is homework for

whatever, so we have a structure in place, we communicate that and we assign it to the kids.

They know we have a routine.

Kari thought that the structure and routines she had in her class directly affected the curriculum

and instruction that took place.

Curriculum and instruction. Kari began her discussion of curriculum in her district by

describing the agreed-upon materials for middle school English Language Arts. She used the

SpringBoard curriculum as the core text, which is a pre-Advanced Placement curriculum for the middle grades. The district adopted the curriculum six years ago since it aligned with the Common Core Standards and was a college-readiness program. Kari related that *SpringBoard* was the "the starting point for everything that we do in the class." She also commented that she did, " sub the Greek and Latin roots….We can't spend the time on it so it's their homework, but they have to do it because I think it's important." She further said this about the *SpringBoard* adoption in her building:

> It's surprising to me the controversy that a curriculum can cause, because I think it doesn't matter what you're using. It matters—it matters what you do with it. It could be the world's best curriculum but it's what you do with your curriculum that makes a difference, not what you were given to use.

Kari said this about her abilities. She said:

> [I have] a lot of experience adapting curriculum to fit a variety of needs because I used this curriculum when I taught in the resource classroom kids with writing disabilities with the very writing heavy curriculum. We were able to make it work, because it's what you do with it.

Early in her career she also taught resource math for middle school as one of her classroom practice experiences. Her district had adopted new math curriculum called Connected Math. The approach of Connected Math was a discovery model, which was opposite from how she had learned math. She stated that her instructions were to open the lesson and then let the students explore math while hopefully arriving at the right conclusion. Parents were angry about the approach and voiced their concerns. She said, "that was a lot newer frame for me because I had to learn how to do that with kids who could do math skills at like a first, second, third grade level of math and so, but it was 7th grade, 8th grade math."

Connected Math "challenge[ed] the way that I had been teaching, especially from when I first got hired and we had textbooks, it was just the same thing. It was just problems." She stated, "I had to learn a lot. And then we would have to as a group learn how to make that work with kids." Having a new curriculum in Connected Math helped Kari "learn how to make an explore [exploration] type of environment in a structured setting, because it's almost kind of a cancel each other out…That was very challenging for me, but it really redid—because it really was about a totally different way of teaching from what I had been [taught]."

Later she worked primarily in English Language Arts and added another experience to her classroom practice. Kari worked on a team at Lincoln, and worked heavily with the other teachers to develop a common writing language for the students. Kari said she adapted the *SpringBoard* curriculum to fit the needs of the kids while maintaining a common language with her team. She said, "I was able to actually adapt, I use some graphic organizers for writing essays or writing paragraphs that I then changed." She stated she allowed some student who needed supports in the class to use the organizers, but also let those who were ready to write without them to do so. The *SpringBoard* curriculum is not a "one size fits all" curriculum in her class, so it was modified as needed.

She described that modifications came in many ways. Kari regularly recalled that she made changes between class periods based on the needs of the students. She had patterns of "typing up quick graphic organizers between classes" or "changing things a lot" when she evaluated the responses of her first period classes. She also thought it was her familiarity with the curriculum that helped her anticipate the students' needs. Kari desired "a healthy learning frustration level, where you don't really know, but you feel that healthy frustration level of like 'Oh, I got to find the answer out.' But not to the point of that shut down." In her classes she did not keep her example materials from one period to the next. She started over with each class. She stated:

Because every class is going to say it a little different or approach it different. So, I don't use the same material. I will have four stacks, one for each class because how we got to that differs. So I don't want one master copy. I never have a master copy. We always do it as a group, because they're—sometimes you know like the book has this answer, but that isn't their answer, and they actually had a better answer… So I won't use the answer key for something like that for my class, because I want us to wrestle through it together.

Students asked Kari if she grew tired of teaching the same thing all day. She seemed to enjoy the newness of each class and the variety she said, "they are different kids and they approach it different and they see it different, and it's literature so you can interpret it different. So I try to make it unique for each class and a fresh approach for each class." She said she differentiated for each unique class by way of time in groups, amount of homework, and expectations during independent work time. For example, Kari said that depending on the class, "we might read a piece of text as a group instead of independently." She said that "if I feel like enough of them would not get it or don't have enough readers to pair them up, or the text is really difficult we might read as a group." She said, "Some of my classes can't do group or peer work very well. They can't so we just won't." In some classes, "It will just look different." For example, "In the honors classes we do more—you know because they are in honors they have more homework and they have more they do and more that we get to."

Homework in her class was regular and expected. She knew that her students could "just do more" if they completed the assigned homework. In her observations, the move from elementary school to middle school created a fractured environment for her students. She said that in elementary school you get "one classroom, you know who to contact, parents know who to contact. You get the folders that are put in the backpack with the homework. You get the weekly newsletter, or at least the monthly newsletter. Everything is contained in one location."

Contrast that to middle school where her instructional plans were impacted by the lack of work happening at the home. Kari thought this about homework: "I think we focus on the kids that don't do it." Even if she did not get 100% completion, she still continued to assign it and continued to expect it. "Organization would be something we face. Home/parent communication is something that we face," recalled Kari when she discussed the challenges to she saw to her students' success. In addition, she commented on her perceptions of middle school transitions, "We're training them in a whole new environment so some of the things I think that we can view as deficits are just really things that they come in struggling with because it's a new environment and a new system."

Vivianne's Story

Down the hall from colleague Rebecca Kezzap, I found the classroom of sixth grade teacher, Vivianne Lark. I interviewed Vivianne on three separate occasions. As with the other case studies, Vivianne shared her biography in the first interview.

Schooling and Professional Coursework

Vivianne Lark was a military "brat" and the oldest of four children. She had one sister and two brothers. She said, "I practically raised my baby brother" since he was 11 ½ years younger than she. Her father was in the Air Force and worked for the National Security Agency, so she lived all over the world. She was born in San Antonio, Texas, but lived in "Turkey, Japan, and several different states, including Alaska." Vivianne spoke about her parents and the life of a military family. She said:

My mom was a stay at home mom, extremely intelligent lady, and she worked in

the home until we were grown… Then she went to the banking world and she became a vice

president of Wells Fargo Bank. So she was a stay at home mom for many, many years but it

didn't stop her from reaching really high in the business arena.

Vivianne described her father as, "gentle and kind and not the Air Force type at all. Very, very, very cool guy and he loved baseball just like me." Vivianne's father was "very poor" growing up and "one of seven kids, no money at all and during the depression. So, he knew what he had."

Vivianne remembered her parents' desires for her schooling. "My dad wanted me to be a doctor, and my mom just wanted me to be happy. But they just—'ah you don't want to be a teacher you know, they don't make any money. You don't want to be a teacher; you got a brain; you could use it.'" Vivianne did not set out to be a teacher either. She said, "I don't have any teachers in my family." She graduated from State College where she studied French and even lived in France for one year of college. She intended to teach college-level French for a career.

In college, however, she met and "married an Air Force guy." Her plans to teach French "all went away" and "[she] had babies" and "moved here." She has been in the city of Columbia ever since. Vivianne shared that her husband "was killed in a plane crash 14 years ago." Vivianne remembered:

> [I] was working as a paraeducator just part time because my kids were coming to school. I loved it and it was so much fun. I worked with special ed., and I just decided that I loved it. It was like so great to come to work every day and to just be able to see the growth in those kids and make a difference. And when I lost him, I knew I had to support my family.

Her principal pulled her aside after the tragic crash and said, "You know what you have to do. You have to be a teacher." One month after her husband's death, Vivianne enrolled in River University in the evening. She already had a bachelor's degree in French, so she only needed the some additional courses to be certificated as a K-8 teacher. She graduated quickly and secured her first teaching job. It was in her present school's pre-school program, which was run in conjunction with the local ESD. When a first grade position opened up the following year, Vivianne applied and got the job. A few years later, her principal asked, "How would you like to

teach 6th grade?" Vivianne responded with, "Are you joking me?" She ultimately agreed to take the sixth grade position to challenge herself and has held it since then. During her tenure at Pierce Harbor Elementary, she went back to River University and earned her master's degree alongside colleague who decided to go back for his degree, too.

Looking back at her schooling, Vivianne recalled her favorite teacher in school. She said it was "pretty easy" to choose which one was her favorite. Mr. Schrambaugh taught her high school French and "got her turned on to French." He was the reason why she studied abroad and studied French in college. She said, "I just wanted to be really good at it, and I don't really know why, except he just, just you know was so enthusiastic about his subject that I think it was contagious and that's what I try to be."

Vivianne easily recalled her least favorite teacher, too. She said she could not remember his real name; however, the students called him "Lizard" because "of the way he used to lick his nose." "Lizard" was her 7th grade science teacher. Vivianne remembered thinking,

> He didn't act like he wanted to be where he was. He just stood up there and gave us information. Told us to read the book, and gave us handouts, fill in the blanks, matching you know and as far as experiments all we did was write them up. We never actually did them. And I just remembered thinking this was a waste of my time.

She said, "I really hoped that I would never turn into that, because that's the time when you stop teaching. It really is! If you don't love what you're doing anymore and you can't bring the energy, you need to stay home."

Classroom Practice: Vivianne's Perceptions

Structure and routine. Vivianne said she tried "to keep her instruction time short" so they could spend the time practicing the desired skill. She said that she does not take questions

during her instructional time, but required the students to wait until she asked, "Are there any questions?" She said, "The only thing you're thinking about is your question. You stopped listening at that point and you're thinking 'I don't want to forget my question…' and I may have answered your question and you didn't even know it." Vivianne said:

> I think routines are important no matter where you are, but I think you tailor the routines to the group you have. There are years where I don't have as many regimented routines as I do this year, and that is because there is some years where the people, where the kids—students are able to extrapolate.

Part of the practice of Vivianne's classroom was the writing workshop format as mentioned previously. Vivianne said,

> I'm constantly pulling groups of kids, or small groups of kids, or single kids over to talk about what they are writing and what their goal is for next time. That's probably my biggest and I like that because I am blessed to be a single content area teacher right now. I can do that three times a day and tailor each rotation to the kids in the rotation.

Vivianne spoke of "tailoring" her instruction to meet the needs of the kids in the room many times while I interviewed her. I read an example of that "tailoring" in a document Vivianne shared with me. She used a rubric with the students for their writing during a unit on argumentation. In one category, "content, organization, and style" the rubric read, "My writing shows: A strong ability to explain the importance of the evidence presented." This was the description of the top score. Vivianne said to earn that category on an essay a student has to highlight that particular example in the writing. Therefore, each student in the class could receive a unique set of descriptions since no two essays are the same.

Curriculum and instruction. Vivianne also taught social studies to her students, but her colleagues shared the rest of the content responsibilities. In social studies, Vivianne used the *Jamer Journey* interactive simulations. She explained:

> We use their Greek and Roman, and their Egyptian interactive simulations to teach social studies and it's just project based learning. It's learning through doing, it's extremely interactive and it holds their focus, it engages them and they end up with a decent product at the end.

Vivianne explained that she modified the interactive simulations as well as the writing tasks for her students. She said:

> I take my conferences as my base for modification. So when a child does a piece of work for me and we confer about that. We look at the rubric and we look at the work, and they will say 'Well I know I did really well on this and I say 'show it to me, prove it to me,' So, they take a highlighter and they highlight their work where they did that. So, I say 'okay, look at the rubric, did you meet that expectation?'

Vivianne met with her students, looked at the writing, and then worked with them to set goals. Each student had individualized goals. Vivianne said, "My modification is mostly goal setting, conference, goal setting, back and forth." She put their goals in "I can statements." Vivianne said, "This is letting them know this is not a choice. Your target is to be able to do that, but you need it, it is not—not this fluff, I think I can do this."

Her school had a high ELL population as well as many students with IEPs and 504 plans. She said:

> Modification for IEP's or ELL, that's a different ball game. I have actually-- when I do my whole group lessons I try a lot of times to use picture clues as far as especially with

vocabulary. I find that when they have non-verbal clues with vocabulary it helps

everybody, not just my ELL kids and or even my IEP kids.

The vocabulary demands were something that Vivianne included in her modifications. She

explained, "Their academic vocabulary is very low and so that's the one that I really choose to

work on with a lot of them because they pick up the playground language a lot easier, but it's the

vocabulary-- the academic vocabulary --that's difficult for them." Vivianne elaborated, "And it's

almost like I have an individual plan for every student in my classroom, but that's the way it

should be because if you're—I don't know." While she walked through the class during

workshop times, she noticed things the whole time the students worked. She said that their

writing was so "personal" that it had to be that way. While she circulated during workshop, she

was able to catch anyone off track. She described her role:

Making sure that there is nobody sitting there afraid to ask a question, not sure they

understand, or worse yet somebody doing an entire paper and realizing that they weren't on

topic...All that work and all that effort and finding out that wasn't what I needed them to

write about.

During workshop time in writing and in social studies, Vivianne used her "traveling chair." She

said, "[I] get my chair out and I wheel it around to the tables and I sit at the end of the table…if

they have any issues we have a safe atmosphere in here where we—work on that from the

beginning of the year all the way through." She commented, "I will give them some coaching,

the other kids will give them some coaching and off we go."

Vivianne explained that she modified curriculum in other ways, oftentimes "during" the

lesson itself. She said:

I change my lesson plans depending on the kids, depending on you know what they need all

the time. So I evaluate, especially ones that I have to create myself where I have to—you

know I like to preview the information for them to give them especially with this demographic there's not a whole lot of knowledge about a lot of stuff. They don't have a lot of experiences outside of school and home.

During the lessons, Vivianne explained that one of her classroom practices was that she watched the students constantly to determine if modifications were needed on the spot. She asked herself,

Are they engaged? Am I losing somebody? What kinds of questions am I getting? Am I getting superficial, kind of listening questions, or am I getting—am I asking probing questions? Or am I asking superficial questions? The parts I modify the most are the questions I ask; I want to ask deeper questions.

Typically when the lesson was over, Vivianne said she "generally" wrote on the lesson plan itself. She commented, "If I'm going to use the lesson again, I write for next time. That's at the bottom of all of my lesson plans. For next time, do this differently, change this, figure this out, ask this question, depending on how it goes."

Tyler's Story

I met Tyler Flanigan while he served as the talented and gifted teacher in the Timber School District. Tyler had taught in the same district at its lowest income school prior to becoming a teacher on special assignment for gifted and talented. In that position, Tyler traveled to all eight of the district's elementary schools each week, working with the identified students in a pull-out program. He met with small groups of students in creative locations in the schools, to work on critical thinking skills and complex projects. At the time of the interviews, Tyler had resigned his position in the talented and gifted program to return to the general education classroom. He told me he could not change the system for the better, so he left. His new assignment was in a sixth grade class at Plateau Heights.

Data collected from Tyler included interviews about his perceptions of his classroom practices. Since he had a traveling classroom during the school year of the interviews, his interviews were limited to his previous five years at a low-SES school. Tyler's comments refer to his time at Pierce Harbor Elementary, where he taught alongside colleagues Rebecca Kezzap and Vivianne Lark. Since Tyler served in a low-income school for five years prior to the interview, his experiences were deemed rich and of great value to this research project. They also aligned with the criteria for a local knowledge case study.

Schooling and Professional Coursework

Although he found his eventual home on the east side of the state, Tyler started life on the west side. Both of his parents worked full-time when he was a child. His father "worked the night shift" at an aerospace manufacturer and his mother "worked as a medical records clerk" for a large HMO. Prior to that, his father had been "drafted to play professional baseball for Cincinnati right out of high school." He played for a time and decided he wanted to go to college, but "partied his way out by November and never made it through his freshman year." Tyler said that hearing the "student-athlete speech" about the importance of academic success was a regular event in his home.

Tyler's father went back to school when Tyler was just a toddler and graduated in business. Tyler's history of schooling was influenced first by his father. Tyler shared that his parents "worked hard" while their children were young. They were both gone to work before he and his older brother got up for the day and returned home near dinnertime. The family "lived in a single wide trailer." Tyler's mother never went to college but had a successful career in the medical records field. Tyler's father worked his way up in the aerospace manufacturing business to become a vice-president. He was transferred to the Columbia area when a new factory

opened. A few years later, he went back to school and earned an MBA from Stanford. Tyler explained:

> He now runs an international business with a group in Rome. He's kind of an efficiency expert so he moves; he only stays with the business for three or four years and then moves to another one. And so now they [his parents] split their time between Phoenix and Rome.

Tyler commented, "We don't ever really see my parents, which has been interesting because it was a source of an issue between my mom and her parents when we were growing up."

Tyler has one brother, Carson, who is 15 months older than Tyler. Tyler said:

We did not have a good childhood relationship because we were so close. In age we were 15 months apart, and we played everything the same, and so I don't think we said more than five or six words to each other the whole time we were in high school. Nobody we went to high school with knew that we were brothers.

Tyler explained more about his brother's experience in high school. Tyler said:

He had a terrible experience in school. He was an all-state basketball

player at Mt. Columbia and he did fine with that, but he was dyslexic and

didn't find that out until he went to college…And so he got, he struggled through getting

grades like 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 GPA and always did really well with math and science.

His brother continued to struggle in reading-intensive classes though. It wasn't until he was in college that someone asked him, "'Have you ever thought of looking into if you're dyslexic or not?' And he said, 'No.' And they found out he was and he can't read for more than 20 minutes at a time until his eyes get too tired and his brain stops process words and things like that." Tyler said, "He actually has a master's degree in biochemistry and bio-technology now." Carson works in southern California doing cancer research, and was just married one year ago. Tyler said, "[It]

was awesome." At the time of the interviews, Tyler said they now talk "all the time." He said his brother had "softened quite a bit" and "it's been easier to get to know each other."

The brothers shared a love for sports. Tyler explained that Carson played basketball, and Tyler played "basketball, football and baseball all the way through. Tyler said, "Love sports, thought it was going to be what I was going to do. Got to senior year of high school and blew out my hamstring and didn't play that whole year; all of the offers for anything to do after that went away." He remembered his father prompted him to take a more specialized modern language in high school, so he took Japanese. By his freshman year of college, he was in the sixth year of Japanese. Couple that interest in Japan with business, and Tyler thought he "would be an international business major." He said, "I knew long term that business meant being away from family and my dad traveled a lot. And so he was gone probably 40% of the time just traveling, and so because I had been dating my girlfriend since freshman year of high school…." Tyler married his high school girlfriend right after college. They have a two-year-old daughter. In college Tyler found that he "hated business classes" and ended up in education because of a job he got with his roommate to tutor kids at an elementary school. He commented:

I walked away the first day like 'Oh this was a ton of fun, I like that.' I will keep

doing this for a year, keep making some money and keep taking my random

classes and by February of that year I was hooked and wanted to do it. Loved

being in the school, loved being around kids.

In terms of his professional coursework, Tyler graduated from college with a certificate in elementary education and endorsements in reading and math. His first job was back at his own elementary school, where his former teachers were now colleagues. He recalled his interview for the teaching job; the interview was casual. The interview team asked, "'How is baseball going? Do you like coaching? Do you want to work here?' And so that was the bulk of my interview;

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they basically said you interviewed for seven years while you were here and so you're welcome

to have the job." Tyler recalled being "exhausted" during the first year of teaching, and

"doubting" if he wanted to teach based on "how hard the first year was." Tyler worked on a one-

year contract for leave replacement that year. He looked for jobs after that year in the same

district. He ultimately was called to interview at Pierce Harbor and spent the next five years there

working in a low-income demographic.

Tyler recalled his favorite teacher from school: Mr. Sugar. Tyler said, "because I spent so

much time with him." Mr. Sugar was a math teacher at Mt. Columbia and Tyler's baseball coach

for several years. Tyler said:

[Mr. Sugar] was a different definition of a Christian man for me because he was

still strong about things and not passive, not a very passive person in the sense

that he knows what he wants you to do and he's willing to kind of do whatever and

he'll be there until 6 in the morning or 8 o'clock at night, or whatever.

Mr. Sugar had an effect on Tyler's future career working with students. Tyler commented, "You

are going to get what I want you to get mentality that I think

has kind of bled over into me in different parts of the way I work with kids. And so I appreciate

that as kind of his gift to me, I guess, through baseball."

Tyler's least favorite teacher was still employed in the Timber School District at the time of

the interviews. He described his sixth grade teacher as "the worst teacher I had ever had. And

he was very mean, very derogatory to kids, would discipline kids by putting them in trashcans

and hanging them up on clothes hangers and stuff like that." Tyler remembered this experience:

 I think it was, there was a sense from him that it was never about us learning things; it was

about him putting in time so he could find something to do. He always talked about coaching

outside of school. He said some extremely inappropriate things to the girls in our class and

from what I hear, still does to girls in middle school.

Tyler remembered the teacher made comments to the students with IEPs. The teacher said,

"Why don't you put your book away because you could never learn this anyways so just take a

nap while we do math." Tyler recalled, "I thought if I was ever going to be a teacher I would

teach sixth grade and do it differently because of that just terrible experience that kids have to go

through."

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Implications

The research study discussed here was a case study of four teachers who work in a low-SES demographic. This case study as well as others can be extremely useful in transferring learning to a larger context. Although the goal of this research was not to make generalizations to the larger population, the goal was to offer transferrable findings. In support, Flyvbjerg (2006) offered, "Formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development; the force of a single example is underestimated" (p. 219). Guba and Lincoln (1989) corroborate that statement and posit that generalization needs to be given up as the goal in research, and rather transferability should be prized instead. This was the case here.

Study Insights

Respect for Teachers' Implicit Belief Structures. These four case studies indicate that the teachers' experiences dating back to their schooling influenced their instructional visions years later in the classroom. Rebecca shared about her sister falling through the cracks in the system, her favorite teacher, "Mr. K" and her difficult experience with a math teacher. Rebecca said in an interview that she thinks of these moments often as a teacher. Tyler shared about his favorite and his not-so-favorite teacher from school. Mr. Sugar admittedly shaped Tyler's approach to "coaching" kids through sports and academics, making the student-athlete connection from Tyler's childhood. In addition, Tyler's sixth grade teacher made such horrible impression on him that Tyler felt led to teach sixth grade. In a way, Tyler sought to remedy the wrongs that he had experienced as a child and make it right for the next generation. For Vivianne and Kari, both women shared experiences from schooling: Kari said she often "looks

for" the student in her class who needs a different path—the student who was like her in school. Vivianne loved learning as a child and seeks to instill that love daily with her own class.

Support for the transference of experience from schooling into the professional life is not new. This finding is concurrent with the literature that the vast experiences teachers have as learners can shape part of their cognition as professionals (Borg, 2003; Freeman, 1992; Holt Reynolds, 1992, Lortie, 1975; Nisbett and Ross, 1980, Nespor, 1987, Numrich, 1996).

Freedom to Differentiate. An additional implication from the findings in the data is in the importance of curriculum in the classroom. Every teacher in the study spoke to the place curriculum occupied in the structure and routine of the day. Tyler and Vivianne shared about the lack of appropriate curriculum available to support the teachers in their planning. Rebecca commented that the "district's pacing guides were oppressive" when she tried the match them with actual students in her class. Kari was given the *SpringBoard* curriculum from her school district, but shared that she modified it as she needed. She made her own graphic organizers to complement the lessons, and changed lessons from group work to individual work to whatever was needed—sometimes from period to period. Each teacher shared how he/she made accommodations to curriculum, disregarded the curriculum completely, followed it with fidelity, or supplemented with their own discoveries.

However, Common Core State Standards are in full effect soon in 45 of the 50 states. As the nation moves to sharing goals, so does the conversation about shared curriculum. With districts working hard to make sure their curriculum aligns with the standards, perhaps professional development on differentiation might be more effective   realistic. Each teacher in the study explained their curriculum modification strategies began with the students in mind. The teachers explained their goals, thought of their students, and then designed curriculum to meet their needs. The data implies that teachers need training and support to modify the path to

learning goals more than they need expensive, standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculum. Fahey and Glickman's (2012) work centers on understanding that the professional development (or teacher learning opportunities) can positively impact students learning. The more the teachers learn, the more the students learn. Since the teachers search their own students for clues as how to instruct, their instructional vision can reflect the culture and strengths of the classroom.

Equity in Schools. The findings of this research indicated that teachers in a low-SES school, in this particular case study, need a voice when resources are determined at their schools. The teachers in the study offered detailed accounts of the time they spend making curriculum fit or in worse case scenarios, searching for their own curriculum. The needs of a low-SES school are unique, and each teacher in the study corroborated that understanding. From bigger copy budgets to more available food, the school needs resources that a high-SES school may not need at all. When considering instruction, each teacher acknowledged that all the sociological impacts on a child had to be taken into consideration. The teachers' requests for different resources for their schools, ironically are continuously denied for the sake of equity. Schools struggle to do business differently, but this persistent theme is couched in the larger idea of the "grammar of schooling," or more commonly, why schools resist change (Cuban and Tyack, 1995). The data of this study implied that teachers are reflexive and responsive to their students. Perhaps we should give teachers a larger voice in the happenings of their classrooms.

From the perspective of teaching and learning, the teachers in low-SES schools in this study worked to know their students and design instruction for them and their futures. Drawing from the work of Moll et al. (1992), a counter-intuitive approach to children in poverty is to "develop innovations in teaching that draw upon the knowledge and skills found in local households…we can organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools" (p. 132). These teachers used this

strength-based approach when they made the curriculum work for the unique kids in the classroom.   This approach required that the teachers examine the lives of students outside the classroom and truly leverage them inside the classroom, building in relevance in curriculum (Moll et al., 1992).

        Trends in Education. Finally, one of the most problematic insights I gained from this research was the crossroads of these dedicated teachers and their occupational pressures. The teachers commented that not once in their careers had any expectations of the job been reduced-- far from it. They were expected to add more and perform stronger each year. The problem is the teachers continue to meet those demands placed by their schools, districts, and state. They meet the demands because they want to teach well and foster success in their classrooms. With the adoption of Common Core State Standards, they are searching for and developing curriculum to support their students, prepare them for exams, and navigate new terrain. In Columbia, the legislature adopted a new teacher evaluation program, which serves to increase the level of performance feedback and raise the performance level of teachers across the state. What it has done in the first year is put immense pressure on teachers and principals alike, moving the focus away from the students during this evaluation period. The governor of the state recently made a decision not to link teacher evaluations to students' test scores. This decision resulted in Secretary of Education Arne Duncan revoking the freedom to use some federal monies the state had previously had jurisdiction over spending. Now tighter restrictions are wrapped around the monies, which will limit districts' capabilities service students in the manner they think best.

        As the data I collected indicated, the teachers still remain dedicated to their students and their personal visions of education. Unfortunately, some teachers can only take so much and are deciding to leave the profession. An article titled *Why they Leave* (Kopkowski, 2008) addressed much of the concern around the professionalism, demands, and unrealistic expectations placed

on teachers in urban and suburban neighborhoods. Many are leaving teaching for new jobs completely or to go into administration. In addition, new teachers are not prepared to deal with the level of bureaucracy and pressures that come with a teaching position. The teachers in this study seemed to commit themselves to serving students well at the risk of being unfaithful to the prescribed curriculum and status quo. These teachers do so in a rogue fashion, but I wonder for how long they will all last?

Study Implications for Future Research

As mentioned in the introduction, the previous No Child Left Behind legislation, although a re-authorization of a previous bill, created a culture in education focused on accountability and assessment. In unparalleled ways, teachers were held accountable for their students' scores, putting immense pressure to teach to the test. The four teachers in these case studies shared their strategies and methods for adapting curriculum to fit the needs to students in their low-SES schools.

While I was interviewing the teachers, I thanked each of them for the time they offered me. Each teacher at different moments suggested that never before had they reflected so thoroughly about their teaching practices. They commented they were so busy doing their jobs that they rarely had time to reflect on their practice. Perhaps the professional development should honor these teachers' reflective needs and their implicit knowledge structures. Perhaps time in the day should be dedicated for teachers to consider the impact of their practices, both individually and collectively. Borg (2003) describes teacher cognition as the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching—what teachers know, believe, and think" (p. 81), which is situated in the literature on teacher socialization, teacher perspective, and classroom practice (Adler, 1984; Goodman and Adler, 1985; Ross, 1987, 1988). Furthermore, the relationship between teacher cognition and classroom practice is corroborated by Cochran-Smith and

Zeichner (2005) and Pajares (1992). Research tells us that reflection for educators is powerful and important.

Statewide, teachers are asked to participate in the Teacher/Principal Evaluation Project, which has raised the awareness of teachers' reflective practices in the classroom. The evaluated domains of teacher effectiveness in the TPEP require reflection from the practitioners. Knowing that teacher cognition affects instructional visions, future research in the area of teacher cognition related to student achievement would be a valuable endeavor. In a time of accountability and assessment fervor, understanding and nurturing a teacher's thoughts and beliefs benefits all parties.

Limitations

These case studies were limited simply because it followed the instructional practices and perceptions of only four teachers during a specific time of data collection, spring 2013. The teachers were purposively selected because of my familiarity with the teachers in what Thomas (2011) refers to as a local knowledge case and their current roles as teachers in low-SES schools. A specific limitation was found in Tyler's case study because, although he taught in a low-SES school for five years, he was not teaching there during the interview and observation times. His descriptions of his time in a low-SES classroom came from memory instead of from current routines. Additionally, no observations could take place because he was traveling through the Timber School District and working with gifted and talented students, only a few of whom came from low-SES backgrounds. However, Tyler's tenure in the low-SES school was a valuable period of learning for him as a professional and profoundly affected his career. For this reason, I found his interviews and documents to be of value to the study.

Because these are case studies, the research does not capture the perceptions and cognition of all teachers in low-SES schools. It does not represent teachers who were ineffective or who were not recommended by the administration.

The data collected in the study included interviews, observations, and documents from the teachers' classrooms. Observations were designed to collect data on the instructional practices of the teachers; interviews were designed to collect data on the teachers' perceptions of the instructional practices; and documents were to triangulate the data. Much of the literature conveys a picture of teachers of low-SES students as having low expectations, but the academic expectations that teachers communicate to students in poverty must be high—and maintained (Olmedo, 1997). Additionally, the literature suggests that the barrier to success that supersedes any other factor in a child's life is poverty (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2003). With that knowledge, the incredible power of teachers to influence lives begins simply with how they think.

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