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“If I Am Losing Them, I’m Going to  
Change. So That’s What We Did!”:  
Third Grade Teachers Contemplate the  
Literacy Needs of Diverse Students  
Within a Teacher Study Group

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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, "IF I AM LOSING THEM, I'M GOING TO CHANGE. SO THAT'S WHAT WE DID!": THIRD GRADE TEACHERS COMTEMPLATED THE LITERACY NEEDS OF DIVERSE STUDENTS WITHIN A TEACHER STUDY GROUP, by MEGAN A. NASON, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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## ABSTRACT

“IF I AM LOSING THEM, I’M GOING TO CHANGE. SO THAT’S WHAT WE DID!”: THIRD GRADE TEACHERS CONTEMPLATE THE LITERACY NEEDS OF DIVERSE STUDENTS WITHIN A TEACHER STUDY GROUP

by  
Megan A. Nason

According to Birchak, Connor, Crawford, Kahn, Kaser, Turner, & Short (1998), Fang, Fu, & Lamme (2004), Kennedy & Sheil (2010), and Wiliam (2008), teacher study groups can provide a supportive and collaborative professional development environment. The purpose of this study was to examine the professional development experiences of three third grade teachers working with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students in a high-needs school as they participated in a teacher study group. The adoption of national standards and pressures for all students to achieve high standardized test scores in math and reading due to Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) resulted in increased stress, anxiety, and uncertainty for the teachers participating in this study. The following research questions guided this qualitative, ethnographic case study: (1) In what ways does participation in a teacher study group impact elementary teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and understandings when teaching culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs school? (2) In what ways do teachers’ literacy practices shift as a result of engaging in teacher study groups focused on issues related to culturally, linguistically and economically diverse student populations? Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 1994) ecological models, Vygotsky’s (1978; 1986) sociocultural theory, and Ruddell and Unrau’s (2004) sociocognitive reading model served as theoretical frameworks that informed this naturalistic inquiry. Through constant

comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) of data collected through pre- and post-interviews, bi-weekly teacher study group meetings, and classroom observations, the teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings about how culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) students learn and develop literacy skills were explored. The findings of this study demonstrate how teacher study groups can provide teachers with a safe space to build trusting relationships so that they can discuss school and classroom-related uncertainties, vulnerabilities, frustrations and successes. Shifts in enacted curriculum, instruction, and beliefs occurred as the teachers in this study attempted to negotiate their beliefs about how CLED children learn through engaging in conversations related to integrated curriculum, higher-order thinking, inquiry-based learning, literacy instruction, literacy development, and the diverse needs of their students.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AYP Adequate Yearly Progress

CLED	Culturally, Linguistically, and Economically Diverse
ELL	English Language Learner
ESOL	English for Speakers of other Languages
LEP	Limited English Proficiency
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NSDC	National Staff Development Council
PDC	Professional Development Community
PDS	Professional Development School

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

As a previous elementary school teacher and literacy coach, I had a passion for working with culturally, linguistically and economically diverse students, but I often felt that I did not have the adequate knowledge or skills needed to effectively meet the social, cultural, linguistic, and academic needs of my students. Unfortunately, the school facilitated professional development trainings that I attended did not help me feel more confident about the literacy practices I was implementing in my classroom. Many of these after-school professional learning sessions left me feeling empty, tired, and frustrated. If they did not work for me, a self-driven, highly motivated educator who loved to learn, how were they going to help teachers who were not highly motivated or who became stagnant in their teaching practices and pedagogy?

My own personal experiences and frustrations with ineffective professional development models and broader societal and school issues encouraged me to want to learn more about how in-service teachers deepen their own literacy-related knowledge, beliefs, pedagogical understandings, and practices. In the beginning of my doctoral program, I took a course focused on teacher development that required my classmates and I to learn more about teacher study groups through participating in one. As I engaged in a teacher study group with fellow doctoral students, I became particularly interested in this model because I liked that it allowed teachers to choose their own topics and facilitate their own professional learning (Birchak, Connor, Crawford, Kahn, Kaser, Turner, & Short, 1998; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Since I was an elementary school

literacy coach at the time, I decided to attempt to organize teacher study groups based on teachers' interests in my school. Although at first I had the principal's permission and support, my plan quickly diminished due to a) district mandates requiring the teachers to participate in mandatory training related to standards-based classrooms, leaving them no time for teacher study groups and b) limited money in the budget to purchase books for the teacher study groups.

Now that I am no longer a literacy coach, but instead an assistant professor who teaches literacy and curriculum-focused courses, I have implemented teacher study groups with many of my undergraduate and graduate students. Through my experiences, I have found that my students seem to really enjoy their teacher study group learning experiences. My graduate students often tell me that they cannot wait to implement them in their own schools. Although this is my first official research study on this topic, I have had the opportunity to implement this model of professional development with my university students and to witness the positive results that it can have for teacher collaboration and learning.

As a university supervisor who currently supervises undergraduate students in an elementary school setting, I noticed that their mentor teachers' stress levels continued to increase due to a variety of contextual factors. One of these factors included increasing pressures placed on them by school, district, and federal mandates to demonstrate student achievement through higher standardized test scores. In August, the principal asked me if I would facilitate professional learning sessions related to differentiation once a month with her entire faculty during their planning periods. As I strengthened my relationships with some of the teachers and became more embedded in the school culture, I realized

that they were experiencing a great deal of frustration due to not only standardized testing pressures, but also due to an increasing number of impoverished and linguistically diverse students in the school and county. Additionally, the administrators began requiring the teachers to participate in weekly school-facilitated training meetings focused on the new standards and instructional frameworks due to changing curricular mandates resulting from the adoption of nationally-created standards. Learning more about the teachers' frustrations and struggles related to these factors influenced me to want to learn more about how a different, more collaborative professional development model might provide more support for teachers working with an increasing number of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs school.

My experiences caused me to become increasingly more interested in learning more about whether teacher study groups could provide teachers with a safe and supportive environment within their school that would allow them to openly discuss their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and beliefs related to teaching and learning. My frustrations related to standardized testing mandates influenced me to want to explore more about how participating in a teacher study group might impact the learning experiences of educators teaching in a "high stakes" testing grade level. Since third and fifth grade are currently considered "high stakes" testing years due to the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), I decided that I would like to focus my study on how a teacher study group might impact the knowledge, understandings, and beliefs of third grade teachers as they worked with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs elementary school. Federally-mandated educational policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) have not improved professional development experiences for

teachers or resulted in improved academic achievement for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse children. Instead, teacher morale is down for many teachers and schools are failing to meet the adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Consequently, many teachers feel unsuccessful, overwhelmed, underpaid, and unsupported.

In the next section, an overview of current research is presented to further explain the significance and rationale behind this qualitative research study. Teacher study groups can provide classroom teachers who work in high-needs schools with a supportive context within which to discuss the needs of their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students as they continue to develop pedagogical practices in their own classrooms. According to Wiliam (2008), teacher learning communities are the most influential professional development model for they encourage teachers to take action and make changes in their daily classroom practices.

### **Significance of and Rationale for My Study**

Language and literacy education researchers continue to investigate school and classroom related issues, especially in high-needs schools. Several researchers attest that schools need to provide more effective professional development opportunities for teachers (e.g., Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Fang, Fu, & Lamme, 2004; Gusky, 2000; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009; Wiliam, 2008). Others argue that schools are setting culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students up for failure through providing them with school experiences that do not lead to success (e.g., Ballenger, 1999;

Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gutierrez, 2000; Gutierrez, Asato, & Baquendano-Lopez, 2000; Hicks, 2002; Olson, 2009; Santamaria, 2009; Tse, 2010).

### **Issues Related to Ineffective Professional Development Models Currently Employed in Schools**

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) found that many teachers felt dissatisfied with their professional development experiences in schools after analyzing of data gathered from a Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) given in the 2003/2004 school year to approximately 130,000 public and private school teachers and a NSDC Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) given in the 2007/2008 school year to 150,000 teachers nationwide (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Guskey (2000) adequately portrayed the attitudes of many public school teachers about their in-school professional development experiences when he stated, “They participate in professional development primarily because of contractual obligations but often see it as something they must ‘get out of the way’ so that they can get back to the important work of educating students” (p. 4). Although it is understood that consistent, quality professional development will benefit teachers and lead to increased student achievement, many schools lack the knowledge and experience that it takes to plan and implement professional development that will positively influence teachers (Fang et al., 2004). If the topic of the training does not work right away, schools and districts will often move on to something new.

Many American schools do not provide teachers with adequate time to engage in differentiated professional development experiences that pertain to their professional needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Guskey, 2000; Sheridan et al., 2009). According to the NSDC report, American teachers stated that they had few opportunities to

collaborate with each other about their curricular, instructional, and student needs.

“American teachers spend much more time teaching students and have significantly less time to plan and learn together, and to develop high quality curriculum and instruction than teachers in other nations” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 6). Although teachers receive less than sixteen hours of professional development, they need at least fifty hours per year in order for it to positively impact their skills in the classroom and student achievement. Several researchers claim that the professional development models and processes most often employed in the United States are not as effective or internally satisfying as those implemented by other globally competitive countries (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Guskey, 2000; Sheridan et al., 2009). The NSDC recommended that American schools model the professional development experiences provided for teachers after the collaborative practices employed in European and Asian countries because it is “intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice” and could lead to student achievement (p. 5).

Guskey (2000) argued that the type of professional development typically implemented in American schools does not encourage a “school culture of continuous learning for all” (p. 15). In order for true change and reflection to occur in schools, administrators should provide adequate time and space for teachers to engage in collaborative professional learning communities (Anders et al., 2000; Birchak et al., 1998; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Guskey, 2000; Gutierrez, 2000; Kennedy, 2010; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2009; Wiliam, 2008) in a safe and trusting place where they can support each other (Guttierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeta, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997). Within these

professional learning communities, teachers can work together to help each other solve problems and improve classroom practices so that they can better meet the needs of their students. The next section is devoted to discussing some of the most significant issues that currently exist in American schools related to teaching culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse children.

### **Concerns Related to Culturally, Linguistically, and Economically Diverse Students in High-Needs Schools**

A major problem that exists for teachers and students in schools is that current teacher education programs and professional development models are not preparing teachers to effectively teach children from different cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds (Gutierrez, 2000). While teachers admit that they do not know how to provide adequate support for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students, they also claim that they are not provided with effective training or professional development support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Hicks, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Teale, 2009). Teachers are struggling to support the diverse needs of the students in the classroom, especially those working in high-needs schools with growing poverty rates and ELL populations. As people from other parts of the world continue to migrate to the United States, many public school educators are beginning to see a significant increase in the diverse cultural and linguistic make up of the students attending their schools (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Kozol, 2005; Tse, 2001). In fact, the population of English Language Learners (ELL) is growing faster than that of English-speaking students (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010b), in 1979, 3.8 million (or 9%) children spoke a language other than

English in their home compared to 10.9 million children (or 21%) in 2008. During the 2007-08 school year, the percentage of ELL students who attended high-poverty schools, or schools where more than seventy-five percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, was five times greater than ELL students who attended low-poverty schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010a). Forty-six percent of the students in these high-poverty schools were Hispanic, thirty-four percent were black, fourteen percent were White, four percent were Asian/Pacific Islander, and two percent were American Indian/Alaska Native.

In addition to increasing cultural and linguistic diversity rates, our nation is currently suffering from rising poverty and unemployment rates. In the United States, the poverty rate is determined by “poverty thresholds” reported by the Census Bureau or “...the annual amount of cash income minimally required to support families of various sizes” (National Poverty Center, 2011). In 2007, the Center for American Progress reported that 12.6 percent of people residing in the United States lived below the poverty line. According to the National Poverty Center (2011), this rate increased to 15.1 percent in 2010, the highest poverty rate since 1993. This organization also reports that the poverty rate is highest for particular sub-groups, specifically blacks (27.4 percent), Hispanics (26.6 percent), and single mothers (31.6 percent).

Hicks (2002) reminded her audience that while children from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds are often viewed by society as the students who live in poverty, many white children also live in poverty. The National Poverty Center (2011), reported that 9.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites are “poor”. Many researchers argue that American schools are setting children who live in poverty up for failure because they are

not meeting the academic or social needs of these children (Ballenger, 1999; Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gutierrez, 2000; Gutierrez, Asato, & Baquendano-Lopez, 2000; Hicks, 2002; Olson, 2009; Santamaria, 2009; Tse, 2010). They also believe that recent educational policies and practices are designed so that they further homogenize culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. In fact, some researchers claim that many schools teach to the “middle class” and are structured so that they maintain the cultural and social structures of society (Hicks, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Olson, 2009).

Teachers’ views about “class” can sometimes have a negative impact on students (Gonzalez, Moll, Floyd-Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, & Amanti, 1993; Hicks, 2002; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996, Panofsky, 2003). Gonzalez et al. (1993) stated,

Educational institutions do not view working-class minority students as emerging from households rich in social and intellectual resources.

Rather than focusing on the knowledge these students bring to school and using it as a foundation for learning, schools have emphasized what these students lack in terms of the forms of language and knowledge sanctioned by the schools. This emphasis on so-called disadvantages has provided justification for lowered academic expectations and inaccurate portrayals of these children and their families. (p. 3)

Hicks (2002) claimed that “... treatment in school systems and in society at large can be oppressively hegemonic in ways that are submerged because of the hidden nature of class consciousness in the United States” (p. 4). She also pointed out that although culturally and linguistically diverse students are researched more frequently, many white children

are also homogenized by the way that schools are currently structured. She explained that “class” is often overlooked in the research and that students classified as being members of the “working-class” are expected to adhere to “middle-class discourses” or a “middle-class educational system” (p. 5).

Another issue that exists in today’s society is that many schools continue to put both ELL and students from poverty in lower-level ability groups or in pull-out programs where they commonly receive thirty minutes of instruction in an environment that is completely isolated from their classroom. Many researchers feel that homogenous grouping is not beneficial for learners (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Kozol, 2005; Olson, 2009). In addition, lack of knowledge about second language acquisition on the part of educators often leads to the misplacement or tracking of these students in speech and language or special education programs. Often, tracking can occur due to the fact that teachers lack knowledge about the histories and backgrounds of cultural groups. According to Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003), teachers may feel that all members of a particular cultural group share the same experiences, skills, and interests as they unknowingly stereotype members from a certain cultural group as being a certain type of learner and, therefore, place all of these students in a homogenous ability group. They suggested that teachers should attempt to become more familiar with each individual child’s cultural, community, and family history. More research is needed that explores teachers’ beliefs and understandings about their students’ social classes (Hicks, 2002).

Since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, teachers have experienced increased anxiety and stress due to the emphasis placed upon standardized test scores and teacher accountability. This federal policy has had a harmful impact on

teacher morale, pedagogical freedom, and student achievement in culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) schools (Fang et al., 2004; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Gutierrez, 2000; Kozol, 2005). Many school administrators live in fear because they worry that they will not make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress), which is determined by their students' standardized test scores. If schools do not make AYP, they are placed on a "Needs Improvement" list and will suffer severe consequences if they remain on this list for consecutive years.

Many schools in high-poverty areas purchase scripted, prepackaged programs that are test-focused and skill-based to improve reading scores (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Kozol, 2005). Gerstl-Pepin and Woodside-Jiron (2005) claim, "Since high-stakes accountability requires the use of statistical tests and measures, determinations of schooling effectiveness has been reduced to standardized test scores" (p. 234). Collins (2003) refers to this phenomenon as "...a hegemonic view" and argues that proponents of this view feel that "...poor children need highly regulated forms of instruction and remediation" (p. 97). Other opponents of this phenomenon feel that students receiving skill-based instruction typically do not learn to apply higher level thinking skills, to become independent learners, or to see themselves as contributing members to the classroom community (Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Woodside-Jiron & Gehsmann, 2009).

This type of scripted instructional method undermines the strengths and creativity that many teachers possess for they are required to "read" exactly what is written (Fang et al., 2004; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Gutierrez, 2000; Kozol, 2005).

Gutierrez (2000) argues, "...we want our teachers to help our children become knowledgeable and informed learners' and ultimately, citizens. Yet, we continue to support reforms that often serve to further de-skill and devalue or teachers" (p. 290). Practices such as these have both cognitive and social consequences for children.

In order for all students to have equitable educational opportunities, schools and teachers need to change how they organize learning and their understanding of the role that culture plays in learning (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gutierrez, 2000; Ruddell & Unrau, 2001). In the next section, I explain how my research investigation investigated some of these broader societal, political, and structural educational issues.

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

Although a great deal of research has focused on the negative issues surrounding professional development in the United States, more research is needed that demonstrates the positive impact that particular types of professional development models and processes can have on teacher growth and student achievement (Burbank and Kauchak, 2003; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Guskey, 2000; Kennedy, 2010; Kennedy & Sheil, 2010; Musanti and Pence, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2009; Wiliam, 2008). Most research studies emphasize what schools in the United States are not doing and compare our professional development programs, teachers, and students to the programs, teachers, and students in other countries who appear to outperform us. Schools currently evaluate their professional development practices through documenting the topics covered, time allotted, credit-hours earned, and teachers in attendance, rather than how they influence teachers and students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Musanti and Pence (2010) stated, "As more professional development programs emphasize the need to create spaces

for teachers to interact, team teach, and educate each other, more research is needed that explores how these interactions impact teachers' roles and the way teachers negotiate identities and construct knowledge" (p. 87). In this research investigation, I examined the learning and teaching experiences of three third grade teachers working in a high-needs school as they discussed systematic, societal, pedagogical, and instructional issues within the context of bi-weekly teacher study group meetings. The following research questions guided this qualitative case study:

- ❖ In what ways does participation in a teacher study group impact elementary teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings when teaching culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs school?
- ❖ In what ways do teachers' literacy practices shift as a result of engaging in teacher study groups focused on issues related to culturally, linguistically and economically diverse student populations?

According to the NSDC report, "Professional learning can have a powerful effect on teacher skills and knowledge and on student learning if it is sustained over time, focused on important content, and embedded in the work of professional learning communities that support ongoing improvements in teacher's practice" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 7). Effective professional development should focus on student learning, relevant student population needs, curriculum content, and school improvement goals and initiatives. It should encourage teachers to form strong relationships with each other and give them time to collaborate so that they can support each other as they engage in conversations about ways to improve their practice and support their students. More empirical research studies are needed to help literacy researchers and professional

development specialists understand how they can better support teachers and students through providing effective professional development opportunities that are based on the diverse needs of the students in the classroom. A critical need exists for additional empirical studies that demonstrate how different professional development processes within particular models impact the skills, behaviors, and dispositions of teachers and how meaningful change can occur (Sheridan et al., 2009). Educational researchers need to strive for a more comprehensive understanding of the beliefs, knowledge, skills, and practices of teachers. Even more specifically, research is needed that demonstrates the impact that collaborative professional learning communities focused on topics related to cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity can have on teacher's instructional practices and student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

Throughout this research study, I relied on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Models of Human Development to help me understand more about how the social forces existing in today's society impact students, teachers, and the overall classroom environment. According to the International Encyclopedia of Education (1994), "Ecological models encompass an evolving body of theory and research concerned with the processes and conditions that govern the lifelong course of human development in the actual environments within which human beings live" (p. 37). Situating my inquiry within the context of this theoretical perspective helped me gain a more comprehensive understanding of how various ecological factors impacted the participants' professional development and classroom experiences as they worked with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. An enhanced understanding about how particular social factors such as poverty and unemployment rates impact children also have

implications for helping middle-class teachers more effectively meet the needs of the students in their classroom.

To complement Brofenbrenner's Ecological Model, I utilized Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) sociocultural theory and Ruddell and Unrau's (2004) sociocognitive model of reading to help me gain a more comprehensive understanding about how teachers learn in a socially-mediated environment and their beliefs related to student development in literacy. Teachers from middle-class backgrounds should recognize that their experiences, knowledge, thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes may differ from those of their students (Hicks, 2002; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Throughout this qualitative inquiry, I continued to make connections to the key ideas embedded within sociocultural theory and a sociocognitive reading model as I attempted to interpret the teachers' literacy-related knowledge, beliefs, understandings and practices.

The teachings of Paulo Freire (1998) in *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* can inspire teachers to become "change agents" or people who advocate for systematic changes in education. Freire's teachings can remind educators that they must continue to reflect on their own experiences, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and pedagogical practices. Positive changes may occur if teachers remain open-minded to new ideas. Freire writes, "Thinking critically about practice, of today or yesterday, makes possible the improvement of tomorrow's practice" (p. 44). Teachers deserve and desperately need time to reflect on their practice, collaborate with colleagues, and search for answers. Schools should provide them with the time and space to participate in professional development opportunities that allow them to engage in critical dialogue about societal factors that impact their students and pedagogical aspects that

pertain to their own personal professional interests and needs. The teachers who participated in my study negotiated and discussed their experiences, thoughts, concerns, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about literacy-related teaching and student learning.

This research study adds additional understanding and knowledge to the language and literacy educational field through exploring the literacy-related experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and understandings of elementary school teachers in a high-needs school within the context of a socially-mediated teacher study group. Through this qualitative inquiry, I explored how collaboration in a trusted and supportive space allowed the teachers participating to engage in conversations about their beliefs about CLED students and their knowledge and understandings related to literacy instruction in their classrooms. The teachers engaged in conversations related to literacy instruction, literacy development, and the diverse needs of their students. Conclusions were drawn that explain how a teacher study group can provide a safe context for professional learning so teachers can experience shifts in their beliefs, knowledge, understandings, and overall classroom instruction. Teacher educators, school administrators, county officials, and state and federal policy makers are provided with ideas for how they can support teachers and students through providing time for teachers to participate in socially-mediated teacher learning communities.

### **Theories That Situate My Study**

Several important educational theories informed my research design and questions. Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) ecological theories were used to help me more comprehensively understand the impact that numerous contextual factors have on students' ability to achieve and develop language and literacy skills in school.

Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) sociocultural theory and Ruddell and Unrau's (2004) sociocognitive model were used to help me interpret the social nature of both teacher and student learning processes. Teachers' and students' cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds were taken into consideration as a means for making inferences about literacy-related knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and practices. A sociocognitive construct known as funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) was used as a lens to view the social interactions and literacy practices occurring in my participants' classrooms.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) ecological models of human development were first developed in the 1970's as a theory to describe the processes that occur as human beings develop. In this particular theoretical framework, "The ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 39). Bronfenbrenner used this model to describe how a child's interactions with multiple factors surrounding him or her in the world impact human development.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), two underlying propositions are essential for understanding how social factors impact human development. He explained that the first proposition, or "proximal processes", maintains that the interactions between a person and the objects, symbols, or people in their immediate environment play a significant role in impacting the development of the person. Children's interactions with parents or with another child play an important role in their development processes, especially when those interactions occur regularly and over an extended amount of time.

When this proposition is applied to a classroom setting, one can see that a students' literacy development is impacted by the types of planned activities, the instructional models employed, the amount and duration of social interaction between the students and the teacher and the students, the amount of time provided for independent vs. group reading, etc.

The second proposition in Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological models of human development states that "The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal process effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment – both immediate and more remote" (p. 38). In other words, factors in the child's outside environment can have a considerable impact on their development. These factors may not necessarily have a direct effect on the child, but they can still impact the way that he or she functions in his or her immediate environment. For example, outside environmental contexts such as their home, neighborhood, peer group, or local religious community can significantly impact the child's experiences in their immediate environment.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1994) came up with five primary layers that exist in a child's environment. Each of these layers plays a primary role in the development of children. The first and innermost layer of this model is the microsystem. This layer of the child's ecological environment includes the interactions that occur in his or her everyday setting. These interactions may take place in a child's school, home, neighborhood, church, peer group, or in the parents' workplace. Bronfenbrenner labeled the second layer the mesosystem. This layer is composed of the interactions that occur between microsystems. An example of this layer could include interactions between a child's

parent and his or her school or peer group. The third layer of this model is called the exosystem. In this layer, children may have interactions with their parents' microsystems, such as with their parent's friends or workplaces. The exosystem can also include the child's or parents' interactions with the current economic system, political system, educational system, government system, or religious system. A fourth layer is called the macrosystem. The macrosystem includes the child's and families' values, beliefs, customs, and social systems. A final layer, known as the chronosystem, includes changes in personal and societal conditions that may occur throughout their lives.

The child's interactions within each of these layers play a significant role in his or her overall development. If teachers have a better understanding about how each of these factors can influence a child's development, then they can more effectively meet the needs of the child in school. In addition, they can plan classroom experiences and implement instructional practices that are more closely aligned to each student's cultural, linguistic, and economic experiences. In my research study, I considered Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) propositions and environmental layers as I examined the classroom activities and social interactions that occurred in the teachers' and students' immediate school environments.

### **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory**

Learning more about teachers' professional development experiences within a sociocultural theoretical framework could potentially lead to improved school experiences for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). Throughout this research inquiry, connections were made to sociocultural theory as I examined the socially-mediated learning experiences of the teachers as they

shared and discussed their school and classroom-related experiences within the context of our teacher study groups. According to Gutierrez, Baqedano-Lopez, and Tejada (1999), teachers can construct knowledge through dialogue within a sociocultural construct. As they socially interacted with each other, the teachers shared their experiences and attempted to negotiate their beliefs and understandings about how their CLED students developed literacy skills.

Although I made connections to sociocultural theory as I examined the learning experiences of the teachers participating in this study, many researchers have relied on it as they attempted to conceptualize the way that children learn and develop language and literacy through their social interactions and experiences in the world (e.g., Au, 2000; Heath, 1984; Jimenez, 2004; Kutz, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Vygotsky (1978) claimed that “children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88). Children engage in social interactions within their family and community environments from the moment they are born. Upon entering school, children continue to engage in social interactions with their teachers and peers, but the rules, procedures, and language used to guide these interactions may be very different from what they are used to experiencing at home (Au, 2000; Heath, 1984; Hicks, 2002; Jimenez, 2004; Kutz, 1997). Sociocultural theory can and should inform teachers’ instructional practices due to its emphasis on providing students with many opportunities to engage in social interactions with peers and to participate in conversation and dialogue about topics that are relevant and meaningful to their lives. Experiences such as these will promote natural language and literacy development for all children (Goodman and Goodman, 1990). In turn, it gives researchers a theory that can inform their classroom-based research studies. As I

observed in the teachers classrooms, I made connections between sociocultural theory and the social-mediated literacy activities occurring in the classroom.

According to Panofsky (2003), most research related to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has focused on the way that people engage in negotiation through social interactions. Panofsky claimed that few research studies have focused on issues relating to "...the dynamics of power, position, social locations in the social interaction of learning" (p. 411). Therefore, she encouraged researchers to focus their studies on the impact that social class can have on students' relationships with peers and teachers, self-confidence, language and literacy development, and overall learning experiences in public schools. Panofsky's ideas demonstrate how sociocultural theory can inform research that is focused on learning more about the ways that teachers interact with and treat culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in schools. She stated, "For some children, the lived experiences of schooling constructs psychological phenomena of negative emotions and motivations toward school and restricts access to experiences that can promote the development of language, memory, logical reasoning and intelligence" (p. 426). She implied that school structures and daily classroom practices may restrict culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students' access to learning experiences that may promote natural development of these skills. As the teachers' beliefs about CLED students were explored, conclusions were drawn regarding how the teachers' beliefs may have impacted the types of activities that they provided for the students in their classrooms.

As I engaged in this research inquiry, I also made connections to the sociocultural construct know as "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992). Moll et al. defined "funds of

knowledge” as being the “...historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Several researchers argue that the type of cognitive knowledge that is expected of students in schools in the U.S. is sometimes different than what they can demonstrate. Consequently, a mismatch between the knowledge and experiences of the teacher and the student sometimes exists (Au, 2000; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Many researchers also claim that many teachers do not value the “funds of knowledge” that children bring into the classroom, especially the diverse linguistic capabilities of some students (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2000; Teale, 2009; Tse, 2001). As Au (2000) and Heath (1983) demonstrated, some children may have different ways of socializing or interacting within the classroom due to their diverse cultural and linguistic knowledge and experiences.

To help bridge the connection between the knowledge often expected in American schools and that of diverse students’ families, cultures, and communities, Moll et al. (1992) recommended that teachers find out as much as they can about their students’ “funds of knowledge”. Santamaria (2010) supported this idea when she proposed that students’ daily cultural and linguistic practices and home and community literacy experiences have a considerable influence on their academic achievement in school. Teachers should learn as much as they can about the daily experiences, literacy practices, linguistic tools, and other family and community elements of their students so that they can begin to use this knowledge as resources in the classroom (Gutierrez, 2000; Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003; Gonzalez et al., 1993). As Garcia and Kleifgen (2010) suggested, “Skilled teachers can provide space in the classroom that empowers students

to affirm their linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge even as they add to their repertoire of knowledge and communicative practices in an additional language” (p. 121). Throughout this study, I made connections to sociocultural constructs such as culturally-relevant pedagogy, culturally-responsive teaching, and funds-of-knowledge as I investigated the literacy-related experiences, knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and practices of three third grade teachers as they participate in a teacher study group.

### **Ruddell and Unrau’s Sociocognitive Model of Reading**

A final theory that informed my research inquiry was Ruddell and Unrau’s (2004) sociocognitive reading model. Ruddell and Unrau suggested that teachers’ personal sociocognitive values and beliefs about reading and schooling inform their instructional practices, and thus the language and literacy development of students. This sociocognitive model includes key concepts related to language development and learning. One of the key concepts behind this model is that “Language and reading performance is directly related to the reader’s environment” (p. 1463). This concept is related to sociocognitive theory (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986) and was kept in mind as I observed the established reading environment in my participants’ classrooms. Teachers should establish learning environments that provide children with opportunities to use both oral and written language to communicate, as well as authentic literacy experiences that involve reading and listening to interesting books.

Another key concept of their reading model states, “The driving force behind language performance and reading growth is the reader’s need to obtain meaning” (p. 1463). In order to encourage students to want to obtain meaning, teachers should find ways to keep students engaged and interested in what they are reading. Therefore, it is

essential that teachers provide students with opportunities to read real texts and support them in making connections between the texts and their own background knowledge and life experiences (Freeman and Freeman, 2000; Jimenez, 2004). Since students often rely on their prior knowledge and beliefs when reading texts, teachers should build background knowledge and be “highly sensitive to student understanding of four types of meaning: text, task, source of authority, and sociocultural meanings” (Ruddell and Unrau, 2004, p. 1466). Teachers should also incorporate texts that appeal to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students. I made connections to these concepts as I observed the literacy activities and social interactions occurring in my participants’ classrooms.

One final key concept embedded in Ruddell and Unrau’s (2004) reading model is that “Readers construct meanings not only of printed manuscripts but also of events, speech, and behaviors as they ‘read’ gestures, images, symbols, signs, and signals that are embedded in a social and cultural environment” (p. 1463). Teachers should incorporate gestures, images, symbols, signs, and signals into their instructional practices to support learners as they construct meaning (Fishkin, 2010; Freeman and Freeman, 2000). As I observed the literacy practices of the teachers participating in my study, I made note of the strategies that they incorporated as they supported students’ construction of meaning. This research study investigated the impact that a teacher study group had on the third grade teachers’ knowledge, pedagogical beliefs, and understandings about how children develop language and literacy practices. Ruddell and Unrau’s sociocognitive model served as a theoretical lens through which I viewed the literacy-related experiences, actions, and interactions of my participants and their students.

## Conclusion

Teachers in the United States need more time to engage in collaborative professional learning environments with colleagues. This research study provides information for policy makers that demonstrate why additional funding is needed to provide teachers with more time to participate in collaborative, professional development opportunities. If we are truly in a “race to the top”, then we need to vastly improve the types and amount of professional learning opportunities that are currently provided for teachers.

In upcoming chapters, I explain further how I explored the literacy-related knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and practices of third grade teachers as they participated in a teacher study group. I focused specifically on their perceptions related to how culturally, linguistically and economically diverse students learn and develop literacy skills. I explored the literacy practices and social interactions that occurred in their classrooms to see if instructional shifts occurred. I also examined how the collaborative processes occurring in their teacher study groups seemed to influence their beliefs about CLED students and their knowledge and understandings about literacy development and instruction. My research questions and case study design were embedded within a theoretical framework guided by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 1994) ecological models, Vygotsky’s (1978; 1986) sociocultural theory, and Ruddell and Unrau’s (2004) sociocognitive model of reading.

In the next chapter, I highlight the need for this research study through reviewing pertinent literature related to diversity and the academic achievement gap, issues related to school structures and schooling experiences for culturally, linguistically, and

economically diverse students, and recent research related to collaborative professional development models. I also demonstrate how this qualitative case study addressed some of the gaps that currently exist in the language and literacy field.

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## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

My experiences as a previous elementary school teacher, former literacy coach, and current teacher educator led me to develop a research inquiry that investigated the professional development opportunities that elementary school teachers experience in today's climate of accountability and programs. A qualitative case study design was used to investigate the experiences of three third grade teachers as they participated in a collaborative professional development model in the form of a teacher study group. Throughout this study, I explored the knowledge, beliefs, and understandings of these teachers as they worked with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse children in a high-needs school. In addition, I examined their literacy-related classroom practices and determined if any instructional changes occurred in their classrooms as a result of participating in a teacher study group. The teachers discussed the needs of their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students while participating in bi-weekly professional development meetings.

Throughout this research investigation, I attempted to support elementary school teachers who worked with children from diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds through providing them with a safe and supportive place to engage in professional development that related to their own interests. The findings and conclusions uncovered during this study provide educational researchers in the language and literacy field with more information related to how teachers' literacy-related knowledge, beliefs, and understandings can shift as they participate in a teacher study group.

In the remaining parts of this chapter, I provide a thorough overview of research related to issues that culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse children currently face in schools. I include examples of relevant research that highlight the widespread feelings of dissatisfaction that some educators have towards the literacy practices and professional development models that are currently implemented in high-needs schools. Additionally, I summarize current research studies that explored professional learning communities that incorporate collaborative models such as teacher study groups. I also make a claim for why further research is needed that focuses on this topic. Finally, I explain how my research investigation informs language and literacy researchers, educators, and policy makers about the implications that the implementation of teacher study groups in schools can have for teachers and students in high-needs schools.

### **Cultural, Linguistic, and Economic Diversity and the Achievement Gap**

Several researchers maintain that a wide achievement gap continues to exist between mainstream populations (consisting of White middle- and upper-class students) and culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse student populations (e.g., Allington, 1983; Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Kozol, 2005; Rothstein, 2004, Valenzuela, 1999). While some researchers contribute this achievement gap to school structural issues (e.g., Collins, 2003; Fang et al., 2004; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Gutierrez, 2000; Kozol, 2005; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996; Portes & Salas, 2009; Woodside-Jiron & Gehsmann, 2009), others claim that a cultural mismatch exists for minority populations between schools and the home (Au, 2000; Gonzalez et al., 1993;

Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002; Jimenez, 2004; Kutz, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al, 1992). Some researchers argue that English language learners are being set up for failure in American schools and that this issue contributes considerably to the achievement gap (e.g., Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gonzalez, Moll, Folyd-Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, & Amanti, 1993; Gutierrez, 2000; Gutierrez et al, 2000; Jimenez, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Olson, 2009; Tse, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). Discrepancies between the socio-economic statuses of middle-class teachers and the students that they teach may also significantly attribute to this phenomenon (Allington, 1983; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Hicks, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Portes & Salas, 2009; Woodside-Jiron & Geshman, 2009). In the next section, I provide an extensive explanation for each of these arguments and demonstrate how multiple factors continue to contribute to the achievement gap that exists in schools in the United States.

### **Issues Related to the Way Schools Structure Literacy Curriculum**

Multiple researchers have concluded that the way schools and classrooms structure literacy curriculum is a major factor that contributes to the achievement gap and school inequalities that exist in America's current educational system (Collins, 2003; Fang et al., 2004; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Gutierrez, 2000; Hicks, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996; Moll et al., 1992; Portes & Salas, 2009; Woodside-Jiron & Gehsmann, 2009). Schools are not providing equal educational opportunities for all children, especially children from diverse cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers are not receiving adequate preparation to help them acquire the knowledge and

skills they need to provide all children with equal opportunities in the classroom (Collins, 2003; Gutierrez, 2000; Hicks, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Olson, 2010; Portes & Salas, 2009).

In his studies of inner-city public schools in high poverty areas, Kozol (2005) found that the teachers typically used scripted programs that incorporated call-and-response type activities. He called these programs, “scripted rote-and-drill curricula” and attested that urban schools “...embraced a pedagogy of direct command and absolute control” (p. 64). He argued,

Teachers working in a school like this have little chance to draw upon their own inventiveness or normal conversational abilities.

In the reading curriculum in use within the school, for instance, teachers told me they had been forewarned to steer away from verbal deviations or impromptu bits of conversation since each passage of instruction needed to be timed...and any digression from the printed plans could cause them problems if a school official or curriculum director happened to be in the building at the time” (p. 71).

Kozol argued that many people expect that children from middle class and upper-middle class communities will go to college and do well in school. He explained that these expectations are “...rooted in demonstrable advantages in what their schools provide to them: experienced instructors, reasonably small classes, well-appointed libraries, plenty of computers with sophisticated software...” (p. 62). He further noted that many people blame “insufficient funds” or “periodic ‘fiscal crises’”, but that the truth should be

attributed to insufficient funds. He also maintained that the schools in our society seem to have one teaching method for poor kids and another one for “middle-class” children.

Collins (2003) engaged in research that investigated how a self-directed, literature- focused language arts program developed around “best practices”, discussion, and inquiry-based practices might impact the literacy development experiences of students from high-poverty communities. He also alluded to the “reading wars” or the debate between phonics-based and whole language instruction and argued, “A hegemonic view argues that poor children need highly regulated forms of instruction and remediation. The hegemonic view is countered by an argument that all children need a pedagogy of learner-directed ‘authentic’ experiences with a wide range of literacy practices and literary texts” (p. 97). He claimed that factors such as increasing literacy failure and social inequality continue to contribute to the debate about how students from impoverished backgrounds best develop literacy skills in school.

Portes and Salas (2009) argued that schools, education, and educational policy in America need to be restructured so that culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students are provided with the same opportunities as middle-class, Caucasian children to develop literacy skills in the classroom. According to Portes and Salas, children from poor backgrounds are often “undereducated” or receive early literacy school experiences that focus on the remediation of skills taught in isolation from authentic reading practices, thus resulting in inequitable literacy development. Instead of holding low expectations for impoverished students, they argued that schools must reorganize literacy instruction so that children from low socio-economic backgrounds receive opportunities to participate in engaging activities that allow them to work within

their zone of proximal development and develop higher order thinking skills. “These programs need to reinforce the child’s development in valued areas with respect to school success in both formal and informal settings. Such communities can promote self-regulation, motivation, higher-order thinking, and orient students placed at risk cumulatively toward grade-level academic learning” (p. 107). They further maintained that children from impoverished communities develop literacy differently than other students, but that schools should still provide them with equitable opportunities to develop literacy skills in despite of their social status. “A developmentally sensitive and mediated learning approach can bring an ever more diverse society closer to equity in literacy, thus breaking down a powerful engine of group-based inequality and poverty” (p. 109).

Gutierrez (2000) agreed that students will only have equitable educational opportunities, if schools and teachers change how they organize learning, their understanding of learning, and their understanding of the role that culture plays in learning. She argued, “Substantive change, of course, will not occur unless there is an equitable distribution of human and material resources in schools and in the larger society” (p. 293). Garcia and Kleifgen (2010) expressed their oppositions towards the inequitable classroom practices often implemented in classrooms and schools containing culturally and linguistically diverse students when they commented, “The political climate has overshadowed these empirical findings, and language has been treated as a problem rather than a resource. The problem does not reside in students or their language, but rather in classroom practices that have been shaped by misguided educational policies” (p. 122).

Many researchers claim that the literacy expectations in most classrooms are based on the teachers' literacy-related experiences and values (e.g., Collins, 2003; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Gutierrez, 2000; Hicks, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996; Portes & Salas, 2009; Woodside-Jiron & Gehsmann, 2009). Consequently, children who do not come from middle class families may suffer because they may have difficulties gaining access to the literacy practices implemented by middle-class teachers who maintain a deficit view of children who are from working-class families, or perceive them as economically disadvantaged or developmentally behind (Hicks 2001). Often times, these children are tracked into ability groups that tend to focus on basic skills rather than higher-order thinking skills (Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992; Woodside-Jiron & Gehsmann, 2009). Hicks (2002) referred to the schooling experiences that many non-middle class children receive as “undereducation” and suggested that the only way to alleviate this problem is to implement “...a meaningful systematic educational restructuring that aligns educational excellence (literacy development) and equity (opportunity to learn regardless of social status)” (p. 108). Levinson, Foley, & Holland (1996) argued that school structures further marginalize non-dominant populations for they “...draw students into dominant projects of nationalism and capitalist labor formation, or bind them even more tightly to systems of class, gender, and race inequality” (p. 1). They further contended that school experiences can cause some culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students to form a negative self-identity and view themselves as a failure.

Valenzuela (1999) addressed a similar phenomenon that she referred to as “subtractive schooling”. She claimed that many culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students placed in a “regular-track” are faced with the “subtractive” processes of schools. She suggested that “subtractive schooling” occurs when schools, “...divest these youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure” (p. 3). Instead of utilizing students’ knowledge, experiences, and linguistic capabilities as resources in the classrooms, many current school and classroom structures take these resources away from students. Valenzuela argued that schools are “...organized formally and informally in ways that fracture students’ cultural and ethnic identities, creating social, linguistic, and cultural divisions among the students and between the students and the staff” (p. 5).

More research is needed that examines teachers’ beliefs about how their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students’ develop literacy skills. Additional research is also needed that explores how teachers structure literacy curriculum and the impact that this structure may have on the literacy development and achievement of CLED students. In this study, I investigated three third grade teachers’ beliefs and understandings about how economically diverse students in their classrooms developed literacy skills. Although cultural and linguistic diversity was considered, an emphasis was placed on economic diversity due to the fact that more than fifty percent of the student population came from impoverished backgrounds. I also explored how the teachers’ beliefs and understandings about literacy development shifted and changed as they participated in teacher study groups and how these changes impacted the types of literacy activities they implemented in their classrooms.

## **Current Challenges Related to the School Experiences of Culturally Diverse Students**

Teachers who work with diverse student populations are not always cognizant of the fact that as students enter their classroom, they bring various experiences and “funds of knowledge” in with them, or “knowledge pertaining to the social, economic, and productive activities of people in a local region” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). Students’ knowledge, experiences, and beliefs are sometimes not valued or become unimportant due to the fact that they are different from those of the teacher (Au, 2004; Gonzalez, 1993; Jimenez, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992; Santamaria, 2010). Individual students are exposed to a variety of beliefs, behaviors, traditions, customs, and socialization and communication patterns in their homes and communities. Various researchers have discussed the implications that out of the home cultural experiences can have for students in schools, especially for students who are members of a non-dominant racial or ethnic group (e.g., Au, 2000; Gonzalez et al., 1993; Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002; Jimenez, 2004; Kutz, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al, 1992; Portes & Salas, 2009). Portes and Salas (2009) argued,

Over time, differing behaviors, beliefs, expectations, values, practices, and experiences are constructed and sustained by participants as individuals, and as members of groups – socialization patterns that may or may not be linked directly to what is required in school or to their potential to make successful adaptations to outside demands made by schools. (p. 102)

For many culturally diverse students, a mismatch occurs between the socialization and language patterns they have formed in their out of school communities and those expected in their school communities (Heath, 1993).

Levinson, Foley, & Holland (1996) comment, “Groups identifying themselves perhaps by ethnicity, perhaps by moral orientation, may feel unfairly subjected to the educational values of a more powerful group” (p. 1). According to Rothstein (2004), the achievement gap continues to widen as many educators, teachers, and school administrators maintain a “cultural deficit model” and view the homes, languages, and communities of many cultures as “inferior” or “deficit.” Ahlquist, Gorski, and Montano (2011) argued that curriculum in public schools have “...promoted a deficit ideology about racial, social class, and language difference...Deficit ideologies serve to justify the existing racial and class hierarchies. If poor white people, and poor people of color are taught that they are ‘less than’ the dominant white culture, they more readily accept their ‘place’ in the existing hegemonic hierarchies” (p. 11). Educational researchers who maintain a deficit view assume that children from diverse cultural, linguistic or low socioeconomic backgrounds are at a disadvantage because they have not had the same types of literacy experiences in the home as middle class children. For example, they may assume that CLED students have had few books read aloud to them or that literacy is not modeled as often in the home environment. Additionally, they may presuppose that the parents are not as educated, and therefore unable to provide their children with authentic literacy experiences in the home. A cultural deficit view can lead to “...diminished literacy acquisition opportunities” for these culturally diverse students because they do not receive the same literacy experiences and opportunities as other

mainstream students and are often tracked into ability groups that focus on basic skills and remediation (Portes & Salas, 2009, p. 101). Consequently, children's literacy development is often related to their family cultures and based on their parents' educational levels.

Currently, many classrooms are isolated from the social networks and resources of families and communities since teachers do not always tap into the "funds of knowledge" of their students (Au, 2004; Gonzalez et al., 1993; Jimenez, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992; Santamaria, 2010). In fact, many teachers view culture as a tangible item or observable action such as dances, food, or folklore (Gonzalez et al., 1993). They do not realize that culture should be viewed as a process or lived experience within the context of a student's family and community. In turn, a number of teachers do not value or utilize the vast knowledge and experiences of minority, working-class families (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 1993; Gutierrez et al., 2000; Teale, 2009; Tse, 2001). Some teachers may even hold negative views of the families of their CLED students.

If teachers want to help students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds achieve success in the classroom and in life, then it is imperative that they find out as much as they can about their students' funds of knowledge, especially related to family background and history (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 1993; Gutierrez, 2000; Gutierrez et al., 2000; Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003; Moll et al., 1992; Santamaria, 2010; Teale, 2009; Tse, 2001).

In a study related to sending teachers into the homes of their culturally and linguistically diverse students, Moll et al. (1993) discovered that the teachers learned a

great deal about the funds of knowledge and family histories of their students and families. As a result, the teachers found it easier to incorporate elements from their culturally diverse students' families and communities in their instructional plans. The students experienced increased interest and motivation because they could make connections between what they were learning in the classroom and their outside of school experiences. Additionally, the teachers felt that they could build stronger relationships with their students and their families because they had more knowledge about their interests and experiences. Teachers can become "...the bridge between the students' world, theirs and their family's funds of knowledge, and the classroom experience" (p. 137). They should continue to learn more about their students' daily experiences and communities so that their funds of knowledge become resources that can be used for teaching, learning, and literacy development (Gutierrez, 2000; Gonzalez et al., 1993). . Students may experience increased academic achievement and self-esteem when teachers find ways to utilize their cultural resources in the classroom. Moll et al. (1992) concluded,

...the 'teacher' in these home based contexts of learning will know the child as a 'whole person, not merely as a 'student,' taking into account or having knowledge about multiple spheres of activity within which the child is enmeshed. In comparison, the typical teacher-student relationship seems 'thin' and 'single-stranded,' as the teacher 'knows' the students only from their performance within rather limited classroom contexts.

(pp. 133-134)

Teachers in a study conducted by Gonzalez et al. (1993) found that students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds had strong family values and responsibility and that their parents had vast work experience in many different occupations. These teachers utilized this knowledge while planning classroom activities around various work related themes. Similar to the study conducted by Moll et al. (1992), the students benefited because they could make connections between what they were learning in school and their life experiences and background knowledge. Diversity should be viewed as a resource rather than a deficiency (Gutierrez, 2000; Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010). Au (2000) also incorporated the sociocultural construct of funds of knowledge into her work as she tried to help researchers and educators see the impact that culture can have on students' experiences in school. In her studies conducted on Hawaiian students, she discovered that they were more likely to develop literacy skills when teachers incorporated their cultural resources into classroom literacy curriculum.

Gutierrez (2000) investigated effective literacy practices in diverse urban school settings through exploring the literacy activities taking place in both classrooms and an after-school technology-based learning lab. She argued that teachers need to learn more about the cultural resources that children bring to school if they want to help culturally diverse students develop literacy skills. She held "...a robust theory for organizing literacy learning in ways that make diversity a resource rather than a problem" (p. 292). Her definition of diversity not only incorporated racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity, but also diversity related to tools, roles, and learning contexts. From her perspective, educational forms have de-skilled and de-valued the pedagogical resources that teachers possess and, consequently, caused many diverse students to suffer.

“If teachers rely primarily on their own informal theories developed over the course of their experiences as students and teachers, they will default to traditional learning scripts and deficit explanations of student learning and achievement” (p. 293). They further attested that teachers need to learn to view the sociocultural resources of all of their students and explore their own pedagogical beliefs within the context of their students’ home and school literacy practices. Engaging in more “reflective and situated practice” may help teachers to develop “more useful and robust theories of students learning” (p. 293).

More empirical research studies are needed that examine how incorporating students’ funds of knowledge into classroom practices impacts student achievement. This qualitative inquiry investigated how teacher study groups can provide teachers with a context within which they can discuss their beliefs and understandings about students and utilize this knowledge as a valuable instructional resource.

Additional empirical research studies are needed that further explore teachers’ knowledge and views related to CLED students and literacy development. Teachers need a safe place to discuss how they currently support the literacy development of their culturally diverse learners. This research investigation explored teachers’ perceptions about their CLED students as they discussed and shared their knowledge, beliefs, and understandings within the context of a teacher study group.

### **Concerns Related to the Teaching and Learning of ELL Students**

Due to the substantial increase of English language learners in American schools (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Jimenez, 2004; Teale, 2009; Tse, 2001), a critical need has arisen that requires teachers to become more knowledgeable about how language

develops and about ways to meet the needs of students who are learning English as a second language (Freeman and Freeman, 2000; 2004). Garcia and Kleifgen (2010) refer to these learners as “emergent bilinguals”, or students who are not yet bilingual (or able to speak two languages proficiently), but who are already proficient in one language and working towards proficiency in a second language. Just as beginning readers are often referred to as “emergent readers” because they are learning the basic literacy skills needed to become proficient readers, emergent bilinguals are learning the basic language skills needed to become bilingual. They propose that teachers must help students to not only preserve proficiency in their home language, but to also assist them in becoming more proficient in the English language. Currently, many teachers face tremendous challenges because they are not prepared to meet the academic and linguistic needs of English language learners (ELL’s) (Fishkin, 2010). Schools are also having a difficult time providing adequate support for ELL’s. The pressures of high-stakes standardized testing and accountability measures have caused teachers, schools, and communities to realize that they are failing to successfully educate all students, especially those students from diverse linguistic populations (Fang, Fu, & Lamme, 2004; Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Goldenberg, 2010; Gutierrez, 2000, Jimenez, 2004, Portes & Salas, 2009).

Goldenburg (2010) claimed that a critical need exists to improve the literacy achievement of all students, especially English language learners. He argued that American teachers are not prepared to work with ELLs and asserted that more research is needed to help educators and language and literacy researchers understand how literacy and second language skills are developed by ELLs. He recommended that educational policy should focus on providing instruction for ELLs in their primary language when

possible, especially since it is known that "...primary language reading instruction develops L1 skills, thereby promoting bilingualism and biliteracy, and promotes reading in English" (p. 703). He also suggested that since we know that most second language learners need instructional support, more research needs to be conducted on the types of instructional supports that are in place in American schools as well as the impact that those supports are having on English language learners. Finally, he advocated that English language learners who demonstrate early reading difficulties should receive intensive interventions that "...should ideally be in a small-group setting and focus on phonological awareness, phonics, and fluent letter- and word-recognition" (p. 703). He also recommended that an oral language component would be beneficial.

Portes & Salas (2009) expressed their frustrations with current literacy instruction in schools for ELLs when they stated, "A social-linguistic support system of interwoven conditions for children reared in poverty needs to be in place to empower development in valued literacy or school content areas. Such a strategy would represent a departure from current stopgap, choral, restrictive approaches such as an English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) pullout or an 'English only' curriculum in which ethnic groups are left to negotiate hostile school environments" (Portas & Salas, 2009, p. 107).

Some researchers fear that schools are setting their English language learners up for failure and that they are being stripped of their cultural and linguistic identities (e.g., Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 1993; Gutierrez, 2000, Gutierrez et al, 2000; Jimenez, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Olson, 2009; Tse, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). Instead of providing support for these schools and teachers so that they can more effectively meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, recently passed federal policies

encourage teachers to implement an English only mentality in their classrooms. This policy makes it more difficult for ELL students to participate equally in the classroom because they are prohibited from using their home language to communicate or to clarify meanings (Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gutierrez, Asato, & Baquendano-Lopez, 2000; Portes & Salas, 2009; Teale, 2009; Tse, 2001). Moreover, English only policies can have a negative impact on the cultural identities of English language learners (Jimenez, 2004). English only policies do not lead to increased academic success for “all” children because they fail to include the linguistic and cultural resources that ELL’s bring to school (Au, 2000; Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Jimenez, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992; Santamaria, 2009).

According to Gee (2004), teachers should embrace the language resources of all students because a child’s early language abilities can be used as a predictor of later reading achievement. He noted, “Almost all children – including poor children – have impressive language abilities. The vast majority of children enter school with large vocabularies, complex grammar, and deep understandings of experiences and stories” (p. 130). This idea aligns with the beliefs of many language and literacy researchers (e.g., Au, 2000 ; Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Jimenez, 2004; Moll et al., 1992; Santamaria, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995 ) because it encourages teachers to look for the capabilities, rather than the deficits, of linguistically diverse students. These students come to school with language skills and effective ways to communicate. Teachers must begin to realize that allowing English language learners to use the language skills that they are most comfortable with will lead to extensive language development and overall learning.

Freeman and Freeman (2000) created a “Checklist for Effective Reading Instruction” for teachers of English language learners (p. 9). They recommended that teachers help students make connections between what they are reading and their own personal experiences and allow them opportunities to respond to text. Jimenez agreed and suggested that when teachers help English language learners make connections between the text and their lives and prior knowledge, it can have a “...potentially transformative power for promoting students’ desires to acquire higher levels of literacy and engage in literate behaviors” (p. 234). Freeman and Freeman also suggested that teachers provide second language learners with many opportunities to talk about what they read and to negotiate their understandings as they discuss and construct meaning with their classmates. Teachers should also provide instructional support for second language learners with academic vocabulary in the content areas through engaging them in frequent reading and through helping them activate prior knowledge, build background knowledge, preview texts, and use graphic organizers to help them organize key ideas (Freeman and Freeman, 2004; Fishkin, 2010).

Jimenez (2004) also made several recommendations for ways that teachers can support the literacy and language development of Latina/o students. His findings suggested that Latina/o students are more likely to become engaged in literacy learning if they feel that their identity is valued. Teachers can attempt to build relationships with their students through helping them to perceive their ability to speak more than one language as a strength. He also recommended that “...helping students see how to make connections across and between their two languages by accessing cognate vocabulary, by judicious use of translation, and by transferring information learned via their first

language is a way to accomplish this goal” (p. 236). In addition, he recommended that teachers have conversations with their students about their multiliteracies and design instructional activities that will allow them to implement their biliterate and bilingual skills.

Literacy-related professional development needs exist for many teachers who work with English language learners. According to Teale (2009), 80 percent of the English language learners who are enrolled in schools speak Spanish. Sadly, only 29.5 percent of teachers have adequate training to work with children whose home language is something other than English (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Since most teachers have had little training related to teaching ELL’s, they are under high demand to assure that students with limited English proficiency meet standardized testing requirements (Fishkin, 2010; Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010). In fact, many schools struggle to provide adequate support for English language learners. As stated by Fang, Fu, and Lamme (2004), “With recent legislation calling for a dramatic expansion of state-wide high-stakes testing, teachers are under immense pressure to comply with the government mandates and to prepare children for such tests” (p. 58). However, schools and communities are failing in their attempt to successfully educate all students in an increasingly diverse population (Gutierrez, 2000).

Additional empirical research studies are needed that investigate how collaborative professional development opportunities can provide support for teachers who work with linguistically diverse students. More research is also needed that examines teachers’ knowledge, understandings, and beliefs about how linguistically diverse learners acquire language and literacy skills. This research study examined

whether teachers' understandings and beliefs about the language and literacy development of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse children changed as they participated in a teacher study group.

### **Issues Related to the Academic Achievement of Economically Diverse Students in High-Needs Schools**

The definition of poverty changes often and is defined in various ways. Portes and Salas (2009) defined poverty as "...an income fault line below which various aspects of human development are compromised" (p. 980). In *The New Poverty Studies: The Ethnography of Power, Politics, and Impoverished People in the United States*, Goode and Maskovsky (2001) argued that a "new poverty" exists due to the development of capitalism and the political and economic changes that have accompanied it. They perceive poverty as "a function of power" for the wealthy continue to achieve higher rates of success and economic status, while the success rates of those living in poverty continue to decline (p. 3). Often times, students from culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse backgrounds are associated with poverty and viewed as "lower class". Portes and Salas (2009) argued, "Thus, a persistent and extraordinary gap in learning outcomes and academic development among ethnic groups is driven by disproportionate rates of poverty that befall families – posing a host of substantial risks for their children that are cumulative and interactive" (p. 97).

Rising poverty rates in the United States have attributed to increased teacher anxiety and reduced morale due to the extensive pressures placed on them by the high stakes testing accountability policies mandated by NCLB (2001). Goode and Maskovsky (2001) commented, "At the economic level, the gap between rich and poor has widened

to an unprecedented distance, both in the United States and worldwide, over the last three decades” (p. 4). Woodside-Jiron & Geshman (2009) argued that many schools do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) even though their economically disadvantaged students make significant gains. They maintained that the “...students in these schools start further behind their economically-advantaged counterparts, and therefore are required to make greater improvements each year if they are to realize the goal of all students being ‘on standard’ by 2014” (p. 51). Portes and Salas (2009) alluded to the negative impact that the NCLB Act (2001) has had on high poverty schools when they stated, “...whatever the measures employed in K-12 schools to gauge literacy, be they adequate yearly progress (AYP) or end of grade (EOG) exams, such measures indicate the brands of literacy that schools sanction and privilege” (p. 101). They further remarked that the increased focus on standardized testing is actually giving students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds fewer opportunities to acquire literacy skills. Many teachers “teach to the test”, or spend the majority of their time on test taking skills and strategies and not on providing students with authentic literacy experiences (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Kozol, 2005).

Portes & Salas (2009) pointed out the great disparity that exists between high poverty and low poverty schools. They stated,

Along with obvious differences in student populations, physical structures, and the communities surrounding them, are also significant variations at other levels, including the knowledge and dispositions of decision makers; resources allocated to students in poverty; teacher-student relations; quality and preparation of personnel, and

their beliefs and goals; and the nature of pedagogical decisions based on the ways educators identify, evaluate, and respond to student cultural competencies. (p. 106)

They argued that the achievement gap exists not because of the differences between socio-economic levels or even parent education levels or occupations. Instead, they attested that the achievement gap is a result of "...forced adaptation to insensitive and inequitable sociohistorical conditions including but not limited to prejudice and poverty" (p. 106). Many researchers agree that students from impoverished backgrounds would achieve higher academic success if school instruction was structured differently (Allington, 1983; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Hicks, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Portes & Salas, 2009; Woodside-Jiron & Geshman, 2009). Teachers should not view students as unable to achieve as much as other children due to the fact that they come from a lower socioeconomic background. They should not try to "catch them up" through using scripted or remedial reading programs.

Collins (2003) stated that race and class can often have a significant impact on the type and quality of instructional opportunities that students experience in the classroom as well as their accessibility to particular content objectives and/or learning activities. He pointed out that in many schools, students are placed into particular classrooms or cohorts based on their socio-economic status or social class. Unfortunately, many students from lower-income households are overrepresented in programs that are on non-academic tracks or in classrooms that implement less engaging learning structures or instructional models. In a study of middle-school students, Collins found that significant differences existed between the types of instruction and overall educational experiences that students

received in the same teachers' classroom. This teacher taught both an honors class and a general education class which was "...composed of students tested as reading at two or more years below their grade level" (p. 94). Collins concluded that the honors class seemed more student-centered in that the students were actively engaged in classroom discussions and encouraged to ask their own questions. In comparison, the same teacher utilized different instructional methods and language patterns while teaching the general education class. She appeared to participate in more talk related to classroom management, asked more questions that followed a "Question-Reply-Evaluation" structure, and did not encourage the students to ask questions.

Hicks (2002) argued that if high-poverty schools and teachers of economically diverse students would expose all students to higher-order thinking activities and encourage them to self-monitor, then they would master grade-appropriate standards and objectives. Portes and Salas (2009) remarked, "The problem we see is that such teaching is neither sufficient nor designed to afford poor children comparable opportunities for the types of literacy that facilitate development and subsequent learning" (p. 99). Instead, many schools track economically diverse students into remedial classes that do not expose students to their zones of proximal development, leading to decreased academic achievement and student motivation. They suggest that what is needed is "...a meaningful systematic educational restructuring that aligns educational excellence (literacy development) and equity (opportunity to learn regardless of social status)" (p. 108).

In an ethnographic research study focused on two working-class children, Hicks (2002) investigated their learning histories and demonstrated how they struggled with

many of the “middle class” literacy practices and assessments implemented in schools. She recommended that teachers should not try to “fix things” for these children, but should instead attempt to interpret their diverse lives in a more literary way through attempting to listen, observe, and understand them. She also encouraged teachers to learn as much as they can about their students’ lives in their households and communities. Understanding more about the family histories of these students may help teachers to view their experiences in a more positive light. Teachers could potentially help these students develop a more positive self identity and acquire the literacy skills needed to achieve academic success if they were provided with more time to collaborate with colleagues.

Additional research studies are needed that investigate how collaborative professional development experiences such as teacher study groups can support middle-class teachers who work with economically diverse students. More studies are also needed that examine the beliefs and understandings that teachers have related to class. In this research inquiry, I examined the teachers’ beliefs and understandings about how social class impacted their students’ performance in the classroom as well as how their perceptions and literacy instruction shifted as they participated in a teacher study group. I also explored whether a teacher study group can provide a supportive and trusting place for teachers to discuss their opinions and attitudes about societal issues such as poverty and class. As Hicks (2002) suggested, I attempted to encourage the participants in my study to reflect on not only their own personal beliefs and attitudes about social class, but also their own socio-economic backgrounds and histories. No empirical research studies have yet examined teachers’ socio-economic backgrounds and their perceptions of the

socio-economic backgrounds of their students within the context of a teacher study group. In this research inquiry, I attempted to find out more about my participants' socioeconomic histories and current understandings, beliefs, and attitudes about their CLED students, as well as how their perceptions and experiences may have informed their literacy-related instructional choices.

### **Literacy Instruction in High-Needs Schools**

Although federal policies under NCLB (2001) have set high reading standards and expectations for all students, several researchers argue that children attending high-needs schools do not receive quality literacy instruction or experiences (Allington, 2000; Stevens, 2003). Children who attend high-poverty schools are often placed in classrooms that implement skill-based literacy programs focused on preparing students for the end of the year standardized test (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Kozol, 2005). Additionally, many teachers in these schools are required to use scripted programs that require them to read a “script” word for word (Fang et al., 2004; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Gutierrez, 2000; Kozol, 2005). The pedagogical knowledge and creative ideas of teachers are not utilized when schools mandate the implementation of scripted programs. Fang et al. (2004) commented, “On one hand, it undermines teacher morale and inhibits their development of professional expertise and wisdom. On the other hand, it increases children’ disengagement with school-based tasks and results in less overall learning for them” (p. 58). Moll et al. (1992) referred to this type of instruction as “rote-like instruction”. These researchers also demonstrated that this type of instruction does not work for the majority of children attending high-needs schools. Students may learn a few skills, but they do not learn to think critically or to

problem solve. Student engagement and motivation also may suffer when programs such as these are implemented.

Many language and literacy education researchers have demonstrated that teachers are ill-prepared to meet the diverse academic needs of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse children (Allington, 2007; Collins, 2003; Fang et al., 2004; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Gutierrez, 2000; Hicks, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996; Moll et al., 1992; Portes & Salas, 2009; Woodside-Jiron & Gehsmann, 2009). In an effort to find out more about the types of instructional practices that high-poverty schools are currently implementing, Kozol (2005) visited numerous inner-city schools located in states such as New York, Texas, Oklahoma, and California. Due to unequal funding allocations, high-poverty schools typically have fewer resources, less qualified teachers, and less desirable school environments. Teacher retention rates are lower for teachers often feel unsupported and are, therefore, more likely to leave the school or profession. Many of these schools are also more likely to adopt scripted programs that encourage rote learning instructional practices. According to Kozol, students are not given opportunities to apply higher-order thinking skills but are instead taught to memorize and recall information. These types of learning experiences do not prepare students for college or help them gain the skills needed to obtain higher paying jobs that lead to future societal success.

Gerstl-Pepin and Woodside Jiron (2005) conducted research at an elementary school in which the administrators and teachers were required to give up a curriculum that emphasized “a love of learning” and student choice for one that was “scientifically-based” and “objectively proven”. They were forced to make this unwanted transition due

to federal policy and the acceptance of Reading First funds. They argued, “High-poverty schools need and are compelled (ultimately forced) to take the money while the instructional and evaluative tenets of the policy enforce middle-class norms around what constitutes literacy” (Gerstl-Pepin and Woodside-Jiron, 2005, p. 239). Adopting particular scripted or Reading First approved programs can result in negative implications for many schools in impoverished areas. More often than not, the diverse emotional, social, and linguistic needs of children are not addressed and, therefore, lead to lack of student engagement and motivation to learn.

Allington (2007) also presented research that demonstrated that children in high-poverty are often exposed to reading instructional activities that are not effective for they do not help them to become more proficient readers. He argued, “The current situation in many schools is that struggling readers participate in 30-60 minutes of appropriate supplemental reading instruction and then spend the remaining five hours a day sitting in classrooms with texts they cannot read” (p. 7). Allington suggested that many high-poverty schools implement “one-size-fits-all curriculum plans and a single-period daily supplemental intervention to accelerate readers’ academic development” (p. 8). His research illustrated the negative implications that pre-packed and scripted reading programs can have for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in high-needs schools. The achievement gap continues to widen as the children in these schools continue to receive exposure to ineffective literacy instruction.

As demonstrated by current research, administrators need to give teachers the freedom to plan authentic literacy experiences that are based on the diverse needs of their students. Teachers should also rely on ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994) and

sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986) theoretical constructs such as culturally-relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally-responsive teaching, and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) as they plan instructional activities that integrate the cultural and linguistic resources of their students. Schools should provide teachers with professional development opportunities that are devoted to giving teachers time and a safe place in which to discuss societal, student, and classroom issues (Duncan-Andrade, 2004). Teachers may learn more about their students' cultural, ethnic, and linguistic capabilities if they are provided with time to talk about the life and school experiences of their students (Au, 2000; Gutierrez, 2000; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Gonzalez et al., 1993; Moll et al., 1992).

### **Research Related to Current Professional Development Models in Schools**

Multiple researchers have reported on a variety of professional development models or opportunities for teachers ranging from traditional in-service models that usually occur after school to more contemporary models such as peer coaching (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Showers & Joyce, 1996) or professional development school (PDS) models (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1995; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Teitel, 2003). Guskey (2000) defined professional development as "...those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students" (p. 16). A quality professional development approach should attempt to improve the skills, dispositions, and knowledge of teachers so that their interactions and relationships with students and parents improve, their classroom environments become more

meaningful for all students, and they become more efficient at implementing effective curricula and strategies in the classroom (Sheridan et al., 2009).

Sheridan et al. (2009) described the “process” of professional development as “How professionals move from awareness (knowledge) to action (practice) and to the adoption of particular dispositions in their professional repertoires” (p. 385). Teachers gain knowledge within the context of their environment through their experiences.

Dall’Alba and Sandberg (2006) devised a contextually-based theory that places emphasis on not only the skills that are acquired through experiences and practices in job-embedded contexts (horizontal learning), but the level of understanding as well (vertical learning). They explained that some people can advance in “skill progression”, but not in their “embodied understanding of practice” (p. 401).

Sheridan et al. (2009) provided examples of effective methods that can be used during collaborative professional development implementation. These methods include demonstration, observation, practice, focused feedback, direct and indirect guidance, personal reflection, scaffolding, and collaborative study (p. 387). The NSDC report (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) suggested that teachers can build stronger relationships through videotaping their lessons. “Teachers can use videotapes of teaching to make aspects of their practice public and open to peer critique, learn new practices and pedagogical strategies, and analyze aspects of teaching practices that may be difficult to capture otherwise” (p. 11). This practice can encourage teachers to engage in reflective practices that may lead to change in knowledge, skills, understanding, and disposition.

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) suggested that effective professional development models are collaborative in nature. They must also allow teachers to share

what they know, discuss what they are interested in learning about, and make connections between new ideas and their own classroom environments. In turn, they argued that university-school relationships in the form of a Professional Development School (PDS) can provide schools with the support they need to provide teachers with effective professional development experiences. They also recommended that teachers need a consistent block of time to plan, share, learn, reflect, and evaluate their instructional practices in a collaborative setting. In the following section, I present a summary of research that illustrates some of the current challenges related to professional development in the United States.

### **Challenges of and Dissatisfactions with Professional Development**

Anders, Hoffman, and Duffy (2000) suggested that the goal of professional development should be long-term impact on teacher knowledge and practices. A common belief held by the various professional development models is that teachers lack knowledge and/or pedagogical strategies that inform the concepts being covered (Birchak, Connor, Crawford, Kahn, Kaser, & Short, 1998; Wiliam, 2008). Wiliam explained that just because a teacher “knows” something does not necessarily mean that she will implement it in her classroom. He argued, “We assemble teachers in rooms and bring in experts to explain what needs to change – and then we’re disappointed when such events have little or no effect on teachers’ practice” (p. 38). Although all teachers need to continue to construct knowledge, this knowledge will not have a positive impact on student achievement and professional growth unless it influences their practice.

Another point that is made in several research reports is that even when teachers are given professional development opportunities, they are often not provided with the materials or the support they need to effectively implement what they have learned in the

classroom (Birchak et al., 1998; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Guskey, 2000; Kozol; 2005). As state by Darling-Hammond et al. (2009), “Teachers lack time and opportunities to view each other’s classrooms, learn from mentors, and work collaboratively. The support and training they receive is episodic, myopic, and often meaningless” (p. 2). Most professional development opportunities provided in schools does not include the job-embedded, collaborative elements that teachers need to effectively implement what they are learning in their classrooms.

Although improving professional development for teachers in schools is almost always included in educational reform initiatives and school improvement plans, it is also one of the first things cut when American educational systems experience a budget crisis.

Guskey asked the question, “How can it be that something universally recognized as so important also can be regarded as so ineffective?” (p. 4).

A key finding included in the NSDC (National Staff Development Council) report stated, “Other nations that outperform the United States on international assessments invest heavily in professional learning and build time for ongoing, sustained teacher development and collaboration into teacher’s work hours” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 5). The educational systems in several other countries willingly pay for travel, conference, and college tuition fees and sometimes even develop national requirements for professional development. Unfortunately, adequate funding is typically not set aside to support the professional development needs of teachers and schools in the United States.

Additionally, in the United States, professional development is typically not practical or related to the needs of teachers. In fact, instead of being job-embedded,

professional development is often viewed as “separate” from daily practices in the classroom (Guskey, 2000; Joyce and Showers, 1995). Most teachers receive some sort of professional development each year that does focus on content, but the content is often disconnected from their classroom or the professional development is often delivered in short spurts (lasting only one or two days), and proceeded with little or no follow-up (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). According to the NSCD report, many teachers indicated that they would like additional professional development on topics such as classroom management, teaching students with special needs, and technology in the classroom. They claimed that they either received limited or no training related to working with ELL’s. Additional research is needed that shows the positive implications that particular professional development models can have for teachers who work with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. My research study addressed one such model that can be categorized as a type of professional learning community. The following sections summarize literature related to professional learning communities and teacher study groups.

### **Professional Learning Communities Based on a Collaborative Professional Development Model**

Professional learning communities (or PLC’s) currently exist in many schools, but are defined and organized differently in schools across America. Dufour (2004) commented, “People use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education – a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, a national professional organization, and so on” (p. 1). He argued that a true

PLC is collaborative in nature and that the members in a PLC should have two common goals – student learning and observable results. Hord (2009) claimed that professional learning communities are based on a constructive approach for members come together to construct meaning and knowledge as they share their background knowledge, experiences, and beliefs with each other. They also engage in an active and reflective learning process.

Wiliam (2008) conducted research on professional learning communities, or “teacher” learning communities as he referred to them. He defined a professional learning community by explaining, “In these small, building-based groups, each participating teacher develops a specific plan for what he or she wants to change in his or her own practice. The groups meet regularly to support team members in carrying out and refining their plans” (p. 38). He recommended that teacher learning communities meet once a month for at least 75 minutes for at least two years. He also suggested that administrators should not force teachers to participate in these communities, but should instead make them voluntary. According to Wiliam, each learning community should consist of between eight and ten educators who teach similar grades or subjects in the same school. He also recommended that teachers develop action plans that can be discussed in professional learning communities and that they use formative assessments to make decisions about practice. I utilized several of Wiliam’s recommendations as I explored the professional development experiences of three elementary school teachers who volunteered to participate in bi-weekly teacher study group meetings. This study investigated the implications that participating in a teacher study group had for these teachers as they worked with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners.

Musanti and Pence (2010) conducted research on a professional learning community that had the “...clear intention to integrate real teachers - their understandings, voices, selves, and practices – into professional development by providing an experiential, collaborative and school-centered context for ongoing reflection on teachers’ practice” ( p. 74). While participating in this collaborative professional learning community, teachers began to think about their needs related to knowledge and professional growth and became “...active agents of their own learning” (p. 85). Musanti and Pence claimed that teachers participating in professional development can sometimes resist change for they are not “...accustomed to collegial relationships embedded in their daily teaching and as part of their professional development. Collaboration challenges the existing school norms of individuality, privacy, autonomy, independent work, and distribution of power” (p. 86). This study demonstrated that teachers can become more confident teachers and build autonomy and independence through constructing knowledge while socially interacting with their peers.

Additional research is also needed that explores not only what teachers learn through participating in school-embedded professional development, but also how they learn best and how they integrate what they learn into their instruction. In order for true change to take place in schools, teachers in diverse schools need more opportunities to collaborate in environments that are supportive and that allow them to examine and reflect on their current classroom practices (Gutierrez, 2000). Teachers need more opportunities to participate in professional learning communities where they can think about, reflect on, and analyze their practice in order to improve their teaching (Gonzalez, 1993; Gutierrez et al., 2000). Additionally, teachers need to think about the theoretical

perspectives behind their instructional practices within the context of their students' home and school literacy practices. "Reflective and situated practice that shapes and is shaped by the local context should help teachers develop more useful and robust theories of student learning" (Gutierrez, 2000, p. 293). Teachers need consistent collegial support so that they may continue to develop effective instructional practices.

More research is needed that demonstrates the impact that different approaches to professional development can have on teachers' knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and classroom practices. For these reasons, I chose to investigate the impact that participation in a collaborative professional learning community had on the literacy knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and literacy practices of elementary school teachers working with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high needs school. This study examined the professional learning and classroom experiences of three elementary school teachers and explored whether or not their literacy practices shifted as they participated in this collaborative learning environment. The next section contains a summary of other research studies that have investigated teachers' experiences as they engaged in teacher study groups. Since more research is needed that examines the change processes that teachers experience as they participate in a teacher study group, my study will attempt to fulfill a gap in the current body of research focused on professional development.

### **Teacher Study Groups**

Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) stated, "Collaborative approaches to professional learning can promote school change that extends beyond individual classrooms. When all teachers in a school learn together, all students in the school benefit" (p. 5). One of

the most well known collaborative approaches to professional development is the study group model (Birchak et al., 1998; Guskey, 2000). In the book, *Teacher Study Groups: Building Community through Dialogue and Reflection*, Birchak et al. (1998) described teacher study groups as "...a place where we could negotiate a shared agenda instead of having someone else's agenda imposed on us" (p. 13). In this book, a group of teachers discussed how they used collaborative dialogue to construct knowledge and encourage reflection on their own teaching practices. They also pointed out that participation in a teacher study group allowed them to serve as the experts rather than an outside person. In addition, they described this type of professional development as having long-term effects on their own personal professional growth. "Instead of changing our teaching with each new fad or mandate, we wanted to thoughtfully critique our own beliefs and practices, explore alternative possibilities, and take charge of our own professional journeys" (p. 13).

Typically, teachers who participate in a teacher study group share a common interest and an aspiration to improve practice in that area of interest (Sheridan et al., 2009). Within their community, they share knowledge, insights, and observations. Professional development "...needs to be conceived as a collaborative enterprise, where a space for learning through mutual exchange, dialogue, and constant challenge is created" (Musanti and Pence, 2010, p. 87). Within these collaborative learning communities, teachers can build autonomy and independence, construct knowledge, and enhance their learning through social interaction and interdependence. Kennedy and Shiel (2010) commented, "The professional dialogue that occurred following demonstrations and observations served to strengthen the collaborative nature of the intervention and deepen

understanding of the reality, complexity, and challenges involved in responsive teaching” (p. 378). Anders et al. (2000), concluded that positive effects can result from teachers working together in study groups, literacy groups, and book clubs.

Collaborative professional development models can positively influence the dispositions of teachers so that they continue to develop their knowledge and skills for an extended period of time. Teachers can become life-long learners when they are provided with the support and resources they need to build practitioner knowledge and pedagogical skills. Sheridan et al. (2009) defined “practitioner knowledge” as consisting of “...facts, concepts, ideas, vocabulary, and related aspects of educational culture and best practice” (p. 379).

Professional development facilitators should focus content on the needs of the teachers and students. Fang et al. (2004) demonstrated this concept when they initiated a collaborative professional development program that was focused on helping teachers transition from using prepackaged commercial programs to designing their own curriculum and pedagogy based on informed decisions about the needs of their students. Before participating in this collaborative professional development program, the teachers in this school were implementing commercially made literacy programs. Unfortunately, many teachers in high-poverty schools with high populations of English language learners are forced to implement skill based or rote-like literacy instruction that is often part of a scripted or commercially manufactured program (Fang et al., 2004; Garcia and Kleifgen, 2010; Gutierrez, 2000; Moll et al., 1992; Tse, 2001). The researchers’ primary goal was to “...create classrooms where teachers grow as professionals who design and implement research-based effective literacy instruction that produces a positive impact on

student learning and achievement” (p. 59). The researchers found that collaborative learning communities can serve as effective professional development models for teachers, especially when teachers participate as equal members and begin to make connections between their own classrooms and what they are learning. For schools that may include high numbers of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students, the content discussed in teacher study group meetings should focus on helping teachers improve their literacy practices so that they become more confident decision makers who can effectively meet the needs of their students.

Teacher study groups may also help teachers become more aware of the sociocultural factors that influence their students. For example, Moll et al. (1992) and Gonzalez et al. (1993) implemented after-school teacher study groups with volunteer teachers who were interested in learning more about their students’ out of school experiences. The teachers went into the homes of their linguistically diverse students and informally interviewed their students’ families. While in their students’ homes, they gained information about their students’ “funds of knowledge” or their family, cultural, and community knowledge, histories, and experiences. These teachers then discussed what they had learned about their students and shared their own funds of knowledge within their teacher study groups. The teacher study group provided them with a supportive environment in which to reflect on their teaching practices and make connections to their classrooms.

A professional development model known as the “change model” was implemented during a study of a university-led, literacy-based teacher study group model in Dublin, Ireland (Kennedy, 2010; Kennedy and Sheil, 2010). The change model was a

collaborative model that required cooperation between the facilitator (university professor) and the participants (teachers). This model incorporated the “funds of knowledge” theory (Moll et al., 1992) in that the funds of knowledge of both the facilitator and the participants were valued equally. This particular professional development model was set up so that the teachers met once every two weeks to discuss different literacy topics and professional readings on those topics. They also shared information about their individual classroom experiences and explained how instructional techniques were working in their classrooms. “The school had evolved into a professional learning community as the participating teachers began to share their growing expertise with colleagues” (Kennedy, 2010, p. 386).

Kennedy and Sheil (2010) commented on the collaborative nature of this professional development model and claimed that the, “...professional readings communicated to teachers that the approaches they were undertaking had been successful in contexts similar to their own, and the demonstrations, planning meetings, and the collaborative approach taken gave teachers the confidence to experiment and take risks with their teaching” (p. 381). Kennedy (2010) suggested, “When professional development is customized rather than prepackaged, takes place over an extended period of time, and uses a range of research-based approaches (including a strong, ongoing focus on student achievement), it can have a major impact on student achievement, motivation, and engagement” (p. 386). She advised that schools need to give teachers the freedom to employ creativity and individuality so that they can create a literacy program that fits the needs of the students in their classroom. In addition, changes should occur slowly and

teachers should experience some success in the beginning so that they build self-confidence and remain open to change.

Duncan-Andrade (2004) investigated the power that critical teacher inquiry groups can have for teachers in urban schools. He found that this type of professional development approach is most effective when an outside person, like a university faculty member, is present to offer suggestions. Duncan-Andrade warned, “The developing culture, however, should be careful to avoid over-dependency on that source as the authority figure. An effective partnership will position teachers to see themselves as capable intellectuals, responsible for designing their own professional development” (p. 349). The teachers in this critical inquiry group served as a support group to each other as they discussed social justice issues within the context of social and educational theory. More research studies like this one are needed that examine the implications that collaborative professional development models and inquiry-based learning can have for teachers in high-needs schools. This study provides additional information related to these topics.

Teacher study groups can provide teachers with adequate support as they share their experiences and discuss their issues and concerns related to teaching and learning. Within the context of a professional learning environment, teachers can discuss effective pedagogical techniques and strategies that they can utilize in the classroom to support all learners (Santamaria, 2009; Tomlinson, 2001). Teachers who work with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners need a professional support group as they continue to build their knowledge and make shifts that may benefit the students in their classrooms. While language and literacy researchers know that many teachers are

not prepared to work with CLED children, what is missing from the research is the role that collaborative teacher study groups can play in supporting teachers as they discuss their concerns related to teaching economically diverse learners. In this research investigation, I employed qualitative research methods as I examined three third grade teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings about how CLED learners develop literacy skills. In addition, I carefully examined their socially-mediated interactions as they participated in collaborative teacher study group discussions that provided them with the freedom to talk about current issues in their classrooms. I also documented any shifts that occurred related to their literacy-related pedagogical beliefs or practices as I observed how they organized literacy instruction and integrated it within the context of other content areas.

### **Ethic of Care**

Since little research exists that examines the types of caring relationships that can form within collaborative professional development models such as teacher study groups, I have situated my study within a theoretical construct known as ethic of care (Noddings, 1984). Noddings argued that an ethic of care theoretical construct can be used in schools to explain the types of caring relationships that form between teachers and learners in the classroom. Although an ethic of care approach to teaching is often considered a “feminine” approach (Gilligan, 1982), both male and female teachers can exhibit this moral educational approach in the classroom. Noddings explained ethic of care as a construct within care theory that can be used to better understand human relationships. She stated, “Perhaps the greatest contribution of care theory as it is developed here is its emphasis on the caring relation. Relations, not individuals, are ontologically basic, and I

use ‘caring’ to describe a certain kind of relation or encounter” (p. xiii). She emphasized the significant role that students play in student-teacher relationships and further explained, “It is about moral life and what makes it possible. The contributions of the cared-for sustain us in our attempts to care” (p. xiv). She also pointed out that school structures and routines can sometimes contribute to a lack of caring relationships in schools and classrooms. According to Noddings, there is a need for more research that examines the contexts within which caring relationships successfully occur. She argued that in current society, caring relationships are needed in schools more than ever before. She stated, “Our efforts should be directed to transforming the conditions that make caring difficult or impossible. This means working to eliminate poverty and exploitation, protecting the earth as the home of all living things, and rejecting violence as a means of defense except under conditions of direct attack and then only to prevent immediate harm” (pp. xiv). Most human beings possess a need to be cared for and a desire to care for others. Noddings describes the “one-caring” as having a reactive, responsive, and receptive role, or one in which the one-caring “...is sufficiently engrossed in the other to listen to him and to take pleasure or pain in what he recounts” (p. 19). This theoretical construct can be applied to any study that attempts to look more closely at the nature of human relationships.

In Vogt’s (2002) study of thirty-two Swiss and English elementary school teachers (twenty-two women and ten men), she explored how gender plays a role when studying the relationships between teachers and their students within an ethic of care theoretical construct. Vogt found that an ethic of care should not only apply to females or be viewed solely as a feminist perspective. When asked to describe a caring teacher,

the participants in this study demonstrated that both male and female teachers exhibit many forms of caring relationships with their students. Based on the teachers' responses to interview questions, Vogt distinguished the following categories or forms of care: caring as commitment, caring as relatedness, caring as physical care, caring expressed by giving a cuddle, caring as parenting, and caring as mothering. Although some forms of care, such as "mothering", were only expressed by female teachers, the male teachers also possessed many beliefs and ideas related to "care" that can be associated with an ethic of care. Vogt stated, "In my sample, both women and men emphasized the importance of caring understood as caring about building a good relationship with pupils" (p. 258). She found that all teachers, both male and female, perceived caring about their students as a critical component in their classrooms.

Roberts (2010) also studied the relationships between teachers and their students in the classroom, but argued that most studies tend to adopt a "colour blind" ethic of care perspective about what it means for teachers to "care" about students in the classroom. In her study, Roberts attempted to examine the relationships that culturally relevant pedagogy may have to an ethic of care perspective for African American teachers working with racially diverse student populations. Within a critical race and care theoretical framework, Roberts closely examined the relationships between African American secondary teachers and their African American students, as well as the teachers' definitions and perceptions of care. Her findings suggested important implications for the formation of a new pedagogical framework known as culturally relevant critical teacher care. Through talking to their African American students about socio-political issues and challenges that they could encounter in society and showing

concern for their futures, the African American teachers in this study demonstrated that they truly cared for their African American students. This study contributed to the field of literature addressing the nature of relationships between teachers and students in current schools because it addressed the need for more studies that examine caring relationships in schools within critical race theory and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Flint, Kurumada, Fisher, and Zisook (2011) made connections to an ethic of care theoretical perspective while examining relationships forming between university facilitators and teachers within the context of collaborative professional development model. When the professional development facilitator actively and consistently engages with the learners in an effort to become more familiar with what they are interested in learning, they are showing that they care about meeting the needs of the learners. After listening intently to the voice of the learners, the facilitator often responds to their needs and plans professional development sessions that are centered around topics that apply to the learners' interests and professional needs. If educators can successfully form positive relationships within a collaborative context, extensive learning and overall professional growth can occur. Flint et al. (2011) situated their study within the context of an ethic of care framework as they provided collaborative professional development opportunities for two third grade teachers interested in learning more about writing instruction. They argued that researchers who investigate collaborative professional development models should realize that a need exists for "...authentic care to occur that recognizes the learner as a whole person and values what he or she brings to the table. This idea is foundational for professional development engagements that are based on interpersonal commitment and an ethic of care" (p. 99). They also stated, "A sense of care is not a personality trait

or something innate in a person, but rather is an action engaged in intentionally. The facilitator is receptive to the learner's own goals for improvement. These goals direct the relationship; however it is also the reciprocity in the relationship that allows both facilitators and learners to benefit" (p. 98). This university research team realized the implications that building relationships with teachers can have for professional development as they observed their participants learning and making significant change to the writing instructional techniques they were implementing in the classroom. They also realized that professional development facilitators can provide more effective professional development opportunities for teachers when they attempt to find out as much as they can about the teachers they are working with and the school and classroom context. Many professional development models do not "...place in the forefront the knowledge, experience, personality, self-identified needs, or the teaching context of real teachers in real places working with real students" (p. 98). This study examined the relationships that a university researcher and three teachers formed as they participated together in a teacher study group. In this study, I also explored how my relationships with the teachers participating in this study may have contributed to the teachers' overall learning experiences.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, additional research is needed that explores not only what teachers learn through participating in school-embedded professional development, but also how their literacy practices, knowledge, beliefs, and understandings change as a result. Teachers need more opportunities to participate in professional learning communities that provide them with opportunities to think about, reflect on, and analyze their beliefs about

students and understandings about literacy development so that they can continue to improve their teaching (Gonzalez, 1993; Gutierrez et al., 2000). Additionally, teachers should continue to think about the theoretical perspectives behind their instructional practices within the context of their students' home and school literacy practices (Gutierrez, 2000, p. 293). In order for true change to take place in schools, teachers in diverse schools need to have more opportunities to collaborate in supportive and trusting environments that allow them to examine and reflect on their current classroom practices (Gutierrez, 2000). Teachers need opportunities to engage in consistent collaboration with their colleagues so that they may continue to develop effective instructional practices that meet the diverse needs of their students.

Anders et al. (2000) suggested that more research is needed that focuses on “educating” teachers rather than on “training” them. They explain that educating teachers means more than just learning about the strategies and instructional approaches that they employ. It also means that more empirical research studies should examine the changes and decision-making processes that teachers engage in as they participate in collaborative professional development models. Currently, most research related to professional development focuses on the forms and structures of professional development, but not necessarily on how teacher’s gain new knowledge, skills, and dispositions and implement them into their instruction (Sheridan et al., 2009). A need exists to find out more about how particular models, techniques, or strategies encourage teachers continue to make instructional shifts and develop their practice. A need exists in the language and literacy field for more empirical research studies focused on effective teaching. “Extensive research is needed to more fully understand the nature of teaching

effectiveness and the change process that can lead to increasing the quality of our teacher preparation for both preservice and inservice teacher education” (Ruddell, 2004, p. 994). Additionally, more research is also needed that contributes to our understanding of how factors associated with school contextual factors and learning environment can influence professional development (Dall’Alba and Sandberg, 2006; Sheridan et al., 2009).

Although many researchers argue that teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the needs of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse children, more empirical studies are needed that investigate the professional growth processes that middle class teachers go through and the perceptions that these teachers have about students from impoverished backgrounds (Anders et al., 2000; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2005; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Fang, Fu, & Lamme, 2004; Gusky, 2000).). This study presents new knowledge to the field of language and literacy education that may help teacher educators and policy makers become more cognizant of the significant impact that collaborative professional development models can have on teachers who work with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse children in high needs schools. Additional research is needed that demonstrates the impact that collaborative approaches to professional development can have on teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and classroom practices. For these reasons, I chose to investigate the impact that participation in a collaborative teacher study group may have on the literacy knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and practices of three third grade teachers who work with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Overview of Study**

According to Creswell (2009), a researcher's decision to implement a particular research design is typically based on, "the worldview assumptions the researcher brings to the study, procedures of inquiry (called strategies), and specific methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation" (p. 3). Worldviews are often influenced by multiple factors including the student's experiences, the research problem, the student's area of discipline, the beliefs and worldviews of advising faculty members, and previous research-related experiences. The methodology and methods applied are also guided by the research purpose, research question(s), and the researcher's own personal epistemology and theoretical perspectives (Crotty, 1998; Bryman, 1984). Qualitative researches attempt to understand how people "...interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2008, p. 5). My own epistemologies led me to consider particular theoretical perspectives and research questions that inform this qualitative research investigation.

#### **Rationale for Choosing a Qualitative Research Methodology**

Over the years, changes in research purposes, problems, settings, investigators, methods, and research agendas have caused educational researchers to become more interested in using qualitative research methods to investigate research problems in the field (Creswell, 2009; Shulman, 1997). Many language and literacy researchers have begun to shift their focus to problems that require more specific and complicated research questions related to school, classroom practices, and educational policy. Shulman

commented that many current educational researchers, "...collaboratively study classroom life in partnership with active classroom teachers" (p. 5). Since my research study took place in the same elementary school, but in three diverse classroom settings that are difficult to generalize, I investigated my own research questions through incorporating qualitative research methods. I relied on Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) ecological theory and Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) sociocultural theory as I engaged in an ethnographic case study approach that examined the teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings about their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students and literacy-related instructional practices. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest, "If you want to understand the way people think about their world and how those definitions are formed, you need to get closer to them, to hear them talk and observe them in their day-to-day lives" (p.35).

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is used to explore and more comprehensively understand how individuals or groups respond to problems in society. Waller (1932) influenced others in this discipline through demonstrating how researchers could use qualitative methods to learn more about the social aspects of schools and participants. Merriam (2009) argued that "Having an interest in knowing more about one's practice, and indeed in improving one's practice, leads to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design" (p. 1). Waller and Merriam's ideas guided me as I examined the prior knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and collaborative experiences of three elementary school teachers through a qualitative research design.

Creswell (2009) suggested that qualitative research provides techniques that can potentially help social scientists to better understand people through exploring the meanings that are constructed by individuals or groups. As a social constructivist, I believe that I can construct meaning through asking my participants open-ended questions and listening carefully to what they “say and do in their life settings” (p. 8). I also believe that culture plays a significant role as people construct meaning about life and develop language and literacy skills, opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and most importantly, knowledge. Creswell argues that “...qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally. They also interpret what they find, an interpretation shaped by the researcher’s own experiences and background” (p. 8). As I engaged in this qualitative inquiry, I attempted to remind myself that my own cultural knowledge and experiences may be influencing how I interpreted what I saw and heard as I worked closely with these teachers in their classrooms.

### **Rationale for Choosing an Ethnographic Approach**

In this research study, I engaged in field work or “the study of something in the natural environment where it occurs or that it inhabits” (Preissle & Grant, 2004, p. 162). As my methodology, I used a qualitative, ethnographic approach as I explored whether or not the knowledge, beliefs, understandings, or literacy practices of these three elementary school teachers shifted as a result of participating in a teacher study group. An ethnographic inquiry approach allowed me to attempt to see things from the participants’ perspectives (Crotty, 1998). I observed them in their natural environment and examined how their student-related and pedagogical beliefs and perspectives changed as a result of

their interactions with each other. Crotty commented, "...ethnography is a form of research in which the social settings to be studied, however familiar to the researcher, must be treated as anthropologically strange; and the task is to document the culture – the perspectives and practices – of the people in these settings" (p. 76). As much as possible, I tried to prevent my own personal beliefs and perspectives from swaying my interpretations. I attempted to report on exactly what I was seeing, hearing, and learning.

**Ethnographic case study.** One popular methodology that is used in qualitative research is a case study approach (Barone, 2004; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). For this research investigation, I utilized a qualitative, ethnographic case study design method. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), a qualitative case study focuses on "...a particular organization (school, rehabilitation center) or some aspect of organization" (p. 60) or a "detailed examination of one setting..." (p. 271). Once a researcher has selected an organization to study, he or she may choose to focus on one or more aspects within that particular organization. This case study focused on a specific group of people (third grade teachers) and an activity (teacher study group meetings) within the school. Yin (2009) argued that a case study is an "...empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). I used a case study research design to help me gain a more comprehensive understanding of the professional development experiences of three elementary school teachers.

In this ethnographic case study, I investigated the experiences of three third grade teachers as they participated in a teacher study group. The following research questions guided this naturalistic inquiry:

- ❖ In what ways does participation in a teacher study group impact elementary teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings when teaching culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs school?
- ❖ In what ways do teachers' literacy practices shift as a result of engaging in teacher study groups focused on issues related to culturally, linguistically and economically diverse student populations?

### **Background Behind This Study**

Prior to implementing this study, I was hopeful that I could provide a group of teachers with a safe and supportive environment within their school that would allow them to openly discuss their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and beliefs related to teaching and learning. I recently facilitated professional development trainings with in-service teachers in elementary and middle school settings. These experiences and my own experiences as an elementary teacher who attended numerous ineffective professional development trainings led me to believe that too many traditional professional development models such as workshops and hour long trainings were still being implemented in schools. In my courses at the university, I introduced teacher study group formats to my undergraduate and graduate students. Their feedback indicated a great need to continue to investigate this model as an effective form of professional learning. Therefore, I wanted to explore how this particular professional development model might work for a group of teachers in a very "high stakes" testing year. Since

third and fifth grade are currently considered “high stakes” testing years due to the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), I decided to focus on third grade at one of the elementary schools involved in the PDS (Professional Development Schools) partnership that I am involved in.

### **Participants**

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) defined purposeful sampling as choosing “...particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (p. 73). The participants involved in this research study included three third grade teachers. I decided to work with third grade teachers because in my experiences, this seems to be the grade that administrators are the most worried about due to policy mandates related to student achievement and standardized test scores (NCLB, 2001). My participants consisted of two Caucasian females and one Caucasian male. I used purposeful sampling to select the participants for this study. I chose these three teachers because they were agreeable to participating in a research study that focused on teacher study groups and discussions around culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. I first met one of the female teachers in an initial PDS meeting that my department had with this particular county last spring. The dean of my university asked the superintendent and each of the elementary school principals to attend this meeting. He also asked each of the principals to bring one of their best teachers with them. I first met Terry at this initial meeting. We immediately hit it off as we discussed everything from writer’s workshop to integrating literacy and various content areas. In the fall, one of my student interns was placed with Terry. When I went to visit Terry’s classroom to check on my student intern, she asked me if I would help her implement a few literacy-related instructional changes in her room. I agreed and Terry and I continue to engage in

many conversations related to meetings the needs of her students through providing authentic literacy experiences.

According to Bogdan and Biklin (2007), another method for selecting participants is called “internal sampling” or “...the decisions you make once you have a general idea of what you are studying, with whom to talk, what time of day to observe, and the number and type of documents to review” (p. 68). They suggested that this participant selection method could help a researcher to focus in on specific elements and to spend quality time getting to know each of the participants in the study. They stated, “...some subjects are more willing to talk, have a greater experience in the setting, or are especially insightful about what goes on. These people become key informants...” (p. 68). Terry became my informant and before I knew it, she had convinced the rest of the teachers on her grade-level to participate in a teacher study group. The other two teachers voluntarily agreed to participate in our biweekly collaborative teacher study group meetings. Although Terry had a student teacher during the semester of this study, she did not serve as a participant in this research investigation.

In December, both the university and school system’s International Review Board (IRB) approved my research proposal and gave me permission to conduct this study. In the beginning of January, each of the participants signed a consent form that informed them about the purpose and important elements of this research study, assured them that pseudonyms and other methods would be used to protect their identity, and reminded them that they may choose to drop out of the study at any time. They also gave me permission to audio record our teacher study group conversations and interviews. I informed them that I planned to transcribe all interviews and teacher study group

meetings and that I would record detailed field notes following all classroom observations.

### **Setting**

During this study, I investigated the professional development experiences of three third grade teachers working with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs elementary school during their second semester or in the months of January to May. Since context is such an important factor in case study research (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 1998, 2009; Yin, 2009), I include a detailed description of the community, school, and classroom setting of this study in chapter four. Here, however, I present a brief overview of the setting of this research investigation.

Although the majority of the students in this school are Caucasian (92 %) I still decided to focus on the teachers' beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students because this school has a rapidly growing rate of linguistically and economically diverse students. At the time of this study, this school contained approximately 380 total students housed in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. Approximately 51 percent of the students attending this school received free or reduced lunch during the semester of this study. Of the 380 students, 28, (7.5 %), of them were labeled as English language learners (ELL). Four of the identified ELL students were students in two of my participants' third grade classrooms. The teachers in this study did not have many experiences working with culturally or linguistically diverse students because this school and county has typically always had a pre-dominantly Caucasian population. More detailed information about the setting and context of this study is included in the next chapter.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My own personal experiences and beliefs informed the qualitative case study design that I chose for this research investigation. Holding a constructionist epistemological belief allowed me to feel comfortable enough to interact with the participants within their natural environment as I observed them and attempted to learn more about their cultural and economic views, histories, and perspectives. Through conducting interviews and participating in their bi-weekly teacher study group meetings, I attempted to delve into their thoughts through asking questions related to their initial knowledge, beliefs and understandings about how culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students learn and develop literacy skills. As my research study progressed, I continued to examine their experiences and learning processes so that I could make inferences about whether their knowledge, beliefs, understandings, or classroom literacy practices seemed to shift as they participated in bi-weekly teacher study group meetings.

As suggested by Yin (2009), it is essential that researchers collect empirical data that is “rigorous and fair” (p. 5). To assure that the data I collected was as authentic and believable as possible, I continued to investigate my personal relationships with the participants throughout this study through recording my thoughts in a researchers’ journal and writing memos at the end of each month. Crotty (1998) states, “There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (pp. 8-9). Because I am human, I had assumptions and biases that naturally came into play as I conducted this research study. I had to become more cognizant of my own assumptions so that I could construct meaning

from my research and prevent my biased opinions from interfering, manipulating, or misrepresenting the data that I was collecting.

“The experience of the researcher as an insider or outsider cannot be a fixed one, because we are all at some point an insider or an outsider, given the setting” (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p.129). During this research inquiry, I acted as an interviewer who was interested in finding out more about the participants’ socioeconomic backgrounds, life and school experiences, literacy-related knowledge, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, and current literacy practices. Although there were times when I felt like an outsider because I was not experiencing the same stresses and frustrations, the teachers always treated me like an insider (Johnson-Bailey, 2004) in that they very warm and open from the very beginning of this study. In their interviews and within our teacher study group meetings, they seemed to feel comfortable enough with me to share their knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Dall’Alba and Sandberg (2006) suggested that “...ethnographic and case studies could be carried out that included observations of practice over time, in combination with interviews about the focus and purpose of that practice, as understood by the professionals concerned” (p. 401). In this qualitative, ethnographic case study, data collection took place from January until May. (See Appendix B for a timeline showing when data was collected.) Data was collected through initial and final semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and bi-weekly teacher study group meetings. Artifacts such as photographs and teacher notes from our meetings were also collected and referred to during the analysis process. I also created notebooks for the participants and myself that we referred to during our teacher study group meetings. These notebooks

included the multiple resources that we viewed and discussed during our bi-weekly collaborative meetings. All data was stored on a password protected computer or in file folders stored in a locked file cabinet. The initial and final interviews and all teacher study group meetings were transcribed and organized into electronic folders according to the type of data in my database. I further organized the interviews into electronic folders that were categorized according to the participant. The interviews were named using the first letter of each participant's pseudonym and the date of the interview. Field notes were also recorded immediately after each classroom observation in the form of electronic word documents. These field notes were then saved electronically into folders labeled with the first letter of each participant's pseudonym and the date. I also printed out hard copies of each of the interviews, teacher study group meeting transcriptions, and field notes and organized these documents into binders. Although I organized much of my data electronically into themes through the use of word documents, I used the hard copies to initially engage in a triangulation of data through an open-coding process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In order to maintain a high level of trustworthiness and dependability (Merricam, 2009; Yin, 2009), I employed both triangulation and open coding simultaneously during data analysis. Table 1 demonstrates how I addressed my research questions through collecting particular data sources during this study.

Table 1

*Data Collection Summary*

Research Questions	Data Sources Addressing Questions
In what ways does participation in a teacher study group impact elementary teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings when teaching culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs school?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Initial and Final Semi-Structured Interview Transcripts</li> <li>2. Teacher Study Group Meeting Transcripts</li> <li>3. Reflective Journal and Memos</li> </ol>
In what ways do teachers' literacy practices shift as a result of engaging in teacher study groups focused on issues related to culturally, linguistically and economically diverse student populations?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Initial and Final Semi-Structured Interview Transcripts</li> <li>2. Classroom Observation Field Notes</li> <li>3. Teacher Study Group Meeting Transcripts</li> <li>4. Reflective Journal and Memos</li> <li>5. Artifacts</li> <li>6. Photographs</li> </ol>

Both the interviews that I conducted and my observations of “practice over time” helped me to find answers to my research questions related to the shifts that the teachers experienced as a result of participating in this collaborative teacher study group.

### **Interviews**

I used semi-structured interviews to collect dialogue and information that would help me to learn more about the initial knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and experiences of my participants. Both lists of semi-structured interview questions are included in the appendix (see Appendix C for a list of initial interview questions and Appendix D for a list of final interview questions). I engaged each third grade teacher in a sixty minute interview in early January. I used the same semi-structured questions for

each interview as a guide, but asked follow up open-ended questions so that I could gain insight into their literacy-related pedagogical knowledge and perspectives about how particular students, especially students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds, develop language and literacy skills. In May, I conducted a final interview with each teacher that lasted about thirty minutes. Originally, I planned to hold a sixty minute final interview, but due to time constraints in the teachers' schedules, they could only meet for about thirty minutes each.

In the first interview, I wanted to find out as much as I could about the teacher's socioeconomic backgrounds, early school experiences, educational backgrounds, and previous professional development experiences. I also tried to find out more about their beliefs about literacy development and effective literacy practices, as well as their beliefs about their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. In the second interview, I asked additional questions to help me explore whether or not their knowledge, beliefs, or understandings about how students develop literacy proficiency shifted since their initial interview. I also asked questions to help me find out more about how they viewed or perceived their professional development experiences and professional growth as a result of participating in a teacher study group. In addition, I attempted to member-check during their final interviews through asking follow-up questions that were driven by my initial findings.

### **Classroom Observations and Field Notes**

Bryman (1984) suggested that rich data can be collected through conducting participant observations. He stated, "'Participant observation' is a rather broad term, in that not only does it encapsulate a wide range of observational practices, it is also used to

denote a fieldwork strategy which includes general interviewing, usually of a relatively unstructured kind, the perusal of documents, and the interviewing of key informants” (pp. 78-79). As a second primary data collection technique, I conducted classroom observations in each of my participants’ third grade classrooms. In the month of January, I conducted one observation during each teacher’s morning block which consisted of a thirty minute language arts lesson, a sixty minute reading and writing lesson, and a sixty minute math lesson. In February, I observed each teacher twice during their morning block of instructional time. In March, I observed each teacher two times for the length of their school day. This allowed me to not only see their language arts, reading, writing, and math instructional blocks, but also their science and social studies blocks which lasted approximately forty minutes each. In April, I was only able to observe each teacher one time during their morning instructional blocks due to the school system’s week long spring break vacation, standardized testing review, and the administration of the standardized test. These three events took place over the span of three weeks in April. In May, I observed each teacher one time during their science and social studies instructional block. I observed each of the teachers a total of seven times, with four of the times occurring during their morning block (language arts, writing, reading, and math instruction), one of the times during their afternoon block (science and social studies instruction) and two of the times during their entire instructional day (language arts, writing, reading, math, science, and social studies instruction). Although my original plan was to observe primarily during literacy instructional times so that I could focus on the literacy strategies and techniques, initial findings led me to inquire about how they were integrating literacy activities into all content areas. In addition, I attempted to

observe on different days of the week so that I could gain a more comprehensive understanding of the types of literacy practices that occurred in each classroom on particular days.

Preissle and Grant (2001) referred to participant observation as “field work” and explained that the researcher “...enters the social world of study, the field, to observe human interaction in that context. Participant observation is a label for research requiring some extent of social participation to document or record the course of ongoing events. The researcher observes through participating in events” (p.163). During my observations, the teachers often asked me questions, sought an opinion, explained why they were implementing a certain strategy or activity, or showed me something their students had completed in a previous lesson. I recorded as much as I could about these conversations in my researcher’s reflection journal or in my field notes. The students also occasionally interacted with me by showing me something they were working on or asking me a question about why I was there or who I was. As time went on, the students viewed my presence in their classroom as a normal event. I recorded detailed notes about the interactions I saw, the dialogue I heard, and the literacy and socially-oriented practices I observed taking place in the classroom. I examined how the teachers interacted with their students as well as how the children interacted with each other (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004). Crotty (1998) advised, “...one is to observe it as closely as possible, attempt to take the place of those within the culture, and search out the insider’s perspective” (p. 76). I kept this advice in mind as I attempted to interpret what I observed in each of the participants’ classrooms.

Following each observation, I immediately typed up descriptive field notes that documented my experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Although I attempted to remain as objective as possible, I used reflective field notes to help me document my own subjectivities in the form of observer's comments (or O.C.'s) and memos (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained why researchers should document their own subjectivities and biases when they stated, "In order to do a good study, you must be self-reflective and keep an accurate record of methods, procedures, and evolving analysis" (p. 122). By diligently keeping both descriptive (objective) and reflective (subjective) field notes, I feel that I successfully achieved a balance that is in line with my constructionist epistemologies and sociocultural theoretical perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986).

### **Teacher Study Group Meetings**

Audio recordings of bi-weekly teacher study group meetings served as a third data source in this qualitative inquiry. Between the months of January and May, the third grade teachers and I participated in nine teacher study group meetings. The recordings captured teacher's comments, stories, questions, reactions, frustrations, and collaborative discussions as they engaged in conversations during these meetings. Although I participated in all of these meetings, I did not plan to facilitate the meetings. My goal was to allow the teachers to facilitate the meetings and to decide what they would focus on in each of the meetings. I wanted the participants to choose topics that either interested them or pertained to critical issues that they were experiencing in their classrooms. I attempted to maintain my role as a participant observer in each of these meetings, but they still seemed to look to me to lead the meetings. Therefore, I usually

ended up leading our meetings in an attempt to keep us on track and organized with a teacher study group meeting framework that I introduced to the teachers during our first teacher study group meeting. A specific professional learning community framework introduced by Birchak et al. (1998) was used during all of our teacher study group meetings (See Table 2).

I continued to encourage the teachers to choose the topics that we discussed in each of our teacher study group meetings. At the end of each meeting, I asked them to determine the next meeting's topic. For some meetings, they immediately knew what they wanted to discuss. For other meetings, they could not come to an agreement. A few days before the meeting I would ask the grade level chair to let me know if a decision had been made. Facilitating these bi-weekly teacher study groups helped me to learn more about the teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings about their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students, and thus find answers to my research questions. More details about our teacher study group meetings are presented in chapters four and five.

Table 2

*Teacher Study Group Framework (Birchak et al., 1998)*

10:00-10:05: Introduction
10:05-10:20: Sharing
10:20-10:50: New Learning and Discussion
10:50-11:00: Review & Getting Prepared for Our Next Meeting

### **Artifacts and Photographs**

In addition to conducting initial and final semi-structured interviews, participating in classroom observations, and attending bi-weekly teacher study group meetings, I also collected artifacts in an effort to gain further insights about the knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and literacy practices of my participants. Some examples of artifacts that I collected were copies of teacher-made assessments, rubrics, or activities, and any hand-written notes or visual representations recorded by the teachers during our teacher study group meetings. Additionally, I took photographs of any learning events or wall decorations (such as learning posters, class created charts, word walls, etc.) that could help me document details pertaining to the learning activities implemented and overall environments present in each classroom. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) pointed out that, “Photographs provided strikingly descriptive data, are often used to understand the subjective, and are frequently analyzed inductively” (p. 141). Later analysis of these photographs helped me to gain further insights about important contextual factors.

### **Researcher’s Reflection Journal and Memos**

Since I was a facilitator and participant in the teacher study group meetings, it was critical that I continued to diligently write down my thoughts and reflections so that I could capture some of my subjectivities and biases. After all classroom observations, informal conversations, and teacher study group meetings with the teachers, I recorded my thoughts and reflections in a researcher’s reflection journal. Each month, I wrote detailed memos (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) so that I could document my thinking processes and attempt to interpret how my interactions with the participants impacted both the data that I collected and my interpretations of these

collaborative events (See Appendix E for more details about the role that memos played during the analysis process). I wrote a memo in February, two in March, two in April, and two in May, for a total of seven memos.

### **Data Analysis and Organization**

“The task of data analysis involves making sense out of the data you collect for a research study” (Sulentic-Dowell, Beal, & Capraro, 2006, p. 243). Throughout the course of this qualitative case study, I engaged in ongoing data analysis that began as soon as I conducted my initial interviews with the participants. The process of implementing ongoing data analysis is referred to as a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method helped new questions, themes, and procedures to continuously emerge as I investigated the collaborative professional development experiences of my participants. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) claimed that “...formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of data collection” (p. 73). I continued to analyze my data as I recorded descriptive observation field notes and transcribed the audio recordings of our teacher study group meetings. I also analyzed my own reflective field notes in the form of observer comments and memos. I read and re-read through my field notes, memos, and transcripts several times so that I could add comments about my thoughts, feelings, and perspectives related to what I saw and heard.

As I recorded my observations and reflections on field notes, transcripts, and memos, I began to make notes about possible codes in the margins of my data sources. Through the open-coding process, some of the codes started to become more dominant because examples of these codes appeared in my data more often. I, therefore, made an initial list of possible codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) in my researcher’s reflection

journal. I continued to transcribe and read through my data sources and began to group the codes into major codes and subcodes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In my researchers' reflection journal, I noted initial codes such as isolated teaching, no time for writing, must "conform" (administration), too much required data collection, math as a focus for professional development, need more time to think about literacy instruction, performance-based tasks, teacher study groups as a "safe place", unit plans developed by someone else not helpful, and examples of ineffective and effective professional development (see Appendix F for a complete list of major codes and subcodes). I continued to refine and regroup dominant codes as I engaged in constant comparative analysis and reflected on my experiences in the classrooms and teacher study group meetings. Through continuing to write memos about the bigger ideas such as what the teachers chose to focus on in our meetings and my thoughts pertaining to what was occurring instructionally in the teachers' classrooms and how these occurrences related to topics we discussed in our teacher study group meetings, I found that I began to identify additional codes and patterns (See Appendix E for a more detailed list of the big ideas recorded in my memos.). As patterns emerged, I created word documents and used the most dominant codes as heading at the top such as standardized testing, beliefs about reading instruction, math as a language, inquiry-based learning, making thinking visible, and literacy centers. I then organized relevant examples under appropriate major codes (See Appendix F for a more detailed list of major codes). In order for this process to work, I had to continue to engage in the analysis process throughout my study.

After I read and reread through my data sources multiple times and moved examples under relevant codes, I went back and looked at the amount of data listed under

each code to see if some had more examples or patterns than others. I then made a list of these major codes on a separate word document. As I began to think about how each of these codes might fit together, significant patterns and themes emerged such as beliefs about professional learning, beliefs about teaching and student learning, beliefs about literacy, beliefs about CLED students, classroom context or environment, impact of a teacher study group, standardized testing, new common core standards, content integration, math as a language/math and literacy, and promoting thinking and inquiry. I then created new electronic word documents with these theme headings at the top. I copied and pasted examples from my data sources under each of these thematic headings. I then began to move the word documents organized by dominant themes into folders based on their commonalities. Examples of some of the folder names included common core standards and unit planning, higher order thinking and inquiry-based learning, integration of content, teacher support, Terry's beliefs about CLED students, Faith's beliefs about CLED students, and Eric's beliefs about CLED students. As I continued to analyze my data sources and add examples under each of the themes, I found that I could refine the themes even more. My themes slowly became more specific and helped me to focus more specifically on particular things as I continued to collect and analyze data. Themes continued to form and shape as I engaged in constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theme coding allowed me to organize my data in a way that made sense to me and helped me to further analyze what the themes meant in relation to my theoretical perspectives, research purposes, and questions. My theoretical perspectives continued to guide me in this process and eventually led me to significant

findings that add important information to the current body of language and literacy research.

While engaging in the data collection, analysis, and writing process, I had to continually go back to my introduction to make sure that my purpose, objectives, and research questions were aligned with my findings. In addition, I read back over my literature review and made necessary changes so that it, too, continued to support my research purpose, objectives, and research questions. This process involved not only analysis of the data, but also interpretation of the data. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described this process when they stated,

Data **interpretation** refers to developing ideas about your findings and relating them to the literature and to broader concerns or concepts. **Analysis** involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns. Interpretation involves explaining and framing your ideas in relation to theory, other scholarship, and action, as well as showing why your findings are important and making them understandable. (p. 159)

I do not feel that I truly understood the purpose and objectives of my research until I went through the process of analyzing, organizing, and coding my data. Continuing to review the literature on my research topic as I engaged in data collection and analysis also helped my theoretical, conceptual, and empirical knowledge to continuously deepen.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness and Dependability**

Many quantitative researchers argue that qualitative researchers employing a case study design often lack the rigor that is needed to obtain objective, reliable, and valid results (Yin, 2009). Creswell (2009) seemed to object to this idea when he suggested that qualitative researchers engage in multiple “validity strategies” as they attempt to “...enhance the researcher’s ability to assess the accuracy of findings as well as convince readers of that accuracy” (p. 191). As Bogdan and Biklin (2007) and Creswell (1998) suggested, I kept detailed and descriptive field notes, recorded all interviews and teacher study group meetings, and wrote observer comments and memos that documented my subjectivities and biases.

### **Generalizability**

Generalizability is a typical concern with case study designs, for some researchers question how generalizations can be made when they are only based on a single case (Yin, 2009). Yin explains that “...case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (p. 15). The goal of a case study design is to generalize theories and not to show statistical significance.

### **Triangulation**

To ensure that that my work was of high quality and as trustworthy as possible, I took several pre-cautions as I conducted, analyzed, and wrote about my research study. First of all, I added credibility to my study through collecting data through the use of multiple data sources or triangulation (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009 ). Several researchers suggest that triangulating data is one of the qualities that makes the case study research method so strong (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Merriam,

2009; Yin, 2009). Creswell (2009) explained that triangulation "...involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data" (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Yin (2009) emphasized the importance of triangulating data when he stated,

The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits for the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p. 18)

In order to maintain a triangulation of data, I utilized several data collection techniques including interviews, participant observations, bi-weekly teacher study group meetings, artifacts, photographs, a researcher's journal, and memos. In January of 2012, I began collecting data and continued until the end of the school year in May (See Appendix B for a timeline of my research study). In this qualitative research investigation, I examined the knowledge, beliefs, and understandings of three elementary school teachers through conducting an initial interview in January and a final interview in May with each of the participants. In addition, I explored their professional development learning processes as I meet with them bi-weekly and supported them as they participated in teacher study group meetings during their collaborative planning time. During the weeks that we did not meet for our teacher study group meetings, I observed the literacy-related activities and social interactions that occurred in their classrooms. Additionally, I

collected artifacts and took photographs to document events or learning activities that might provide relevant information for my study. I diligently recorded thoughts related to my observations and teacher study group meetings in a researcher's journal and wrote detailed memos at the end of each month as I engaged in open coding and constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) throughout the data collection process. In five months time, I collected a rich, thick set of data (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009) that provided me with detailed descriptions of the teachers' collaborative experiences in their teacher study group meetings and of the literacy events that occurred in their classrooms.

### **Voluntary Participation**

One essential principle that I employed during this research inquiry was voluntary participation which ensured that the participants voluntarily agreed to participate in my study. In addition, I made sure that I got documented permission (or informed consent) from them, their school administrators, and the school board before beginning my study. I informed the teachers participating in this study of all of the procedures and risks that were involved with this research project. I also asked for their permission to tape record all of our interviews and teacher study group meetings for use in my final research report. I do not feel that they were subjected to any risks of harm as a result of participating in this study. In addition, I guaranteed the participants complete confidentiality by assuring them that I would use pseudonyms for both their names and schools when writing up and publishing the results of my study. I allowed the participants to choose the pseudonyms that were used in place of their actual names. I am the only person who knows their true identity.

### **Member Checking**

In addition, I conducted member checking in order to further maintain the validity of my study through insuring that my work was of high quality, credible, and believable. In chapters four and five, I included specific details of events, dialogue, and thoughts through extracting many of the participants' actual verbally expressed words from my transcriptions and field notes. I asked my participants to read through chapters four and five so that they could check them for accuracy and inform me if I misrepresented them in any way. This member check ensured that my interpretations of the knowledge, beliefs, and understandings of the participants were represented as accurately as possible. I believe that collecting data for five full months gave me a great deal of data to work with. Collecting data about the participants' knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and experiences both before and after they participated in the teacher study groups helped me to better interpret whether or not shifts occurred as they participated in this study.

I also attempted to engage in member checking through asking follow up questions in our teacher study group meetings and during our final interviews so that I could make sure that I interpreted their knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and experiences as objectively as possible. Reflective field notes and ongoing analysis helped me to make note of any follow up questions that I might need to ask them in an attempt to clarify my interpretations. Through this research investigation, I feel that my participants and I developed a trusting and supportive relationship with each other that allowed them to feel comfortable enough to share their honest feelings, opinions, beliefs, understandings, and experiences.

### **Peer Debriefings**

In order to add another level of trustworthiness and dependability to this research study, I enrolled in a writing support class in June and July that allowed me to receive both verbal and written feedback from my peers and instructor. During this six week class, I engaged in collaboration with two of my doctoral peers and one of my doctoral professors about the progress of my data analysis and writing. My peers and instructor read over my initial findings and data supporting these findings. Their comments and feedback helped me to think even more deeply about the ideas I included or areas that needed more attention.

### **Limitations of the Design and Issues of Bias**

One of my goals was to collect data that represented the participants' experiences, feelings, and perspectives as clearly and objectively as possible. Since I recognize that I am human and that it is difficult for me to remain completely objective, I attempted to represent my participants in as believable a manner as possible through continuing to analyze a rich collection of data and to self-reflect about my own subjectivities and biases. Prior to conducting this qualitative case study, I put much thought into the types of data collection methods and techniques that I would utilize. I made sure that the data collection methods were focused on my research purpose and questions through creating a data collection summary chart (See Appendix A). In addition, I continued to think about my epistemologies and theoretical perspectives as I relied on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978; 1986) to help me develop questions that would assist me in the analysis of my data.

Employing a theme identification data analysis method also allowed me to find common themes throughout the different data I collected. Thematic analysis does not

necessarily reduce biases. In fact, I feel that biases actually focus what we see. Through recruiting two of my doctoral peers and one of my doctoral professors to provide me with feedback on writing related to my initial themes, I added a second layer of authenticity to my research findings. The data that I collected from interviews and teacher study group meetings was authentic because I audio recorded them word for word. I used many examples of my participants' own words to provide support for the findings that emerged during the data collection and analysis process. The rich data that I collected helped me get a better idea of whether or not their knowledge, beliefs, understandings, or literacy practices changed as a result of participating in bi-weekly teacher study group meetings. My observation field notes, artifacts, and photographs added another layer of authenticity for they demonstrated some of the actual activities that occurred in the classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

Creswell (2009) suggested that a qualitative research methodology is best when "...a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it" (p. 18). In this chapter, I have provided a comprehensive and extensive explanation for why a qualitative methodology in the form of an ethnographic case study best helped me to answer my research questions.

In chapter two, I argued that little research exists that explores the significant impact that teacher study groups can have on teachers' literacy-related pedagogy, knowledge, beliefs, and understandings, especially for teachers who work in high-needs schools with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse children. I feel that my work exhibits high quality because I carefully followed the steps of my research design (See Appendix A and B) and took special pre-cautions to make sure that I avoided all

ethical issues. The following chapters include themes, findings, and results that honestly represent the experiences, knowledge beliefs, and understandings of the participants.

In the next chapter, I provide a detailed description of the context and setting of my study as I introduce the reader to the community, school, and classroom settings where this qualitative research investigation took place. Additionally, I include a detailed description of each of the teachers who participated in this study.

In subsequent chapters, I include detailed information related to significant findings uncovered during a thorough and on-going analysis of the data collected in this study. I also draw conclusions that can help language and literacy researchers, policy makers, administrators, and teachers better understand the implications that collaboration in teacher study groups can have for teachers who work with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in high needs schools. I hope that my interpretations and the summaries of my findings will help other educators to see the positive benefits that teacher study groups can have for teachers as they attempt to learn and grow professionally in a safe and supportive collaborative learning environment.

## CHAPTER 4

### SETTING AND CONTEXT OF STUDY

We were constantly having conversations about what we were talking about...what our purpose was. ‘What are your kids doing?’ ‘What are my kids doing?’ ‘Do you have any ideas about how I can do this?’ There were always conversations whether it was at lunch or recess. ‘What can I take from your environment?’ And I think we all had that attitude. ‘What can I learn from you that I could implement in my own environment that would increase that student achievement and student engagement?’ And so, I don’t feel like we were in competition with each other (Terry, Final Interview, 5/24/12).

In this ethnographic case study, I explored the professional development activities that three third grade teachers in a high-needs elementary school participated in during the second half of their school year (January to May). Since context is an essential factor in case study research (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 1998, 2009; Yin, 2009), this chapter includes a detailed description of the community, the school where this study took place, and the participants involved in this research investigation.

#### **Introduction to the Community**

##### **Macks County**

This ethnographic research study was conducted in a small, semi-developed rural county located in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Historically, this area of the state was not very diverse because most of the people who were born here or who

moved here from the city or other areas were Caucasian. According to the most recent United Census Bureau report (2011), this county has over 20,000 people with about 92% of the population identifying as Caucasian, 4% as Hispanic or Latino, 1% as multiracial, 1% as Black, and less than 1% as Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. The percentage of Latino/a population living in this county increased to approximately 4% from 2% in 2009. The diversity of the population continues to shift and grow as people of Latino/a descent move to this town because of the growing agricultural industry, including poultry and livestock farms, located in this part of the state (The University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, 2009). The construction of a major highway through the county has also contributed to the shifting population. This highway now connects the mountains located in the north part of the state to a large metropolitan city located approximately an hour south. For this reason, many people have relocated to this town because it is easy for them to commute to their jobs in the metropolitan areas surrounding the large, urban city. There is also a bus system that provides daily transportation for commuters who work in the city, but live in this small town or surrounding towns.

Since the construction of a major highway through the middle of the town, many businesses have established themselves along both sides of this highway, including a large shopping mall that is located near the elementary school where this study took place. Some of the teachers, parents, and student interns from the local university who work at the school have part-time or full-time jobs at this mall. Several retail businesses sit across the street from the mall including a grocery store and a large hardware store intermixed with several smaller restaurants, convenience stores, gas stations, nail salons,

and other small businesses. Two large chain restaurants, a drug store, and several small fast food chains sit next to the outlet mall. Dentists, doctors, chiropractors, and other medical professionals have also established practices along the highway. All of these businesses are located within a half-mile stretch of each other along the sides of the two to four lane highway.

On multiple occasions, I have visited the restaurants, grocery stores, mall, and other businesses located within this busy, half mile stretch of the town. While visiting the outlet mall stores, I have noticed an ethnically diverse group of people. Some of them may be locals, but most are consumers who have driven from other areas of the state . The mall is almost always busy, especially around holidays and on weekends.

The downtown area of this town is very different from the half-mile stretch of businesses located along the north and south-bound highway for it is comprised of small family-owned businesses rather than corporate chains. Most of the businesses in the small downtown “square” are family-owned businesses that are well established. A few businesses have closed because of the recent economic recession, while others have come in to replace them. Several hair salons, a florist shop, and a few other small businesses make up the tiny downtown square. Located just off the square is a small Mexican restaurant, the county post-office, the county public library, the county school board office, and the largest elementary school in this town. This elementary school was the first school to ever exist in the county. It started as a small school that held all of the students in the county, kindergarten through twelfth grade. As the county grew and more people settled in the area, the school board opened a separate high school which is now located across the street. Since then, they have also built two middle schools (one of

those middle schools is located down the street) and three additional elementary schools, one of which was the setting of my study.

A 10K benefit race was recently held and the starting line was located right around the corner from this elementary school. I decided to participate in this race because I wanted to become more familiar with the downtown area. I thought that actually running through the downtown part might help me become more familiar with the buildings and businesses in this town. As I was running, I tried to pay attention to the context surrounding me. Here is a description of my race experience and this part of the community:

*As we hear the gun shot, we all begin to move forward at a slow pace. We are at first like a herd of sheep moving across a field. As we move away from the race car museum, we begin to spread out and set our pace for the race. As I sink into my slow, but steady stride, I take note of my surroundings. We first run past a Head Start day care center on our left. I think to myself, "Oh! So that is where the Head Start child care center is located." As a university professor, I have often recommended that my undergraduates volunteer at one of the Head Start programs in our surrounding community. This child care center is the only government funded Head Start program in this county, although there are several others located in neighboring counties. The poverty rate has risen dramatically in both this county and the neighboring counties, especially since the economy has plummeted and so many people have lost their jobs. At the end of this road, I see the school system's county office on my left. It is a rather small and simple building. When the local university where I work first began to develop a*

*Professional Development School (PDS) partnership with the elementary schools in this county, several of our planning meetings were held in this building.*

*As we round the corner, I see the high school campus to my right and the elementary school to my left. I also notice an old sign with the paint peeling off of it that reads “Montessori School.” The dilapidated appearance of the school grounds and building make me think that the school must have closed down. At the stop sign, we turn right and I notice a senior center on my right and some kind of county-run charity thrift store and food bank on the left. I have heard some teachers talk about the fact that they sometimes volunteer at a local food bank that provides meals for those in need in the county. A counseling center and a large church are located on my right. In the front yard of the church is a big sign asking for clothing donations*

Running through the downtown area helped me to notice the impact of the recession and the community’s response. While conducting this research study, I overheard many teachers discussing the rising poverty rates in the county and the significant impact that the economy has had on the students and families who live here. In this close-knit community, many of the educators in the town volunteer their own money and time to help out those families who need it. Although I sometimes still feel like an “outsider” because I am new to this community, conducting this research study in this town has helped me to learn so much about the people who have spent most of their lives in this community. This experience has led me to want to continue to research the impact of poverty on students who live in the Appalachian area, as well as the strategies that schools and teachers are implementing to provide children who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds with support so that they will have positive

school experiences. This research inquiry has helped me to investigate the following research questions:

1. In what ways does participation in a teacher study group impact elementary teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings when teaching culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs school?
2. In what ways do teachers' literacy practices shift as a result of engaging in teacher study groups focused on issues related to culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse student populations?

In the next section, I provide more information about the setting of this study. I explain why I chose to conduct this research inquiry at Lakeside Elementary School (pseudonyms are used for all participants and places), one of the four elementary schools in this county. I also provide demographic information and descriptions of the school environment.

### **Lakeside Elementary School**

#### **How I Became Affiliated with Lakeside**

Lakeside Elementary School participated in its first year as a Professional Development School (PDS) in partnership with a local university during the same year that this qualitative research study took place. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) argued that partnerships between schools and universities can result in new knowledge that can serve as a powerful experience for both teachers and students. In a PDS, teachers, researchers, and educators work collaboratively to improve school experiences for students. Teitel (2003) stated that professional development schools

(PDS's) are "...innovative types of school-college partnerships designed to address this disconnection and finger-pointing and bring about the simultaneous renewal of schools and teacher education programs – restructuring schools for improved student learning and revitalizing the preparation and professional development of experienced educators at the same time" (p. 2). The university that recently partnered with this school is located in the same rural, rather mountainous area that the study school was located. I currently teach in the School of Education at this small, local university. In May of 2011, I was asked by the Dean of the School Education to facilitate a PDS (or PDC as we call it – Professional Development Community) partnership with four elementary schools located within the same county. I chose to conduct this study at one of the elementary schools involved in the PDC partnership because it had the most culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse student population in the county.

### **Lakeside Elementary School Demographics**

Lakeside Elementary School is a public elementary school that housed approximately 380 total students in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade during the 2011-2012 school year. The majority of students in this elementary school, (92 %), were White. The number of students in this school who were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch increased from 31% to 51% during the 2011-12 school year, thereby designating it as a high needs school. The school was also recently designated as a Title I school. Title I provides support for schools with a large number of economically disadvantaged students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). According to the U.S. Department of Education, the school can be labeled as a "Title 1" or "low income" school due to the fact that more than 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

During an informal meeting with the principal in December of 2011, she shared that the school had recently gained a small population (7.5%) of English language learners (ELL). At the time of our meeting, the school had 28 students who were officially designated “ELL.” Of these 28 students, 27 were Latino/a and one was German. All of these students except for one spoke Spanish as their primary language. Four of the identified ELL students were in the third grade during the time that data were collected and were, therefore, students in my participants’ classrooms. Working with ELL students has been a very different experience for some of the teachers at this school because they have had few opportunities to work with ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse children within a school setting.

### **Description of the Physical Environment at Lakeside**

Lakeside Elementary School is a small school split into two long hallways that split off into smaller wings on the left and right sides of the hallways. The kindergarten, first, and second grade classrooms and the gymnasium are located down the hallway to the right. The hallway to the left holds the cafeteria, the music room, the art room, and the third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms. This qualitative research study took place in the third grade wing located off of the hallway to the left. Although there were only three third grade teachers at the time of this study, four classrooms were located on the third grade wing. Since one of the classrooms was empty, the participants sometimes used it for small group lessons, projects, or reader’s theater performances. I did observe one of the teachers practicing a reader’s theater play with her students in this room on one occasion. Our teacher study group meetings typically took place in one of the participant’s classrooms, but we did meet one time in the empty classroom because the

custodian was cleaning the teachers' classrooms. I also held one of the participants' pre and post interviews in the empty classroom, while the other two participants' interviews were held in their classrooms.

### **Professional Development Communities at Lakeside**

During the 2011-12 school year, the school administration grouped the teachers into professional learning communities by grade-levels and required them to attend weekly professional development meetings on Wednesdays called "Wednesday Workshops." These professional development workshops were either focused on elements from their school improvement plan or on the new national standards they were getting ready to adopt in the upcoming school year. Occasionally, the grade-level teams were provided time for collaborative planning. I was asked by the principal to facilitate several of the Wednesday Workshop meetings with each of the grade level teams. In total, I facilitated five, 50-minute Wednesday Workshops with each individual grade level and one, half-day professional development in-service with the entire faculty. The administration asked me to focus on differentiation within the context of a standards-based classroom during these Wednesday Workshops. Within the first few sessions I established a relationship with many of the teachers, particularly those teaching third grade. These meetings were located in the professional development room across from the front office. The assistant principal either facilitated or attended the Wednesday Workshops weekly and the principal dropped in on occasion.

In the fall, the third grade teachers asked me to join them during their bi-weekly collaborative planning times. When I asked them if they would like to participate in my dissertation study and they voluntarily agreed, we collectively decided that this

collaborative planning time would become our “teacher study group” time.

Unfortunately, the teachers were not given very much of their Wednesday professional development time to collaboratively plan during the semester of this study because they had to attend trainings centered around the adoption of the Common Core standards. Therefore, instead of meeting on Wednesdays, we decided to meet every other week on Tuesdays during the participants’ planning time.

### **Lakeside Elementary School Improvement Plan**

The principal at Lakeside Elementary School voluntarily provided me with a copy of their School Improvement Plan (SIP). This plan helped me understand the school-wide improvement goals of the school which informed the initiatives of the administration. Improving the standardized test scores of all third, fourth, and fifth grade students in mathematics was the primary goal. For this reason, many of the Wednesday Workshop topics revolved around differentiated instruction, math assessment, math instruction, and the new Common Core performance standards the state was adopting in math and language arts.

### **Context of Our Teacher Study Groups**

During the semester that this qualitative research study took place, Terry, Faith, Eric and I participated in ten teacher study group meetings lasting approximately fifty minutes each. We held our teacher study group meetings biweekly on Tuesdays during the teacher’s collaborative planning time which occurred from 10:00 to 11:00 am. Typically, the four of us were the only participants in the meetings, although the assistant principal did drop in for about ten minutes on one occasion. We usually held our teacher

study group meetings in Terry's room, although one meeting was in Eric's classroom and one in a classroom next to Terry's classroom.

In our first teacher study group meeting, Eric, Faith, Terry, and I discussed the purposes behind a teacher study group, protocols that might be important during a teacher study group meeting, and other topics such as ways to organize a teacher study group (see Table 4 for a list of topics discussed in our teacher study groups). I shared information with them from several texts related to teacher study groups (i.e. Birchak et al., 1998; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Wiliam, 2008). I also explained that study groups often focus on a variety of issues and topics, but that it was important that these meetings addressed their concerns. To help them think about possible ideas for our meetings, I asked them to talk about their own professional development goals. Even though they all had several different goals, one that was common among all three of them was the need to help their students perform well on the standardized test they would administer in April. Therefore, helping students to perform better on math assessments became one of the primary focuses of our meetings. Although discussions related to this topic led us to talk about many other topics, this was one that we continued to come back to on a regular basis. Other topics we discussed included preparing students for the standardized test, supporting struggling students with math problem solving, integrating literacy and mathematics, implementing inquiry-based learning to engage students in science and social studies content, the common core standards and frameworks, and differentiated instruction (see Table 3 for a more detailed list of teacher study group topics). In our meetings, I implemented a meeting framework borrowed from Birchak et al. (1998) that included the following timeline: a five minute introduction, fifteen minutes of sharing,

Table 3

*Topics Discussed in Teacher Study Group (TSG) Meetings:*

<b>TSG Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Topics Discussed</b>
#1	1/27/12	-Effective vs. ineffective professional development experiences -Definition, organization, and protocols of a TSG -Possible topics to discuss in our meetings -Introduction to TSG notebooks
#2	2/7/12	-Resources I found on the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Website (NCTM) (Math games, math center ideas, math strategies, etc.) -Benefits of whole group vs. small group math instruction -Integration of math and literacy
#3	2/15/12	-Differentiation math strategies and issues in the classroom -New math common core standards & frameworks -Literacy centers -Ability grouping vs. mixed ability grouping
#4	2/29/12	-Stressful topics: behavior and academic problems in the classroom, student issues, standardized testing, grades and assessments, upcoming writing assessment, faculty cuts
#5	3/6/12	-Standardized test preparation: Different approaches and ideas -Not enough time to adequately cover social studies and math -Shared anchor chart examples and discussed how to use them
#6	3/20/12	-Met briefly to look at some of their students' writing samples (state-mandated writing assessment was quickly approaching) -Teachers were stressed, so they asked if they could have the rest of the time to work on their test preparation planning
#7	4/24/12	-Implementing inquiry-based learning in the classroom -Introduction to a Thinking Routine: <i>Think, Puzzle, Explore</i> -Shared Professional Growth Plans (PGP's) -Discussed and shared new ways to integrate in the classroom -Discussed new common core standards and state frameworks
#8	5/1/12	-Looked at the common core standards and worked together to plan their first language arts unit for the upcoming school year
#9	5/2/12	-Discussed and shared ideas for differentiation -Looked at the common core standards and worked together to plan their first language arts unit for the upcoming school year
#10	5/15/12	-Shared and discussed their professional development experiences -Discussed their students' scores on the writing assessment and standardized test and reflected on what might have contributed to their growth and progress -Discussed student issues, especially those related to economic diversity

thirty minutes of new learning and discussion, and ten minutes of reviewing and getting ready for the next meeting. Table 3 includes a detailed list of the topics we discussed in each of our teacher study group meetings.

### **Third Grade's Daily Schedule**

The administrators at Lakeside Elementary School mandated that all of the teachers in the school follow a block schedule so that the needs of all students could be met. In a faculty meeting that I attended, I heard the principal explain that the special education resource teachers could not serve students in the subject areas outlined on their IEP's (Individual Education Plan) if the classroom teachers were not following the master schedule. Each grade level was provided with a master schedule at the beginning of the school year. All of the third grade teachers were required to follow the daily schedule included in Table 4 for the entire school year. I observed in the teachers' classrooms during language arts, reading, writing, and math, and occasionally during science and social studies. Table 4 shows the teachers' daily schedule.

Table 4

#### *Third Grade Daily Schedule*

<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Time:</b>
Morning RTI Interventions	8:00-8:30
Language Arts	8:30-9:00
Reading/Writing	9:00-10:00
Specials (PE, Music, or Art)	10:00-11:00
Math	11:00-12:00
Lunch	12:00-12:30
Science	12:30-1:10
Recess	1:10-1:40
Social Studies	1:40-2:20

### **A Standard's-Based Curriculum**

Teachers at Lakeside Elementary were expected to base their daily instruction and lesson plans on particular state-mandated math, language arts, science, and social studies standards. They were required to provide evidence of their standards-based curriculum on the walls of their classroom. Each teacher in this study used his/her bulletin board as a place to post the standards, the essential questions that were guiding student learning, and important vocabulary terms that related to the content area topics. Along the top of one classroom wall in each classroom were thinking map posters, which they were required to post. All elementary school teachers in the county were participating in thinking map training at the time of the study. Thinking maps are a specific type of graphic organizer that can be used to build and strengthen student's thinking skills.

The teachers were also encouraged to use various skill-based programs that were aligned with the state standards, including *Literacy by Design* (2011), *Harcourt Math* (2012) workbooks and *Mountain Math* (2012). Another skill-based program called *Mountain Language* (2012) and a language arts workbook were sometimes used to teach grammar skills. All of the participants in this study used a combination of science and social studies nonfiction trade books from the library on various content-focused science and social studies topics, leveled nonfiction books, and occasional articles to support their science and social studies standards. Educational videos and other interactive games, activities, word documents, and power point presentations displayed on the Smart Board were also very popular whole group activities in all three classrooms. Terry and Faith used a computer-based reading program called *RAZ kids* (2012) and Terry's students also used *Glogster* (2012), or a website for creating interactive online posters, on a daily basis.

## **Assessments**

Testing was prevalent at Lakeside school. All teachers were required to administer benchmark testing at the end of each nine-week grading period and the *AIMS Web* diagnostic assessments in both math and reading several times throughout the year. In addition, the third grade teachers had to collect three writing samples (narrative, persuasive, and expository) for the Third Grade Writing Assessment test throughout the year. In April, all three participants administered a state wide standardized test in the subject areas of math, reading, language arts, science, and social studies.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I introduce the participants in this study and provide information about their background, classroom environments, content and instructional knowledge, and teaching styles. Terry, Faith, and Eric were all third grade teachers at Lakeside Elementary School at the time of this study.

### **Introduction to Lakeside's Third Grade Teachers**

#### **Terry**

Terry, a Caucasian female, was a third grade teacher in her nineteenth year of teaching at the time of this study. She had just looped up with her second grade class to the third grade and was serving as the grade-level chair of the third grade team at Lakeside Elementary School. In her initial interview, she described herself not only as an educator, but as “a mother of five boys.” She shared that she lived in the Lakeside Elementary School district with her husband and children. She also told me that she had earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in Early Childhood Education, a reading endorsement, and an ESOL endorsement.

**Terry's background.** In our initial interview in January, Terry shared she was born and raised in the county where Lakeside Elementary School is located. She attended elementary, middle, and high school in the same school building located near the downtown area. In her interview she explained, "I went to school here, grew up here, graduated here, went away to college, and then I was actually given an opportunity to come back and teach here and so, I have real strong roots here to this area" (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12). Terry also shared that she had taught at three of the four elementary schools in the county. Her first job was in the same elementary school that she attended when she was growing up and at the time, it was the only elementary school in the county. She transferred to a second elementary school when it opened, and then to Lakeside Elementary when it opened ten years ago. Prior to the year of this study, Terry taught third grade for eight years and second grade for ten years.

When I asked Terry if she had experienced or observed any changes in the county, she responded,

I have seen big changes. We have grown exponentially since then.

I remember when I first started teaching in this county, when there was just the one elementary school, I knew all the parents because they were from...they were local parents. It was a very odd occurrence if you had someone move in from outside of the county. So, you were teaching the students of your classmates...knew everybody. And then about 5 years into my teaching, there was this just mass movement of people into the county and little by little and even now, it's very rare to get someone that you know. So, now it's a very

diverse population...it's becoming more diverse. Now it's becoming more ethnically balanced. Back then, [students were] all Caucasian...all from this area. Very little cultural experience outside of the county (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12).

Terry described her early learning experiences as “textbook oriented” in a “traditional learning environment” (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12). She also mentioned that because she was a “concrete visual learner”, she struggled with math as a young child in school. She explained, “I remember having a hard time learning math and I think that has been a deficit for myself since then. I don't feel like I'm strong in math. If I can't understand it, I can't teach it so I keep at it...learning it.” As a young reader in school, Terry categorized herself as a “sight word learner,” because she did not remember receiving any phonics instruction in school. She explained that overall, she felt she was a good student who had a positive experience in school, but she was also very “quiet” and “reserved” (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12).

**Terry's classroom.** Terry's classroom is warm and welcoming. The first time I entered I noticed she had a tea pot filled with herbal tea and an incense machine that gave off a lovely fragrant and calming smell. Her walls were covered with bright colored posters and pre-made charts. In the back of the room, she had created what appeared to be a cozy place to read or write by placing soft seat cushions on top of a row of old crates. Her room was also filled with materials, such as hands-on manipulatives, pencils, markers, paper, and other instructional materials. The desks were already organized in little clusters conducive for cooperative groups and projects.

**Terry's content and instructional knowledge.** One of Terry's greatest instructional strengths is her ability to teach her students about the craft of writing. In addition to earning a reading endorsement, she shared with me that she had attended many professional development workshops and trainings related to writing because she was so interested in learning more about teaching writing. She mentioned going to one of Lucy Calkin's writing workshop conferences during our first teacher study group meeting. On several occasions during our teacher study group meetings, Terry stated that teaching students to love writing was one of her passions. When I observed in her classroom during her writing workshop time, I noticed that the students were actively engaged in different stages of the writing process. Some students wrote individually at their desks, while others participated in conferences with a peer, with Terry, or with the student teacher at one of the tables in the back of the room. Other students wrote while sitting on the floor, on little crates with cushions in the back of the room, or on the computers.

Terry is also very knowledgeable about explicitly teaching reading strategies to students. She implemented guided reading and literacy centers during her reading block and other literacy activities throughout the day. I often observed her modeling her own metacognitive thinking processes in both whole group and small group instructional settings. Her walls were covered in reading-related anchor charts, charts created either with or by her students with the purpose of helping them "anchor" or retain information in their minds.

**Terry's teaching style.** On a daily basis, Terry implemented whole group mini lessons followed by small group instruction and independent centers during her reading

and writing, math, science, and social studies blocks. She often began with a five or ten minute whole group mini lesson before sending her students to either an independent center or small group center facilitated by Terry or her special education resource teacher. I observed her teaching several mini lessons that either involved a video, interactive game, visual image, or some type of text on the Smart Board, a read aloud, or some type of kinesthetic demonstration that involved the students. Terry utilized multiple techniques to hook her students' interests, to help them make connections to real life situations, and to assess their prior knowledge about the topic. She used songs, dances, movements, and role play quite often during whole group and small group lessons. Terry shared with me that she felt that having five sons assisted her in coming up with creative ways to actively engage the students in her classroom in learning. For example, while working on a measurement unit, the students watched a *Brain Pop* video that included two kings, one who represented the metric system and another who represented the customary system. Terry brought in two different crowns so the students could role-play the two types of measurement systems. She played a game in which she would place a certain crown on her head. Depending on the type of crown that was on her head, the students would have to shout out the correct unit of measurement. They each had an anchor chart in front of them that they had created that was essentially a measurement conversion chart. They used their anchor chart to help them convert between the two different systems of measurement.

I feel that Terry had a very dialogic teaching style because she asked a lot of open-ended questions and used a variety of techniques to engage her students in conversation and experiences that allowed them to show off their reading and writing

skills through the use of oral language expression. For example, on several occasions, I observed her using the “turn and talk” method to encourage her students to share their thoughts and ideas related to the topic. During writing, Terry often invited students to come to the front of the room and read their story. In reading, she asked a group of students to perform their reader’s theater play in front of the class. Terry would also model how to give constructive feedback and then she would encourage the students to become coaches and try it. The student or group of students in the front of the room seemed to enjoy getting feedback from their teacher and peers.

### **Faith**

Faith is a Caucasian female who teaches third grade at Lakeside Elementary. At the time of this study, she was in her seventh year of teaching third grade at this school and had earned a bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education and a gifted endorsement. Faith shared in her initial interview that she had two children, a son and a daughter, both of whom were grown. She lived with her husband in the same county where this study took place. Although Faith did not remember very much about her childhood or school experiences before third grade, she did share many of her backgrounds experiences with me in her initial and final interviews.

**Faith’s background.** Faith began her career not as an elementary school teacher, but as an occupational therapy assistant. Once she had children, she obtained a job as a paraprofessional in an elementary school. While working as a paraprofessional, she went back to school and earned an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education from a small university in the southern part of the state. Later, she obtained a gifted endorsement. When I asked her to tell me about her educational background in her initial

interview, she told me that she did not have her master's degree yet, but that she was planning to talk to her principle to find out if she had any suggestions for her related to obtaining a master's degree. Additionally, she told me that although she did not have a degree in special education, she co-taught in a special education inclusionary setting for several years. She was teaching in a regular education third grade classroom at the time of this study.

In our initial interview, Faith talked about the fact that she grew up living in poverty. Her father died when she was in third grade and "left Mom with the six of us" (Faith, Initial Interview, 1/23/12). Consequently, Faith, her single mother, and five siblings had to move so they would have the support of other family members. "We were poor. We were really poor. But, I was always happy and...I was very, very good in school" (Faith, Initial Interview, 1/23/12). She commented that her sixth grade teacher changed her life because she placed her in an honors program which helped to increase her self-confidence in school.

In her initial interview, Faith told me that she felt that her heart always went to the underdogs and to the shy children because she could relate to them due to her experiences as a young child living in poverty. She believes her experiences have helped her to have a deeper understanding and empathy for students who come from economically diverse backgrounds. In Faith's final interview, I asked her if her childhood experiences related to growing up in poverty impacted the types of activities she planned for some of her economically disadvantaged students. She replied,

Well, I never give up on anybody, ever. And, I'm sure there are people who would have given up on me growing up. I mean, I didn't

come from a very good arrangement, you know. But, there were people that always stuck by me. And when you experience that, you know what a difference it makes. You're more likely to do it I think. I get frustrated with teachers when they say things like, 'They really need to learn that at home. I can't teach them that. If their parent doesn't help them with that at home...' I'm sorry, they're just not going to know it. And I hear that a lot, especially with multiplication facts and stuff like that. And I just say, 'Take the parent out of the equation and do what you would do without the parent.' And it's hard to do because it's overwhelming. It's hard to do it. But, I think in these times, we have more and more parents that can't afford it or that are working when the kids are home. I can't tell you how many of my parents work at night. You know, single moms and they're working at night! I mean, when do you see the child? You just really don't. So, homework takes on a different meaning. It goes from being an asset to being a detriment, because it creates arguments in the family and it's hard to know what to do. (Faith, Final Interview, 5/18/12).

Although Faith did not remember very much about her childhood or school experiences before third grade, she did say that she remembers being a happy child who received a lot of love and support from her mother, siblings, and extended family and that for the most part, she enjoyed her school experiences. Her background experiences provide her with a way of thinking about her students.

**Faith's classroom.** Faith's desks were set up in a similar fashion to Terry's desks. The majority of the desks were pushed into three, separate clusters, while two desks sat side by side in the front of the room. Since she had two students with behavior issues, she did not allow them to sit with the other students in the clusters of desks unless they were engaging in a center or group activity. In the front of the room, Faith had her "teacher" chair and a small table that usually contained papers or other teacher resources. In the back of the room, she had one small circular table on the left (closest to the door to the inside of the school) with several shelves behind it. On the right side of the room, was a kidney-shaped table where she met with small math and reading groups. On the wall to the right side of the classroom were six large, desktop computers. They were set up in two rows of three chairs each. Faith's desk was located in the front right corner of the room, closest to the door to the outside of the school building. On the wall of the front of the classroom, contained a Smart Board, several bulletin boards, and Math and Reading center charts.

**Faith's content and instructional knowledge.** Faith had more knowledge than any of the other teachers on her grade level team about the state- and county-mandated curriculum and assessments required of all third grade students. In our teacher study group meetings, Faith shared her knowledge and experiences related to third grade curriculum, performance-standards, standardized testing, state writing assessments, and other county-based assessments. Often, she provided her grade level colleagues with support through answering their questions or sharing ideas about how she implemented particular standards or assessments.

In her initial interview and during our teacher study group meetings, Faith told me that she felt that one of her greatest strengths was her ability to integrate technology in the classroom. She often used her Smart Board as an instructional tool in all content areas. She also incorporated a computer center during both her reading and math blocks. Quite often, Faith signed up for the school computer lab so that her students could work on technology-oriented projects or writing products. Faith mentioned that she knew that she was going to be getting a Smart Board in her classroom in the fall, so she spent an entire summer watching webinars and researching the tools that could be used on a Smart Board.

Faith explained in her initial interview that she felt that having an occupational therapy background helped her instructionally because she was able to more effectively meet the needs of students who struggled academically in her classroom. One of the primary responsibilities of an occupational therapist is to help people develop the skills they need to function in their environment. Faith shared that she felt that her training helped her to provide more support for the “low” students in her classroom. For example, she shared that she sometimes provided some of her students with graphic organizers to provide them with a note taking structure as they searched for information in nonfiction texts. In addition, she offered students choices about whether they wanted to read with a partner at their center table or by themselves on the reading carpet. Faith also told me that she believed that her struggling students needed to build foundational skills in math and language arts. She explained that she attempted to help them build those skills through implementing methods such as timed multiplication assessments,

math computation skills practice on dry erase boards, or other skill-building programs such as *Mountain Math* and *Mountain Language*.

**Faith's teaching style.** Faith's teaching style was similar to Terry's, but still different in many ways. Although she implemented small group literacy centers and math centers in her classroom, they were organized in a much different way than Terry's centers. The students engaged in the same activities each time as they rotated around the room from center to center. In March, Faith asked me if I could help her improve the centers because she was not completely happy with them. As a result of many conversations during planning time and after school, she revamped her centers to include flexible grouping (instead of ability groups) and inquiry-based activities. We also worked together to add a content-focused center that integrated her social studies content and literacy. In this center, students researched different historical figures that they were required to know. She included leveled texts on each of these historical figures and a graphic organizer that gave them some directions as they read the texts and searched for information on the person they were researching.

Faith used a whole group teaching method to introduce language arts, grammar skills, and math concepts. In several of my observations during both language arts and math, students solved word problems or recorded answers in response to *Mountain Math* or *Mountain Language* (two scripted programs that include comprehensive skill-building exercises) on individual dry erase boards. These two programs require the students to practice particular skills each day. She also had conversations with them during these whole group times and asked a lot of open and close-ended questions to see if they knew the answers. I observed her demonstrating math concepts and problem solving skills

through interactive activities that she would pull up on her Smart Board. She made some of these interactive Smart Board activities by herself, while others were part of an electronic resource provided by their math curriculum.

### **Eric**

Eric is a Caucasian male who moved from fifth grade to third grade during the year this study took place. He was in his sixth year as an elementary school teacher at Lakeside Elementary School and his first year as a third grade teacher. He lived in the county where this research study took place with his wife and two daughters. His wife was the ESOL and gifted teacher at the same school. Although Eric did not discuss in detail his childhood experiences with me, he did talk a great deal about his educational background and community experiences. Through our initial interview, I learned that Eric completed a bachelor's degree in Social Science, a P-12 (Pre-K through twelfth grade) master's degree in Educational Leadership, an ESOL (English as a Second Language) endorsement, and a gifted endorsement. At the time of this study, he hoped to one day pursue a leadership position in an elementary, middle, or high school setting.

**Eric's background.** Similar to Faith, Eric did not start out wanting to be an educator. In his initial interview, he told me that he did not have an early childhood degree and that a variety of experiences led him to his current position as a third grade teacher in an elementary school. Eric's first career began after he obtained an electrical technology degree, which led him to open his own construction business. Even though he liked this line of work, he did not like the fact that he was away from his family due to the travel demands of the profession. He explained, "My wife was a teacher and she really enjoyed it, so I went back to school and got my teaching degree in two years and

went ahead and got my bachelor's degree in social science. Then I went back and got more and so now I am certified P through whatever" (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12).

While in school earning his teaching certification and bachelor's degree in social science, Eric completed a pre-service teaching internship in a high school setting. Although he initially looked for a high school teaching position, he was not able to find a job. Instead, he ended up accepting a middle school position in a neighboring county that required him to teach eighth grade social studies to a group of struggling students. He commented that he really enjoyed working with these students within a program called, RICA (Reading in the Content Areas). "They gave me a couple classes of students who were not meeting standards and then my job was to remediate those [students] and get them passing again and then they would exit out as they could" (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12). Eric also mentioned that he became the head football coach at the middle school and led the football team in winning a state championship.

Six years ago, Eric decided to resign from his middle school teaching position so that he could find a teaching position in the county where he and his family lived. When I asked what made him want to transfer to a school within his own county, he stated,

The church. We live in Macks County. We were working in Franklin County...went to church in Macks County and got to know everybody of course at church and...God laid it on my heart that I needed to be teaching in the same community that I lived in...and so, God found a way. There weren't any jobs anywhere, you know....And then, the next thing you know, [my wife] had a position. So, here we are. God provided a way for both of us to be here. (Eric,

Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

During his first interview, I also asked Eric if he wanted a middle or elementary school teaching position when he first began looking for a job in his own county. He responded,

You know, I wanted to have a different experience. I was leaning towards possibly going into leadership anyway, so being able to kind of broaden my horizons a little bit...be able to teach elementary and middle school and have that high school experience would kind of give me a better understanding of where kids were going and where they need to be, you know. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12).

Eric did end up achieving his goal of finding a teaching job in his own community. He was hired as a fifth grade teacher at Lakeside Elementary.

When I asked Eric to talk about how he felt when he found out that he was going to teach fifth grade, he said that he was excited about teaching it because of a research project he completed during his master's program. He stated,

Whenever I did my capstone for my leadership...mine was about drop Outs. Why do kids drop out? And all my research led to fifth grade. So, I was really interested in getting fifth grade and that opened up, so that's where I was at Lakeside until this year. Well, I taught fifth grade, I saw what my kids were coming to me with and I realized, even though the research said fifth grade, there were certain things you just can't put a number to and I find out that kids actually drop out much sooner. They are not able to drop

out because of truancy, but as far as their mental ability and their understanding where they are versus their peers and finding out if school is a happy place for them and I think they start realizing that in second or third...especially third. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

This statement demonstrates Eric's passion for helping struggling students to have a positive school experience. Eric also shared that he and his wife try to support economically disadvantaged students at the school by providing them with the things that they need. He explained,

We buy shoes. We buy coats. We buy book bags, markers, whatever... treats, candy, anything to get them motivated about learning. We try to give back. Not only with our time, but also with our money...to benefit our students. We were talking with our former principal about why do we spend so much money and time on [this] population here at school? She said, 'Well, you know, because they need it!' And I agree with that. It's kind of hard to swallow at times, but they need that extra encouragement if nothing else, which is free. You know, it doesn't cost anything to say, 'You know, you're doing a really great job or I really like what you did here!' Kids are kids. It doesn't matter where they come from or what means they have...nothing like that matters. It only matters where they are at that particular moment and how you can most benefit them. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12).

Eric mentioned that he attempted to get his students and parents more involved in helping their community through posting upcoming community events on an information

board located on a wall in his classroom. He shared that the counselor at Lakeside sometimes sends home pamphlets to the parents to inform them about parenting classes, literacy classes, and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for parents who were trying to learn English. In addition, he stated that he often helped with Parent Nights held throughout the school year. Parenting nights focused on informing parents about the instructional and assessment methods used in the school, offering ideas for helping their child or children at home, and increasing parent involvement in the school community. These ideas demonstrate Eric's commitment to students, parents, the school and community.

**Eric's classroom.** Eric's classroom arrangement was very different from the other third grade teachers. The arrangement of the furniture in Eric's classroom looked very different from the other third grade teachers' classrooms. While Terry and Faith pushed desks together to create collaborative pods, in Eric's classroom, the desks were arranged in three straight rows, with seven desks sitting side by side in each row. The front of the classroom contained a wall with a large Smart Board in the middle, an empty dry erase board that he sometimes used for drawing visuals or writing words on the right, and a small bulletin board on the left. Along the side wall sat four large, desktop computers on a long, high-top table. To reach the computers, students had to stand up because there were no chairs. Eric's desk, a large kidney shaped table, and a large cabinet were located in the back of the classroom. A bookshelf and small filing cabinet were placed behind his desk. Eric would often walk over and pull a history book or college textbook from the bookshelf behind his desk so that he could share an idea with his students or make some connection between what they were learning and information

in the book. To illustrate, one day I observed the students using an American hero's book about Frederick Douglas (Cunningham, 2006) to write a biography about Frederick Douglas' life. While they were writing, Eric walked over to me and handed me a copy of the trade book that the students were reading. He shared that they had watched a biography on Frederick Douglas in class the day before and that their homework assignment had been to write a biography about him. They were now working on making revisions to their biographies. Eric then showed me a textbook from a history class that he took as an undergraduate student. He told that he had recently shared a quote out of this history book with his students and asked them to interpret what it meant. Next, he proceeded to read the quote to me. I noticed that he had written "Douglas speech" with a pencil in the margin next to the quote. He then explained that he often tries to use excerpts from different books to make a point or to encourage discussion on a higher thinking level.

**Eric's content and instructional knowledge.** Eric had a great deal of content and instructional knowledge in social studies, science, and math that stemmed from both his educational background in electrical technology and the social sciences and his previous careers as a builder, electrician and middle school social studies teacher. His experiences in the electrician and construction businesses, allowed him to relate his skills in these trades to geometry and other mathematical concepts. For example, in one math lesson I observed, he brought in a tool that he used when he was on a construction site. After introducing the tool to his students, he used it to explain angles and other measurement-related concepts. Eric's social science degree and experiences as a middle school social studies teacher provided him a great deal of content knowledge about

American history, government, economics, and other areas of social studies. When asked how having a social sciences background helped to prepare him for working with elementary school students. He replied,

Having a social studies background gets them really engaged. We work from the college book in American History quite a bit. It's a narrative history and so, we get to know a lot of the dirt on all the different people. We don't always just sit on all the sugar-coated stuff. We're always trying to find mistakes in our books and we always try to dig down a little bit deeper. And it's not all the stuff that our publisher wants us to know about and it's not all the things that you hear about on the history channel. We try to find a lot of the dirt and stuff on all the different leaders and people in high places and so, they'll get on the bus and they'll tell their friends and they'll go home and tell their parents about what we learned in social studies or what we learned in language or whatever. And so by the time they get home and get settled, they've told six people and so that really solidifies what we're trying to do in the classroom. So, it's just making it fun and engaging and everything that we do. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

Eric seemed to have a critical perspective on history and the way social studies curriculum is sometimes delivered in schools. Eric also shared that he felt that it is important to show students how social studies content connects to other content areas such as math and science when he stated, "Social studies is one of those things that really lends itself to language and to math and to science and I see where it all fits together and

ties together” (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12). In addition, he expressed his belief that social studies should be presented to students as a collection of stories. He explained,

Because basically, it’s just a journal of American History or the history of the world. And knowing that all it is is just a collection of stories and a bunch of gossip. So we have a lot of students who like to gossip and they really enjoy that. If you like listening to stories, and you like hearing about stories, then you really love social studies. It’s not just that it is dry or mundane, lifeless subject. So, it really can come to life if you just got the right person telling the right story. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12).

**Eric’s teaching style.** Eric’s teaching style was very different from both Faith and Terry’s teaching styles. Although he tended to teach most subjects using a whole group instructional approach, I noticed that he was effective at differentiating instruction and keeping his students focused and engaged in learning. On numerous occasions, I watched him teach a whole group lesson while continuing to support individual learners or to spontaneously make connections to a real world concept through a video clip, a visual drawing that he would draw on the board, a song, or a kinesthetic movement that would immediately bring their attention back to the lesson. Eric would offer his own thinking processes or share personal connections when students worked individually on workbook assignments related to reading or math. He also engaged the students in conversations about their own experiences.

Eric gave his students several paper and pencil assessments, many of which he created. These teacher-made assessments were in language arts, math, social studies and

science. He custom-made these assessments so that he could assess whether or not they had learned what he had taught. For example, one day, he handed the students a quiz on the landforms they had been learning about in social studies as soon as they walked in the door from lunch and told them to take the quiz and check their answers when they were finished. He had the answers taped to the door of a closet in the back of the room. As students finished, they walked to the back of the door and checked their answers and then turned their quiz into a basket. The students were self-assessing their ability to answer the questions on the quiz correctly. He trusted that his students would be honest while grading their own work. They, in turn, were able to self-assess how well they knew the content or how successful they had become at doing that particular skill.

I observed Eric's students doing a lot of writing during the second semester, especially right before the third grade writing assessment was due in April. Sometimes, Eric encouraged his students to write at home for homework and to bring in their writing the next day so they could continue to work on revising and editing it in the classroom. During my observations, I noticed that he would often encourage them to go through the writing process and that he gave them suggestions when they came to him with questions. On a few occasions, I saw him provide students with materials such as an editing checklist or a dictionary if he felt they needed it. At the end of each writing block, Eric would typically provide time for those students who were finished to voluntarily share their writing pieces. He would then encourage the class to give the author constructive feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. In addition, he would often model how to give constructive feedback through sharing his own comments and prompting them to apply what they knew about quality writing.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In the next chapter, findings extracted from the data collected during this five month qualitative research study are presented. A discussion surrounding the implications that teacher study groups may have for teachers in rural community settings such as Macks County and in high-needs schools such as Lakeside Elementary are highlighted in chapter six. As public school student populations in counties with similar demographics continue to become more diverse, teachers may need additional support in their classrooms as they attempt to provide successful school experiences for their students. This study explored the shifting knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and instructional practices, of teachers as they discussed and reflected on their instructional practices and beliefs within the context of a teacher study group.

Although each of the participants had their own unique qualities and strengths, they worked well together as a team. Through collaboration, they shared their strengths and knowledge with each other and provided support when needed. The next chapter includes more detailed accounts that were carefully selected from teacher interviews, classroom observations, and teacher study group meetings.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS

“So, I guess that’s what I mean by support. And she brought in organic pears the other day. We don’t eat healthy. We don’t have time to take care of ourselves. So, we had our organic pears. That’s the kind of stuff...it’s not educationally related at all! But if you have that stuff, then when we met together collaboratively, we were effective”

(Faith, Final Interview, 5/18/12).

This qualitative research investigation examined the implications that participation in a teacher study group had on the teaching and learning experiences of three third grade teachers in a small elementary school located in a rural mountain area currently experiencing a significant rise in the poverty rate. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

1. In what ways does participation in a teacher study group impact elementary teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and understandings when teaching culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs school?
2. In what ways do teachers’ literacy practices shift as a result of engaging in teacher study groups focused on issues related to culturally, linguistically and economically diverse student populations?

I drew upon a variety of data sources collected from individual teacher interviews, weekly classroom observations, and bi-weekly teacher study group meetings to demonstrate how teacher study group meetings provided these teachers with additional support and encouragement during one particularly stressful semester. The study group

sessions encouraged the teachers to reflect on and evaluate their current literacy practices that they implemented with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. During the course of this study, teachers were affected by accountability requirements, standardized testing pressures, aligning curriculum to common core standards, increasing poverty rates, and pressures to participate in a school-mandated professional learning community that included weekly meetings and workshops. Data analysis resulted in three significant themes:

1. Teacher study groups as a safe space to build relationships and trust.
2. Teacher study groups as a learning space to discuss enacted curriculum and pedagogy related to content integration, higher order thinking, inquiry, and literacy development.
3. Teacher study groups as a discovery space to negotiate beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students.

The above themes are discussed in detail in the remaining sections of this chapter. Every caution possible was taken to assure that the voices of the participants were represented in the crafting of this chapter and overall study.

### **Teacher Study Groups as a Safe Space to Build Relationships and Trust**

The first theme extracted from the data was that teacher study groups can serve as a safe space to build relationships and trust. The teachers in this study discovered that participating in a teacher study group helped them to build stronger relationships with each other as they engaged in collaboration in a safe space that allowed them to the autonomy to choose topics that related to their own professional learning needs, experiences, and interests. As their relationships with each other deepened, so did their

trust in each other. The teacher study groups provided a safe environment that allowed the teachers to discuss their perspectives and frustrations related to new curricular mandates, standardized testing, and issues related to working with students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Throughout this inquiry, the teachers continued to mention how the teacher study group meetings supported them as they dealt with the everyday issues and problems they faced. Teachers often need reassurance or confirmation that they are doing the right thing in their classroom. The teachers in this study commented in their final interviews that they felt that one of the most valuable aspects of the teacher study groups was that they built closer relationships with each other and developed stronger friendships as a result of participating in these meetings.

In our first teacher study group meeting, Eric helped us establish a supportive tone for our collaborative meetings when he came up with a new combination of words for the acronym, “TSG”, which usually stands for “Teacher Study Group”. When I first introduced the characteristics of teacher study groups to Eric, Faith, and Terry, I was in the middle of explaining what that the initials “TSG” stood for when Eric replied, “Teacher support group.” The following examples demonstrate how our teacher study group meetings naturally became “teacher support groups.”

### **Team Work, Friendship, and Collaboration**

The consistent collaboration fostered in the study group meetings enabled the teachers to develop close friendships and a strong professional team as they worked together to find solutions to school and classroom-related issues. They continued to build trust that allowed them to feel increasingly more comfortable in this particular

professional learning environment. In his final interview, Eric expressed that he felt that collaborative models such as teacher study groups were effective because they provided teachers with an opportunity to build relationships with each other and share issues that they were all experiencing in their classroom. He commented that it helped his stress level to know that his coworkers were also dealing with similar issues in their classrooms. When asked to elaborate more on his teacher study group experiences, he explained,

I see it as more of a team building, trust thing. And it kind of forced you to say, 'Okay. We are going to talk about an issue. We're going to talk about our craft.' To be able to share ideas with each other and also, to share problems. As humans we have to share problems and we have to come up with solutions together. That's the only way we move forward. If we've got a problem, we work it out...we solve it together and then, keep moving forward. So, I think that's what I got out of it. It's nice to be able to hear that other people are having some of the same Issues. We realize they're not just our kids in our classroom. They're ours as a school and as a system and as a district, then we'll be able to grow. But, until that happens, it's not going to work. (Eric, Final Interview, 5/22/12)

Eric also articulated that he felt that people must first form a trusting relationship and friendship before they can feel comfortable enough to share with each other. He explained,

I think that if people are within a group for an extended period of

time, then people start to loosen up their barriers. They begin to share more things that are personal outside of school and then that begets another friendship and then you start building bonds and then you see your teachers struggling and you want to help that person so then you offer the help. But, if you're constantly being mixed up and thrown into the air and you never get the opportunity to build that relationship, then it doesn't work. So, you've got to be friends first almost before you have the empathy to be able to reach out to your neighbor and say, 'I see where you're struggling. Would you like to see what I do?' (Eric, Final Interview, 5/22/12)

When asked to describe her experiences related to participating in a teacher study group, Terry talked about how they were forced to hold collaborative team meetings during the first semester of the school year. However, she explained that the teacher study groups replaced those forced collaborative meetings and became a more effective model for professional development. In the following excerpt, she explained further,

In the beginning, I think it was what I would consider, 'forced collaboration'. You've got to meet here. You've got to create this document. And, in the beginning, everybody, and I can say this consistently, everybody in the building had this perception that this is about a product. Collaboration is about a product that you hurry up and create and then leave with and then it's off your plate. And I think you moved us past the product to the conversations. And then that allowed us to focus on the process. And then we understood, 'It's not

really about the product. It's about what happens in the middle to getting to the product.' (Terry, Final Interview, 5/24/12)

Terry further commented that she felt that her grade level had reached a much higher level of collaboration than other grade levels because of their teacher study group meetings and because they continued to have conversations daily about their classroom issues and students. She stated,

The difference between...and the administration noticed it, too... the difference between ours and everybody else's was that we were talking in between the collaboration times that they had scheduled. Most people would have the collaboration, create the document, and they wouldn't think about it again until two days before. It wasn't a natural process. (Terry, Final Interview, 5/24/12).

Terry explained that she felt that the positive relationship that she and her grade-level team members shared helped them to learn from each other because they were always sharing ideas and asking questions. In the following example, Terry shared more thoughts about her relationship with her colleagues:

We were constantly having conversations about what we were talking about in our meetings and what our purpose was. What are your kids doing? What are my kids doing? Do you have any ideas about how I can do this? There were always conversations whether it was at lunch or at recess. What can I take from your environment? I think we all had that attitude. What can I learn from you that I could implement in my own environment that would increase that student achievement

and student engagement? And so, I don't feel like we were in competition with each other. (Terry, Final Interview, 5/24/12)

Faith also commented on the supportive relationship that she and Terry developed during the semester that this study took place. The following excerpt from Faith's final interview explains how she and Terry made a conscious effort to support and build each other up:

Our jobs are stressful. The biggest thing I deal with is too much to do and not enough time. And the result of that is stress. So, mostly, I need help handling that. And Terry would come in...Terry said, 'We need to de-stress. I'm going to bring in a box of tea and we'll put it in that cupboard. We'll just sit. We're going to have thousands of things to do, but we're not going to do them. We're just going to sit and talk for a few minutes.' And you know what? You just kind of take a deep breath and to know someone else feels like you is I think helpful. So, I guess that's what I mean by support. And she brought in organic pears the other day. We don't eat healthy. We don't have time to take care of ourselves. So, we ate our organic pears. That's the kind of stuff...it's not educationally related at all! But if you have that stuff, then when we met together collaboratively, we were effective. (Faith, Final Interview, 5/18/23)

The teacher study group meetings helped the teachers form trusting relationships as they became friends who shared personal and school experiences with each other. Through sitting together and having tea or eating a healthy snack, they provided each other with the support that they so desperately needed. Eric further emphasized the importance of

trust when he asserted, “You will use your strengths to help others when you see them struggling because you trust them and want to help them.” He further elaborated,

You’ve got to have trust and you have to have people willing to share.

I can look at it and say, my strengths were language arts, but unless I’m willing to share how I teach, it’s going to be counterproductive. I’m going to skirt all the way around it. I’m going to tell you little snippets and nuggets about how I teach nouns, but I’m not going to go out and teach you, ‘This is how I teach [language arts] and this is why I’m successful.’ So, you have to break that first before you can get to the next piece.’ (Eric, Final Interview, 5/22/12)

As demonstrated by their comments, these teachers were not in competition with each other, but instead listened to, supported, and shared ideas with each other. Their strong relationships and close-knit friendships enabled them to work together collaboratively as a team.

### **Sharing Uncertainties and Vulnerabilities**

Teacher study groups also served as a venue for sharing uncertainties and vulnerabilities related to school and classroom-related events and topics. As their relationships deepened and they became more comfortable with each other, they became more open to sharing their uncertainties about shifts in grade level assignments, grade level content, the new core standards, and integrating language arts with writing.

In one of our teacher study group meetings, Eric shared his uncertainties about moving yet to another grade level during the upcoming school year. When he found out that he was moving to fourth grade, he shared his vulnerabilities related to moving to a

different grade-level. He said, “I know I’ve got questions about fourth grade because I’ve never taught that grade, but kids are kids and they’re going to put their pants on just like I do. I’m not really worried about behavior or classroom management issue stuff. My perspective is that fourth grade is a lot of content, which I like” (Teacher Study Group Meeting #7, 4/24/12). The following example demonstrates how we attempted to ease Eric’s uncertainties through offering our support:

Faith: Fourth grade is fun! I like fourth grade.

Terry: And he’s really good at science and social studies is his thing and they have a lot of history type stuff...

Megan: Well, you have so much content knowledge. In a new grade, it takes a couple of years to become familiar with the content. But you have that so that isn’t a struggle for you.

Faith: The science and social studies in fourth is just so awesome. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #7, 4/24/12)

The teacher study group meetings became a place where the third grade teachers could support each other when they became apprehensive over not understanding a grade-level concept. Terry shared that as her relationship with her colleagues grew, so did her level of comfort, which allowed her to become less vulnerable and more willing to go to Eric or Faith for support when she had a question about a content-related third grade standard or concept. Since she was new to the grade-level and somewhat unfamiliar with some of the social studies and math concepts in third grade, she shared that she often needed someone to help her understand the concept. The following excerpt

demonstrates the high level of support that the teachers in this study provided for each other when uncertainties arose.

Megan: I know that you guys have mentioned the strong relationship that you have as a collaborative group. So how do you think that impacted your teaching? Did you change anything due to having this group or did you have any shifts in your beliefs or the way you taught?

Eric: I think we came to trust our colleagues a lot more than we would have in the beginning.

Terry: I felt very comfortable going over, like there were many times that I'll go, 'Can you tell me, what is the difference between this math property and this math property?' just for sheer basic math knowledge because I couldn't see how I could teach it differently because it sounded so much alike. [I would go to] Faith for social studies and Eric for math. I felt comfortable doing that, but some people don't do that and they don't understand it and they try to teach it when they don't understand it and there's no way you can bring it down.' (Teacher Study Group Meeting #9, 5/15/12).

In addition to Terry's uncertainties related to third grade math and social studies concepts and Eric's anxiety over learning the standards he must cover in a new grade level, all three teachers experienced uncertainties related to the state's adoption of new nationally-created common core standards. Throughout this research study, the teachers supported each other as they attempted to not only understand, but also negotiate their opinions about the new curricular mandates. The following excerpt demonstrates how the

teachers discussed the new common core standards and worked together to consider how these standards would impact their teaching in the future.

Eric: You've got to throw it all away because of the common core standards.

Faith: No we don't. I don't think so.

Eric: That's what they said. You can't use that parachute. I saw the video.

Faith: Did you look at the frameworks?

Eric: Yes.

Faith: Ok. So did you see that a lot of the activities in the frameworks are the same as they used to be? If the state says they can use the same things, who are we to say we can't. The state is still saying that this is still an acceptable activity.

Terry: You just have to revisit to make sure that it's aligned and if it's not, you just have to tweak the assessment. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #7, 4/24/12)

In the above example, the teachers struggled to understand how the new frameworks for math and language arts created by the state department of education aligned with the common core standards. Their administrators told them to rely on frameworks as they developed their math, reading, writing, and language arts units for the following school year. In our meeting, Eric expressed his apprehensions about completing the first math and language arts unit by the due date because the administrators instructed the teachers that they should meet with their new grade level teams and complete the first math and language arts unit before the end of the school year.

Megan: Alright. So, unit planning would be a good focus?

Eric: Yes. See, I've never written units.

Faith: Let me tell you right now, this is what our assistant principal said. We were just chatting while he was flipping through the units and I looked through it and it does look pretty good. Much better than the old frameworks in terms of being more all inclusive. The other ones didn't have enough. You couldn't teach just that. This one you maybe could. He said, 'I think you should just teach this next year.' I said, 'So for our unit plan, do you see it being just this?' He said, 'Yes. I have no objection. Matter of fact, I would even recommend cutting and pasting it into the unit plans.' So, if you think of it that way, isn't that a piece of cake?

Eric: It's easier for sure.

Faith: Yes. So, didn't I help you?

Eric: Yes.

Terry: Just put the framework on your desk top. You cut and paste it into your unit according to where...

Faith: And it's got your objectives. It's got evidence of learning. It's got the remediation and the extension. It's got everything you need. So, I said to him, you wouldn't necessarily need to see a day by day thing because you're going to do that same activity over a long period of time. You're not going to do that activity once and be done with it. The kids need to do that in a center for a certain period of time.

Terry: All of the EQ's [essential questions] are in there. All the evidence of learning, all of the differentiation techniques, all of your assessment options. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #7, 4/24/12)

The teachers continued to discuss how they could organize the activities suggested by the frameworks in their lesson plans. They were anxious about creating new unit plans and somewhat uncertain about how to align them to the new standards. We talked about how they could use the activities suggested in the frameworks within their units.

Terry: See, that is so awesome because on the units, as in whole group, we could just cut and paste these in just like we did on the framework math units. Everything could centered around that mini lesson for the day.

Megan: Mmhmm...That's what I'm thinking. Because the mini lessons...I mean you can read aloud a part of a text...a chapter...at couple of pages. But, then you have them apply the comprehension strategy.

Eric: I'd rather teach that way anyway. You don't lose your audience either.

Terry: Then you come back and you show your evidence to support what you were working on.

Megan: Do you think that kids would do better if you just started with...let's say making connections is the first one you work on and you work on that one for a week or two. Then you pick up another one like questioning and you work on that one for a week or two. And then maybe you pick up inferences so you are kind of teaching...

Terry: Yes. You're building. I like that because I think that they have to understand how to do it before you can expect them to do it. And you

can't assume that they all know how to do it. I have powerpoints that I found somewhere that are on reader's workshop that go through...one powerpoint about questioning, one powerpoint about making predictions. And it's to use with the kids.

Megan: That would be a great resource, I think.

Terry: So the kids can understand how all the pieces fit together. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #9, 5/2/12)

In the end, they decided to copy and paste the unit activities suggested by the state with the idea that they would "tweak" the units in the fall.

The teachers also shared their uncertainties about whether they were allowed to integrate writing and language arts or whether they should continue to keep them separate in their lesson plans. The teachers shared that they knew that it made more sense to integrate ELA (English Language Arts) standards and writing standards, but that their administrators required them to teach ELA and writing separately due to the mandated block schedule. The following conversation demonstrates how they worked together to come to a consensus about whether they were allowed to integrate writing and language arts standards because the frameworks integrated them.

Faith: Now, when we're planning our units, are we putting writing and ELA into the reading unit? That's the question. We did last time. We just labeled it separately at the bottom.

Terry: You know, I'll be honest. I have not looked at the ELA. I was focusing on the math.

Faith: But I don't know if we can. If one of the two administrators was here, we could ask that question. Or, do we want to do what we want to do?

Terry: Well, I think it's easier for me even though reading and writing are connected, I need a separate lesson plan for the language arts skills and writing. Even though it might be connecting the reading even though there might be so many components to it. That's just the way I think.

(Teacher Study Group Meeting #9, 5/2/12)

Faith then shared that she currently taught language arts separately from reading and writing, but that she still placed all of the objectives and standards on the same lesson plan. She expressed her confusion and anxiety related to the new way the common core ELA frameworks organized reading, writing, and language arts.

Faith: I don't want to cut and paste all of that in there if everyone's saying, no let's not do that. This is writing here, so I'm going to put the reading standards first. To me, in a reading and ELA unit, you should put the reading standards first. But this person put the writing.

Terry: Why, because the reading...Oh, so you do start with narrative again. I didn't like it when they started with response to literature. Maybe you don't do that in third. Megan, are these units? Have you look at the language arts? Are they based on the reader's workshop model where you are integrating your mentor text into reading and writing and the skills?

Faith: You know, now that I'm looking at this, I don't see any reading in this. This is all literally ELA. There's no list of standards at the beginning.

Terry: She breaks them up by lesson.

Megan: Now, I'm looking at Eric's and it has writing...research connections.

Yours didn't have that in the framework.

Faith: It has writing, but it has no reading. Here's mine right here.

Terry: Eric, can you get on your computer and print [the ELA frameworks], because we are going to have to have it anyway for 4<sup>th</sup> grade?

Faith: Normally, in the very beginning, they put all the standards and we cut and paste all the standards in first. All the reading standards...all the ELA standards...all the writing standards. We're going to have to go get them from somewhere else because they're not putting them here.

Megan: Well, I printed off the standards for you.

Faith: But, we need them electronically. See what I mean? And this is about authors. This is writing. That is not an easy unit to follow and I don't know who made it but... (Teacher Study Group Meeting #9, 5/2/12).

As our conversation continued, Faith realized the organization of the frameworks did not coincide with the school-mandated schedule they had to follow. She explained, "But in our particular school, we have to teach LA separate from reading because of special ed. So, I think we can put them in the same lesson, but we have to prepare to teach them at different times" (Teacher Study Group Meeting #9, 5/2/12). I pointed out that the purpose behind the common core standards was to encourage more content integration and that the frameworks were organized around themes that integrated multiple content areas. Faith responded by saying, "I'm going to find the CCGPS resources from the assistant principal." Her comments helped me to realize that she had to find a balance

between incorporating the frameworks designed by the state education department and continuing to follow the administrators' orders related to teaching language arts separately from reading and writing.

Following our conversation, Faith pulled up the electronic document I sent her that morning and started copying and pasting the reading standards into her lesson plan template. Although the frameworks were organized differently, she decided that it was easiest if she continued to represent the standards in her lesson plans in the same way. She inquired about the integrative elements of the reading, writing, and language arts standards within the frameworks as she talked through her thoughts, opinions, and feelings related to the way they were set up. Although she did not feel that the organization was conducive to the way that she was used to organizing her lesson plans, she still decided to organize her plans in the same way since her assistant principal instructed her to do so.

### **Sharing School and Classroom-Related Frustrations**

The trusting relationships that the teachers built with each other also allowed them to feel comfortable enough to talk about their frustrations related to school or classroom-related issues, events, and topics. For these teachers, frustrations related to adequate preparation for the standardized test was prevalent throughout the conversations. The passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 has caused the pressures to achieve a high pass rate on an annual standardized test to escalate, especially for third and fifth grade teachers. If schools do not achieve a certain "pass" rate in third and fifth grade classrooms, then the state will place them on a "Needs Improvement" list because they did not make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress). If schools do not meet AYP,

negative consequences can occur that may impact administrators, teachers, and students. Third and fifth grade students are at-risk for grade retention if they do not meet the standardized testing requirements in math and reading mandated by NCLB. As a result, many third and fifth grade teachers focus a great deal of their instructional time on preparing their students for the standardized test.

In the month of March, most of what we talked about in our teacher study group meetings centered around the upcoming standardized test, most likely because third grade is a high-stakes testing year and because the test was less than a month away. Terry commented, “It’s weighing on our mind because it’s coming faster than we anticipated” (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12). As I visited each third grade classroom, I noticed that the students were often engaged in taking a practice test, completing a test-practice workbook page, or bubbling in their answers to a worksheet on a bubble sheet. The closer they got to standardized testing week, the more they seemed to replace authentic learning activities with standardized test preparation techniques. In fact, the standardized test seemed to become the primary focus of the teachers.

In our first teacher study group meeting in January, Eric stated, “My goal is to cram as much information into their little bodies as I possibly can between now and the [standardized test].” Later in the year during our fourth teacher study group meeting, he was still thinking about the test as evidenced by the following comment: “I just hate that it’s twenty something days before the [standardized test] and they’re finally getting it. I mean, that’s the scary part” (Teacher Study Group Meeting #1, 1/27/12).

In one of our teacher study group meetings held in February, Terry expressed her struggles related to incorporating more time for her students to practice test taking skills

independently so they would be more prepared while taking the test. She shared that she was frustrated because she could not find time to fit in independent test practice. Terry asked for suggestions and through engaging in collaboration, came up with the idea to incorporate a “test-prep” math center during her math block. She felt that this would give her students more opportunities to practice and apply their math skills in a standardized test format.

In March, I sensed teacher morale was low and could tell they were feeling stressed as soon as they walked into the room for our teacher study group. Since we usually began our meetings by sharing something, I decided to ask the teachers to talk a little bit about the stress they were feeling. During this conversation, the teachers shared that they were frustrated due to their apprehensions related to adequately preparing students for the standardized test in April. Faith replied, “You get to a point where you are just drowning” (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12). Eric shared that his biggest struggles and frustrations related to knowing how to prepare the students for the reading section of the standardized test. He explained, “I’m not sure how you can teach reading [test] prep. So, I’m having trouble finding and gathering things that are going to help me in that pursuit” (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12). Faith attempted to alleviate his stress and frustrations by suggesting that he might want to consider using *Book Pals*, a free website that includes online stories read aloud by famous people. The following conversation resulted:

Faith: I know you like technology. The famous people read the books and for ASP [After School Program], all I did is play one of them and we did the

whole thing - beginning, middle, and end. And we did the author's purpose and we did what was the problem? What was the solution?

Eric: What was it?

Faith: Book Pals. The kids loved it! Just because it was...

Eric: Something different.

Faith: Yeah! And they liked listening to it. You know I can never control them in ASP. They're wild by the time....

Eric: I saw them in their...quiet.

Faith: Yeah, they loved it. And I covered all those standards. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12)

In this same teacher study group meeting, Terry and Faith mentioned that their stress was coming from the fact that they had not had enough time to cover all of the math standards that the students would be expected to know on the standardized test. Faith shared, "I'm worried about math. I don't have it all done. But, I have touched on everything because of Mountain Math. Mountain Math covers everything. So, I use those teachable moments." (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12). Terry demonstrated that she shared the same sentiments when she commented, "We have measurement and we're still finding our kids need more time on decimal fractions...on converting and so we've had to stop and we're looking at our schedule. We have two weeks and we're thinking, 'Man, how are we going to get them through measurement and data in those two weeks when we need at least a month?'" (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12).

Faith and Terry worried that their students would not do well on the social studies part of the upcoming standardized test. They admitted that they had only adequately covered one or two of the historical figures, although there were seven required by the social studies standards. Faith shared that one of the things she had tried to do in her classroom was integrate some of the historical figures into her guided reading group. She explained, “What our problem is...we’re kind of in the middle of studying a lot of people. I did a little group today. I did “cause and effect” and I tied in two of the books, their character traits, what caused them to have these character traits? So I tied it into cause and effect and I moved it to my guided reading” (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12).

Faith was also concerned that some of her students who were poor readers may not have the level of understanding needed to do well on the test. Instructional tools such as anchor charts, thinking maps, and oral presentations were suggested as strategies to support struggling readers. The teachers offered ideas related to shifting their daily schedule so that they would have more time for social studies instruction. Making these changes would give them more time to devote to covering social studies content. The following conversation shows how the teachers supported each other as they discussed their frustrations related to not having enough time to adequately cover the social studies standards:

Faith: Today, what I was thinking...If you’re moving on to rivers and mountains...I was thinking to give us more time, that we could maybe flip flop social studies and science. Science is the longest subject we have. Social studies is the shortest subject we have, time wise. So, I was going

to flip flop them and then we could maybe do parallel teaching or something.

Eric: That's a great idea!

Faith: Because we haven't decided what we are going to do. And then I could still be doing these historical figures and you could still be doing...I don't know. We start our science time at 12:32 and we go to 1:45. It is the longest subject we have. And for social studies, by the time we get back in, it's like 12 to 12:30. You know what I mean? It's like double the time in science. So, we can flip flop them and accomplish it.

Eric: It makes sense why I got finished [with science] so early now. I didn't realize it, but now I know that's why. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12)

In the last part of this conversation, Eric realized that the reason he was able to cover all of his science content was because he had a long block of time to teach science each day. Talking through their frustrations related to the way their teaching schedules were organized helped the teachers make sense of how they were utilizing their time in the various content areas.

Time for students to learn new content or practice skills for the upcoming tests continued to be a concern for Faith. She was frustrated that several of her students had lost the workbooks that were sent home for test preparation practice. Terry and Eric both replied that they kept their students' workbooks at school and shared how they were using them in their classrooms. These ideas helped Faith see how she could keep the books at school and provide her students with more time to use them in the classroom.

Additionally, all of the teachers realized that the books were not supposed to be used solely as an independent activity, but that they could use the books to model their own thinking processes and guide students in discussions about comprehension strategies. The following excerpts from our fifth teacher study group meeting demonstrate how this shift occurred:

Faith: Oh, I've been having them do it at home, too, because they're doing it in the center one day. They get one done. I've got to move faster than that.

Terry: Now [my students] are doing two of those because they are just whizzing through them. So, every other day they can do a reading [page] together because a lot of them need to talk, not copy, but to talk to understand where...I don't understand what that word is or where do you find that?

(Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12).

After Faith mentioned that her students were only getting to work on the reading books in her class once a week in their literacy center, Terry shared that her students were working on them collaboratively. She pointed out that she felt that the students could deepen their understanding if they were allowed to work together to find the answers. Faith contemplated whether she should change the way she was using the reading books and further explained, "There are some things they need so much more of than others. Like, they really need to be doing that book every day. And the way we're doing it now, they're going to go a whole week before doing it again." The conversation shifted to a discussion about how they could better support the literacy needs of their students if they used the test-prep workbooks within a guided reading instructional framework:

Megan: Because then you could work on helping them learn how to think about it.

You know like here's the topic. What do you think the story is going to be about? When you first see a story, you need to think about what you know about the topic. You might even have them draw a circle map or something, just to kind of put their ideas down. Sometimes you could let them read it silently or do a popcorn reading or a shared reading. Then you could discuss, 'What should we do in response to this question?'

Faith: Yeah, once they do that for a while they learn how to look for the vocabulary. That's the biggest thing they learn from that book.

Megan: Because you're there modeling it for them. You're modeling your thinking processes. If you were taking the test, what would you do to answer the questions? What kind of strategies would you apply to the passage? And so with you there guiding their reading of it, I think it can be really powerful. I think you could do it whole group or small group. Small group of course would be a little easier to keep them on task and to keep them focused.

Faith: Or, we could not do guided reading and do 15 minutes of that in small groups and then move into guided reading. And then they would still have enough time to finish their centers. It's hard to know because the guided reading was very helpful today.

Megan: I know. I think we kind of replaced guided reading with the test-prep books for a little while, but then we still did bring guided reading in sometimes. We kind of went back and forth between the two. But, I

know you have limited time so you have to kind of plan out how much time you're going to spend on it.

Faith: You know what I could do? These skills I could do in the whole group and then move the test-prep reading books with me into the guided reading. That way, everybody would do it every day. That's what I think I'll do! Of course, only for 15 minutes.

Eric: Hey, that's better than what you do now. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12)

In the previous example, Faith went back and forth between replacing her guided reading small group time with practice in the test-prep workbooks or continuing to use her guided reading time to work on other reading skills. By talking it through with colleagues, she made a decision that signified a definite shift in her thinking and later, classroom instruction. This example demonstrates how the teachers negotiated their beliefs about what worked best for the students in the classroom and supported each other in the decision making process while participating in our teacher study group meetings.

Through my classroom observations, I noticed that although each of the teachers gave the students opportunities to engage in independent work either through centers or whole group activities, they still provided guided instruction and support for their struggling students in their areas of need.

During our final meeting, Faith shared that her emotions took over as she watched her students take the test. She said, "I actually cried during the standardized test because they worked so hard. I don't know if I told you guys that" (Teacher Study Group Meeting #10, 5/15/12). When we asked her to explain, she replied, "I did not have many

high kids in there. And I was very concerned about what they were going to do. And I had a lot of troubled kids. And by the fourth day, they took a long time. They worked really hard and I started thinking about how hard they were working and about how hard they were trying and I started to cry in the middle of the test. But they did try hard and they did do well” (Teacher Study Group Meeting #10, 5/15/12). The fact that Faith shared this story with us exhibits the high level of trust that she had for us. She felt comfortable enough with us to share the emotions that this experience brought out in her.

### **Celebrations of Success**

In our teacher study groups, the teachers sometimes celebrated their own and students’ successes. For example, in our final teacher study group meeting, the teachers expressed their excitement over their high standardized test scores. Before the meeting, Terry sent me an email to inform me that 96 % of their third grade students met or exceeded the standard in reading, 92% in math, 96% in language arts, 90% in science, and 92% in social studies. She was also excited because 45% of their students exceeded the standard in reading, 47% in math, and 52% in science. In our ninth teacher study group meeting, the teachers shared their experiences and excitement about their overall test scores. In the following example, Terry demonstrates her excitement related to her students’ performance during the administration of the test.

Terry: I was very happy when my kids were taking the CRCT. I had a little girl that’s behind in reading and she took every minute on every section. She ended up scoring like an 840 something on the math, but it was because she took her time and she used that process. They were using the strategies that I had taught them.

Megan: That's great!

Terry: And I was really happy about that because they were useful to them. At that point I knew they were using them on their own.

Megan: So they were writing in the book?

Terry: Oh, writing in the booklet, marking out answers, solving on scratch paper. And really, in that book, circling words that they were looking for. I was really happy about that. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #10, 5/15/12)

In the above example, Terry shared her excitement about the fact that her students applied many of the test-taking strategies she had taught them while taking the standardized test.

In several instances during our teacher study group meetings, we all engaged in celebrating their successes. For example, in one of our meetings, we were discussing Eric's formal observation conducted by the assistant principal. Since I was also in his classroom observing on this particular day, I complimented him on what a good job he had done. He immediately gave credit to Terry for being a "good tutor" because she had helped him prepare for his observation. She replied to him by saying, "His kids are awesome! He's trained them to know that if I ask you to be somewhere, you need to be there and do what I'm asking you to do. I think that expectation...and they know...that is absolutely the number one expectation, that they are there and doing it and on task" (Teacher Study Group Meeting #4, 2/29/12). This example shows how we celebrated Eric's successful annual observation through congratulating him on his achievement.

In our sixth teacher study group meeting, we all found out that the principal had decided to move Terry into an EIP/ESOL position during the following school year that

would allow her to engage in some peer coaching. As Terry shared this news with us, we all congratulated her and celebrated her success.

### **Teacher Study Groups as a Learning Space to Discuss Enacted Curriculum and Pedagogy Related to Content Integration, Higher Order Thinking, Inquiry, and Literacy Development**

The second theme, teacher study groups as a learning space to discuss enacted curriculum and pedagogy related to content integration, higher order thinking, inquiry, and literacy development arose in response to both of the research questions guiding this qualitative inquiry: “In what ways does participation in a teacher study group impact elementary teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and understandings when teaching culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs school?” and “In what ways do teachers’ literacy practices shift as a result of engaging in teacher study groups focused on issues related to culturally, linguistically and economically diverse student populations?” Data analysis revealed teachers made changes in their practices as they examined integrated curriculum, higher order processing skills, inquiry-based learning and overall literacy development.

#### **Shifts in Understanding Literacy**

Our teacher study group meetings gave the teachers a space to discuss literacy instruction and their own personal beliefs about how students develop literacy skills. The following sections demonstrate how the teachers’ views about literacy development and the role that literacy should play in all content areas shifted as they participated in discussions during our teacher study group meetings. As a result of our conversations in these meetings, the teachers began to negotiate their own beliefs and practices related to

providing their students with opportunities to apply higher order thinking skills and integrating literacy into different content areas.

**Terry's Definition of Literacy.** In an attempt to find out more about each teacher's literacy beliefs, I asked them to define literacy in their initial interviews. Terry shared her definition of literacy in her initial interview.

My definition of literacy is the ability to read any information, in any content area and be able to connect it to something that you already know or you seek to make connections and once you do, your brain just grabs it and it attaches. And I also believe that once you do that, you will want to share it in some form with someone else. So, I guess the ability to use reading and writing without even knowing it... without even being aware of it. You know, it becomes a habit to you... to use those things to make sense of your world. That to me is literacy.  
(Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12)

In this example, she expressed her belief that her students must make connections to their background knowledge so that what they are reading or learning about will form an attachment to their brain. She also mentioned that she felt that another natural part of literacy is the eagerness to share what you have learned with someone else. Terry appeared to hold the social nature of learning in high regard. In her definition of literacy, Terry also referred to the automaticity of reading and writing when she stated that reading and writing must become a "habit" so that a person is not even aware that they are doing it. She further supported this belief when she described her goals for her students. She explained,

First of all, I want them to leave my room loving to read and loving to write. I want them to understand that writing is not something that you do just when you are in school. It is something that you can do in your life. Journaling, that sort of thing. To share your life on paper. Reading wise, I want them to develop that love of reading so it's not just an assignment. It's, 'Oh, where do I go?' When I see a student and I can think of one...When I'm teaching a math lesson, he's over there under his desk reading his book. And, I'm like, 'Oh I hate to ask him to put that book away!' He takes it to lunch with him. But, that's when you know, they are reading no matter what! That's when you know they have developed that love of reading. You've helped them do that. (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12)

According to her interview, Terry's literacy goals for her students included helping them develop a love for reading and writing through viewing reading and writing-related activities as enjoyable and pleasurable tasks. She also stated that she wanted to help her students see reading and writing as daily life practices that are embedded not just in their school life, but in their outside world, as well. In her initial interview, she also talked about her passion for instilling a love of writing in her students. She referred to her struggle between helping them with the craft of writing versus the conventions. Terry admitted that she sometimes struggled with balancing the two during writing workshop. She explained further,

Talking about writing...I constantly struggle with balancing the craft and what I call the conventions and the craft. I want them to understand

that often times, teachers only look at the convention part of it and so they miss the craft and so the students learn that writing is all about the mistakes that you are going to find...and it's not. It's about the wonderful details and then that's just another part of it. So, we work a lot. If my students can understand when they leave me, that there are two parts of a piece of writing and I must look at them differently, then I think that they will continue to write. (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12)

Terry continued to mention her struggles with balancing between the craft and the conventional part of writing in several of our teacher study group meetings. She admitted that she did not focus on the conventions of writing at all in the beginning of the year. Instead, she had the students read their story out loud to her so she could listen to the craft. I observed her modeling these techniques on several occasions during her writing workshop time. For example, during my fourth observation in Terry's classroom, the students were completely engaged in different stages of the writing process (Terry, Observation #4, 3/1/12). As the students needed support, I noticed that they would either ask a peer for help or go to Terry for feedback. She kept a stack of sticky notes in front of her. As they read their writing to her out loud, she would close her eyes and listen. When they were finished reading, she would write her suggestions on a sticky note and hand it to the student as she gave them verbal feedback about what she thought about their writing.

In our fourth teacher study group meeting, Terry expressed some of her frustrations related to writing in front of the group:

I really don't think that we have a clear understanding of how to teach

the craft of writing. We have a problem separating the conventions and the craft and we have a real problem giving kids those foundational or just continuing to build up all the things that create good writing habits...independent writing habits and I'm worried about that. I have talked to administration many times. I don't believe it's the teachers' fault because they haven't been trained and they don't fully understand how to do it. It's very subjective. But I believe, it's looked at as, 'Why aren't you teaching the Writer's Workshop? You've been trained one time. You should be able to do all of this stuff. Why aren't you doing it?' It's like, 'It's not that easy.' (Teacher Study Group Meeting #4, 2/29/12)

The above example explains the high level of passion that Terry exhibited when she talked about writing. She not only worried about her own students' writing abilities, but also about the writing attitudes and abilities of all of the students in the school. She also worried about the fact that although all teachers were expected to implement writing workshop, many of them did not have adequate training and, therefore, were not able to implement it correctly. In one of our teacher study group meetings, Terry told us that one of the fifth grade teachers asked her if she would work with her students on writing before the fifth grade writing assessment. When she asked the students in the fifth grade class to honestly answer the question, "How many of you like to write?", only one person in the entire class raised their hand.

In our initial interview, Terry elaborated on her beliefs about the connections between reading and writing. The following excerpt from her interview demonstrates her beliefs about their interconnected qualities:

Terry: I believe that reading and writing go hand in hand and I believe that if you can read and understand what you read, it really sets you up for success for life. We do a lot of exploring books. We do a lot of tracking, of getting them to move from that dependent to independent level. I do a lot of out loud reading...a lot of modeled reading because I want to get them excited about it! A lot of people just moved into chapter books and we track them and I have book conference with them. 'How are you doing? How did you like it? Why didn't you like it? And so, if you don't like it are you going to stick with it to see if you're going to like it or is it just one that you're like, 'I just can't get into this and I'm ready to go change it?' I want them to understand and I do say, 'How would you look at this as a reader? What about a writer?' So, we do a lot of connection between the two and they understand that good readers can be good writers. Good writers are often good readers. So, we try to connect those and I do believe that reading is very, very important!

Megan: You mentioned book conferences. Are those individual or in a small group?

Terry: Sometimes we do them in a small group. Sometimes, if we're doing them during their guided reading group, I'll say, 'Bring your library book and let's talk about it. Tell me if you like it. Tell me what's going on.' And so that way, the other kids are exposed to some of the other types of...because some people have a preference for nonfiction...graphic novels, fiction, different kinds of fiction. So, we talk about, 'Why do you

like these types of books?’ Sometimes we have conversations.

Sometimes when I notice that a student is not sticking with a book, I’ll call them over individually and I’ll say, ‘Tell me why? Let me go with you to find a book. What kind of things are you interested in outside of school? What kinds of things have you read before?’ You know, just the basic questioning. I try to get them back on track to stick with a book long enough to build that endurance up for chapter books. (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12)

In the above example, Terry mentioned that she tried to increase her students’ motivation to read books through asking questions in an attempt to learn more about their experiences outside of school. She then attempted to guide their book choices by suggesting books that may connect to their experiences and interests. Terry also discussed the different genres with her students and encouraged them to talk about why they liked certain types of books or genres. These examples show that Terry believed that “conversations” or the dialogic (Wilkinson and Son, 2011) component of literacy was important. She had a lot of discussions with her students and encouraged them to have a lot of discussions with each other throughout the day.

In my initial observations in Terry’s classroom, I noticed that the students were participating in various activities in all content areas focused on preparing students for the standardized test in April. I also observed that the students were engaging in the writing process, but most of their writing pieces were focused on fictional topics. As the semester progressed, I gathered evidence demonstrating that her students began to spend more time writing informational text about various science and social studies topics. I

realized that Terry's beliefs about the role that literacy instruction should play throughout the day continued to shift as she gained new ideas and perspectives as a result of our teacher study group discussions. She continued to try new literacy methods in her classroom, especially during science, social studies, and math instruction. Terry began to realize the importance of integrating literacy methods within all content areas. She also gained more knowledge about how to build literacy skills through helping students make connections to their interests, background knowledge and life experiences. In addition, she encouraged her students to engage in inquiry-based learning activities that encouraged them to create products such as Wow posters (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007), or student-created posters that include interesting facts and illustrations related to a topic, and Glogsters, or interactive multi-media posters created on the Internet. In an effort to help students think at higher levels through making thinking visible, she experimented with thinking routines, thinking maps, and other strategies she learned about in our teacher study group meetings. Our meetings supported both Terry and the students in her diverse classroom as she continued to make shifts in both her literacy-related beliefs and instructional practices.

**Faith's Definition of "Literacy"**. I also asked Faith to share her definition of literacy in her initial interview. She stated the following,

I don't have a definition of literacy...but, it should be the...the ability, I guess, to use language in your day to day life. Your understanding of language and words and I actually feel...that it is the most important thing I teach. Whether they have to pass that test or not...and I actually pull literacy into science and social studies. Like, the philosophy of

some people was...don't teach science and social studies. Pull it into literacy. Pull it into your reading. Just read nonfiction stories. And I'm like...nah...I like to have science, but I like to make it about literacy. It gives me more opportunities to read and find information and understand reading and learn new vocabulary. I make it an extension of reading. It gives me some more time.

(Faith, Initial Interview, 1/23/12)

Based on the above statement, it does not appear that Faith believed that literacy should be taught in isolation, but rather that other content areas, such as science and social studies, should involve the integration of literacy. Towards the end of the semester, I observed Faith several times during science and social studies in the afternoons and noticed that she incorporated many literacy activities that involved reading books and creating products that incorporated writing and language skills. The students were often encouraged to verbally present or share their products with the rest of the class. During one of my observations towards the end of the school year, the students in Faith's class were engaged in an inquiry-based research project that allowed them to choose an important historical figure to research. The students were preparing to role play a historical figure in the wax museum through dressing up like that person and writing a speech about their life that they would then present to the rest of the class. Faith also told the students that they could make a Wow poster that included a drawing of their historical figure if they finished writing their speech in time. I heard some of the students ask Faith if they could work on their poster at home. Faith agreed that this was allowed and reminded them that they were to work independently on their research and

speech. One of the students asked for ideas for an astronaut costume because he was researching Neil Armstrong. Faith's student teacher suggested that he find an empty fish bowl so that he could hold it under his arm. Another student called me over and told me that he was planning to wear a pot on his head because he was going to be Johnny Appleseed. The level of excitement in the room was apparent as the students worked hard to prepare their oral presentations and come up with ideas for their costumes. At this point in the school year, it was also evident that Faith believed in incorporating many elements of literacy into her social studies block, including researching through reading for information, recording important facts, listening to the ideas of others, asking questions, summarizing important ideas through writing speeches, and orally presenting what they had learned. She allowed the students to become the experts on their topics.

Although Faith incorporated several hands-on science activities in the beginning of the semester and knew that it was important to integrate literacy during science and social studies, she was unsure about how to integrate more literacy elements. Through the support of her grade-level team members and the collaborative discussions that we had during our teacher study group meetings, Faith began to discover new ways to integrate more literacy elements into her science and social studies blocks. She also began to incorporate more informational texts and writing into her guided reading and literacy centers, as explained further in the "Literacy Centers" section below. Faith's knowledge about content integration and effective literacy instruction continued to shift as a result of her collaborative experiences in the teacher study groups. Faith told me in her final interview that she had always believed in integrating literacy into multiple subject areas, but that she had struggled with it for several years due to the fact that they

were mandated to teach each subject area during a separate block of time. She also mentioned that she knew that they were supposed to give students opportunities to engage in projects that would encourage higher level thinking processes, but that she had always found this difficult due to the fact that she had many students from economically diverse home environments and little to no personnel support with instruction in her classroom. She shared her excitement about the book, *Strategies that Work* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007) and stated that she was planning to read it over the summer so she could continue to learn about new ways to help students make their thinking visible, apply comprehension strategies while reading, and engage in higher level thinking processes. Faith felt that her students greatly enjoyed choosing what or who they researched in social studies and presenting what they learned in the form of Wow posters or oral presentations. She also felt that the changes she made to her literacy centers during the semester of this study provided her students with more authentic literacy experiences, especially in the social studies inquiry-based research center. Faith's pedagogical beliefs and instructional practices shifted as she learned how to more effectively integrate authentic literacy activities throughout her day.

**Eric's Definition of Literacy.** When asked to talk about his literacy beliefs in his initial interview, Eric replied, "Reading is one of those things we just hit every day. We hit reading throughout the day, every day. We don't just try to just push it down their throat. We try to sneak it in, whether it be, 'I want you to read this one paragraph or read this caption or tell me what you thought about this or let's discuss it...let's have a debate.' Whatever we can do to get them to read something" (Initial Interview, 1/19/12). Eric also shared in our first teacher study group meeting that he tries to encourage his

CLED students to read independently outside of school through sending home a reading log. In the following example, Eric explained how he gives his students the choice to read outside of school, but he does not require it. He explained that by giving them a choice, he feels that he is encouraging them to read independently.

We've been doing reading logs. I said, 'Read one or two books every night. And they're small, it doesn't take very long. And I've got some reading seven and eleven books at night. They just read, read, read, read, read! Mom and Dad sign it. They are reading, what did I say? Twenty minutes. A lot of them are reading for an hour and a half. But you know, I haven't told them to do it. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #1, 1/27/12)

The above comments demonstrated that Eric believed that teachers should provide students with opportunities to make choices about what they read. He believed that if he gave his students the freedom to read what they wanted to read at home through incorporating a reading log, many of them would naturally become self-motivated readers. In addition to incorporating reading logs in his classroom, Eric also talked about motivating his CLED students to read at home through giving them opportunities to participate in programs such as the *Book It Program* organized by *Pizza Hut* and another program put on by *Six Flags* that allows students to win tickets and prizes when they read a certain amount of books. He also mentioned that he had recently tried to give his students more time to read. He stated, "I think that with their busy schedules and their mom's and dad's busy schedules, I don't think the students have the time to enjoy reading anymore. They've got a lot of screen time as far as their gadgets and their

phones and their things on TV, but just them getting back to basics and getting them to enjoy reading again” (Initial Interview, 1/19/12).

In his initial interview, Eric also mentioned that he and his wife supported a county-run literacy program that sends a free book each month to the homes of children under the age of six. In the following excerpt, Eric demonstrated his views on the importance of developing early literacy skills, especially for CLED students, and his beliefs about the importance of integrating literacy in the content areas:

We know that research has shown that students who are low socio-economically do not have a media rich environment. We’ve got a really good literacy foundation in Macks County that is really active. We know that being able to read, especially at a young age, is really important. The Governor spoke about that in his last state of the address saying that more money needs to be funneled into Pre-K through third grade. You’ve got to get those students reading at such a rate that it is going to carry through the rest of their educational career. For me, literacy is top. Of course literacy, math, and science...of course I’m a social studies teacher so I am able to pull all those strands in social studies, but social studies is just as important as any other subject, but I think literacy above all. If you can’t read, you can’t lead. (Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

When I asked Eric to tell me about his students’ attitudes about literacy activities in the classroom, he immediately began talking about the struggles and reluctance that several of his CLED students’ experience when asked to write. He used an example of one student to make his point in the following example:

I've got some kids who absolutely despise writing! They hate it! I've got one that wouldn't even write in his agenda. I mean, it was awful! But through working with the parent and working with the student and showing him, 'Hey, you like reading. I know you like reading.' 'Yeah, I like reading. It's great!' 'Well, it's time for you to be an author.' And, we had that conversation. 'Hey, it's great to read other people's stuff, but wouldn't it be great to have your own stuff?' And, so, we kind of got his wheels turning and we kind of left it at that...planted the seed. We came back a week later, sat down again and kind of touched on it, and we're trying to find some success there and he's writing pretty well. Still not getting the volume I like to get, but just trying to get him to pick up a pencil was pretty successful. Mom's seen some success, too, as far as him wanting to write and writing some stuff at home. (Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

Eric expressed that his students seemed to enjoy many of the writing activities that he incorporated in his classroom, especially when they were integrated within science or social studies content. He shared,

We've got others that just beg me to give them free time so they can write plays or they can write dialogue or they can do a public service announcement [PSA]. I told them what a PSA was and they were just ecstatic! So, my class, the third graders, had the first PSA on the school's morning news...something they had written, on their own time, about litter on the playground. So, one of the things about my classroom, I try to pull environmental issues from the beginning of the day all the way to

the end of the day and we relate most everything we learn with it being about economics, or science, or social studies, or math...something about being environmentally related because a lot of them are really engaged when it comes to the environment or climate. That's something they really want to know about. And habitats...so we try to pull that as a thread through everything. So that's where the PSA comes from and persuasive. Why not do this? So, we talk about writing in that way. (Initial Interview, 1/19/12).

Through the data analysis process, I discovered that Eric had some very strong opinions about language development and its impact on literacy development. A few days before our fourth teacher study group meeting, I gave each of the teachers an article about children who live in poverty called, *What Children Living in Poverty Do Bring to School: Strong Oral Skills. Let Them Talk!* (Mason & Galloway, 2012). I asked the teachers to share their opinions about the article. Eric was the first to share.

Eric: I think it made a valid point that they felt that their language was...one of the best. You know, that they had ownership of their language. And, then, I think that them coming from different backgrounds, that they have to speak a different language. You know, if you are of this income level, you have to speak and act a certain way and if you're of a different income level, you have to speak and act of a different way. And, so they're trying to change that to academics. Speaking is the way I'm reading it.

Megan: Mmhmm... There's lots of students that I've seen in your classes that have a pretty thick dialect, you know. But I think what I brought away from this article is that we have to make sure that kids feel valued, and even though they do speak a different dialect and we do have expectations, like you said, for certain types of language within their writing or even within presentations if they're doing some type of presentation, we can model that and point it out and help them improve it, but also let them feel... like the way they speak, that it's not like a bad thing or a negative thing because then that makes them feel... their self-esteem is like, 'I'm not really that great at putting my thoughts on paper. I'm not really that great at expressing my ideas.' So, what do you guys think about that whole idea?

Eric: It's scary, you know because that language... that dialect has served them well all of these years within their family unit and within the people that they live with and hang around and that sort of thing. I mean, I think, not so much here in Macks County, but it can be. But if you're in the inner city and it's predominantly black and you speak like a white person, then you'll be picked on because you're one of them, you're not one of us. So, getting them to switch from that can be dangerous. We saw that whenever I was in South Alabama teaching... It was the same sort of thing. You know, if you had a black kid that spoke like a white person, he was ostracized in the black community... um, because he would articulate. He would pronounce things properly. He would use the correct vocabulary.

And he wasn't one of them. So your dialect is part of who you are as a person. But, as teachers, as educators, we want to show them which way's right, you know, whether it be...for them to speak correctly, but then also how to write correctly in order to get them to where they want to be. So, okay, if you want to stay in this impoverished part of Cottonwood, Alabama, this is the way you speak. If you are ready to move on to bigger and greener pastures, then you're going to have to speak and write this way. Because you are being judged on...every time you go to an interview, how you're able to articulate, how you're able to write. You know, you've got to be a good communicator. And so, you're trying to bridge that...I don't want it to make you feel bad, but this is life. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #4, 2/29/12)

In the above excerpt, Eric articulated his beliefs regarding the role that language plays in classrooms. Eric seemed to believe that culturally diverse students need to learn to speak and write using proper English if they are going to achieve success or “move on to bigger and greener pastures.” He also argued that part of a teachers' job is to help students learn to speak properly, but that he also realizes that students come to know a certain type of language or dialect that “has served them well” in their own families and communities. He commented that some students, especially those from non-White cultures, may experience tension as they are taught in schools that they should replace the language that they have always spoken with a new language that will help them “...to be a good communicator” because others will judge their ability to articulate and write using proper English. In addition, Eric expressed his belief that all teachers must be careful

that they do not cause students to become ostracized by the people inside their cultural communities. He stated that teachers must try to balance between not making students feel bad, but teaching them that they must learn to speak and write using correct English, or the type of English that is valued in most American schools, if they want to make it to the top in our society. Although many of the students in Eric's classroom had a strong southern dialect that was often noticeable in their writing and/or speech, he pointed out that this form of oral and written language was what they had grown up with all of their lives. To make these students feel that their way of speaking or writing was inadequate may cause them to view their families and culture as inadequate. However, he believed that it was important to help them understand that they must learn to read and write using proper English if they want to achieve success in life.

Through his engagement in the teacher study group meetings, Eric's beliefs about literacy and content integration shifted as he became more knowledgeable about methods he could use to further develop students' literacy skills and engage them in higher level thinking processes in his classroom. He became more effective at articulating why it is important to help students make connections between social studies and science concepts and real world problems or events. This shift was illuminated when he and Terry experienced a "light bulb" moment as they discussed ways to help students become more engaged in the content so they could think at higher levels. He shared that he had his students watch a clip from the television show, *Swamp People*, in an effort to help his students better understand the science and social studies concepts they were studying. Due to his keen knowledge about social studies, science and math content, Eric consistently provided the rest of us with new ideas and ways of thinking about the

content areas. Faith and Terry continuously added to our conversations through sharing their own knowledge and strengths related to writing instruction, teaching comprehension strategies, using anchor charts, planning literacy centers, incorporating inquiry-based projects, using technology in the classroom, etc. The teachers continued to share ideas and knowledge and as a result, continued to become better at articulating why they implemented certain instructional models or strategies. The teachers' knowledge and beliefs related to literacy instruction, integration, thinking processes, and inquiry-based learning continued to shift as a result.

**Literacy centers.** Although Eric did not implement literacy centers in his classroom, Terry and Faith implemented them on a daily basis. Conversations related to ability grouping and different ways to organize instruction led us to a discussion about literacy centers in our third teacher study group meeting. During this meeting, Faith began asking questions about different methods for organizing centers, since she implemented both literacy and math centers in her classroom. She mentioned that although she tried to organize her literacy centers in a different way earlier in the semester, her method did not work out. The following dialogue exemplifies how our suggestions in one of our teacher study group meetings helped Faith to change the way she organized her literacy centers.

Faith: So, then I would let them go to the next center. Now would you recommend not doing that?

Megan: You would just send them back to their same center.

Faith: See, everybody was on one thing, but I had more than 4 centers and they could choose whichever one to go to.

Eric: But, they'll have an anchor station they could go to, too. So, like if they are finished with that part, they still have something in the background they can do independently.

Megan: Exactly. That's how I set mine up. There was a task they had to do in the center...in the independent center. And those were differentiated. Once they finished that task, then they had an anchor station or a choice of anchor stations.

Faith: Ok. So rather than going to another center, they just had an anchor.

Megan: They had an anchor. They had choices.

Eric: Well, it could be as simple as having them work in their workbook or having them preview or having them go back and hit missed skills, or looking at the OAS [Online Assessment System].

Faith: Well, that would be easier to manage because the way I was doing it, I had to have all the centers set up every day, which I did, but then, you know, it was a lot harder than if I just had one anchor station. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #3, 2/15/12)

This conversation between Faith, Eric, and I represents how the teachers' beliefs and thinking sometimes shifted as a result of our collaborative discussions. Through asking questions and sharing their background knowledge, ideas, and experiences, the teachers helped each other to reflect on and negotiate their own understandings about teaching, learning, instruction, and other classroom, school, and society-related issues. In this example, Faith's understanding about how to keep students engaged and busy in a literacy center shifted as she began to realize that she did not need to provide her students

with multiple center options each day. Through incorporating a few anchor activities, or activities that students can do once they finish their assigned center task, she could decrease the amount of time that she was spending on planning the centers.

Faith continued to share her concerns and questions related to finding a better way to organize her literacy centers so that all of the students would continue to develop literacy skills while working in them. She was especially concerned about her struggling readers and writers because she worried that they were not developing the literacy skills they needed while participating in the literacy centers. Faith asked me if I could help her reorganize her literacy centers and brainstorm new ideas for activities that she could place in the centers. We met one afternoon after school and came up with a new organizational plan and center activities. I also observed her on the first day that she introduced and implemented the new literacy centers. The students seemed very engaged in the centers and seemed to really enjoy the social studies inquiry center. In this center, Faith attempted to integrate social studies content into her reading block through having the students choose historical figures to research. She provided the students with a tub full of informational leveled texts about various historical figures. She also provided them with a graphic organizer that included thinking maps to help them organize the information they found. Once the students were finished gathering and recording information on their graphic organizers, they were allowed to create either a Wow poster or a book about the historical figure they researched. This example demonstrates a significant instructional shift in Faith's classroom that resulted because she gained the confidence and support she needed to change the way she organized and implemented literacy centers in her classroom

Our teacher study group meetings led to shifts in not only Faith's thinking processes, but also in Terry's. After hearing Faith share her issues related to organizing centers, Terry admitted that she did not like using a timer to rotate the students through her centers because she could not complete her lessons and often felt rushed. The following conversation resulted when I suggested an alternative way of organizing centers:

Megan: I think that the way that you're doing them can work with some students and in some areas, where you're switching, like with math for example. I know you guys switch back and forth between two groups and I think that works well for math. And Faith, I know you have them rotating through your centers in reading and math, where you kind of tell them when to switch...and that's what you kind of did as well.

Faith: I tried to change that, but...

Terry: We've thought about that. We go from whole to groups and we have done it two ways. We've done it where they spend 23 or 24 minutes. One with her, one with me. Right now we're moving this way, but we talked about moving this way so they have one guided group and one independent group and keeping them that whole time...like the whole 25 minutes rather than switching.

Megan: And with this method, I would sometimes call a group for five minutes and then I might send them to do something independent and then when they finished that, they brought me that back and then they went back to the center.

Faith: Now, when you did it, when I did it, some of them were done before I was...

Megan: Ready to switch? Right?

Faith: So, now, like the one day...the day you were actually in there...I pulled a group...it's my high group. They really don't need anything, so I just kind of just gave it to them and then I left. Theoretically, you're saying just send them back to their desks and pull another group.

Megan: I'm saying, pull them for a few minutes, because you definitely want to check in with your advanced learners to make sure you're challenging them. You want to make sure that you are taking them to that next level. So you meet with them and you give them something they can go do in either partners, independently, in a [group of] three, you know, whatever you decide...They might choose to work with a partner or they might choose to work independently on that task that you're going to have them do. Maybe even give them a choice of what task they're going to do. So, like, if it's a book they're reading, maybe their spending some time independently reading the next chapter and then they're also doing some kind of reading response or something in response to the text. And maybe they have some choices of how they respond to it. Like I've seen teachers use like a choice menu almost and they choose one of them...

Faith: Yeah, we have that, too. Tic-tac-toes.

Megan: Yeah, like a tic-tac-toe. They choose one to do that day in response to the chapter. But, you only need to check in with them for a few minutes, guide them, and then send them to their desks to finish that independently.

Faith: Gotcha.

Megan: And then, when they get finished, you have a place they turn it in. They then go back to the center they were in when you called them, which is heterogeneously mixed. So, they're going to be working in a group, in a center, or in a station with other kids of differing abilities, but the activities that you set up there for them to do are differentiated.

(Teacher Study Group Meeting #3, 2/15/12)

Due to our conversations, both Terry and Faith began to think about other ways to group their students so they received both guided instruction and independent practice. Terry mentioned that she believed that she should give students time to work independently in order to do well on the standardized test they must take in April. She also argued that she felt that these types of centers could not only provide students with opportunities to do independent work, but also to receive guided instruction and support in their areas of need. This conversation caused both Terry and Faith to consider other ways to manage their centers. Later in the year, I observed both Terry and Faith trying out new ways of grouping students and organizing centers.

In her final interview, Terry made the following comment,

I'll never forget what Faith said. She said, 'I needed help with centers.

I didn't understand it. I didn't know how to implement what I was trying to do.' She said, 'Megan came up here on her day off and

helped me...talked me through it and kept talking to me and talking to me until I could finally see the big picture. I could finally see how it could work. And I tried it and the kids loved it.' So, I think people, when they say, 'Time, I don't have any time!' But if you are willing to go back to them and say, 'Let's talk about this more. What can I do to help you understand this better so we can get it implemented?' I think having that person to go back to makes you accountable. (Final Interview, 5/24/12).

The examples above demonstrate how our teacher study groups helped Faith to gain the confidence that she needed to attempt new approaches in her literacy centers. In our meetings, she became comfortable enough to admit that she was not satisfied with the way her centers were organized or with the types of literacy activities she was implementing. The support she received through the teacher study group meetings eventually led to instructional shifts in her classroom. Throughout the semester, she continued to comment about how much her students were enjoying the new methods she was incorporating in her literacy centers.

### **Learning About and Implementing Integrated Curriculum**

Throughout this study, the teachers often brought up the topic of integration during our teacher study group meetings. In some instances, we discussed ideas for integrating science and social studies content into their reading and writing block. On other occasions, we discussed how certain types of literacy activities could possibly help CLED students gain a deeper understanding of concepts in their science, social studies, and math instructional blocks. We talked about how anchor charts and thinking maps can

build CLED students' academic vocabulary, background knowledge, and conceptual knowledge in the content areas. Since the administration mandated that all teachers in the school follow a block schedule, the teachers often taught reading, writing, and language arts separately. Throughout the teacher study group meetings, Eric, Faith, and Terry commented that integrating reading, writing, and language arts skills within the context of authentic literacy practices would allow their CLED students to develop deeper understandings and enhanced literacy skills. The teacher study group meetings provided the teachers with opportunities to share ideas about how they could make content integration possible in their classrooms despite the block scheduling.

In the following teacher study group example, Terry shared her ideas for how they could integrate science content during their language arts instructional block. Faith agreed that it was impossible to adequately cover all of the reading, writing, language arts, science, social studies, and math standards in the limited time allotted by the block schedule.

Terry: You know what I also thought about? I had this epiphany the day before the test and I don't know why I didn't have it at the beginning of the year. That would have helped a lot more. All your language arts type skills... you're integrating them into writing anyway and you want to see them transfer. But what if you took them...science and social studies curriculum and you made...let's say you were doing compound sentences. A metamorphic rock is blank...A metamorphic rock is formed by heat and pressure. How can you combine these two sentences? Because that goes with what you are teaching in science and social studies.

Faith: That is what I do! Because there is not time to fit language arts in...

Terry: Rather than using the language arts, you know, the book or daily warm-ups or daily editing, all that stuff...If you're going to do daily editing, create it yourself so it's about what you're studying at that particular time. It could be math, it could be...you know. It's easier. If you're teaching historical figures through writing, you're doing it through writing or reading, then your language arts skills, quotes, whatever, is about that, too. It's not de-segmented so it's not like, 'Bill went to the store and bought an apple.'

Faith: It's the only way to accomplish it all. If you teach it all in one little segment, you can't fit it all in...especially in language arts.

Terry: That's integrating....right! (Teacher Study Group Meeting #10, 5/15/12)

In response to this conversation, Eric shared his knowledge about a school that was completely integrated around themes. He explained, "What they do is they set a pacing guide for the entire school. And it's on the wall for the parents to come and see and no matter what you're doing, no matter what special you're teaching, everything is thematic throughout the entire school. Every person in the school is doing something that is integrated and they do that all day" (Teacher Study Group Meeting #10, 5/15/12).

As we continued to discuss the high level of engagement that integrated learning projects could provide for CLED students, Terry remembered an instance when two of her male students became very interested in writing a story that incorporated math vocabulary while working together on a WOW poster.

Terry: I just thought about the WOW poster! Jose...He and Matt took their math vocabulary for I believe it was geometry and they made a comic strip out of the math vocabulary and made the people in the comic strip. It was Geo Man. They created that. And Geo Man was taking them through this town and they had a list of vocabulary words and they made up these little scenes that were dialogue between two characters, but they had to tell in the scene what that vocabulary word meant.

Faith: I don't actually know what a WOW poster is...I mean if you have the instructions, I wouldn't mind just looking at what they actually say...

Megan: Well, the idea came out of my favorite books. It has so many different ways you can have kids learn in science and social studies and yet integrate it into reading and writing. So, instead of teaching reading, writing, social studies, science, separately, it kind of shows you ideas for how you can now teach about these people during your reading block and your writing block because the kids are doing reading and research and comprehending.

Faith: This is where I want to go, too! This is why I said, 'How can I do that?' That's one way...integrating.

Megan: Integrating! And the book gives you lots of ideas for how to teach kids to make connections when they're reading and writing. How to teach kids to make inferences when they're reading and writing. How to teach kids to question... (Teacher Study Group Meeting #7, 4/24/12)

**Integrating literacy and science.** Science seemed to be a likely place for teachers to integrate literacy skills. Students in Terry's classroom created WOW posters, or posters containing interesting facts and images about a particular topic, to reflect their understandings of the effects of oil spills. They also used technology to integrate science and literacy. On several occasions, I observed students reading e-books, watching science videos, or creating Glogster posters (or web-based, interactive posters) on the computers. In my field notes, I noted, "Two students are sitting in desks working on laptops – one to my right and one to my left. The boy is listening to a Brainpop Science video. The girl is working on a Glogster blog about magnets. Another student is reading a magnet book on RAZ kids" (Terry, Observation #6, 3/28/12). Terry often displayed the best Glogster posters, or interactive, multi-media posters created on the Internet, in the hallway outside of her classroom. This was the first semester that Terry used Glogster with her students. She also allowed the students to orally present their Glogsters on the Smart Board, which provided them with more opportunities to orally share what they had learned about their topic. In one of our teacher study group meetings, we discussed the positive impact that providing students with opportunities to create multi-media products such as Glogsters could have for CLED students. We all agreed that Glogster was one method that the teachers could use to stimulate their students' curiosity and motivate them to want to learn more about the topic.

During my observations, I noticed that Faith began to integrate more science content and informational text during her reading block while working with guided reading groups. On one occasion, Faith supported six students in a guided reading group as they independently read a non-fiction article about whales and fish and recorded the

similarities and differences between the two sea animals on a double bubble thinking map. Faith said, “Let’s take a look at the whale again. You could write about how it breathes or that it has a blowhole. What did you write on the fish side? What did they tell us in the article? You are absolutely right! Other groups have not mentioned that. Whales swim by moving their tails up and down and fish swim by moving their tails left to right. (Faith, Observation #2, 2/16/12).

In Eric’s classroom, I observed that Eric began to integrate science and writing during his writing workshop time through using it as an opportunity for students to make connections between what they were reading in science and their own lives.

A child reads her response to *The Lorax*. When she was finished reading, Eric asked me, ‘What do you think?’ I responded, ‘I really liked all of the connections that she made to her life and experiences.’ He said, ‘Yes! She did do a great job of making connections. I especially liked that she connected it to what is happening to the land in her neighborhood and how that relates to the animals.’ He then handed me the book, *The Lorax*, and explained that they were focusing on a unit about the environment. He said that he was trying to tie everything to the environment. A second child read her response. When she was done, he said, ‘That was pretty good. You did a really nice job of retelling the story. All you need to do is add more connections. Once you add those connections, it will be great!’ (Eric, Observation #2, 2/13/12)

Later that day, Eric told the students that they were going to read another story that also connected to the environmental theme called, *Our Tree Named Steve* (Zweibel, 2005). He informed them that they were going to work on another response to literature in response to this text.

During a unit on magnets, I noted how Terry integrated literacy elements such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening into her science instructional block. She encouraged students to record their observations in a science journal and to use their resources, in this case the science textbook, to locate information. While demonstrating the strength of magnets with a magnet and paper clips, Terry asked open-ended questions and encouraged the students to record their responses in small, teacher-made magnet booklets. Terry asked, “How many of you think that this one is going to go higher in the air without falling off? Tell me why?” A little girl pulled her textbook out of her desk and told Terry that the answer was in their science book. Terry said, “You have figured this out! You even found a picture in your science book! Is that how we do it? What does it say in the book?” ((Terry, Observation #3, 2/24/12, p. 5).

After allowing each of the students to experiment with the magnets, Terry integrated more writing through encouraging her students to record their observations in their science journals. In our teacher study group meetings, we discussed the importance of providing students with opportunities to record their thinking through writing and to use texts to look up the answers to their questions. On several occasions, I observed Terry implementing these strategies during her science, social studies, and math instructional blocks (See Figures 1 and 2).

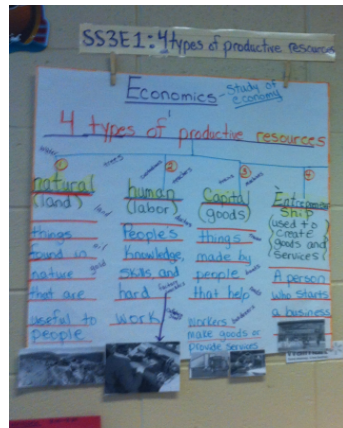


Figure 1. A teacher-created tree map containing facts and pictures exemplifying the four types of productive resources associated with economics.

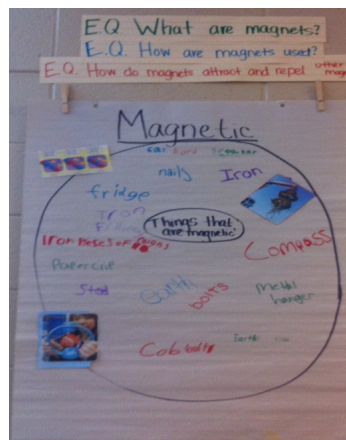


Figure 2. A teacher-created circle map listing ideas and pictures related to “Things That Are Magnetic.”

During an observation in March, I saw Terry again incorporating reading and writing into a science lesson. In my field notes, I wrote, “‘Read like a scientist. Write like a reporter.’ was displayed on the Smart Board. Students chose their own science trade book and then used a four square graphic organizer to help them pre-write. They, then, used that to write their story” (Terry, Observation #4, 3/1/12). I also created the

following table to help me remember what the graphic organizer looked like (See Table 5). The four square graphic organizer was also displayed on the Smart Board.

In my field notes, I also recorded some of the feedback that Terry gave the students as they worked on their four square graphic organizers. She said, “Remember, the best place to go to get your ideas is to go to the table of contents. Put a star next to the ones that make you think, ‘Oh yeah! I remember that one!’” In response to another students’ recorded ideas, she commented, “You know what I liked? You could tell they were WOW facts for you. You know what I wonder? Now have you thought about a diagram or a chart? Have you thought about what you want to use? You can do an illustration with captions. So, think about that for a minute” (Terry, Observation #4, 3/1/12).

Although I did not see much integration of literacy and content in the beginning of my study, I did notice that the teachers began to incorporate more reading, writing, sharing, and speaking opportunities for their students as the semester progressed. I observed the teachers integrating more informational reading, writing, and sharing opportunities into their science instructional blocks and integrating science standards into guided reading, literacy centers, and writing workshop. I believe that the discussions we had in our teacher study group meetings surrounding integrating literacy and the content areas led to these instructional shifts in the teachers’ classrooms.

Table 5

*Four Square Graphic Organizer*

Main Topic 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Details</li> <li>• Details</li> <li>• Details</li> </ul>	Main Topic 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Details</li> <li>• Details</li> <li>• Details</li> </ul>
Main Topic 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Details</li> <li>• Details</li> <li>• Details</li> </ul>	Share your most interesting fact and tell the reader something they can do.

**Integrating literacy and social studies.** As the semester progressed, I also observed that all three teachers seemed to provide their students with more opportunities to write books and stories that covered both social studies and literacy standards. For example, Eric’s students worked on biographies about Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) during their writing workshop block. They gathered facts for their biographies through watching a video about FDR and reading informational texts about him. As I was observing, Eric told me that he read them a quote spoken by FDR from an old history book. He explained that he liked to share examples from some of the history books he used to read in his college courses. He also provided each student with a leveled reader about FDR’s life. They were to use facts gathered from the books, the video, and their conversation to write their own biographies on his life. “Now that you’ve gotten your facts from the video, from the college book, from your book, and from your text book, and now you’ve got some information on your papers. So, I want you to check your paper and make sure that you do not have three words in sequence that comes out of the

book. If you do, I want you to draw one line through it” (Eric, Observation #3, 2/29/12). Here, he made connections to a previous talk that he had with them about plagiarism. He used this teachable moment as an opportunity to show them how to use quotes and quotations in their writing.

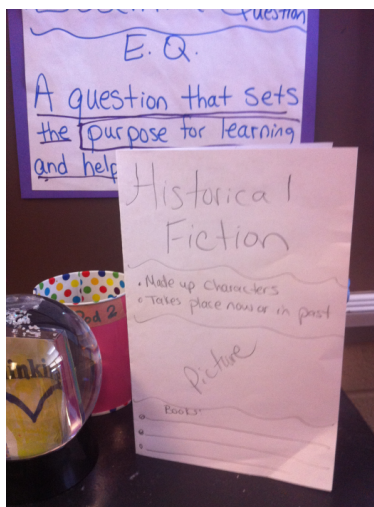
Similar to how Eric used writer’s workshop as a place to integrate social studies and science topics, I observed Terry doing this with social studies topics. During one of my observations, the students were engaged in different stages of the writing process during writing workshop. I noted in my field notes that all students were writing in various places throughout the room. I also noticed that Terry answered some students’ questions as she guided their writing in a small group setting. She asked them to read their stories out loud to her while she closed her eyes and listened. Then, she would give them suggestions about how they could improve their writing. In my observer comments, I wrote,

Terry seems to have set up a very open and free environment during writing workshop. Even though the students were all working on biographies about a famous historical person, they were all in different stages and choosing different methods for writing their story. Teachers must give students an opportunity to write freely and to write about what they want to write about. Terry allows them to choose a thinking map that works well for them as a graphic organizer. (Terry, Observation #4, 3/1/12).

In my field notes, I recorded examples of how the students were engaged in different aspects of the writing process. I wrote, “I sat down between two students who

were writing. One was a little girl and she had a page or so written on her person. She continued to go back to the book to look up facts. The other boy was working on filling out a thinking map. I also noticed that several other students were reading their stories out loud to each other” (Terry, Observation #4, 3/1/12). I also noted that this was the first time that I observed her students working on informational writing pieces during writing workshop. The above example demonstrates how Terry integrated social studies and writing during writing workshop.

In Terry’s classroom, I also observed a lesson that encouraged the students to make booklets that included elements of historical fiction and examples of books that fall under this genre. The following figure shows a sample book that Terry made to help her students understand how to make their historical fiction booklet (See Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Example of a teacher-created sample “Elements of Historical Fiction” booklet.

The conversations in our teacher study group meetings centered around integration of literacy and content areas prompted Faith to change the way that she organized her centers in an effort to integrate more content areas during her literacy block. She decided to make changes to all of her centers which included adding a social studies research center, a free writing center, and a language arts word study center. The social studies center provided the students with opportunities to practice literacy skills while researching information connected to social studies standards. In this center, the students were encouraged to choose a historical figure that they wanted to learn more about. In this instance, students read a non-fiction text about Abigail Adams either independently or with a partner. They recorded their WOW facts on a thinking map. Once they completed their research, they were to choose between either creating a WOW poster or a teaching book.

Throughout the spring, Faith continued to integrate more literacy activities during social studies. On one particular day, I observed the students in several different stages

of the writing process. Some were still searching for information in non-fiction books while others were recording WOW facts on graphic organizers. Still others were working on writing the speech that they would read aloud once it became time to role play the famous person they were researching as they participated in a mock wax museum. Faith explained that she allowed the students to choose the historical figure that they were most interested in researching. The following example shows how the students used a graphic organizer to record their facts and then used the information to create a speech from the perspective of the famous person they were researching. In this specific example, the student recorded facts on a graphic organizer while reading a book about Pocahontas. She then used this information to write a speech about Pocahontas.

**Integrating literacy, science, and social studies through implementing the common core standards.** The teachers' discussions surrounding incorporating the new common core standards into their language arts units during the upcoming school year sparked additional conversations related to integrating science and social studies content. Terry asked if the novel included in the first fourth grade language arts framework related to the Revolutionary War covered a fourth grade history standard. When we all agreed that it did, she commented, "You know, I like the way they did that. You and I were talking about or we've been talking all year...all of us. 'How can we incorporate reading into science and social studies...into the content areas?'" In this example, she pointed out her realization of and appreciation for the fact that the new language frameworks were trying to integrate science and social studies standards into the new literacy common core standards. I then commented that it was interesting that all of the fourth grade novels in the fourth grade language arts frameworks were supportive of many of

the science and social studies standards, but the third grade frameworks were all based on fiction novels. I reminded them that the extensive book list that the assistant principal shared with us during one of their Wednesday Workshops could be found online and that it contained many texts that could be used to integrate literacy and content standards. Eric commented that he had already saved the book list on his computer.

The above conversations are examples of discussions we had during our teacher study group meetings about how to make connections between literacy elements and various content areas and the implications for content integration, student motivation, and engagement.

**Integrating language, literacy, and mathematics.** Since the school improvement goals were focused on increasing student achievement in mathematics, we often discussed ways to improve math instruction in our teacher study group meetings. As a result of our discussions focused on this topic, the teachers began to realize that there were many commonalities between how children develop math skills and how they develop language and literacy skills. This realization led them to consider how they could utilize many of the same effective language and literacy techniques used in reading and writing during math instruction. The following conversations exemplify the teachers' epiphany that math is a language and even though it has unique qualities, many of the same techniques can be used to help CLED students construct meaning about math vocabulary terms and comprehend text when attempting word problems.

In our first teacher study group meeting, I asked the teachers to reflect on their own personal professional development goals. As the teachers shared, I noticed that their professional development goals were typically related to their most significant struggles

in their classroom. In the following example, Terry explained that she was struggling with helping her CLED students learn to apply higher-level thinking skills when solving math word problems. In my response to her, I suggested that her students' issues with solving math problems could relate to several different literacy issues.

Terry: Mine is.... (takes a deep breath)...math problem solving. I mean I know I'm looking at these MCAPS [Math Concepts and Application – A benchmark assessment used in math at this school]. Every concept that we teach in math is rolled into problem solving for application. And, how can I get students to look past the numbers...to think about the problem? How do I get them to think when I'm not guiding them? What strategies can I give them to think when I'm not guiding them or modeling for them how to do it?

Megan: Yep. And I think it comes down to being really a literacy issue, even though it's math, with just comprehension. Helping them to comprehend this new language or this different language that's different than what they're used to. That's why, I mean, I know you guys all are very good about trying to incorporate literacy as much as possible into your math instruction through having them write and having them draw and having them, present, and having them think and I think it definitely is important.

(Teacher Study Group Meeting #1, 1/27/12)

In the above example, Terry's willingness to share her concerns about her CLED students' weaknesses regarding math word problems guided the teachers in making connections between math and literacy. I explained that I felt that the students' struggles

with solving these word problems was related to comprehension because they were having difficulty understanding the language used in the word problems. In addition, I pointed out that the teachers incorporated multiple literacy elements, including reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, during math instruction.

In response to my comments, Terry stated that she wanted to focus on math as a language as her primary professional development goal. She shared that she wanted to learn more about how she could help her CLED students learn to make connections to the real world and use writing to clarify their misunderstandings about math concepts. She argued that teachers should not just view math instruction as teaching numbers and concepts, but that they should also view it as a language. In her initial interview, Terry further explained why she wanted to learn more about integrating math and literacy,

I really want to learn more about how to connect math as a language.

I believe that if I could just connect math as a language...there are books on these topics of the real world and writing about math helps you to clarify misunderstandings. I can do it in Science and Social Studies. Math is where I have the hardest time because it's always been about just the numbers or just the concepts, but connecting that to bring in that a writer also writes about information...So connecting math as a literary area is one of my goals of what I really strive to do.

(Terry, Initial Interview, 1/21/12)

Observations during the teachers' math instructional block provided another lens in which to consider how teachers shifted in their beliefs and understandings around literacy practices. Over the course of the semester, Terry began to use "literacy inspired"

strategies for teaching math. While I was observing in her classroom during a math lesson, she explained to me that the problem of the day that the kids were solving was written by one of her students. As Terry displayed the math problem on the Smart Board, she stated the following in front of her class, “By the way, I forgot to tell you, Matt. Remember that problem that you created last week? This word problem was inspired by you. Now, how do you make your mental math visible on paper? (Observation #7, 4/30/12). The math problem was related to Matt’s experiences at a pizza party held at his neighborhood pool. I noticed that the students immediately became engaged in reading and solving the word problem. Terry encouraged them to draw visual representations in their journals to help them solve the math problem. As the students worked independently to solve the problem, Terry explained that the students created their own math problems earlier in the week and that she was using those problems to stimulate their engagement for solving math word problems. Once the students solved the problem, she instructed them to share their thinking processes through a “think-pair-share” activity. The activities implemented in this math lesson provided all of the students with opportunities to think at deeper levels as they engaged in literacy practices such as reading, writing, visualization, making connections to their experiences, and sharing their thinking processes.

The importance of integrating literacy strategies in mathematics came up again in our third teacher study group meeting. As a group, we discussed the importance of not only helping CLED students build background knowledge about math vocabulary, but also showing them how to apply comprehension strategies to help them better understand the ideas embedded in math word problems. As Terry expressed her concerns about the

impact that the new common core standards may have on the math curriculum, we began to talk about how they could help their CLED students to apply the reading comprehension strategy known as visualization to math word problems:

Terry: I'm hoping down there that their vision of this Common Core...it's more than just, 'What's  $2 + 2$ ? Memorize that fact! That there are 2 bunnies and 2 more hop along, how many bunnies do you have now? Visualize 2 bunnies plus 2 bunnies. Those numbers stand for something. That's what's happening now. 2 plus 4, 2 plus 4, 5 plus 5 is 10. Yeah, they memorize those, but they can't visualize in their mind what that even stands for.

Megan: It's like when you teach kids to read. You teach them to visualize. To picture in your head what's going on.

Faith: Like a movie in your mind.

Megan: So, it's the same thing in math. It needs to be happening, but it doesn't always.

Faith: E-Harcourt is good at showing them the pictures of what they're actually doing.

Megan: Mhmm...So visuals are very helpful. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #3, 2/15/12)

In the above conversation, Faith, Terry, and I discussed the importance that visualization can play in mathematics, especially for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. Faith explained it as making "a movie in your mind" and made a connection to the electronic mathematics resource that comes with their math

series. I often observed her using visuals from this math resource to demonstrate mathematical concepts on her Smart Board.

In *Strategies that Work*, Harvey and Goudvis (2007) suggest that the implementation of anchor charts in classrooms can help students learn to apply comprehension strategies while they are reading such as making connections between what they are reading and their background knowledge and experiences. Through conversations in our teacher study group meetings, we realized that this construct could also be applied to mathematical concepts and word problems. In our fifth teacher study group meeting, the following conversation occurred as I shared examples of anchor charts that could be used in math:

Megan: There are some really good ideas on here. Like one of these charts is all about division. You have them start off with making almost like a bubble map with what they know about and kind of to get their vocabulary in there. And then you talk to them about the different ways to solve division where they can use arrays, they can use related multiplication facts, they can use tables, skip counting repeated subtraction. So, you're kind of reviewing with them all of the strategies they can use. And I'm sure there is an example in here, but you could almost make a measurement chart that reviews all of this stuff and shows how it is equal to each other.

Terry: Just like...remember that you showed us that thing with the gallon and stuff that they have to know in fourth grade...I would love to have kids make WOW posters on the conversions. Have them actually make the

posters themselves so they can see, you know, this is a paper clip.

Whatever the things are...

Faith: Oh, I remember what they need to know. 'If you were to measure a table, would you measure it in kilometers or meters or centimeters?'

Terry: They need to have that true understanding of what metric units are and guess what setting you would use them in.

Megan: And you almost need to be able to visualize and make that connection to...I'm going to measure this thing. What am I going to use?

Faith: Did you look at what the book says? Millimeter is the width of a dime. Centimeter is the width of your finger.

Terry: I think they are confused because we've always measured in inches and feet and yards. Why do we have to measure in millimeters or centimeters? Why can't you just use inches? And we have to say to them, well if you ever go to Europe.... (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12)

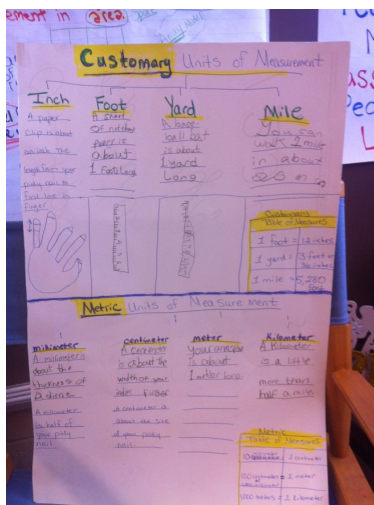
Through their conversations in the teacher study group meetings, the teachers helped each other to better understand how the reading comprehension strategy known as "making connections" could also help CLED students deepen their comprehension of math-related vocabulary and concepts. Eric explained how he helped his students make connections to the real world and understand why we have two measurement systems when he stated, "I tell them that it is so scientists can communicate with each other. There was a great discovery that happened in Europe and those scientists needed to be able to share their discoveries with America" (Teacher Study Group Meeting # 5, 3/6/12). Terry replied, "That's a good connection...I like that."

The teachers discussed what their students should know about measurement and shared ideas for how they could help them make connections to their background knowledge and life experiences. Their primary goal was to lead their students to an enhanced understanding of these mathematical concepts. For example, Faith shared her ideas for ways they could help students make connections between the size of metric units and real life objects. In this example, the teachers deepened their own understandings about the concept of measurement through discussing how strategies that are typically regarded as reading comprehension strategies could also be used to build understanding in math.

Following this meeting, Terry came up with an idea for how she could use an anchor chart to help her students better understand the differences between the two measurement systems. I observed her using this teacher-created anchor chart as a model with her students (See Figure 4). She also had them create their own measurement posters to demonstrate their understanding of the metric and the customary measurement systems. My field notes show how she integrated multiple content areas into her math lesson through incorporated several literacy techniques and making connections between measurement and science. In my field notes, I noted that Terry said, “Now, I want you to be doing two things. I want you to look at your metric system poster and I want you to compare it to your body. I would like you to read what you have for millimeter.” (Terry, Observation #6, 3/28/12). Next, a boy read a fact off of his poster and stated that a millimeter is about half of his fingernail. Another student said that it is about the width of a dime. Terry asked if anyone had a dime to share. A little girl went and took a dime out of her desk. After looking at the dime, Terry commented, “Look, that is very, very

tiny! That is even smaller than we thought. If a millimeter is the width of a dime, then it would be about the size of what part of our finger? Good, the fingernail! Not if you have long nails. I have long nails. I haven't cut them in a while. What if we divided our fingernail into  $\frac{1}{4}$ 's? Not literally. (She laughs.) I have an idea." Terry went and got a marker and divided her fingernail into  $\frac{1}{4}$ 's. She said, "Imagine the size of a millimeter. Why would a scientist need to measure things in millimeters?"

While observing in Eric's classroom, I noticed that he incorporated several literacy activities during his math instructional block to help his CLED students build their understanding about types of triangles and their attributes. Eric asked his students, "If I told you on a test and asked you to draw, classify, and label [each type of triangle], could you do it?" (Eric, Observation #2, 2/13/12). The students answered, "Yes." Eric then took the students over to the board and showed them the math standard listed on the board and the information under it said, "What will be the evidence of learning? Evidence will include: Drawing, classifying, labeling. Through: Thinking maps, writing, projects, technology, and discussions." Eric then displayed a tree map on the Smart Board and asked the students questions such as, "What goes up here?" The students said, "Triangle!" Next, he asked them what should go on the next three lines. The students shouted out the names of the three types of triangles.



*Figure 4.* Making mathematical thinking visible through using a tree map to demonstrate examples of units of measurement.

Eric then sent the students to different math centers around the room. Five students worked with the special education teacher. They were having a discussion about math vocabulary terms such as “circumference”, “circles”, and “center.” The special education teacher helped them to make connections between the new vocabulary terms they were learning about and the ideas in a picture book about circumferences. Four students were in the back of the room engaged in a variety of math activities on the computers. One watched a Brainpop video about triangles, another student researched a math concept on Google, and two other students played math games. In another corner of the room, three students were working on a math activity that required them to read books and record their ideas on dry erase boards.

Eric instructed his small group of students to write down tips on their tree maps that might help them remember the elements of a triangle. He then said, “How can we use writing to show what we know about triangles? Use your journals to share a

paragraph about the three types of triangles. Be sure to use the vocabulary words below. Equilateral, isosceles, scalene, sides, and congruent. Include hints to help others remember the 3 types.” About five minutes later, Eric asked the students in his group if they were ready to share. When a boy stated that he was ready, Eric asked him if he proofread it and reminded him that he must go through the entire writing process. Next, Eric shook some type of shaker and asked all of the students to stand up immediately. He said to the students, “You may walk around and talk to each other about what you have been doing. That way, you will know what to do.”

As the above example demonstrates, Eric embedded multiple literacy activities in the math centers including creating a thinking map, drawing visual representations of triangle attributes, writing in a journal, writing on dry erase boards, reading books related to the topic, researching facts on a computer, watching a video on the computer, playing math-related computer games, recording ideas on a thinking map, and sharing information through discussing it with a partner. Eric attempted to support his CLED students learning and understanding of math concepts through integrating multiple literacy activities into his math instructional block.

As our teacher study group meetings progressed, Terry continued to emphasize the importance of language development in mathematics and pointed out that just as it is important for linguistic and economically diverse students to learn through exposure to the language, experiences, and thinking of other students in reading, the same goes for math. She mentioned that providing time for discussion is essential and that these discussions should happen in a whole group setting because small group instruction often incorporates ability grouping in math. Our conversations surrounding the importance of

discussions in math led to conversations about making thinking visible through encouraging students to model and discuss their thinking. Terry expressed her thoughts on these topics in the following example:

Those kids that are a little bit behind in math...they need those examples of those higher order thinking skills....So, the whole group [can be used] to try to pull out some of their thinking so that everybody can share their thinking on how they arrived at this solution or this operation. We have a hard time trying to figure out, because we have identified five that need that intense, targeted instruction and you've got the ones that need the spiraling and then those kids that just get it and take off and can apply it. Those low kids need the thinking strategies from those high kids. But, to put them in the same group wouldn't work because those high kids would get bored and they need to be doing something else at that moment. So, I think we struggle in how do you, during that whole group time, have those conversations and have kids talking back and forth so that they can see, 'Wow! I didn't think about that or maybe I should do it this way?'

(Teacher study group meeting #3, 2/15/12).

In response to Terry's comments about her struggle with not knowing how to promote conversation in math so that her lower-performing students were exposed to the language and higher-level thinking processes of the more advanced students, I decided to share a strategy that involved a "placemat" with a graphic organizer on top of it. The graphic organizer provides scaffolding for students in that it gives them a specific format within which to discuss and model their thinking processes and problem solving steps

with a partner. The students must use the graphic organizer to draw a visual model that represents their thinking processes and the problem solving steps they took to solve the problem. The students must also analyze their models cooperatively as they compare and contrast their visual representations. The following excerpt from our third teacher study group meeting demonstrates how I explained this strategy to the teachers:

Well, I want to share this with you for math, because it kind of goes with what you were asking. This would be called a 'placemat' and it would actually be placed between two kids for math, and they would have a problem that they're trying to solve. One of the kids would write their solution and process on this side and maybe draw their model and the other child would write their solution and process and draw a model on this side. Then they would discuss the similarities and write them in the middle and the differences and write them in the middle, depending on what you want them to discuss. So, they can kind of discuss their thinking processes for how they solved the problem and decide what did we do the same or what did we do differently to get the answer? And it kind of helps them talk through the process in a way that they're sharing background knowledge with each other. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #3, 2/15/12)

I introduced this strategy to the teachers because they continued to mention that they were having a difficult time getting their CLED students to apply higher-order thinking skills while attempting word problems. I hoped that this graphic organizer could serve as a template that would encourage their students to not only model their thinking processes

and problem solving steps, but to also engage in conversations with their peers about the processes they implemented while solving the problem.

Teachers applied language-based strategies in their classrooms in an attempt to encourage their students to make their thinking visible. In the following conversation, I shared with the third grade team that I observed Eric using some very effective techniques in his classroom during math instruction that seemed to promote student discussions about their thinking processes:

So yes, you can do that [engage students in discussions about their thinking processes] in whole group, but sometimes, having them do it in partners. I've seen you do that quite a lot, too. Like when you say, 'Get up and talk to somebody about what you learned today.' So he has them do this in transitional times and I think that something like this could be used after you maybe do some whole group talking about... modeling some problems on the Smart Board or whatever and then you have them partner up and maybe solve a problem where they're talking to a partner and maybe trying to do some of the things you've just modeled through talking. You would have to model how to talk through your process, probably, unless that's something you already have them do. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #3, 2/15/12).

In this example, I took an idea that Terry shared (having students share their thinking in a whole group setting) and connected it to something Eric did in his classroom (having students share their thinking with a partner). My intention was to expand on and support what Terry was saying through sharing an example of another

technique that I observed her colleague using. I also expanded on the importance of teacher modeling and talking through the processes or steps taken to solve a math word problem.

### **Learning about Ways to Promote Higher Order Thinking**

As a result of discussing ways to make thinking visible in mathematics through incorporating more literacy and language activities, the teachers began to discuss how they could promote higher level thinking in all content areas. In one of our teacher study group meetings, I presented the teachers with hard copies of several of the “thinking routines” (Gardner, 2012) I learned about while attending Howard Gardner’s *Project Zero* conference in the fall. I also brought in large printed posters of a few of the routines. Terry was the only teacher who already knew about these routines for she attended the conference with me during the previous semester. As I pulled out the posters, the following conversation resulted:

Terry: Are those thinking routines?

Megan: They are.

Eric: Where will they be? In our rooms?

Megan: Well, we had one set made just for the university students, but of course, if you guys want to use them, you can just get them. But this one is, ‘What Makes You Say That?’ You would use this one to ask kids, ‘What’s going on or what do you see that makes you say that?’ So, you could use this with a math problem, you could do this with a painting that you put up that might be related to a social studies topic or a science picture of something that is related to your science and you just have them

really think about what they think is going on in the picture or in the math problem or in the passage that you put up on there.

Eric: We did that with Frederick Douglas. They had to use adjectives to explain what do you see? So, it's the same thing. And then for my high kids, they have to use adjectives. The low kids, you just write down what you see. But I never realized that there was a routine behind it, but...we do that.

Megan: Yeah. There's all sorts of them. These are all different. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #2, 2/7/12)

In the above example, I introduced one of the thinking routines, “What Makes You Say That”, to the teachers and explained how it could be used in the classroom to promote thinking in the content areas. Eric immediately made a connection to a similar technique that he used in his classroom to get his students to think about what they were seeing while studying a historical figure in social studies. According to the visible thinking website, “Visible thinking is a broad and flexible framework for enriching classroom learning in the content areas and fostering students’ intellectual development at the same time” (Gardner, 2012). Through these thinking routines, students deepen their understanding of content and experience increased motivation. They also increase their ability to think and learn and develop attitudes that help them know when thinking opportunities come about. In turn, “...a shift in classroom culture toward a community of enthusiastically engaged thinkers and learners” can occur. Thinking routines and their implications for students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds are discussed further in the next chapter.

In another teacher study group meeting, Faith shared her frustrations related to her struggle with trying to get her students to think at higher levels. The following excerpt from our fifth teacher study group meeting exemplifies her frustration and the way the rest of us offered her suggestions and shared our own experiences in an effort to support her.

Faith: I tried to let them make a connection yesterday. We were talking about fossils. We talked about how the camel fossil is really tiny, but camels today are really big. So, camels have changed. We can draw the conclusion that camels have changed over the years. The next thing was, let's talk about plants. Oh, look at this plant, this fern fossil. And look at the fern today. It looks the same. What conclusion can we draw? I tried for ten minutes to get someone to draw that very same conclusion...you know, just the reverse that, 'Oh, they look exactly the same. They haven't changed.' Do you know not one student could draw that conclusion? I finally had to tell them.

Eric: That's sad.

Terry: Why not?

Faith: I do not know! But this is how my whole day goes. They cannot...they do not think. They do not have those processes. To me, when I verbally tell you this one, you should be able to take the second one and draw a similar kind of conclusion. I even went back and said, 'Let's review what I just said.' And I said the animal one all over again and we looked at the

camel all over again and I said, 'What conclusion can we draw about the fern?' They could not tell me. I had to tell them the answer.

Megan: You have to model your thinking and you to have to say, 'This is how I would come up with the answer.'

Faith: All day long? I mean this has been going on all year. Why is that?

Megan: I don't know? Maybe these thinking routines would help you, because that's what these are meant to do. They are meant to build student's thinking processes through the way that you are questioning them or through the things you're saying to them. Like this one, for example, I think would be terrific for social studies. Where they have to look at something from the perspective of a certain person and they have to think about it from that person's perspective and they have to come up with questions that they have from that perspective and then come up with new ideas that they now have about the topic that they didn't have before.

Faith: They get it in reading, but they don't...they can't transfer it to any content area. Even math they have trouble with. I think maybe they've been trained to think of it in reading. They can't really infer, though. Point of view is a lot easier than inferences.

Megan: Well, too, you have to remember, coming from second to third... some teachers K, 1, 2...they baby the kids in a way. Some know that they can think and know that they have higher level thinking processes. But others think, 'We have to hold their hand through it and show them...teach them.'

Terry: They focus on the implicit of what's on the page, not on the extension of... because they may not be developmentally ready for this, but if you guide them into that thinking process, they can do it.

Megan: They can do it, but sometimes they haven't had the opportunities to or been shown how or allowed to try it. So that's when they come to third and you're expecting them now to be independent thinkers, but sometimes they haven't had that scaffolding to be able to do it or the experiences to be able to do it. So that's what these are meant to do is to provide them with that scaffolding to help them. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #4, 2/29/12)

The above conversation is quite significant because it provides insight into the following research question: In what ways do teachers' literacy practices shift as a result of engaging in teacher study groups focused on issues related to culturally, linguistically and economically diverse student populations? In the above example, Faith began the conversation by stating that she was frustrated with the fact that she could not get her students to apply higher-order thinking skills such as drawing conclusions or making inferences. Through our discussion, Terry made the comment that teachers must guide students in the thinking processes rather than just assuming that they cannot think. This conversation led the teachers to a shift in thinking. They left the meeting with new ideas and questions related to how they could guide students in their thinking processes and help them learn to draw conclusions and make inferences. They realized that through modeling their own thinking processes, they could help students arrive at their own answers derived through applying higher order thinking processes. In her post-interview, Faith told me

that she decided to purchase the book, *Strategies that Work* by Fountas and Pinnell (2007) because she wanted to learn more about how she could make thinking processes visible for her students.

In our fifth teacher study group meeting, the teachers realized that they could promote higher level thinking processes and student engagement through providing CLED students with more opportunities to make connections to the real world and their own lives. While Faith and I were talking, Terry and Eric were having a side-bar conversation of their own. I asked them if they would mind sharing and Terry immediately began to tell us about their conversation related to her struggles with keeping her students engaged and focused so that they could apply thinking and inquiry processes. The following conversation resulted:

Terry: Eric had a light bulb. We've kind of noticed a little bit of this in the beginning of the year when we tried to do responding to what you read. Let's read this, let's talk about this science thing that's going on. Respond in your journals with words or diagrams. They couldn't do it. I mean, if you look back at their journal, it's one sentence. Some couldn't even do the one sentence. But, if you hang in there and you say, 'What were you thinking? Share your thinking.' Every kid in this classroom writes a half a page and includes a diagram and 90 % capture the reader's attention in the beginning and we don't even tell them to do that. I mean it's a process. I mean it's a long process, but background... a lot of them don't have the background or the connection so you have to intentionally give them the connections and another thing I think is that sometimes, we're

having this conversation and all of the sudden you look over and they look like they're listening, but they're really not...

Faith: They're off somewhere else.

Terry: They're off somewhere else. They've missed every third word you've said, so by the time you get to the question, it's like, bam, I'm back. I have no idea. So, I guess that engagement while you're trying to get them to make that process is something I struggle with. How do you keep them engaged, you know, so when you get to the thinking process, they are still engaged and are ready for it? (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12)

In response, Eric attempted to enhance Terry's understanding by sharing one of his experiences related to trying to keep his students engaged through helping them make connections to their background knowledge and experiences.

Eric: Like yesterday, I was losing them for a minute and we were talking about trees and talking about what role they play in their habitat. Plants, animals, whatever. So, we watched a little clip from Swamp People, you know, that will keep their attention. Man, as soon as I got finished with that, they were dead on. Oh, I understand how a cyber tree works. Oh, I understand how the root system works. Oh, I understand what role they play on the habitat and what role they have on food...setting the engagement.

Terry: Because telling them won't make that connection. They have to see it...

Eric: They've got to stay engaged!

Terry: Then, they discuss it, then you intentionally make that connection and then they can think about it.

Eric: And it had to be cool. It's cool to talk about swamp people. And to have Troy with his Louisiana accent and then from there we started talking about, well these are capital goods and that led us right into our social studies lesson with Swamp people and how they make their living doing this and this is how they do it but they rely on the trees and they rely on this...

Megan: But, you're helping them make those connections.

Faith: He's great at that!

Eric: No, I got it from the history channel. If I am losing them, I'm going to change. So, that's what we did. It was great! They loved it! (Teacher Study Group Meeting #5, 3/6/12)

Through these conversations, the teachers realized that students can learn to think at higher levels if they are provided with opportunities to make connections to their own lives, experiences, and interests. Eric shared an example from his own classroom that demonstrated how he hooked into the students' interests through helping them make connections to a television show about people who work in a swamp. By appealing to his students' interests and encouraging them to make connections to real-world events, Eric helped them think at higher levels which, consequently, led to a deeper understanding of the science and social studies concepts they were studying. This example also represents a shift in the teachers' thinking because Eric helped them to realize that students can

learn to think at higher levels, especially if they are provided with opportunities to make connections to their life experiences, interests, and real world events.

While observing in Terry's classroom during a science lesson about magnets, I noticed that she seemed to implement new techniques in an attempt to encourage higher level thinking in her CLED students. In this example, Terry used language such as, "I wonder?" and "Why do you think that?" to encourage her CLED students to engage in higher level thinking processes through asking question and explaining their thinking processes. She also attempted to build her CLED students' vocabulary knowledge through helping them connect their ideas to other words they knew. In my field notes, I recorded the following language used by Terry,

Can someone tell me what you observed? How would you describe these? Okay. So, the sides. One of them looks different. Oh, I see that. Good observation. Weight! Okay. What did you notice? Hmm...I wonder if it has anything to do with the way I retied that paper clip. What do you think? Which one is going to be harder to pull off? What makes you think that? What word did you use? Why did you use that particular word? What were you thinking? Oh, do you know what mass means? You used a word that is a synonym for mass. Yes, mass is another word for weight. I want you to feel the magnetic force. Which one is the magnetic force? What do you think?

(Terry, Observation #3, 2/24/12)

In another observation of a lesson focused on finding the perimeter and area of squares and rectangles, Terry challenged her students to come up with other shapes that

were not quadrilaterals so that they could figure out the perimeter and area of these shapes. She told them to model the shapes for their classmates through visualizing the shape and drawing it on graph paper (Terry, Observation #4, 3/1/12). I also observed Terry encouraging her students to “show their thinking” through recording their thoughts in math journals. After she gave the students a few minutes to record their thinking in their journals, she said to the class, “How are you going to figure that out? I am going to give you ten seconds to figure that out. How are you going to figure out how many people are at the party? I hear a lot of good thinking going on” (Terry, Observation #7, 4/30/12). After she allowed a few students to share their answers, she again reminded them to think about it and stated that she could see that some of them had already followed this step in their journals. She used modeling to circle the numbers in the problem. Then, she drew a thinking map and talked to the students about taking parts and adding them up to get a whole. In this part of her lesson, she demonstrated that just as think alouds are often used in reading to model comprehension strategies, teachers can also use them in math to make thinking visible so that students learn how to apply metacognitive processes as they attempt to comprehend word problems.

Faith and Eric also used think alouds to demonstrate how they apply higher level thinking processes as they are reading informational text. Eric sometimes used think alouds to make his thinking visible as he solved a math word problem on the board or demonstrated how he figured out the meaning of an unknown vocabulary word that he came upon in a science or social studies text. Faith used think alouds to show students how she drew conclusions or made inferences after reading aloud a section out of a science text. She also used questioning techniques to encourage her students to explain

their thinking. For example, as I observed her facilitating a discussion with a small reading group about whales, she responded to a students' question by saying, "What would make you wonder that? What are you thinking about?" (Faith, Observation #2, 2/16/12). In a previous teacher study group meeting, we discussed different strategies for engaging students, more specifically CLED students, in higher order thinking processes. The teachers continued to use questioning techniques and think alouds to make thinking more visible in their classrooms and to encourage their students to engage in higher order thinking processes.

### **Learning about Inquiry-Based Learning**

In our seventh teacher study group meeting, the topic of inquiry-based learning came up as the teachers shared that their students engaged in inquiry-based activities in science such as experiments and social studies projects such as a wax museum comprised of historical figures and a market day related to economics. They also explained that they used thinking maps to encourage their CLED students to ask questions and make connections to their background knowledge and experiences. During several of my observations, I witnessed the students creating different types of products to show what they learned as they became experts on their topic through inquiry-based research. Some of the students in Terry's room created Glogsters, or interactive posters, on the computers. Students in both Faith and Terry's classrooms produced Wow posters and I Wonder charts (Harvey and Goudvis, 2007). Eric shared that his students created objects out of junk during a recycling unit and then sold them at an auction to raise money for a local charity. According to the teachers' comments and my observations, the students became immersed in these projects which led to increased student engagement and

independent thinking and learning, especially for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. Inquiry-based learning projects also allowed the students to “create” something which, according to Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), is considered to be one of the highest levels of thinking. All students were provided with opportunities to engage in higher level thinking processes through these inquiry-based learning projects. One of the special education students in Terry’s classroom chose to create a Glogster as a free choice when he was told that he could do something “fun” on the computer if he finished his test early. We talked about the high engagement and motivation levels of the students due to these inquiry-based projects in our seventh teacher study group meeting, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

Megan: And I thought that was amazing, that he wanted to go work on his research poster over anything else. And that’s what I hope the frameworks...and I haven’t looked at the new ones, but that they do give kids that opportunity to, you know, research things they’re interested in instead of saying, ‘All kids will research this.’ Within your unit, whether it’s rocks or minerals or whatever it is, they kind of get to pick an area to choose and look at.

Faith: We assigned our books on people for the wax museum and two kids went home and made WOW posters already.

Terry: I saw them!

Faith: They were all excited! They actually got their own poster board. Because we made the little Wow posters with the...they just transferred that

knowledge of the American heroes over to the biographies we are doing.

They went home and made those posters.

Megan: That's amazing! They are loving learning! They enjoy it! (Teacher Study Group Meeting #7, 4/24/12)

In our ninth teacher study group meeting, we discussed how a differentiation strategy known as “four corners” could be used to promote inquiry-based learning. We came up with different ideas for how to use the four-corners method including having the students come up with their own questions about a topic in cooperative groups in each of the corners. The teachers could place or hang up a piece of chart paper in each of the four corners of the room and write a topic at the top of it. The students would choose a corner based on the topic they were most interested in researching. The teacher could facilitate as the students engaged in conversations about their topic. Their goal could be to record their questions and background knowledge about the topic on their chart paper. We also discussed how they could integrate thinking maps or anchor charts to help them organize their questions and ideas and how these types of activities could help students who are not typically motivated to learn about a topic become more interested in finding out more information about their topic. We decided that giving them a choice and encouraging them to ask questions could result in student engagement. As a group, we looked at resources related to interest-driven independent study projects. Our collaborative discussions led to a shift in the teachers' thinking for they began to realize the implications that incorporating inquiry-based learning activities on a daily basis could have for their students, especially those students who were typically not as motivated in

school. As a result, I noticed that Terry and Faith began to incorporate more inquiry-based projects that were inspired by their students' interests and background knowledge.

During writing workshop, I observed Terry's students as they engaged in inquiry-based research projects about nonfiction topics. I watched as Terry held a conference with two students who were working together on their project. She encouraged the students to record WOW facts about the topic they were each researching. She also guided the students' text choices when they were not sure where they should look for important information about their topic. As she was meeting with two students, she said, "This is what you guys need to decide. This one is more general. Let's look at the table of contents. I think that these books are similar. Why don't you get together on the carpet and read them together and then decide" (Terry, Observation #4, 3/1/12). While conferencing with another boy in the classroom, she suggested that he use an internet research website known as *NetTracker* to find information on his topic. She helped a third student decide whether he should use a diagram or chart in his writing. Another student was writing a television news report on adaptations. As he read his ideas aloud to her, she helped him come up with a more engaging lead and complimented him for including a Wow fact.

I also observed a small group of Terry's students engaging in an inquiry-based project in math that involved sorting and graphing beanie babies. Terry gave them a box full of different kinds of beanie babies and instructed them to find a way to sort them using different categories. Once they were sorted, she told them to create a graph based on the categories they came up with. When she saw that the girls needed some help with coming up with a way to sort the animals, Terry said, "Do you remember what we talked

about? Graphing! You are to think of a way to sort these animals. What would be the best way to sort these animals? Okay, habitats. When you say habitats, what kind of habitats are you thinking? Swamp animals, okay. How about...could you sort them by ocean? Salt water, fresh water? So, write that down on your paper” (Terry, Observation #7, 4/30/12). After helping the students get started, Terry left them alone so they could work together to come up with a way to sort and categorize the animals. The girls came up with categories such as “animals that live on a farm” and “animals that live in a house”. Once they sorted and graphed the beanie babies, they had to come up with questions about the different categories of animals. Although I was not present to observe this part of the activity, Terry told me later that the students really enjoyed this activity because she gave them opportunities to come up with their own questions about the different categories of beanie babies. In this example, she was encouraging her students to engage in higher level thinking processes.

In Faith’s classroom, I observed the students engaging in an inquiry-based project that required them to find Wow facts about the historical figure that they were researching. I witnessed her students engaging in inquiry-based research projects during both her literacy centers and during one of her social studies blocks. As they read nonfiction trade books, they recorded Wow facts on various thinking maps and then created Wow posters that showed what they had learned. Faith encouraged them to find answers to their questions. My observations demonstrated that all three teachers experienced instructional shifts as we considered the needs of their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students and came up with ways to support their literacy development.

### **Teacher Study Groups as a Discovery Space to Negotiate their Beliefs about Culturally, Linguistically, and Economically Diverse Students**

A third theme that arose in response to my research questions was that teacher study groups can serve as a discovery space in which teachers can negotiate their beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. In an attempt to answer my research questions, I tried to find out as much as I could about the teachers' perspectives about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students, before beginning this study through conducting pre-interviews with each of the teachers. In these initial interviews, I asked open-ended questions so I could learn more about their knowledge, beliefs, and understandings. An analysis of the teachers' initial interviews resulted in the following findings.

#### **Teachers' Beliefs about Their Culturally, Linguistically, and Economically Diverse (CLED) Students**

In the beginning of this study, I wanted to explore the teachers' beliefs about their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. Therefore, I conducted a sixty minute interview with each of them in January before beginning the teacher study groups or classroom observations so I could learn more about their experiences and beliefs related to their students. In their initial interviews, I asked open-ended questions so that I could learn more about their past experiences. I used a semi-formal interviewing approach that would allow me to learn more about each teacher's individual educational backgrounds and upbringings. I was also interested in learning more about their attitudes and opinions related to "class" and the socio-economic statuses of their students. Hicks (2002) commented, "The feelings, histories, and attachments more overtly revealed in

stories are things I have come to see as an important lens for shaping studies of learning” (p. 11). I listened to and further examined the stories of these teachers so that I could better understand their feelings, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and experiences. Finding out more about their knowledge, educational histories, and life experiences helped me to understand more about them so that I could explore whether or not their knowledge, beliefs, or understandings shifted as they engaged in bi-weekly teacher study group meetings.

Although the population at Lakeside is primarily Caucasian, the student population was becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse at the time of this study. The socio-economic statuses of the students were also changing as the poverty rates in Macks County increased due to the declining economy. Since the teachers in this study had a significant number (approximately fifty percent) of impoverished students in their classroom, this study focused primarily on the teachers’ beliefs about how economic inequalities impacted their students, as well as their instructional choices in the classroom. Additionally, I decided to examine the teachers’ beliefs about cultural and linguistic students due to the recent growth of this subgroup.

**Terry’s beliefs about CLED students.** In an effort to find out more about Terry’s perceptions of the student population in her school and county, I asked her in her initial interview if she felt that the student population in Macks County was changing. She responded she felt that the population was growing and becoming more diverse. She explained,

I have seen big changes. We have grown exponentially since then. As far as I remember when I first started teaching in this county...when

there was just the one elementary school, I knew all the parents because they were local parents. It was a very odd occurrence if you had someone move in from outside of Macks County. So, you were teaching the students of your classmates. Knew everybody. And then about probably five years into my teaching, there was this mass movement of people into Macks County and little by little and even now, it's very rare to get Someone that you know. So, now it's a very diverse population. Now it's becoming more ethnically balanced. Back then, when we went to school...we were all Caucasian...all from this area. Very little cultural experience outside of Macks County. (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12)

When asked to talk about the students in her classroom, she said,

I have a mixture...I'll describe them in several different ways. First, economically. I have a range from poverty to the wealthy and all in between. I'll also describe them as family backgrounds. I have some grandparents that are raising children. I have divorced parents raising children. And very few parents that are still together raising the children that I have. Also, talking about learning, I have every range. I'm inclusion, so I have every range from those students who are academically behind to those students who fall in the middle to those gifted students. They're not actually, they have not tested for gifted, but I find myself, they have the gifted strategy, they think...logically and so I was going to test them for gifted. I have every range in there...in between. So, a very broad range of students in the varying background experiences. Some have never

been outside of Macks County or around this area, they may have moved counties but never to the city. They've never been outside the rural areas. And then, I have some who are very cultured and that travel throughout the year when they're not here. Also ethnically, I have a wide variety of students. I have some ELL students. I have racially mixed students. So it's just a broad range of those characteristics in there...in my current classroom of 19 kids. (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12).

In her interview, she also shared her perceptions about the education levels of her students' parents. She explained,

Academically, I know that some of their parents are...uneducated and that makes it hard for them to be able to help their students at home. I believe that every parent wants to. I don't think they have the tools to. I believe that some of them are very involved in their education at home and want to know what's going on and there are those mothers that work two jobs and they just don't have time to interact as they probably would like to with their children at home. As far as the emotional things that happen at home that impact their learning, there are about five students, some of those are in poverty, some are not, but that have really difficult home situations where their parents are divorced and they're not getting along or the ones that are in poverty, you know, you always worry about, 'Do they have food? Did they eat this morning?' Especially when we're out of school. (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12)

When asked if she noticed any differences between her students as far as interests or motivation, she responded by discussing the importance of self-motivation and the differences between students who are highly motivated and those who are not. She asserted,

There is a difference. And those are the ones...they are what I call 'self motivators.' I give them a project. They are self-motivated. They will do it. Then there are some that will need clarifying of understanding or focus to get started. Then there are some that just are what I call 'non-independent workers' and it's not really...but most the time, it's because they're not motivated. You have to find that one thing about that project that motivates them and then you get the other pieces. So, I know that I've targeted the ones that I notice are the ones that are academically behind and I have to...because the project-based stuff is harder for them because it has a lot of the application components of it. So, I have to offer them more support, then it usually gets them started and going. But I have to be ever aware of that! (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12)

In a follow up question, I asked Terry if she knew very much about the "non-independent workers'" previous school or home experiences. She replied, "I know that both of them actually have been retained. I don't think the parents have the ability to help them...they have an academic weakness in reading. I don't think the parents are able to help them get that reading. I don't think that they ever got modeled reading at home. I try to say to them, 'Yes this is hard, but you guys are playing catch up, okay?'" (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12). It is important to note that Terry believed that there

was hope for these two students. She told me that both of these students came from impoverished home situations. She believed that she could motivate them by finding a way to spark their interests. While observing in her classroom, I noticed that she seemed to have a knack for getting her students excited about doing performance-based or inquiry-based projects.

Terry also had one ELL student in her classroom who was not receiving ESOL services, but was still being monitored by the ESOL teacher in the school. She mentioned him as she shared her beliefs and understandings about her students. She said, “And then you have my one student who’s an ELL student. His parents you can tell value education. They may not...they all speak Spanish at home, but...you can tell he’s very well behaved at school. He wants to learn. He does his work. He wants that. It is very valued at his home” (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/20/12).

I asked Terry to tell me more about the students’ attitudes in the classroom towards school and academics because I wanted to try to find out more about her perceptions about her students. She replied,

In my classroom, we try to be very open and honest. They will say, I’m just not good at math. More than just that statement, I say, ‘What makes you think that?’ And usually it’s because they have come across something that is very difficult for them to understand. And I say, it’s just a gap. You were learning math. All the sudden, you fell into a gap. Let’s figure out why you have that gap. Is it the words that you don’t understand? Is it the concept? What makes it hard for you? So we explore that...a lot of conversations...a lot of conferencing with them. I guess I don’t except, ‘I

just don't like writing.' Okay. What is it about writing that you don't like? Is it hard for you? You know, usually it's because it's difficult for them. And so we try to get over those hurdles. We view them and I say to them, 'You know, if you are finding it difficult or you finally just say, 'I'm just not good at this.' Look at it as a hurdle. Let's get over the hurdle. Let's figure out why it is. Let's dig deeper. Most of them are very excited about learning. I think when kid's ask, 'I want to do something fun today,' I think they're really asking, 'Can you get excited about what you're teaching me today?' I mean, we do some crazy stuff in there, but it works. And so, they get excited if I get excited. If I'm not excited about something, they are not going to be excited about it. So I think that I have an impact on their outlook about school. I can change their outlook about school. (Terry, Initial Interview, 1/22/12)

**Faith's beliefs about CLED students.** In her initial interview, I asked Faith open-ended questions in an attempt to learn more about her beliefs about her CLED students. When I asked her to tell me about her students, she replied,

Well, I have six children whose parents have been...either their mom or their dad or both...in prison the last year. Some of them are still in prison now. One's mom just was put in prison about two weeks ago. And her dad's already there. So, it's a hard year. She cries a lot now. And, she was already a struggling student...I have three kids right now with head lice. I have one with scabies. You know, it's a low socioeconomic group. They're not real good readers...real strong readers.

To me, when I found out how many of my parents have been in prison over the last year, that was shocking to me. I mean 'cause that's just not... typical. (Faith, Initial Interview, 1/23/12)

Faith also talked about how she felt that it was unfair that she always seemed to get the struggling students. She shared with me that she did not know if it was because of her occupational therapist backgrounds or some other reason. She shared that she went to the principal about her concern. She explained,

I feel like I just I always get a rough group. Like last year, I had so many problem kids. I couldn't breathe. They [the administration] actually moved two out. So, you know it's got to be bad! But, I feel like I've been type cast! And, I think, 'How did that happen?' I used to love special ed. I loved co-teaching. But, I feel like I've been so buried that I just want some high kids. I just want some. But, I don't think they see it that way, so I'm not going to talk about it anymore. But, I'm going to pray about it. Because, you know, three years ago, I had every low child in the group...and it was just a very hard year. So, for the first time, I didn't take co-teaching. And then, low and behold, I got that very difficult class now without a co-teacher. I had two unidentified kids working their way up from EBD [Emotional Behavior Disorder]. So, then I went back and I saw other people. They had their gifted [students]. So, I went and got my gifted endorsement last year. And then I asked for gifted this year. We just happened to look at reading scores so that we could come up with a rough level before

we had a chance to put them in groups. I look at theirs and they have these high reading levels that I don't have! I'm like, 'I'm supposed to be gifted! How can I be gifted when I don't have any high kids?' (Faith, Initial Interview, 1/23/12)

Next, Faith talked about the fact that she could not teach the way she wanted to because she had students in her classroom who could not "handle" particular types of activities. The following excerpt from her initial interview demonstrates Faith's frustrations related to having no outside personnel support to help her in her economically diverse classroom.

To me, to keep getting EBD kids working their way up, it just changes the way I teach. I'm like a hands-on...like to have fun. I like to do it in games. My whole philosophy is to make learning fun. But, when you have a large portion of kids that can't handle that kind of...I don't want to say freedom, but, less structure...you can't do it! And the strong behavior problems they bring...other kids gravitate towards them and then other kids that would probably be alright are now not alright, because they're influenced by that not alright. So, it's totally changing the way I teach and it's frustrating. (Faith, Initial Interview, 1/23/12)

Faith then told me about the principals' response to her when she confided in her that she was frustrated and struggling with her class because she had several students with behavior problems, but no support from resource teachers. Faith said,

But, she [the principal] said, 'Oh, they all must have six kids with

parents who have been in prison.’ I’m like, ‘I don’t think so!’ Like, she was shocked. She said, ‘Just the law of averages. That couldn’t happen!’ But, it did. I don’t think they do it intentionally, but I think you develop a certain teaching style...Oh, this one would be good with her. And they don’t really think about them as being problems. But, then when you look at them and you say, ‘They’re all low socioeconomic.’ But, I think that as a grade-level, it’s a difficult year...It’s just not as high as usual. (Faith, Initial Interview, 1/23/12)

In the previous excerpt, Faith implied that she felt that the teachers in her grade-level were experiencing more academic and behavior problems in their classrooms because they had more children coming from “low socioeconomic” backgrounds. She also explained that the administrators claimed that they tried to equalize each of the classrooms when assigning students to teachers through making sure that they each had a similar amount of students with behavior or academic problems. Faith stated that she did not think that the classrooms were balanced because the other teachers had more advanced learners than she did. She also alluded to the fact that she felt that the children from low socio-economic backgrounds were typically the students with the most “problems”. She shared that she sometimes wondered if the administrative team gave her so many of the “problem” students because they felt that her teaching style would best support their needs.

As we began to discuss how the poverty rates in the county were increasing rapidly, Faith commented, “But this particular group of kids I think is especially low...especially in math. There do seem to be a higher portion of...socioeconomic

issues. That's the way I see it. And they're sweet, but they're so...emotionally needy. Like the one whose mom was put in prison. I'm trying to work with her on these academic things, but she's crying all the time and thinking about the more important things" (Faith, Initial Interview, 1/23/12). Faith also shared with me that she often found herself spending time during the school day doing non-academic things. When I asked her to elaborate, she explained,

Like, they come in and they say, 'We're supposed to go home such and such a way.' And I start by saying, 'Well, if you don't have a note...', and then I looked at who it was, and I said, 'I know you can't help this, but I'm going to have to reach somebody. Thank you for telling me.' You know, but you want to just say, 'Without a note, no you're going home.' Then, you look and you think, 'Whose she going to get a note from? She probably doesn't even know who she's staying with', you know. So, it changes what you do and I spend a lot of time on the phone doing none academic things. It's just different... it's just different. (Faith, Initial Interview, 1/23/12)

In her initial interview, I also asked Faith if she had any ethnically or linguistically diverse students in her classroom. She responded by explaining that at least half of the students in her class came from a lower socio-economic background. She also told me that she did have one student who was receiving ESOL services for her parents spoke German in the home. She explained that all of the other students in her classroom were Caucasian, except for two who recently told her that their fathers were part Native American. From my perception, Faith appeared to view the students in her classroom as

diverse due to their economic diversity. She talked very openly in her initial interview about her beliefs about students from impoverished backgrounds and seemed to view these children as disadvantaged and as having behavior and academic problems.

**Eric's beliefs about CLED students.** Similar to Terry and Faith, I tried to learn more about Eric's beliefs about CLED students through asking him to tell me about his students during his initial interview. I first asked him to tell me about the students in the school. He replied.

Mack's County is blessed and cursed. We've got probably one of the most affluent subdivisions in Mack's County that bleeds into Lakeside Elementary. On the flip side of that, we also have one of the lowest populations, um, subdivisions that bleed into Lakeside. Mostly rentals. And then we've got some other locations out and about that come into Lakeside that are not very becoming. So, we get a little bit of both. We get the high of the high as far as socioeconomics is concerned and we've got the low of the low, and they all come to Lakeside. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

When I asked Eric if he knew very much about his students' experiences and communities outside of school, Eric shared the following experiences with me.

[The students live in] homes, apartments, single families, trailers... I've even heard of people living in tents. We've got some students that were homeless and they were coming from a homeless shelter and they were bused in. Of course, there's a whole other set of laws and things as far as dealing with homeless students, whether they're

out of district or in district. But if they're homeless, they get to pretty much go where they want to go...where they first resided. So, we've got some of that as well. And this year, of all my years teaching, this has probably been one of the hardest as far as socioeconomics is concerned. That is probably why my tax bill is what it is, because I've never had to pull out of pocket as much as I've had to this year. When you've got kids who are complaining about their teeth, and you find them dentists and things that will work with them and that sort of thing, kids with holes in the bottoms of their shoes or they're too tight, you buy them shoes. Book bags that don't work anymore, you buy them book bags. So, you've got to get those barriers met before you can even consider academics. And, if you're going to be effective, you've got to make sure that kid's got her teeth fixed...that she's not hurting every day, because that just kind of bleeds over into the student sitting next to them and the next one and next one and next one. Especially in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade! I've found it just kind of moves like a ripple. If one student's hurting or needs something, they all show compassion and they all get their mind off what we're trying to do. So, you fix it...and as quick as possible. So, that's what we do. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

Next, I asked Eric, "When you have a homeless student, do you know? I mean, do they tell you that the student is homeless and then you know?" He replied,

You just kind of know. Just in some of the things that students say. I don't like to pry. I don't like to look at who's getting free lunch and

who's not. I would just rather not know. I've got all I can do with what I've been given. So, I don't go into that. I don't ask questions, 'Are you homeless?' No. But if they, if I see a need, we fix it. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

Eric then shared some of his approaches to building relationships with parents. He explained,

And we've got some parents at home or here or I'll go to their work... if we know where they work, well I go see them, or I'll go visit with them, or I'll leave a tip or I'll... whatever needs to be done to make sure that they feel comfortable with me and comfortable with what I'm trying to do and get behind my program. Because, I mean, it starts at home. Everything starts at home. We can do what we can do here at school, but one of the things is just following through at home and empowering parents to empower their students. You know because they look to us certainly, but I always tell parents, 'They listen to me as a teacher, but they are looking to you as the parent. We pull a lot of weight and they do listen to us, but at the end of the day, they're watching you.' (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

I also asked Eric to tell me more about the students who struggled academically in his classroom. He answered with the following response,

As far as struggling academically in this particular class, you know if you look at the numbers, we've got about five or six that go out for interventions. I had to make a page just to keep up with all the places

they go. They go to some sort of intervention whether it be Success Maker or Aims fluency stuff, comprehension things, math, you name it. They're all out of the room throughout the day. Then I've got others who have been on for behavior things, but then, I think, 'Well, why are they on behavior?' Well, Dad's been in jail for however long and they're trying to work through all those issues. I've got about four right now with head lice and we're working through that and educating the students on how to best keep that at bay. And a lot of that is home life and not being able to afford treatment. It's expensive. For an average, it costs \$150 bucks just to go through your house and delouse everything. So, I'd probably say, over a third of my students need some sort of either support academically or financially or if you look at how many students get free or reduced... We're a Title I school and I think we get like 51 percent, which is keeping in line with the rest of America. We do have a lot of need and we serve a lot of students here at Lakeside. If nothing else, a lot of our kids, this is where they eat. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

Eric's final comment in his initial interview also related to the socio-economic status of his students. He stated, "So, it's pretty sad when you think about it, but the best thing we can give them is a good education. You've got to break the cycle of poverty." After hearing Eric talk about the student issues that he faced in his classroom due to economic factors, I asked him if he could tell me about his experiences with linguistically or culturally diverse students. He replied,

Yes. I do have a lot. Quite a bit actually. I've got one student who comes

from a mixed heritage. Black and white. And then I've got several Hispanic students this year. You know different people from all over everywhere... but you can't tell. My after school program looks about the same which is based on socioeconomics...academic need. You know, we've got some from Germany, of course, we've got some from Guatemala, some from Mexico. I mean, it's just a...slice of America. We've got a little bit of everything here and somehow we have to come together and make it work as a community. And we all have to work together and even through our differences and misunderstandings and cultural differences that we have sometimes and from time to time, it will pose a problem. We've got some people from different religions. We've got Jehovah Witnesses. We've got Christians. We've got all sort of different things and the students are curious. 'Why doesn't she stand for the flag?' or whatever, so we work through those and we talk about them and discuss them and everything is pretty much out in the open. We don't sugarcoat things. We just answer their questions and the students seem to respond pretty well to that. So, that's the way we work it here in my classroom and I haven't had any issues with it and I think the students know that they can trust me and I trust them and whatever they want to know, we'll find the answer. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12).

He also informed me that three of his students were served through the ESOL program and that Lakeside Elementary had the highest ESOL population in the county. He then

shared a story about one of his current ELL students who went to school in Mexico. He said,

She didn't speak hardly any English. She went through that silent period where she didn't talk, she didn't speak. She's finally starting to break out, but she's always done exactly what I ask her to and more so I think that's probably one of the reasons...she's highly motivated. She doesn't want to go back. She wants to stay in America. I'm really proud of her and she's doing great! But, we've got several that moved in from all different sorts and they have different cultural backgrounds and different experiences. I've got some that travel over the break. Any break they get, they travel someplace and you hear about their stories, so it's a wide range of experiences for all my students. I got a new student. She was from Guatemala and her parents run a store, so I stopped by and visited with mom. Of course, mom couldn't speak English, but I had her sister from year's back, so she translated for me. So she was really pleased that I came by and shook her hand and I wanted to reach out to her and let her know, 'If there's anything I can do...' and she was really surprised that her behavior's changed. I think that may have been one of the reasons she came here is because behavior was pretty rough where she was before, but she seems to be fitting in really well. (Eric, Initial Interview, 1/19/12)

Although Eric was the only teacher who talked in detail about his experiences related to working with culturally and linguistically diverse students, all three teachers

talked about their experiences with economically diverse students. The information that they shared through their pre-interviews helped me to gain additional insights into their beliefs about and experiences with culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. Analysis of classroom observations and teacher study group meeting conversations helped me to learn more about how the teachers' beliefs and understandings about culturally, linguistically, and economically students impacted their instructional choices. All three teachers seemed to hold the same belief that they were teaching more socioeconomically disadvantaged students than ever before. Based on my perceptions, it appeared as though the teachers believed that more of their students were exhibiting academic and behavioral issues at school because they were experiencing more problems in their homes and communities.

### **Discussing Ways to Help CLED Students Make Deeper Connections to Their Background Knowledge and Life Experiences**

The teachers' beliefs about how their economically diverse students learn shifted as they discussed how they could support these learners in our teacher study group meetings. As mentioned above, Terry shared in her initial interview her belief that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds typically came to school with less background knowledge and experiences than other students. Through our conversations, Terry soon realized that she could help her economically diverse students make deeper connections to their background knowledge and experiences. Eric's "light bulb" moment helped her to deepen her own understandings about how she could help her students make connections to the real world. She realized that she had to first engage them in the topic through appealing to their interests. Terry, Faith, and Eric also discussed how they

could help their economically diverse students engage in higher level thinking processes through making thinking more visible in their classrooms.

As we continued to discuss ways to help students who struggled in the classroom, the teachers began to realize that they could help students with less background knowledge to build knowledge through applying different instructional methods and utilizing particular learning tools in the classroom. Terry shared that she used anchor charts as a way of helping students make “connections” between new learning and prior knowledge. In our ninth teacher study group meeting, Terry shared that she used anchor charts as a tool for helping students make connections in social studies because they continued to make connections to the anchor charts they helped create. She explained that the anchor charts providing scaffolding for students who needed it because they helped them to recall information that they had previously learned. Terry also made suggestions for how her coworkers could use anchor charts to support their students with learning new information included in the new common core language arts standards. She suggested that they could differentiate for those students who struggled academically by taking a picture of class-created anchor charts so that they could add the picture to their journal as a resource that would help them remember what they discussed about that standard or topic in class as they were creating the anchor chart.

In response to Terry’s ideas, Faith shared that she was concerned that her students could not create the anchor charts themselves. Through their conversation, the teachers came up with the idea to make the reading-related anchor charts on the Smart Board so that they could just print off and copy the chart for the students who could not create them independently. The students could then use the chart to help them make

connections to previous learning which would support them as they continued to build background knowledge.

Our conversation surrounding the importance of supporting students who have a difficult time making connections to their own background knowledge and experiences helped the teachers to deepen their own understandings and reflect on their beliefs about how economically diverse students learn. Terry shared her realization that teachers should help students make these connections so that they see the purpose behind why they are learning what they are learning. She felt that student engagement would increase for students who were not typically self-motivated learners if they could see the purpose behind what they were learning. Eric and Faith both shared other examples to demonstrate how they helped students who struggled with making connections to make deeper connections in their classrooms. The teacher study group meetings helped the teachers' thinking to shift as they realized that although their students from low socio-economic backgrounds seemed to struggle academically and sometimes lack motivation, they could increase their engagement through helping them make deeper connections to their background knowledge and life experiences.

### **Discussions about How CLED Students Build Background Knowledge**

As I analyzed our teacher study group conversations, I noticed that the teachers' thinking continued to shift as they engaged in discussions about how their economically diverse students could benefit from hearing the other students in the classroom share their thinking processes. In our teacher study group meetings, the teachers talked about how their CLED students could possibly build background knowledge and learn to apply higher level thinking processes through engaging in collaborative discussions with their

peers. These dialogic (Wilkinson and Son, 2011) experiences would provide their CLED students with opportunities to not only share their own ideas and experiences, but to also build their background knowledge through hearing about new ideas and experiences shared by their peers. In our teacher study group meetings, we engaged in many conversations related to how to make these thinking processes more visible so that students who struggled with applying higher level thinking processes could learn how to apply thinking strategies through seeing it modeled by their peers.

Wilkinson and Son (2011) claim that students construct meaning that helps them to better understand text as they engage in dialogically-mediated activities within their classroom environment. The following example exemplifies one of the many conversations we had in our teacher study group meetings surrounding this topic. This particular conversation occurred during our third teacher study group meeting. In this example, Eric shared that he organized his math centers in a certain way because he wanted to give his students, specifically his linguistically diverse students, an opportunity to talk with each other about their thinking processes. Eric explained further, "I just left them in one spot because I wanted to come back and discuss it... Instead of sending them back and having to go meet with each one individually. Because I wanted them to be able to discuss as a group what they were learning. So, that was the whole piece of it, too. Especially because I had two ESOL students in my group and I wanted them to get that experience with the group discussing their ideas. (Teacher Study Group Meeting #3, 2/15/12). In this example, Eric shared his belief that ESOL students can learn from their peers when they are given opportunities to collaborate and discuss.

Although this study focused primarily on economic diversity as opposed to linguistic diversity, I still feel that it is important to mention the teachers' beliefs about how English Language Learners learn because a small percentage of linguistically diverse students were enrolled in the third grade at the time of the study. Additionally, the ESOL population in this school was growing and because many of the teachers in this school were not used to working with a linguistically diverse student population, I noticed that they were engaging in more conversations about how they could meet the needs of their ESOL students. The teachers in this study appeared to care a great deal about the academic progress and success of their ESOL students. Although Faith and Terry each had a linguistically diverse student in their classroom who was being monitored through the ESOL program, Eric was the only teacher who had linguistically diverse students in his classroom who were receiving ESOL services at the time of this study. On numerous occasions, Eric talked to me about his excitement related to the significant progress that two of his ESOL students were making. When one of the students transferred to another school, he shared his disappointment over the fact that she was not in his class anymore because she had made a great deal of progress in a very short period of time. Eric was constantly encouraging his students to share in pairs, in small groups, or in whole class discussions. In the above example, he shared that he wanted his ESOL students to get the chance to discuss their ideas with each other. This idea is important because it shows that he was thinking about supporting the language development of his ESOL students through giving them opportunities to work in groups so they could share their ideas and listen to the ideas of other students.

The teachers in this study continued to talk about new techniques that could be used in their classrooms to provide additional support for their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. Through our conversations in our teacher study group meetings, they gained new ideas that could be used to help students become more engaged in learning and thinking. As a result, they experienced shifts in their beliefs and in the literacy practices they implemented in their classrooms as they searched for new ways to provide their CLED students with increased opportunities to engage in integrated curriculum, higher level thinking processes, and inquiry-based learning activities.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In this chapter, examples from our teacher study group conversations demonstrated how the teachers' beliefs and thinking shifted as a result of our collaborative discussions. Through our discussions, the teachers realized that integrating curriculum would benefit their CLED students because it would make it easier for them to make connections between the concepts they were learning about in different content areas. The teachers also experienced shifts related to how they taught math as they began to learn more about how literacy activities could support the thinking and language development of their CLED students as they engaged in mathematical problem solving. Additionally, the teachers discussed ways to more deeply engage their economically diverse students in the learning process. They reflected on how implementing more inquiry-based learning projects in their classroom would provide their CLED students with more opportunities to choose their own topics, which could lead to higher levels of engagement and motivation. They also realized that they needed to provide their CLED students with opportunities to apply higher level thinking skills as they participated in authentic literacy activities during science and social studies units. As the year

progressed, so did their understandings about literacy and their beliefs about how children from diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds learn and develop thinking skills and literacy skills. Through sharing their knowledge about effective teaching practices and asking questions about their practice, they reflected on and negotiated their own understandings related to teaching, learning, instruction, and other classroom, school, and society-related issues.

The teachers in this study had to learn to trust the other members in their teacher study group before they could feel comfortable enough to share their instructional strengths and classroom-related issues during our teacher study group meetings. Teacher study group meetings can provide teachers with a safe place and space in which to discuss their classroom issues and needs. Collaborating with others in a supportive environment helped the teachers in this study to become more self-aware of their instructional strengths as they built each other up and supported each other. They were also more willing to admit their weaknesses because they realized that they were in a safe, secure environment, that they could trust the people they were collaborating with, and that they could ask for suggestions that might help them address their areas of weakness. Through participating in a teacher study group, their beliefs, understandings, and instructional practices shifted as they learned about and from each other. Their knowledge about literacy and content area instruction and their beliefs about how CLED students learn also continued to shift as they engaged in discussions about topics that pertained to their own classrooms and students.

In the next chapter, the implications for the findings discussed above are addressed within the context of relevant literature related to these topics. The resulting

themes are discussed in detail and connections are made to both theory and literature.

Conclusions based on the data presented in this chapter are included in the following

chapter.

## CHAPTER 6

## DISCUSSION

“Learn from each other. Support each other. Let us be our support!”

(Faith, Final Interview, 5/18/12).

The above quote signifies how Faith felt about her teacher study group experiences and the high level of support provided by her grade level team members. As long as she had the support of her grade-level team members, she did not feel that she would need as much support from outside resources. All three teachers participating in this study shared this same opinion and commented that they greatly valued the supportive relationship that they had with each other. On numerous occasions, both the principal and assistant principal mentioned that they were impressed by the high level of support that these three third grade teachers provided for each other. The principal once said to me in passing that she wished that all grade levels could collaborate like her third grade team. In order for professional development models like teacher study groups to be effective in schools, it is important for administrators to support teachers in their collaborative efforts. They must also understand the power that collaboration can have on the learning processes of their teachers.

This chapter includes a comprehensive discussion of the conclusions resulting from this inquiry study and provides additional insights into the implications of the three themes I presented in the previous chapter. I make connections between the themes, conclusions, relevant educational theories, and current research related to teacher study groups and other collaborative professional development models. In direct connection with these themes, I discuss three major conclusions within the context of research and

theoretical perspectives of Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) ecological model, Vygotsky's (1978; 1986) sociocultural model, and Ruddell and Unrau's (2004) sociocognitive reading model. I extrapolate the findings to consider three conclusions. Additionally, I make connections to implications that this inquiry study has for educational policy, literacy education, and research related to professional development for in-service teachers.

Traditional means of professional learning are often perceived as ineffective because although teachers are given new information, they often walk away without changing what they do in their classroom (Anders et al., 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Gusky, 2000; Sheridan et al., 2009; Wiliam, 2008). As a result, very few teachers benefit from more traditional professional development models. Professional learning communities such as teacher study groups provide a more active approach to promoting change in the classrooms because the teachers participating in them continue to discuss new ideas (Sheridan et al., 2009; William, 2008). This inquiry study demonstrated how this type of collaborative professional development can impact teachers' knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and actions in a high-needs school with a rapidly increasing poverty rate.

The teacher study groups in this study provided teachers a great deal of support as they developed deeper understandings and meaning about teaching and learning. Friendships and professional relationships formed because they were provided with opportunities to engage in a supportive, professional learning community. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Eric stated that he felt that teacher study groups were an effective format for professional development when he stated, "I see it as more of a team building,

trust thing. And it kind of forced you to say, ‘Okay. We are going to talk about an issue. We’re going to talk about our craft.’ To be able to share ideas with each other and also, to share problems. As humans we have to share problems and we have to come up with solutions together” (Eric, Final Interview, 5/22/12). Terry claimed that the high level of friendship and support for each other developed because the teacher study groups helped them to build not only a trusting relationship, but also a collaborative one. Faith further supported this same idea when she expressed that she felt that they functioned as a true collaborative team because they had developed such strong relationships and friendships with each other. The trusting, supportive environment provided through the teacher study group meetings helped the teachers to work through their vulnerabilities so they could open up and share their thoughts, worries, fears, and weaknesses.

As demonstrated through multiple research studies, teacher study groups can serve as an effective form of professional development due to their collaborative nature (e.g. Birchak et al., 1998; Gonzalez et al., 1993; Kennedy, 2010; Kennedy & Sheil, 2010; Moll et al., 1992; Sheridan et al., 2005). Teacher study groups can provide teachers with a safe, supportive, and trusting place to discuss curriculum mandates, classroom instruction, and student issues. One persistent complaint about professional development at the beginning of this study was that it was typically not differentiated according to teachers’ instructional needs and learning styles. The teacher study groups provided the teachers with a place where they could discuss the topics and issues that were most related to their daily practice. The idea that students can become more engaged in learning when provided with a choice (Tomlinson, 2004), can also apply to teachers. At times it was difficult to find topics that related to everyone, but it did not seem to matter because we all worked

together to provide support for the teacher who had questions about the topic or needed help with coming up with solutions in response to a school-related, classroom-related, or student-related issue. When they were given opportunities to talk about what they wanted to talk about, it was clear the teachers benefited because they supported each other in taking risks and trying new things in their classrooms (Kennedy and Sheil, 2010).

Researchers have noted the power of collaborative study groups (Anders et al., 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Tejeda, 1999; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Turner, 1997). Wiliam (2008) argues that teacher learning communities are the most influential professional development model because they encourage teachers to take action and make changes in their daily classroom practices. Musanti and Pence (2010) claim that collaborative professional development models have a “clear intention to integrate real teachers - their understandings, voices, selves, and practices – into professional development by providing an experiential, collaborative and school-centered context for ongoing reflection on teachers’ practice” ( p. 74). While participating in this collaborative professional learning community, teachers began to think about their needs related to knowledge and professional growth and became “active agents of their own learning” (p. 85). They came up with new ideas to put into action. However, teachers participating in professional development can sometimes be resistant to change because, “Neither schools nor teachers are accustomed to collegial relationships embedded in their daily teaching and as part of their professional development. Collaboration challenges the existing school norms of individuality, privacy, autonomy, independent work, and distribution of power” (p. 86). This study demonstrated that teachers can become more confident teachers and build autonomy and independence through

constructing knowledge while socially interacting with their peers. Musanti and Pence argue that “professional development needs to be conceived as a collaborative enterprise, where a space for learning through mutual exchange, dialogue, and constant challenge is created” (p. 87).

Although the teachers did experience stress because of the time they had to sacrifice to come to our meetings, they still felt that they benefited from their experiences in the teacher study group meetings. When I asked Eric about his opinions related to teacher study groups, he said,

I think they're great. But in order for it to work, I think you've got to advertise to your teachers, in order for us to do this time, this is what I'm taking off your plate. Not adding to your plate. And you have to advertise that. And so, if your program's going to fly, I think that you have to advertise it to your teachers and to your staff. Why this is helpful. And you have to do it and show them that this is not adding to their plate. That, we're taking this away from you because this is more valuable than...xyz. Do you see what I mean? (Eric, Final Interview, 5/22/12).

Eric's comments remind us that although teacher study groups can support teachers who work in high-needs schools, teachers may not want to participate unless administrators provide them with time to attend these collaborative meetings. At Lakeside, the teachers already had weekly meetings and professional development sessions that they were expected to attend. Eric felt that the administrators would have to take some of the other meetings away in order for teachers to voluntarily participate in these meetings.

## **Themes Embedded within Ecological Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and a Sociocognitive Model of Reading**

The following are themes addressed in this study:

1. Teacher study groups as a safe space to build relationships and trust.
2. Teacher study groups as a learning space to discuss enacted curriculum and pedagogy related to content integration, higher order thinking, inquiry, and literacy development.
3. Teacher study groups as a discovery space to negotiate beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students.

I uncovered these themes through a constant-comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of data collected through transcriptions of our teacher study meetings. The themes were further supported through information gathered during on-going analysis of pre- and post-study interview transcripts and field notes of classroom observations, and other artifacts collected during the teacher study group meetings and classroom visits. As I examined and analyzed the professional development sessions and classroom experiences of the participants, I made connections between theory and what was learned about teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. I found that I could make links between the context of these teachers' and their students' experiences both inside and outside of school and the layers that form the foundation of Bronfenbrenner's theory related to the ecologically-mediated contextual factors that impact both students' and teachers' learning experiences. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory served as a lens for viewing how the social interactions occurring between the teachers in our teacher study group meetings and on a daily basis impacted their own learning processes. I found that I

also continued to make connections between what I was learning through this inquiry and Ruddell and Unrau's (2004) sociocognitive model for the teachers were engaging in a meaning-construction process as they participated in our bi-weekly teacher study groups. As their knowledge and beliefs shifted through this meaning-making process, so did their literacy practices.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1994) ecological theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978; 1986) became the primary theoretical lenses through which I viewed the participants' experiences. Panofsky (2003) helps to make this connection when she suggests, "Ideally, the perspective of sociocultural theory is able to integrate levels of analysis from the macrolevels of culture to the microlevels of social interaction and individual thinking and speech" (p. 411). In this study, I attempted to implement a teacher study group model similar to the change model used in Kennedy & Sheil's (2010) research. Kennedy and Sheil implemented this model during a study of a university-led, literacy-based professional development model in a high-poverty school in Dublin, Ireland. The change model was a collaborative model that required cooperation between the facilitator (university professor) and the participants (teachers). Although this study looked at the implications that on-site teacher study groups facilitated by a university-researcher could have for the literacy achievement rates of the students in an urban disadvantaged school, it did not explore the learning experiences of the teachers, shifts in their literacy practices, or their beliefs about their impoverished students.

I also made connections to Ruddell and Unrau's (2004) sociocognitive reading model because it includes key concepts related to literacy development and learning. One of the key concepts supporting their model is that "Language and reading

performance are directly related to the reader's environment" (p. 1463). The emphasis on students' environment relates to both ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994) and sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986) theory. According to both ecological and sociocultural theory, the contextual elements in a students' environment impact their learning experiences. Ruddell and Unrau and Vygotsky claim that students are more likely to learn when teachers set up their classroom environment so that it provides students with opportunities to use both oral and written language to communicate and to participate in authentic literacy experiences.

Within our teacher study group meetings, we discussed the integrative nature of literacy elements such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This reading model with multiple elements of expression helped us to understand more about how children make meaning as we discussed the importance of providing opportunities for students to make connections and to ask questions. We also discussed different methods that could be used to promote students' engagement, specifically related to student interests. We discussed how teachers could provide students with opportunities to read real texts and to engage in authentic reading and writing experiences.

We collaborated about how the third grade teachers could help their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students make connections between the texts they were reading and viewing and their own background knowledge and life experiences (Freeman and Freeman, 2000; Jimenez, 2004). Since students often rely on their prior knowledge and beliefs when reading texts, teachers should help students build background knowledge and be "highly sensitive to student understanding of four types of meaning: text, task, source of authority, and sociocultural meanings" (Ruddell and

Unrau, 2004, p. 1466). Teachers should also incorporate texts that appeal to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students (Au, 2000, Jimenez, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Each of the themes discovered through this qualitative research study provide educational stakeholders with additional insight into the implications that teacher study groups can have for teachers in high-needs schools. Teachers' professional development experiences and the educational system in the United States as a whole could improve drastically if administrators and policy makers became more informed about the benefits that can result when teachers are provided with time to hold consistent professional development meetings within a protected space, meaning that the teachers can collaborate with people they trust about their needs and issues in an environment that does not include members from the administrative team or agendas dictated by their administrators (Birchak et al., 1998; Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Dufour, 2004; Guskey, 2000; Hord, 2009; Kennedy, 2010; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Wiliam,2008).

As I further analyzed the findings and made connections to current literature related to literacy education and teacher education, I developed the following conclusions:

- 1) Teacher Support Groups
- 2) Vulnerability of Difficult Topics
- 3) Current Curricular Pressures Do Not Align with What Teachers Think Is an Effective Practice
- 4) Learning How to Better Support Students from Diverse Backgrounds

In the next section, I discuss each conclusion in connection to my research questions, relevant theories, and current research.

### **Teacher Support Group**

Although my original intent for this study was to find teachers interested in participating in a teacher study group so that I could examine their professional development experiences and shifts occurring in their classrooms as a result of participating in a teacher study group, I found that our collaborative time together took the form of a teacher support group more than a “study” group. In their book about organizing and facilitating teacher study groups, Birchak et al. (1998) explained that their teacher study groups were made up of “...a voluntary group of teachers who would meet right after school dismissal for an hour-and-a-half every other week to talk about their issues and concerns related to the broad topic of literature-based curriculum. The focus of this group would be for them to dialogue and reflect with each other rather than listen to presentations” (p. 5). As I was planning this research study, I believed that it was important that I allow the teachers to choose the topics they wanted to discuss in the teacher study groups. Birchak et al. maintained that teacher study groups will look different from school to school because they are typically based on the context and needs of the school and community and the issues that the teachers in that school community are experiencing. They further explained,

School-based study groups seemed to provide the context needed for critical dialogue about issues of teaching and learning. They did not begin with a specific agenda or plan of professional development but with a focus on negotiating shared agenda and

encouraging professional growth. Teachers could take a step back from their practice and beliefs and, in a supportive environment, critique those practices and beliefs by knowledge gained through the study group process (p. 3).

Similar to the teacher study group model discussed in this book, our meetings ended up becoming more like support groups as the teachers shared their frustrations and uncertainties about mandated curriculum and discussed the issues they were experiencing with CLED learners in their classrooms. Throughout the course of this study, we continued to build relationships with each other, which resulted in the four of us establishing trust and friendships that led us to genuinely care for each other. As mentioned in Chapter 2, connections can be made to the theoretical framework known as ethic of care (Noddings, 1984; 2006). The trusting relationships that we formed in our teacher study group meetings helped the teachers' comfort levels to increase which consequently allowed them to become more open to sharing their uncertainties, vulnerabilities, struggles, and successes related to school and classroom-related events and ideas. An ethic of care framework (Noddings, 1984; 2006) can be used to explain how our caring feelings for each other provided the teachers with the confidence and support they needed to implement new instructional methods and to integrate more literacy instruction into math, science, and social studies. As mentioned in chapter 5, Eric suggested that the acronym "TSG" sometimes used for "Teacher Study Groups" should be changed to "Teacher Support Group." All three teachers mentioned in their final interviews that the teacher study group meetings helped them to grow closer and to develop trust in each other so that they could collaborate about the issues and frustrations

they were experiencing. They viewed the teacher study group meetings as a type of support group. As I continued to build my relationship with the teachers and to earn their trust, I truly wanted to help them find solutions to their problems and to help them to come up with new ways to support the literacy development of their CLED students. In this study, we all had the opportunity to participate in a collaborative professional development model that functioned like a support group embedded within an ethic of care.

### **Vulnerability of Difficult Topics**

Based on my own personal experiences as a previous elementary school teacher, I believe that teachers are often afraid to discuss difficult or stressful topics, especially when members of their administrative team are present. Professional repercussions and being viewed as ineffective contribute to the teachers' misgivings about discussing sensitive topics. My beliefs were further supported by what I observed during this study. As mentioned above, in their final interviews, all three teachers stated that the teacher study group meetings provided them with a safe space in which to talk about the school-related issues that often left them feeling stressed or vulnerable. As noted in chapter five, the high level of trust that they developed for each other allowed them to feel comfortable enough in our teacher study groups to share their uncertainties, vulnerabilities, struggles, frustrations, and successes.

Within the context of collaborative teacher study groups, the teachers in this study openly shared their opinions and frustrations related to topics such as adopting newly created and mandated common core standards and state-created frameworks, standardized testing requirements, school mandates, and issues related to teaching

students from diverse economic backgrounds. Panofsky claims that few research studies have focused on issues relating to “the dynamics of power, position, social locations in the social interaction of learning” (p. 411). To answer her call to examine the impact of social class on students’ relationships with peers and teachers, self-confidence, language and literacy development, and overall learning experiences in public schools, this study examined the teachers’ perceptions of students living in poverty. In the beginning of this study, the teachers’ seemed to have a deficit view of students identified as living in impoverished situations. Based on their responses in their initial interviews, the teachers seemed to believe that students coming from “low” socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to have behavior and academic problems. They felt that these students could not learn as quickly or as deeply as other students because they had too many needs resulting from outside of school contextual factors. The teachers’ beliefs impacted their instructional decisions. Terry and Faith both commented that these students were not motivated, found project-based activities difficult, and needed more structure.

Similar to research conducted by Gonzalez et al. (1993) and Portes and Salas (2009) that suggested that teachers who view students from low socio-economic backgrounds as “disadvantaged” often lower their academic expectations for these students in the classroom, the teachers in this study initially held such viewpoints. Through our teacher study group meetings, however, their beliefs about economically diverse students began to shift. As they collaborated with each other and shared their struggles and frustrations, they began to see that their economically diverse students could learn when they were provided with opportunities to participate in authentic literacy activities embedded in the context of multiple content areas. Through my analysis, I found that the teachers

thinking continued to shift as they discovered that their CLED students could learn when provided with opportunities to engage in dialogic (Wilkinson & Son, 2011) discussions with other students because metacognitive thinking processes became more visible.

### **Current Curricular Pressures Do Not Align with What Teachers Think Is an Effective Practice**

Teachers in high-stakes grade levels may teach to the test not because they want to focus all of their time on test preparation, but because they are forced to focus on standardized test results. Many teachers have experienced anxiety about their student pass rates on standardized tests and reduced morale due to high stakes testing accountability policies mandated by NCLB (2001). According to Allington (2000) and Stevens (2003), since NCLB, teachers are held accountable for meeting higher reading standards and expectations for all students. To meet these pressures, teachers spend the majority of their time on test-taking skills and strategies and not on providing students with authentic literacy experiences (e.g.; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005; Kozol, 2005).

The teachers in this study became very focused on preparing their third grade students for the standardized test that was administered in April. As discussed in chapter five, the teachers were most concerned about their economically diverse students because they feared that they may not do well enough to pass the math and reading sections of the standardized test. Instead of implementing what they viewed as effective teaching practices, they allowed their fears related to their students' performance on the test influence them to engage in more skill-based and test-taking practice type activities, especially in the two months prior to the administration of the standardized test.

Our teacher study group meetings became a place that teachers could discuss their frustrations related to adequately preparing students to take the standardized test in April. We used our teacher study group meetings as a safe space to discuss ways to support their students who struggled academically so that they could pass the standardized test. Although many of our conversations revolved around implementing inquiry-based learning techniques and authentic literacy practices, I noticed that many of the teachers resorted to paper-and-pencil assessments and test-taking practice workbooks in February and March in an effort to prepare their students for the test. Once the test was over and the results were in, we also used our teacher study group meetings as a space to reflect on the school year and on how the students did on the test. In these meetings and in our final teacher study group meetings, the teachers discussed the fact that they did find themselves “teaching to the test” because they were afraid that their students would suffer and that they would not pass the test if they did not prepare them to do well on it.

Alongside the tensions around test preparation, the teachers also shared concerns related to the new common core standards and the state frameworks. At the time of this study, the teachers had to watch webinars and attend multiple Wednesday Workshop sessions that focused on training them on the new math and language arts common core curricular standards that they were expected to adopt the following year. The teachers mentioned that the professional trainings they had on the new common core standards were ineffective due to the fact that they usually required them to watch a webinar related to a particular aspect of the new national standards. These webinars were free and, therefore, did not require the county or school to invest any additional money into training the teachers on the new common core standards. Unfortunately, the schools with

the most diverse student populations typically receive the least amount of funding (Au, 2000) which means that the teachers may receive little to no training to help them learn about new curriculum mandates. This trend negatively impacts the literacy development of students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds because they attend schools with fewer materials, less qualified teachers, and often fewer learning opportunities than mainstream students (Kozol, 2005).

The teacher study groups offered an alternative when learning new mandates and directives. In chapter five, I included several examples that exemplified the teachers' uncertainties and fears related to how the adoption of the new common core standards would impact their instructional practices. They discovered through study group conversations that the state-created unit frameworks that they were being forced to utilize were not aligned to what they viewed as effective literacy instruction. Eric did not like the idea of copying and pasting ideas from the state-created frameworks for he felt that he knew his students best and, therefore, should have the authority to make the decisions about how they should learn. As mentioned in chapter 5, Faith pointed out that the organization of the frameworks did not coincide with the school-mandated block schedule they had to follow.

As discussed in chapter five, the teachers shared that they believed that effecting teaching practices included elements such as teacher modeling and helping students make connections to their background knowledge, life experiences, and real world events. They also believed that children learned through socially interacting with their peers and that students who were not typically motivated could become more motivated when given opportunities to engage in inquiry-based learning, content integration, and hands-on,

authentic, performance-based learning projects. Although these beliefs played a significant role in their instructional choices, the teachers often struggled between their beliefs about the importance of literacy, content integration, and effective instructional practices and their anxiety related to making sure that their students were prepared to do well on district and federally-mandated assessments. In fact, the teachers experienced a great deal of stress and frustration due to the pressures placed on them by federal policies focused on making teachers more accountable for student success. More often than not, they chose instructional activities because they would help prepare their students for the upcoming standardized test and not because they viewed them as effective teaching practices.

Ruddell and Unrau's (2004) sociocognitive model of reading demonstrates how a teacher's interpretations and instructional decisions are significantly impacted by their prior knowledge and beliefs. Teachers own beliefs and instructional knowledge are often based on their perceptions about how their students' make meaning and construct conceptual knowledge. The teacher study group sessions enabled the teachers in this study to feel more confident about the instructional decisions that they were making in their classrooms. These meetings provided the third grade teachers with a place to share ideas or offer suggestions as they openly discussed student, classroom, or school-related issues and concerns.

### **Learning How to Better Support Students from Diverse Backgrounds**

Teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings about students, teaching, learning, and literacy instruction can shift when they are given time and space to collaborate in professional development models such as teacher study groups with

colleagues they trust. These changes can lead to shifts in their beliefs about effective teaching practices and consequently, the instructional practices they implement in their classrooms. These shifts could have implications for the overall school experiences of their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. We discussed how particular contextual factors impacted the students' learning experiences in the participants' classrooms. For example, in their initial interviews, the teachers talked about the impact of poverty on their students' behavioral and academic performance. All three teachers believed that they were experiencing more student issues in the classroom and finding that their students had more needs due to the increasing poverty rates. Faith and Eric shared that they felt that some of their economically disadvantaged students had behavior problems because one or both of their parents were recently placed in jail. Terry mentioned that she did not feel that some of her economically disadvantaged students' parents could provide them with the support they needed at home because they either had to work multiple jobs or did not have the educational background needed to provide their child with adequate support with reading or math at home.

Based on the results of this study, the conclusion can be made that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings about students, teaching, learning, and literacy do shift as they participate in consistent collaboration within a teacher study group. When teachers are given the time and space to collaborate in professional development models such as teacher study groups with colleagues they trust, they gain new knowledge and their beliefs and understandings about their students and pedagogical beliefs change. These changes can lead to shifts in the instructional practices they implement in their

classrooms and, consequently, to the overall school experiences of their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students.

### **Shifts in Thinking about Content Integration, Higher Order Thinking, Inquiry-Based Learning, and Literacy Development**

One of the shifts that occurred for the teachers was that they realized the powerful role that inquiry-based instructional models could have for engaging economically disadvantaged students in the learning process. Inquiry-based learning instructional methods can be used to promote student engagement and achievement because it integrates students' individual learning styles and interests. When students are encouraged to choose their own topic, to expand on their curiosity, to ask their own questions, and to search for answers, their academic achievement level, motivation to learn, attitudes about learning, and self-esteem will improve (Estes, Mintz, & Gunter, 2011). Through our conversations, the teachers also realized that explicit strategies must be incorporated that make thinking visible, especially for culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. As we discussed ways to make thinking visible, the teachers realized that instructional tools such as thinking maps, anchor charts, and thinking routines could help make thinking processes such as making connections and questioning visible so that students could learn to apply them in all content areas. As demonstrated by current research on the school experiences of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students (e.g. Au, 2000; Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside Jiron, 2005; Goodman & Goodman, 1990; Gonzalez et al., 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992), teachers should consider the diverse needs of students and plan authentic literacy experiences that are based on these needs. Teachers can

provide students with opportunities to think at higher levels when they give them with opportunities to apply literacy skills while analyzing and creating text and visual images. Often, teachers are mandated by state, district, or school policies to teach using a particular program, method, or framework. These programs typically incorporate teacher-directed instructional models such as direct instruction or call-and-response type activities (Kozol, 2005). In the case of the teachers in this study, they were required to follow a block schedule that made it difficult for them to integrate various content areas with effective literacy practices. They also worried that the administrators expected them to use the literacy program that was adopted by the school several years prior to this study. They did not feel that the literacy program provided their students with enough authentic learning experiences or that it integrated content well enough, so they supplemented with their own ideas and activities. Although they believed that inquiry-based model was an effective instructional model for teaching students to problem solve and better understand mathematical concepts, the teachers questioned whether they should follow the math textbook since the benchmark math assessment administered in January was aligned to the concepts in the math textbook. Through their conversations, they provided each other with the support needed to feel confident in the choices they made. Sometimes their choices were based on curriculum mandates and other times they were made based on the needs of their students. Preparing their students for the standardized test continued to interfere with what they believed was effective teaching. However, they had a safe space in which to discuss the tensions that they experienced as they negotiated between implementing instructional practices that would engage students compared to those that would help students to achieve higher scores on the standardized

test. Their conversations in the teacher study groups helped them to reflect on their teaching and make instructional decisions that incorporated more engaging instructional practices such as inquiry-based learning projects. Inquiry-based learning can potentially support students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in the learning process because students can become engaged in learning if they are given opportunities to research topics that they choose (Tomlinson, 2001).

### **Shifts in Thinking about the Role Literacy Plays in Math Instruction**

Another shift that occurred for the teachers was the realization that they could incorporate literacy techniques into daily math instruction. Terry initiated these conversations when she became conscious of the fact that math can and should be viewed as a language, just as educators view writing and books in the context of written languages and speaking in the context of a spoken or oral language. Math can be viewed as both a written and a spoken language for the symbols and vocabulary are unique to this discipline (Adams, 2003). Teachers can incorporate many literacy techniques in math such as journal writing, note taking, children's literature, talking, writing, visualizing, illustrating, questioning, making connections, and technology. In our teacher study group meetings, we discussed the fact that student's content-related background knowledge and prior knowledge related to math vocabulary terms must be taken into account when planning instructional activities. We also discussed how different grouping methods in mathematics might impact students who come from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds because the teachers realized that it is important to allow students who may not have the same familiarity with the academic vocabulary critical to understanding math concept to hear the thinking processes of other students

who are more familiar with the terms and concepts. The teachers also realized that it is important to allow the more competent math students to model how they solve math word problems so that other students may begin to apply similar strategies and thinking processes. Through our teacher study groups, the teachers started to realize that the processes needed to solve math word problems were very similar to those needed to read texts. Many of the same literacy elements could be applied such as recording thinking processes, making connections to prior knowledge and experiences, and visualizing. This realization helped the teachers to shift their thinking away from ability grouping students and using skill-based math practice activities. As a result of our conversations, they started to realize that they should plan more inquiry-based math activities that allowed the students to come to their own conclusions through engaging in inquiry, questioning, and higher-level thinking skills such as analyzing and creating. They also realized that they had to help students see the connections between the real world and what they were learning about math concepts. Literacy practices such as writing, visualizing, making inferences, making predictions, discussing, and sharing their thinking could lead students to a more comprehensive mathematical conceptual understanding. The teachers beliefs about their economically diverse students changes as a result for they realized that these students could develop problem solving skills when they were provided with opportunities to think and apply their knowledge and experiences.

### **Limitations**

I chose a qualitative research methodology for this research study because I wanted to closely examine the learning processes and instructional processes of my participants as they participated in a teacher study group. Waller (1932) demonstrated how

qualitative methods could be used to learn more about the social aspects of schools and participants. “Having an interest in knowing more about one’s practice, and indeed in improving one’s practice, leads to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design” (Merriam, 2009, p. 1). Dall’Alba and Sandberg (2006) concluded that “ethnographic and case studies could be carried out that included observations of practice over time, in combination with interviews about the focus and purpose of that practice, as understood by the professionals concerned” (p. 401). Although case study methodology is often used by qualitative researchers in the educational field because it can provide detailed information about the life experiences of participants, it also has many limitations that must be considered. Qualitative case study research often requires complex investigations where data are collected in the settings of participants. This ethnographic case study was conducted in the classroom and school environments of the three participants. One limitation of this study was that with only three participants, it was impossible to generalize the findings for all third grade teachers because qualitative research studies are not designed to generalize for larger populations. Another limitation was that during some of the interviews and teacher study group meetings, I sometimes felt as though the teachers’ minds might have been focused on other things. They often felt pressed for time which could have impacted their responses or level participation in our conversations. A third limitation was that this study only took place for five months or half of their school year. A five month study did not capture their professional development experiences as thoroughly as a nine month study or multiple year study. Unfortunately, I did not have the time or the financial means to extend the duration of this study.

Before conducting this study, I was concerned that teacher resistance may be an issue (Musanti and Pence, 2010). Therefore, from the beginning of the school year, I worked hard to establish relationships with the teachers at Lakeside Elementary before asking them if they would like to volunteer to participate in this research inquiry. Before planning this teacher study group, I had to consider the context of the school culture, form relationships with the teachers, assess the needs of the teachers and students, and think deeply about what my role would be as researcher and facilitator of a teacher study group. Although I often made suggestions for topics or brought resources to our teacher study group meetings, I tried to encourage the teachers to choose the topics that we studied in our teacher study groups. Birchak et al. (1998) argued that all members of a professional learning community are experts and, therefore, the facilitator's primary responsibility is to "enact the structures that the group has established for the meeting and to support productive talk in the group" (p. 55). Like the teachers in this book about teacher study groups, I saw my role as "one of process and not content" (p. 54). In our first teacher study group meeting, I served as the primary facilitator as I introduced the elements of a teacher study group and proposed an organizational structure that could help us maintain a respectful community to engage in collaboration, reflection, and discussion of relevant topics. In later meetings, I attempted to participate as an equal member of the group through participating in the discussions and letting the teachers guide the topics that we discussed. Due to the fact that there were times when they viewed me as the expert and asked me to present resources or to share my beliefs or ideas, I think that it is important to reveal that I naturally had some impact on their decision making and learning processes. My role as a participant in our teacher study

group meetings could be viewed as a limitation to this study. My influence on the participants and their influence on my learning processes occurred naturally as we engaged together in a professional learning community. When educators participate together in a collaborative learning community, all participants can learn through their social interactions with each other (Vygotsky; 1978;1986). Goodman and Goodman (1990) stated, “But it is the knowledge learners bring to the making of meaning, the knowledge and relationships between the people in the environment who interact with the learners” (p. 231). As a participating member in this teacher study group, I interacted socially with all three teachers and shared my ideas related to literacy development and instruction in our teacher study group meetings and during other parts of the school day. As a researcher and active participant in this study, it was impossible to remain objective. Therefore, it was difficult to not share my opinions and beliefs about teaching and student learning in response to the teachers’ comments during our teacher study group meetings. My comments and biases did impact some of the instructional shifts that they experienced in their classrooms.

### **Implications for Further Research, Policy, Curriculum and Instruction, and Professional Development**

The adoption of new national standards by the majority of the states in America will impact the way that this nationally-influenced curriculum is implemented and assessed in classrooms nationwide. How will newly adopted policies impact the current standardized testing and accountability pressures that are currently placed on teachers? What types of support will schools provide for teachers as they adopt a new set of national standards? What types of professional development models will schools

implement while attempting to provide this support? How will new policies and national standards impact culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in high-needs schools? Teachers need support as they attempt to implement the common core standards and integrated curriculum in their classrooms. Goldenburg (2010) advised that a critical need exists to improve the literacy achievement of all students due to the pressures being put on teachers and schools by federal policy, accountability measures, and high-stakes testing. He argued that the need for more research-based knowledge in the literacy and language field has never been greater. Further research needs to be conducted on the implications that the new nationally-normed standards are going to have for teaching, learning, and literacy development in schools in the states that have adopted them.

Some of the money allotted to schools could be spent on resources to support the standards-based curricula that continue to be enforced on all schools through federal policy. More funds are needed to supply teachers with additional time to participate in collaborative models such as teacher study groups. Au (2000) argued, “An implication for policy is that standards and related assessments must be accompanied by sufficient resources to improve instruction, so that students of diverse backgrounds have the literacy learning opportunities needed to read and write at the demanding levels required” (p. 845). She also claimed that many students of diverse backgrounds attend schools where time spent on literacy instruction is inadequate and, therefore, recommended that all districts create policies that require that a sufficient amount of time is spent on literacy instruction in all classrooms. In turn, she addressed the lack of quality instruction currently being experienced by children of diverse backgrounds and suggested that

instruction should focus on higher level thinking and not rote skills taught in isolation (Moll et al., 1992). CLED students need effective teachers who know how to integrate authentic literacy activities in the content areas, how to implement inquiry-based learning instructional models, and how to provide students with opportunities to engage in higher level thinking processes.

Federal and state policies should be created that provide all schools with effective teachers and the resources needed to implement quality instruction. The findings from this research study suggest that more money could be devoted to providing teachers with more time to participate in teacher study groups and other collaborative professional learning opportunities. In the NSDC (National Staff Development Council) report Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) claimed that compared to the United States, other countries provide their teachers with significantly more time to engage in collaborative professional development opportunities.

Considering the context of a school's culture is also essential to planning any professional development program. Policy makers must provide more funding for the professional development needs of schools and district employees and administrators must place "time for teacher collaboration" at the top of their list. "At a basic level, context influences whether professional development opportunities are available, how and when they are delivered, what is expected, how they are financed, who is involved, and what roles individuals play" (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 394). Joyce and Showers (2002) stated,

The culture of the workplace—including the goals and mission of the agency, workplace morale, quality of the work environment, length of

work hours, size of caseload, opportunities for teacher collaboration, quality of administrative leadership, and agency-induced requirements that extend beyond support for children's learning—are variables of the job context that may relate to the efficacy of various forms of professional development” (p. 394).

Additional research is also needed that focuses on how Professional Development School (PDS) partnerships between an elementary school and a local university can provide professional development support for in-service teachers. Both university faculty members and pre-service teacher supervisors involved in a Professional Development School (PDS) model can serve an important role in the professional learning communities functioning in their schools if they are given opportunities to form trusting relationships with the teachers in the school. More research studies are needed that investigate these types of opportunities, especially in high-needs schools.

Alternative methods and elements of professional development need to be explored perhaps through other research designs such as mixed methods research. Currently, less than one percent of the research related to education is conducted on topics related to in-service teacher education (Anders et al., 2000). More research is needed that demonstrates the positive impact that a variety of types of professional development models and processes can have on teacher growth and student achievement (Burbank and Kauchak, 2003; Guskey, 2000; Musanti and Pence, 2010). Most research studies emphasize what schools in the United States are not doing and compare our professional development programs, teachers, and students to the programs, teachers, and students in other countries who appear to be outperforming us. Schools currently

evaluate their professional development practices through documenting the topics covered, time allotted, credit-hours earned, and teachers in attendance, rather than how they influence teachers and students. Musanti and Pence (2010) point out, that more research is needed that investigates how teachers' interactions in a collaborative professional development setting impact their construction of knowledge and their self-identities.

Currently, most research focuses on the forms and structures of professional development, but not necessarily on how teacher's gain new knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Sheridan et al., 2009). More empirical studies are needed that demonstrate how different professional development processes within particular models impact the skills, behaviors, and dispositions of teachers and how meaningful change can occur (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2009). Educational researchers need to strive for a more comprehensive understanding of the knowledge, skills, and practices of teachers, especially those who can impact the future of the young children in their classrooms. Even more specifically, research is needed that demonstrates the impact that collaborative professional learning communities focused on topics such as poverty, language development, or inquiry-based learning can have on teacher's instructional practices and student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). A need exists to find out more about ways to encourage teachers to continue to learn, grow, and develop their practice.

Additional research is needed to learn more about how individual combinations of professional development models influence the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of in-service teachers. Since little research on effective teaching has been conducted, "Extensive research is needed to more fully understand the nature of teaching

effectiveness and the change process that can lead to increasing the quality of our teacher preparation for both preservice and inservice teacher education” (Ruddell, 2004, p. 994). In turn, more research is also needed that contributes to our understanding of how factors associated with school contextual factors and learning environment can influence teachers’ professional development experiences (Dall’Alba and Sandberg, 2006; Sheridan et al., 2009).

This study demonstrates the positive impact that teacher study groups can have for teachers and culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in high-needs schools. When teachers are provided with opportunities to engage in collaboration about their opinions, thoughts, and frustrations, their beliefs about diverse students and knowledge and understandings about how diverse students learn can shift. Teachers can experience professional growth when they are provided with time and a safe space to talk about the school, classroom, and students issues they experience. This qualitative inquiry provides findings and conclusions that demonstrate that teacher study groups are an effective model of professional development. Administrators and school districts should consider spending less money on hiring outside experts to facilitate large faculty trainings and more of their money and efforts to providing teachers with time to collaborate with their peers within professional learning communities. Educational researchers should continue to investigate the implications that teacher study groups can have for teachers and students, especially in culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse schools.

### **Final Thoughts**

I feel truly blessed to have had the opportunity to participate in a collaborative professional learning community with this group of teachers. I was continually amazed

by the amount of support that they provided for their students and each other. While conducting this study, I began to realize that a teacher study group is not just a place to collaborate about topics of interest in an effort to learn more about curriculum and instruction. A teacher study group, or teacher “support” group as Eric called it, is more than that. When teachers are provided with opportunities to just sit and talk over herbal tea or organic pears about their concerns, frustrations, stresses, and the issues that they deal with on a daily basis, they benefit because they feel supported by a group of people who they trust.

Two months since our last teacher study group meeting, I was invited to go to the grand opening of the new “Coaching Room” at Lakeside Elementary School. Terry spent her entire summer decorating and planning out the organization of this room which is going to serve as a professional development room for the teachers. She and a few other teachers are leading a peer coaching initiative with the goal in mind to offer more support to each other during the school year following this study. Their motto, which is now etched into the middle of one of the main walls in the “Coaching Room” says, “Teamwork makes the dream work.” My experiences as a participant in a teacher study group with this group of teachers have helped me to understand the true meaning of teamwork and collaboration. Our teacher study group meetings supported this group of teachers as they learned to collaborate in a way that truly benefited them within their school and classroom environments. They were not just meeting so they could document the fact that they had meant, but they learned to value the process of collaboration and to realize the benefits that it had for their students.

All three teachers were asked to describe their experiences related to participating in a teacher study group meeting in their final interview. When asked what provided him with the most support during the school year, Terry, Faith, and Eric replied without hesitation that it was their grade-level team.

Participating in a teacher study group in a high-needs school can help teachers feel supported, especially as they deal with student issues related to poverty or other issues that have become so prevalent in schools. I am hopeful that this research study can help educators, administrators, school district employees, policy makers, and other educational stakeholders to realize that teachers working in public education need support. Schools are becoming more diverse. The recent economic downturn in our society continues to negatively impact children and families in ways that make it difficult for them to prosper or sometimes even survive in their communities. Students are coming to school with more issues than ever before. Schools must provide teachers with more effective professional development support that will aid them in providing students with positive school experiences. Teachers need time and a safe space in which to talk about their craft, to share their ideas and funds of knowledge, and ultimately, to offer each other support.

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## APPENDIXES

## APPENDIX A

## Data Collection Summary

January 2012 – May 2012

Research Questions	Data Sources Addressing Questions
<p>In what ways does participation in a teacher study group impact elementary teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understandings when teaching culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in a high-needs school?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Initial and Final Semi-Structured Interview Transcripts</li> <li>2. Teacher Study Group Meeting Transcripts</li> <li>3. Reflective Journal and Memos</li> </ol>
<p>In what ways do teachers' literacy practices shift as a result of engaging in teacher study groups focused on issues related to culturally, linguistically and economically diverse student populations?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Initial and Final Semi-Structured Interview Transcripts</li> <li>2. Classroom Observation Field Notes</li> <li>3. Teacher Study Group Meeting Transcripts</li> <li>4. Reflective Journal and Memos</li> <li>5. Artifacts</li> <li>6. Photographs</li> </ol>

## APPENDIX B

## Timeline of My Research Study

October 2011	<p>Complete the writing of my Prospectus  Submit Prospectus announcement  Work on IRB proposal for university and county  Complete IRB consent form  Update CITI training  Meet with possible participants during collaborative planning time to continue building relationships  Complete Timeline of Research Study  Complete Data Collection Summary Chart  Complete Initial Interview Questions</p>
November 2011	<p>Successfully Defend Prospectus  Submit IRB proposal to university and county  Meet with possible participants during collaborative planning time to continue building relationships</p>
December 2011	<p>Get IRB Approval from university and county  Meet with possible participants and explain research purposes and procedures  Have participants complete IRB consent forms  Prepare for initial interview and teacher study group meetings  Set up initial classroom observations  Secure all needed data collection equipment and materials</p>
January 2012	<p>Conduct initial semi-structured interviews with all three participants  Participate in and audio record one bi-weekly teacher study group meetings  Observe in each participants classroom one time  Complete field notes, observer comments, and memos  Transcribe interviews and Teacher Study Group meetings  Collect relevant artifacts and photographs  Begin initial data analysis  Meet with advisor as needed</p>
February 2012	<p>Participate in and audio record two bi-weekly teacher study group meetings  Observe in each participants classroom two times  Complete field notes, observer comments, and memos  Transcribe Teacher Study Group meetings  Collect relevant artifacts and photographs  Continue ongoing data analysis  Meet with advisor as needed</p>
March 2012	<p>Participate in and audio record two bi-weekly teacher study group meetings  Observe in each participants classroom two times  Complete field notes, observer comments, and memos</p>

	<p>Transcribe Teacher Study Group meetings  Collect relevant artifacts and photographs  Continue ongoing data analysis  Meet with advisor as needed</p>
April 2012	<p>Participate in and audio record two bi-weekly teacher study group meetings  Observe in each participants classroom two times  Complete field notes, observer comments, and memos  Transcribe Teacher Study Group meetings  Collect relevant artifacts and photographs  Continue ongoing data analysis  Meet with advisor as needed</p>
May 2012	<p>Conduct final semi-structured interviews with all three participants and member check initial findings during interviews  Participate in and audio record two bi-weekly teacher study group meetings  Observe in each participants classroom one time  Complete field notes, observer comments, and memos  Transcribe final interviews and Teacher Study Group meetings  Collect relevant artifacts and photographs  Continue ongoing data analysis  Meet with advisor as needed</p>
June 2012-July 2012	<p>Conduct Data Analysis  Meet with Nicole Maxwell to discuss data analysis and findings  Enroll in Writing Support class  Write and summarize findings  Meet with advisor as needed</p>
August 2012	<p>Provide participants with an opportunity to member-check findings  Write and summarize findings  Meet with advisor as needed</p>
September 2012	<p>Write and summarize findings  Meet with advisor as needed</p>
October 2012	<p>Successfully Defend Dissertation</p>

## APPENDIX C

## Questions for Initial Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers

January 2012

1. Can you tell me about yourself?
2. Can you tell me about your teaching experiences? How many years have you been teaching? What grades have you taught?
3. Can you tell me about your experiences as a young learner in school?
4. Describe to me what your family or home life was like when you were growing up?
5. Can you tell me a little about your students?
6. What do you know about your students' previous school experiences?
7. What do you know about your students' home and community experiences?
8. What are your students' attitudes like in school? What are their attitudes towards reading? Writing? Other subjects?
9. What are your students' motivation levels in school? Towards reading? Writing? Other subjects?
10. What literacy goals do you have for your students?
11. What is your definition of literacy?
12. What do you know about literacy instruction? What do you still want to learn about?
13. What are your beliefs about literacy instruction? Have they changed since you first began teaching? How?

14. What types of literacy activities do you like to implement in the classroom?

Which literacy activities do your students seem to enjoy the most?

15. Do you model your attitudes towards literacy in your classroom? If so, how?

16. What are your literacy goals for this current school year?

17. What are your overall professional development goals for this school year?

18. What do you think of the professional development experiences that you have experienced so far at this school?

19. What types of professional development opportunities would you most like to have in your school?

20. How is your relationship with your colleagues? Your administrator? In what ways do they support you?

## APPENDIX D

## Questions for Final Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers

May 2012

1. What can you tell me about your professional development experiences this semester?
2. What were your experiences like involving the bi-weekly teacher study group meetings?
3. What have your students learned this semester? What progress have they made?
4. What have you learned about your students this semester?
5. What do you now know about your students' previous school experiences?
6. What do you now know about your students' home and community experiences?
7. What are your students' attitudes like in school now? What are their attitudes towards reading? Writing? Other subjects?
8. What are your students' current motivation levels in school? Towards reading? Writing? Other subjects?
9. What literacy goals do you still have for your students?
10. What is your definition of literacy?
11. What have you learned this year about literacy instruction?
12. What do you still want to learn about literacy instruction?
13. What are your beliefs about literacy instruction? Have they changed at all this semester? How?
14. What types of literacy activities would you like to implement in your classroom next year? Will you do things the same or differently next year?

15. Which literacy activities do your students seem to enjoy the most?
16. What are your overall professional development goals for yourself?
17. What do you think of the professional development experiences that you have experienced so far at this school?
18. What types of professional development opportunities would you most like to have in your school next year?
19. How is your current relationship with your colleagues? Your administrator? In what ways do they support you?
20. What are your thoughts about teacher study groups?

## APPENDIX E

## Researcher's Reflection Journal and Memos

January 2012 to May 2012

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Date Source:</b>	<b>Explanation of Ongoing Data Analysis Occurring During Data Collect:</b>
January to May	Reflection Journal	Immediately after each observation and teacher study group meeting, I made notes in my researcher's reflection journal about important events or noticings. I also read over my field notes and added more details and observer comments (O.C.'s) to document my thinking processes. I also worked on transcribing my initial interviews and all Teacher Study Group (TSG) meetings. As I transcribed, I added my O.C.'s. I also made a list of initial codes in my researcher's reflection journal. I continued to add to this list throughout the data collection and analysis process.
2/12/12	Memo #1	Wrote about where I was in the data analysis process and what I still need to do to organize, transcribe, and analyze the data I had collected so far. I made notes about my noticings about the teachers' learning styles and their reactions/engagement in the TSG meetings. I also recorded my thinking about the instruction I was seeing in the classroom and the topics we were discussing in our TSG's. I also wrote about my relationships with the teachers at this point in the data collection process.
3/14/12	Memo #2	In this memo, I wrote about how my data collection and analysis were going and made notes to myself about ways I could improve or things I needed to still do. I wrote notes about what preliminary data analysis was suggesting about the instructional activities going on in the teachers' classrooms. I also reminded myself of my research questions and began to make a list of codes under each research question including: Economy, Poverty, Multilayered Learning Context, Teacher's Background Knowledge, Influence of Poverty, Influence of Church and Religion, Focus on the Environment, Article Discussions
3/18/12	Memo #3	I wrote about some more thoughts that I was having about the teachers after thinking about and processing everything that we discussed in our last TSG meeting, conversations we had, and my classroom observations.
4/13/12	Memo #4	I wrote about the fact that I noticed during my classroom observations that the teachers seemed to have a major focus on preparing their students for the standardized test. I also posed more connections and tried to make connections

		between what I was observing and my theoretical frameworks.
4/21/12	Memo #5	In wrote about the fact that the standardized test was over and wondered if I would notice changes in the stress level of the teachers. I also came up with a plan for our next TSG meeting and brainstormed some possible topics to suggest to the teachers. I also wrote down new ideas and thoughts that I had related to my research questions.
5-1-12	Memo #6	I wrote about some of the instructional “shifts” that I was seeing in the teachers’ classrooms. I also wrote my thoughts down related to how I could engage them in more conversations about their CLED students, especially related to culture and poverty. I made a list of new codes (Ex: Math as a Language, Literacy Strategies, Integrating Content and Literacy, etc.) and used this list to help me create <i>Word</i> documents with examples (See Table 3).
5-16-12	Memo #7	I wrote this memo after our last TSG meeting. I attempted to organize examples from some of the thinking in my memos that might provide additional insights into my research questions. I also made a list of possible themes. (Ex: Stress Caused by CRCT, Reasons for Progress of “Low” Income, Inquiry-Based Learning, Beliefs About Students, Strong Collaboration, etc.) These themes continued to change and shape as I engaged in the data analysis process.

## APPENDIX F

## Data Analysis Process

May 2012 to August 2012

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Data Sources Analyzed:</b>	<b>Explanation of Data Analysis Process:</b>	<b>Examples of Major Codes or Themes:</b>
5-7-12	TSG Meetings, Interviews, Observation Field Notes (Including my O.C.'s)	I created a <i>Word</i> document and developed a list of major codes as I re-read my data sources. I pasted examples from my data sources under the major codes and included the data source, the lines where the example occurred, and the date: (TSG1,236-239, 1/27/12).	<b>Major Codes:</b> -Isolated Teaching/No Time for Writing -Must “Conform” (Administration) -Too Much Required “Data Collection” -Math as a Focus for PD (Professional Development) -Need More Time to Think about Literacy Instruction -Performance-Based Tasks (Hands-on) -TSG as a Safe Place -Challenging “High” Kids, but Still Meeting Needs of Low Kids -Unit Plans Developed by Someone Else, Not Helpful -Examples of Ineffective PD -Examples of Effective PD
6-12-12	TSG Meetings, Interviews, Observation Field Notes (Including my O.C.'s)	I continued to add examples to major codes and began to add new codes and subcodes as they arose.	<b>New Codes:</b> -TSG as standing for “Teacher Support Group” -Professional Development as Being “Interconnected” -“Personalizing” PD -Time Is an Issue
6-27-12 & 7-2-12	TSG Meetings, Interviews, Observation Field Notes (Including my O.C.'s)	I continued to add examples to major codes and began to add new codes and subcodes as they arose.	<b>New Codes:</b> -Anchor Charts -Students Making Connections -Learning Ideas from Each other in the TSG Meetings -Supporting One Another -TIME To Collaborate: -Student Independence -CR Environment/Room Arrangement

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Learning Styles of Teachers</li> <li>-Beliefs About Reading Instruction</li> <li>-Standardized Testing</li> <li>-Math As A Language</li> <li>-Inquiry-Based Learning</li> <li>-Engaging Students Through Making Connections to Background Knowledge</li> <li>-Literacy Centers</li> <li>-Math: Discussion and Songs</li> <li>-Making Thinking Visible</li> <li>-They Cannot Think!</li> <li>-Learning Processes of the Teachers</li> <li>-Light-Bulb Moment</li> </ul>
7-7-12	All	<p>Themes started to emerge. I created separate <i>Word</i> documents of the most prevalent themes &amp; examples.</p> <p>*I did not end up including all of these themes in my findings chapter, because I refined as I revised.</p>	<p><b>Themes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Beliefs About Professional Development</li> <li>-Beliefs About Teaching &amp; Student Learning</li> <li>-Beliefs about Literacy</li> <li>-Beliefs About Students</li> <li>-Classroom Context or Environment</li> <li>-Impact of a TSG</li> <li>-Standardized Testing</li> <li>-New Common Core Standards</li> <li>-Integration</li> <li>-Math as a Language/Math &amp; Literacy</li> <li>-Promoting Thinking &amp; Inquiry</li> </ul>
7-25-12		<p>I began to create folders and categorize themes through placing common themes inside folders.</p>	<p><b>Began to Categorize Themes in Folders:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Common Core Standards &amp; Unit Planning</li> <li>Higher Order Thinking &amp; Inquiry-Based Learning</li> <li>Integration of Content</li> <li>Teacher Support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendship &amp; Trust</li> <li>• Stressful Issues</li> <li>• Discussing the Needs and Issues of Students</li> <li>• Teachers Supported Each Other with Instructional Questions and issues</li> <li>• Standardized Testing</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

8-26-12		I created a folder that included a Word document with examples of each teachers' beliefs about CLED students.	<b>New Folder:</b> -Faith's beliefs about CLED students -Terry's beliefs about CLED students -Eric's Beliefs about CLED students
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