How Teachers Use Instruction, Assessment, and Reflection To Impact Student Learning

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Dedication

To my beautiful daughter Ali, I love you.
Abstract

Looking back at our formative years in education, many of us can think of at least one teacher who exemplified effectiveness. It is those effective teachers that paved the way for many of us current educators.

This dissertation looks closely at five elementary education teachers as they utilize instruction, assessment, and reflection to impact student learning. Teachers participating in this study ranged in experience and grade level taught. Teachers in this study participated in interviews, classroom observations, and focus group meetings.

Throughout the three forms of data collection, information was gathered and analyzed using an interpretive lens. In the chapters that highlight the five participating teachers, I illustrate what it looks and feels like to be in an elementary classroom. I utilized classroom observations and teacher interviews to show how teachers make use of instruction, assessment, and reflection in their daily routine.

Upon analyzing the research collected, several themes arose demonstrating that teaching is a dynamic profession that requires individuals to make numerous decisions in relatively short periods of time to enhance student learning. Whether the teaching decision centered on instruction, assessment, or reflection, teachers in this study employed a variety of tools to help students succeed.

Finally, effective teachers deeply care about their students and their development. The five teachers in this study showed numerous times on many levels the importance of caring for students and the positive rewards this can bring.
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Chapter I: Introduction

“Education is a social process…Education is growth…Education is, not a preparation for life; education is life itself.” –John Dewey

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.” –Albert Einstein

I never thought I would be an educator. I always thought I would be a doctor or an astronaut or something that was “important.” Do not get me wrong, I always liked my teachers and principals and I was a top student in school. For whatever reason though, I never made the connection between being a teacher and something that was worthy. I do not think I could have been more wrong.

Fast-forward fifteen years and I am completing my doctorate of philosophy in education. Education is an essential part of everyday life; considered vital to most people. However, if asked, people usually think of educators as those individuals who have three months off in the summer and paid vacation days every month. That thought could not be farther from the truth. Educators today are people who have mastered the art of multi-tasking, know many different subjects, and have eyes in the back of their heads.

Defying the laws of nature, I am one of those educators. I work with today’s children who will become tomorrow’s leaders. I am able to read with a small group of students, manage kids at a computer, and have a conversation with a colleague, all at the same time. No, I do not think this is anything extraordinary, just my reality. I arrive at school before required and leave when it is dark. I work with families that need
support outside of the school walls and invite volunteers into my room. This is a day in
the life of a teacher. An individual, who at times is taken for granted by many, and
whom, rarely looks for a reward or compensation for efforts given.

I became an educator because I thought it would be an easy thing to do. I was
tired of getting okay grades in chemistry and math and wanted to find something in
which I could excel. This is not to say that my schooling in education thus far has been a
breeze. On the contrary, I have worked extremely hard in my classes and created lessons
and units that emphasize a student-centered approach to learning. Throughout my training
and on the job experience, it has become crystal clear that education is not a cakewalk
profession. Education is something that requires dedication, heart, and compassion if the
end result is to have an impact on a student’s life.

My journey in education has seen its ups and downs, good times and bad times.
Even though I may not be in a lab finding a cure for cancer, I feel that I am making a
difference in someone’s life each and every day. Meeting the ever changing needs of my
students and the desire to be the best teacher possible has led me to this very point, the
completion of my doctorate. Learning as much as possible about the history of schools
and curriculum, how to perform research in education and evaluate it, and how to use this
information to make informed decisions about children and their educational successes
has been the focus of my life for the last several years.

My desire to become a better teacher has been the impetus for my dissertation
project. I have experienced many things during my tenure in education. However, my
experience has been only that, my experience. I wanted to see, hear, and experience what
other educators do on a daily basis within their classroom walls. It was my curiosity
about the experience of other teachers that started as a seed and blossomed into a research project.

Education itself is a broad topic. There are many ideas and concepts that can be analyzed and discussed more closely. To narrow down potential research ideas I first looked at my own teaching practice. If I look closely at my own teaching, what areas do I want to learn more about? Are there pieces of my teaching that I feel can be improved? How will this new information impact my students and their learning?

From these initial ideas I chose to focus my research on instruction, assessment, and reflection. Each of these ideas plays an important role in my teaching and student learning. I use assessments to help make decisions about my teaching and I reflect on how the process unfolds in my classroom. I continually monitor student progress through frequent check-ins and observations.

Knowing that I am interested in assessment, reflection, and instructional practice, I decided to investigate these phenomena as close to the source as possible. Therefore, I decided to study teachers. Being a teacher myself, I am fascinated with the mystery and power that is in every classroom. Stepping inside a classroom, one will find an untapped wealth of information that every teacher holds. Every school is full of teachers who are bright, energetic, and most importantly willing to share their expertise with others if invited.

From this point forward I am not looking at and thinking about my own experience as a teacher; it is other educators’ experiences that I want to learn from in order to better myself as a teacher and help inform others in the education field. Having the opportunity to visit different classrooms and witness what occurs in these
classrooms will provide detailed descriptions for others to read about and learn from.

Walking into a classroom in a public school can be daunting and overwhelming for even the most seasoned educators. Inside any classroom, students of varying abilities, ethnicities, language, cultural backgrounds, and value systems are present. These descriptions do not take into account student dispositions, personalities, and learning styles that affect the classroom make-up as well. However, it is the educator’s job to take this group of children, no matter where they have come from or what they can do, and shape them into individuals who will contribute to society in positive, meaningful ways.

How is this done? In many states, educators are given curriculum that is based on state and national standards, with the intention that schools, teachers, and even students can be held accountable for their learning. In addition to mandated curriculum, schools have the looming possibility that they may not make Adequate Yearly Progress or AYP as part of the No Child Left Behind accountability system. This system can cause frustration, anxiety, and stress for teachers when expected to do all of this while “leaving no child behind.” Schools and classrooms have become more like the New York Stock Exchange bidding floor rather than places where growth and development are priorities.

What many of us remember about school from our own experiences is vastly different in comparison with the present. Educators are expected to do more with less while simultaneously injecting as much knowledge and content into their students as humanly possible. Trips to the apple orchard and public parks have been replaced with study groups and test prep hour. Current students’ eventual memories of school may play in black and white instead of something glowing with color.

Teachers are also assessing their students more frequently and making
instructional judgments from the assessment results. Assessments can take on many forms depending on the desired outcome. Often students are given standardized assessments to satisfy district, state, and national requirements. Springtime in Minnesota brings about many state-wide standardized assessments. Two types of assessments, summative and formative, have permeated school walls in recent years. Each of these assessments has a vital role within a school, but for significantly different reasons.

Whether you are a classroom teacher and using assessment to gauge how students are doing; to inform instruction (formative assessment) or a district administrator reporting the number of students meeting grade level proficiency (summative assessment), assessing students has become as probable as lunch or recess.

Now if you are reading this and are already quivering with nerves, you are not alone. Since an educator’s job can be extremely demanding, exhausting, and overwhelming all at the same time, something needs to happen or the people in the system will crack. One way for educators to cope with the system is through reflective practices. Teachers may reflect to release stress or reflect as a way to benefit instructional planning. When teachers are able to reflect upon their teaching, instruction and student learning will benefit greatly. With the complexity found within each school, instruction, assessment, and reflection are experiences that all teachers encounter on a daily basis. It is how these three phenomena are linked together that form common experiences for classroom teachers.

When assessment is embedded throughout classroom practice, teachers are constantly making judgments about what is working and what needs to be modified or adjusted. Through various forms of assessments, classroom teachers are gathering
evidence in small amounts about their students and their capabilities and then reflecting on what to do next. When all is said and done, instructional decisions are made with the intent that improved student learning will occur.

Stronge (2007) states that teaching occurs at a crossroad of complex disciplines and involves interacting with diverse and complex student learners. He continues to say that teachers must have sufficient knowledge on subject matter and of teaching and learning to appreciate these complexities. Teachers must also recognize each student as a multifaceted person, understanding that each student brings a lifetime of ideas and experiences in and out of school to the classroom. Finally, teachers must recognize that a class is, itself, a dynamic and complex entity, made of many personalities, evolving into a personality of its own.

As the roadmap for this dissertation unfolds, it is important to keep the following guiding questions at the forefront to help with our synthesis of this project. How do teachers utilize personal reflection and how does it play into their teaching? How do teachers plan for and make use of assessment data? Finally how are teacher reflection, assessment, and instruction linked together in classroom practice and the improvement of student learning?

In the next chapter I have researched and organized a literature review to highlight current trends and thoughts on instruction, assessment, and reflection. I write about instruction, assessment, and reflection separately and then how each practice impacts the other. It is important to understand the three concepts as they help create a visual representation of my work with teachers and the analysis of the data collection.

Following the literature review, I highlight the research methodology and
framework on which this dissertation is built. Using an interpretive lens to collect data, I have been able to show the reader what it is like to give a classroom assessment and how the teacher may react to it. I have been able to capture thoughts, feelings, and frustrations through my observations and interviews that will illustrate for others how instruction, assessment, and reflection are woven together.

The heart of the dissertation lies within the pages of my work with the teacher participants. I observed, interviewed, and wrote anything and everything I could from these individuals. I watched teachers circulate their classrooms to monitor student learning. I listened as teachers modified instruction midway through a lesson. I witnessed teachers working tirelessly for their students with the hopes of success. My own knowledge of teaching and the intricacies that are part of teaching were tested and strengthened. I myself became a better teacher.

To conclude the dissertation I spend time analyzing the data that was collected and how it relates to the initial research questions that were posed earlier. What significance do my observations of participants play in the larger educational research domain? Am I able to make sense of the data and translate it into improved student learning? How can I take a snap shot of a teacher’s classroom and show the great work that is occurring on behalf of students? In summary, this dissertation will show how instruction, assessment, and reflection work together to impact student learning. When a teacher can effectively use all three concepts, high-level teaching and learning are a result.

Chapter II: Review of Literature
“Teachers provide a social and intellectual environment in which students can learn.” – James MacGregor Burns

“The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.” – Paulo Freire

When one looks at teaching and what comprises the act of teaching, instruction, assessment, and reflection are vital players. These three entities individually are important, but collectively are vital to student success. When researchers look at what makes a great or effective teacher, instruction, assessment, and reflection routinely play a role. When teachers are able to weave the three practices together student success will occur.

This literature review is organized into four sections. In the first section, I will describe how others have characterized effective teaching. Next, I will explain assessment and the role that it plays in teaching and instruction. Then, I will clarify reflection and its role in instruction and assessment. Finally, I will show how instruction, assessment, and reflection all work simultaneously together to impact student learning.

**Describing Effective Teaching**

The definition of what makes a teacher good, effective, or even knowledgeable can differ depending on whom you ask. Every teacher can have one or two qualities that make them shine within the classroom, but those teachers who remain in our minds and hearts have traits that separate them from the others. As I reflect on who I originally thought were effective teachers and who I think about now there is a difference. As a child, I thought the best teachers were ones who gave extra recess and no homework on Fridays. Yet, it was the teachers who taught me to write, to think critically, and to ask
questions about our world who have had more of an impact on me than anyone else.

According to a number of educational researchers several key characteristics stand out as critical pieces of effective teachers. A teacher’s knowledge of child development, curriculum, and the ability to design and sequence lessons are all parts of effective teachers.

Good teachers understand what students everywhere can confirm: teaching is not just talking, and learning is not just listening. Effective teachers are able to figure out not only what they want to teach, but also how to do it in a way that students can understand and use the new information and skills. Teachers know what students are ready for and need to learn, so they choose tasks that are productive, and they organize these tasks in a way that builds understanding. Finally, they monitor students’ growth and progress so they can address specific needs and keep students engaged in school, learning productively, and growing as cooperative and thoughtful citizens who will be able to participate in society (Horowitz et al., 2005, p. 88).

For teachers to be able to do all of these things, knowledge and understanding of content and child development is crucial. “A foundation of knowledge about child development is essential for planning curriculum; designing, sequencing, and pacing activities; diagnosing student learning needs; organizing the classroom; and teaching social and academic skills” (Horowitz et al., 2005, p. 88).

According to research conducted by Horowitz et al., a teacher who has a good understanding of child development and learning is more likely to be effective in the
classroom; recent data shows that new teachers who have had coursework in learning and
development are also more than twice as likely to stay in teaching (Horowitz et al., 2005,
p. 89). “Teachers knowledge of child development, language, cultural backgrounds, and
special needs is important for being a learning-centered teacher” (Bransford, Darling-
Hammond, & LePage, 2005, p. 32). Finally effective teachers know the importance of
taking a developmental perspective; the inevitability of individual differences in
development; the interactions among development, knowledge, and learning; the
centrality of cultural contexts for development; and the strategies for helping prospective
teachers acquire developmental expertise (Horowitz et al., 2005, p. 92).

The idea of looking at curriculum and learning through a developmental lens is
vital to our understanding of teacher knowledge. When I think of my own child and her
learning in comparison with the other children in her classroom there is a difference. For
the longest period of time, my daughter’s language development had me concerned.
Being a teacher, I wanted Ali talking and reading books by the time she could walk.
However it was her early childhood teacher who reassured me that children develop in
different stages. My job as a teacher is to acknowledge those differences and meet
students at their level.

According to James H. Stronge (2007), we need to understand what is meant by
effective. Effective teaching is the result of a combination of many factors, including
aspects of the teacher’s background and ways of interacting with others, as well as
specific teaching practices. I feel it is important to this dissertation to understand the
factors that go into being an effective teacher. To have some clear points to speak from
will only help strengthen the claim I make about teacher reflection, assessment, and
instruction.

Stronge (2007) continues to say effective teaching can be summarized under four overarching statements. Effective teachers care deeply. Effective teachers recognize complexity. Effective teachers communicate clearly. Effective teachers serve conscientiously. As Stronge states, “the Four C’s could be used to epitomize the teacher we aspire to be,” (Stronge, 2007, p. 100). If you were to think about your schooling experiences, were you fortunate enough to have a teacher who possessed any or all of these traits? One way to be an effective teacher is not only knowing how to teach, but how to do everything else.

If we take a close look at what Stronge calls the “Four C’s,” to care deeply is something that we can find in research regarding effective teachers. The effective teacher seeks to understand the challenges facing their students by inquiring as to their well-being—whether that caring is evidence in a simple phone call home when a child has missed a few days or a congratulatory note when a child has made an accomplishment. A caring teacher also recognizes that challenges at home affect a student’s performance at school and works with the student and the family to overcome those challenges (p. 100).

Those of us who are in education know first hand how complex teaching is. I like to think of a teacher as someone who can balance five or six plates in the air while simultaneously keeping a smile on his/her face. One way to succeed, the effective teacher must have sufficient knowledge of content, of pedagogy, of context, and of students to appreciate the intricacies that are bound up in the teaching and learning process. This deep understanding of complexity can help prevent the teacher from trivializing content and underestimating the work it takes to prepare lessons. An understanding of
complexity is also reflected in the effort it takes to implement lessons with students. The effective teacher also recognizes each student as a unique individual, understanding that each one brings his or her own set of experiences and perspectives to the classroom, (Stronge, 2007, p. 101).

When we communicate with others, either verbally or nonverbally, our tone, body language, and mannerisms can say volumes that words simple cannot. Teachers not only need to communicate clearly to their students about content, but the communication they instill in their students sets a tone for a cohesive classroom unit. The teacher’s job requires clear articulation of expectations, encouragement, and caring, as well as content knowledge. Effective communication in teaching requires that a teacher have a clear understanding of the subject matter and of how to share that material with students in such a way that they come to own and understand it deeply (Stronge, 2007, p. 102).

The last of Stronge’s “Four C’s” speaks to serving conscientiously or the ability of a teacher to dedicate time and energy to the profession (Stronge, 2007, p. 102). I find this idea especially important as we continue to study characteristics and traits of effective teachers. We want our teachers to continue their learning through schooling and workshops and use that knowledge to help their students. We look to our teachers to be “continual learners” and help foster that enthusiasm with their students. The classroom walls are not the only places where learning can occur. It is this notion that learning is a dynamic and fluid process that propels effective teachers.

Teachers need to be able to understand what it is like not to understand something or to misunderstand something, or to understand it differently. Teachers need to be experts at alternative points-of-view, perspectives,
outlooks, biases, and orientations. They need to be able to see things from the child’s viewpoint. More likely, excellent teachers are those who are both smart and yet who find difficult easy to understand. (van Manen, 1991, p. 192-193)

An effective teacher encompasses many different things. An effective teacher has knowledge of learners and their development, curriculum and subject matter, and knowledge of teaching. Effective teachers can simultaneously incorporate these concepts into their day and mold them to positively impact student learning.

When you think back to great teachers that you had, how did they interact with you and your classmates? Were they active or passive? Did they have enthusiasm about their subject matter? Lee S. Shulman (1987) highlights some of the characteristics that are found in high quality teachers. Substantial interaction with students, probing for alternative views, scaffolding instruction, and using a flexible teaching style that accommodates all students are all qualities that have been found (p. 1). Shulman continues to say “knowledge, understanding, and skill we see displayed haltingly, and occasionally masterfully, among beginners are often demonstrated with ease by the expert” (p. 5).

What also seems to separate a novice teacher from a master teacher is knowledge of teaching that goes far beyond knowing basic skills, content knowledge, and general pedagogical skills. Those individuals who we remember as great teachers not only knew what they were teaching but had a sense of child development and age appropriate activities, and the ability to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students. One could say these individuals were “super” teachers in their ability to instruct a
classroom.

A teacher knows something not understood by others, presumably the students. The teacher can transform understanding, performance skills, or desired attitudes or values into pedagogical representations and actions. These are ways of talking, showing, enacting, or otherwise representing ideas so that the unknowing can come to know, those without understanding can comprehend and discern, and the unskilled can become adept. Thus, teaching necessarily begins with a teacher’s understanding of what is to be learned and how it is to be taught. (Shulman, 1987, p. 7)

In work done by Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues John Bransford and Pamela LePage (2005) they have identified some common practices among highly effective teachers. A few examples are:

1. Expectations for the students are clearly stated.
2. Student work can be found everywhere.
3. Teachers do not stand still and lecture, they cover every part of the room and monitor every activity.
4. Multiple small group activities are present.
5. There are high levels of “instructional discourse;” students are encouraged to ask questions, discuss ideas, and comment on statements.
6. The organization of the rooms and the lessons are clearly evident, materials are accessible when needed, and class time is not wasted preparing. (p. 6)

In addition to these examples, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, and LePage state that a central part of being a professional teacher is a commitment to help all students...
succeed. They need to have knowledge and skills and access to other professionals to be able to follow through with their commitments rather than simply to try and fail.

Effective teachers are able to figure out not only what they want to teach, but also how to do so in a way that students understand and use the new information and skills. Furthermore, they know what students are ready for and need to learn, so they choose tasks that are productive, and they organize these tasks in a way that builds understanding. Finally, they monitor students’ growth and progress so they can address specific needs and keep students engaged in school, learning productively, and growing as cooperative and thoughtful citizens who will be able to participate in society (Horowitz et al., 2005, p. 88).

Assessment

Assessment is an integral piece of today’s education. Since it plays such an important role, teachers need to understand assessment’s purpose and how best to use it in the classroom. Effective teachers are able to use a variety of assessments to help guide their instruction and impact student learning.

Purpose of Assessment

Since the basic premise of schools is to educate young people to their fullest
potential, there needs to be systems in place to monitor progress and adjust instruction accordingly. Assessments are such systems. Assessments are used to educate and improve student performance, not merely audit it. Assessments are instructive to students, teachers, and school clients and overseers. Assessments need to be an integral part of teaching and learning in order for it to serve its educative purposes (Wiggins, 1998, p. 8). Teaching, learning, and assessing must be understood as interactive and cyclical; for example, assessments of student learning should help improve teaching and subsequent learning (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005, p. 23). It is the assessment task, in other words, that brings the words in the curriculum statement to life (Danielson, 2006, p. 92). When assessment and instruction are effectively intertwined, then assessment insights can be used in real time to adjust instruction (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 292).

This last statement regarding instruction and assessment being intertwined is crucial to the understanding of the two concepts. When educators are working with students they need to know what the end should be; meaning summative assessment. However the learning and instruction that occurs day-to-day needs to be checked, this is where formative assessment comes in. I like to think of formative assessments as the periodic dipstick checks in a students learning and understanding. If one of the “checks” informs the teacher that learning has not occurred to the point where it should, the instruction needs to be tweaked and modified. Formative assessment can also be defined as occurring while knowledge is being learned and one that is interactive while summative assessment can be defined at the end of a learning episode or when it’s difficult to alter or rectify (Marzano, 2006). This process is dynamic in that instruction, assessment, and learning will look different depending upon the students and the level
of knowledge that the teacher has.

The word assessment tends to send shivers down educators backs with the current pressure that is put on them with regard to accountability. As negatively as assessments are viewed, they can offer an educator a surplus of information that, if utilized properly, can hold valuable potential. Assessments can drive building and district change. Assessments can show student progress over time or provide evidence in areas that need to be improved. In an era where decisions are driven by data, assessments can help fine tune grade level and building goals and show where strengths and weaknesses lie. Assessments are the most powerful educational tools for promoting effective learning (Black & Wiliam, 1999, p. 2). Assessment of student learning is an integral part of the learning process (Shepard et al., 2005).

There are many forms or types of assessments present in schools today. Educators can assess at the end of a unit or project. Educators can also assess periodically during instruction and modify their teaching to meet the needs of their students. The terms formative and summative assessments are concepts that have become increasingly prevalent in schools today. Educators should make assessment decisions depending on the goal or outcome desired by students. Whether a teacher is formatively assessing during a period of instruction or assessing at the end of a unit, summative, the purpose and outcome will be different.

Assessment of Learning

Summative assessment, or assessment of learning, refers to tests administered
after learning is supposed to have occurred to determine whether it did (Stiggins, 2005, p. 326). Summative assessments have been used to determine grades, as well as satisfy local, state, and national testing requirements (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005, p. 17). Summative assessment refers to those assessments that are generally Tracyd out at the end of an instructional unit or course of study for the purpose of giving grades or otherwise certifying student proficiency (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 275). These assessments should allow students opportunities to demonstrate higher level skills and provide multiple ways to demonstrate their proficiency as well as evaluate students in relation to performance expectations.

To be supportive, formative and summative assessments should be conceptually aligned. Summative assessments should not be mere repeats of earlier formative tasks. Rather, they should be culminating performances that invite students to exhibit mastery and to use their knowledge in ways that generalize and extend what has come before. Summative assessments can be thought of as important milestones on the same learning continua that undergird formative assessment (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 297). From a cognitive perspective, the best system would be one where formative and summative assessments were mutually aligned with conceptually oriented learning goals, and where summative assessments were used as milestones of accomplishment (perhaps acknowledged by family and friends) following successful learning periods supported by formative assessment (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 298).

In the district where I work the practice of aligning formative and summative assessments occurs frequently. An example of this is in our new math documents. Curriculum writers created documents for teachers to use based on the Understanding
by Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005) framework where formative and summative assessments are pieces of that framework. Teachers know what the end result should be (summative) and are given several options for checking student understanding (formative). This process alleviates the discussion of “I wish I would have known my students didn’t understand this concept.” When both formative and summative assessments are aligned with curriculum the opportunities for learning are more thorough and effective.

Knowing that formative and summative assessments should be aligned, the notion of grades and how to grade does not become an obstacle, but a relatively smooth process. If summative assessments are embedded in learning progressions, then the reliability of graded events is supported by other evidence of each student’s developing competence along that underlying continuum (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 305). Summative assessments and the grades based on them should represent achievement. Achievement-based grades will be more transparently aligned with feedback on the same standards used for formative assessment and will communicate better to external audiences (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 305).

**Assessment for Learning**

For teachers to be effective in supporting student learning they should constantly be checking for student understanding. Formative assessment or assessment for learning, is a process which can be used by teachers and by their students in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. When used properly, formative assessments can be used to adapt the teaching work to
meet learning needs (Black et al., 2003, p. 2). Formative assessments are conducted during learning to promote, not merely judge or grade, student success (Stiggins, 2005, p. 326).

Formative assessment is defined as assessment Tracyd out during the instructional process for the purpose of improving teaching and/or learning. Ideally, formative assessment should be seamlessly integrated with instruction (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 280). To be effective, teachers must be skillful in using various assessment strategies and tools such as observations, student conferences, portfolios, performance tasks, prior knowledge assessments, rubrics, feedback, and student self-assessments.

W. James Popham (2008) has created his own definition of formative assessment. “Formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students’ status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics” (p. 6). Popham continues to state that formative assessment involves a series of carefully considered, distinguishable acts on the part of teachers or students or both. Adjustment decisions made by teachers and students during the formative assessment process must not be based on whim but on evidence of the students’ current level of mastery with respect to certain skills or bodies of knowledge. Popham states that the reason for formative assessment is to improve students’ learning. One of the products of this will be improving how teachers teach. Finally Popham states that students play an active role in the assessment process and make changes in how they are trying to learn.

Formative assessments occur concurrently with instruction (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 71). These ongoing assessments provide information to guide
teaching and learning for improving achievement. Formative assessments include both formal and informal methods, such as ungraded quizzes, oral questioning, observations, draft work, think-alouds, student-constructed concept maps, dress rehearsals, peer response groups, and portfolio reviews.

Teachers ought to have a deep understanding of the formative assessment process and understand its close relationship to instructional scaffolding. They should be able to use insights from assessment to plan and revise instruction and to provide feedback that explicitly helps students see how to improve. Sadler (1989) points out that it is insufficient for teachers merely to give feedback about whether answers are right or wrong. Instead, to facilitate learning, it is equally important that feedback be linked explicitly to clear performance standards and that students be provided with strategies for improvement. Formative assessment, if effectively implemented, can do as much or more to improve student achievement than any of the most powerful instructional interventions, intensive reading instruction, one-on-one tutoring and the like (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 277).

If we are to look at teachers, they should be knowledgeable about formative assessment that is Tracyd out during the instructional process for the purpose of improving teaching and learning. Teachers need to be skillful in using various assessment strategies and tools such as observation, student conferences and interviews, written work, and discussions, as well as responses on tests and performance tasks. Teachers also need to be knowledgeable about formative assessment that is Tracyd out during the instructional process for the purpose of improving teaching or learning. Such assessments should be infused throughout the instructional process to help make students’ thinking
visible as they progress through a course of study, enable feedback about their work that
guides revisions in their thinking and performance, and plan teaching so that it is
responsive to what students need to know and how they learn (Darling-Hammond &
Baratz-Snowden, 2005, p. 23).

In a model of formative assessment, Atkin, Black, and Coffey (2001) frame the
learning-assessment process with these key questions:

1. Where are you trying to go? (Instructional goal)
2. Where are you now? (Assessment question)
3. How can you get there? (What is needed to reach the goal)

(Quoted in Shepard et al., 2005, p. 278)

With this model teacher and student are in constant communication about the
learning process and what needs to happen for student success. This model is an example
of how a teacher will scaffold instruction or use a gradual release of responsibility model
to help students become more independent and responsible in their learning process.

Formative assessment can occur many times in a lesson. It can involve several
different methods for encouraging students to express what they are thinking and several
different ways of acting on such evidence (Black et al., 2003, p. 2). The fact that
formative assessment can occur frequently compels the teacher to constantly be thinking
and monitoring his/her classroom. In a classroom when assessment is being used to help
learning, the teacher is involved in gathering information about his/her students’ learning
and encouraging them to review their work critically and constructively (Black &
Wiliam, 1999, p. 7). Formative assessments serve to help students learn more (Black &
Designing good tasks, activities or questions requires that teachers have good subject knowledge, but this is not the kind of abstract subject knowledge that is developed through advanced study of a subject…but what Shulman calls pedagogical content knowledge-knowing which aspects of a subject cause students particular difficulties, and knowing the metaphors, contexts and analogies that students find helpful. (Black et al., 2003, pgs. 5-6)

In other research conducted by Lorrie Shepard (2005), she makes the connection between formative assessment and scaffolded instruction. These are strategies that teachers use to move learning forward in the zone of proximal development (p. 66). In other words, formative assessment and scaffolding are like supportive bridges between students and what they are learning as well as what they can learn. The level of support, or how much a teacher scaffolds instruction, is derived from the results of formative assessments. Shepard continues to say that formative assessment uses insights about a learner’s current understanding to alter the course of instruction and thus support the development of greater competence (p. 67).

Rick Stiggins (2005) identifies three major reasons for the resurgence of formative assessment. One, educators’ realize that once-a-year summative standardized testing does not happen frequently enough to affect instructional decisions. Second, the belief among some that the key to success resides not in the evidence gathered but in how that evidence is managed. Third, using many different assessment methods to provide students, teachers, and parents with a continuing stream of evidence of student progress in mastering the knowledge and skills that underpin or lead up to state standards (pgs. 326-27). Stiggins goes on to say that, “students partner with their teacher to
continuously monitor their current level of attainment in relation to agreed-upon expectation so they can set goals for what to learn next and thus play a role in managing their own progress (p. 327). In a classroom where formative assessment is occurring, there is a great amount of dialogue between the teacher and student about the type of teaching and learning that is happening.

Formative assessments not only inform productive adjustments to instruction but also ensure consistently delivered, viable curriculum as they allow teams to see, on a frequent basis, that their efforts are paying off (Schmoker, 2006, p. 123). With a focus on learning, assessment results become the leverage for improvements in teaching, which then impacts student learning.

Another way to look at formative assessment is how school teams examine how well students are doing, what targets they should set to improve learning, and what strategies might get them to where they want to go. Teachers collect data on their own classroom practices and student performance and share these results with other school teams (Fullan, 2001).

This new information on formative assessments appears to be a beacon of light in the educational system. Of course there remains questions about how to successfully implement this change in today’s classrooms. What is important for teachers and administrators to know is that assessment for learning, formative assessment, involves frequent, continual use of both formal and informal classroom assessments (Popham, 2006, p. 82). This is critical for teachers to realize; there is not just one way to do things. Educators have some freedom in how they choose to assess their students. This innovative approach to classroom assessment is based on careful analysis of the
enabling knowledge and sub-skills that students must first acquire to master a higher curricular aim (Popham, 2006, p. 82).

**Levels of Formative Assessment**

In his work with formative assessment, Popham (2008) has identified four distinguishable levels of assessment. These levels are teachers’ instructional adjustments, students’ learning tactic adjustments, classroom climate shift, and school wide implementation (p. 49). Each of these levels plays a role in the assessment process while affecting teacher instruction and student learning.

If we are to look at the first level, instructional adjustments, teacher knowledge and experience play a pivotal role in this stage. The classroom teacher needs to decide when an adjustment should be made. The teacher needs to choose the appropriate formal or informal assessment. The teacher also needs to determine the level of student performance. Finally, the teacher, with this new information, needs to make any additional necessary adjustments to instruction (Popham, 2008, p. 53).

Since it has been stated prior that students play a role in their learning, understanding the assessment piece would be a natural offshoot. While teachers are making instructional adjustments, students are reacting to these decisions. Students are seeing how teacher adjustments and assessments fit into their learning plan. Since students are active participants in the assessment process, they make decisions, along with the teacher, of what best fits their educational needs.

When “new” terms and concepts are introduced into the education world, a shift in learning and how a classroom operates will occur. Formative assessments are
concepts that allow teachers and students to look at learning in a different way. Instead of waiting till the end of the term to see how a class has performed, a teacher can see snapshots along the way. This philosophical shift is also shown in the active process of formative assessments. If I think back to my own educational experience, there was not a lot of active participation occurring and certainly not in the area of assessment.

Classrooms have the tendency to be provincial places where what happens on the other side of the door cannot be shared with others. The notion that teachers are on their own island is not something that teachers do on purpose. Sometimes school climate sets the tone for how classroom teachers interact with each other and grow professionally. According to Popham (2008) through professional development and teacher learning communities, school wide implementation of formative assessment is possible. This professional development is systematic and ongoing. This helps teachers develop the relationships that are necessary if a school wide implementation of formative assessment will be successful.

Reflection and Thinking

Quality instruction and assessment are vital pieces to student learning, but without teacher reflection on the two, positive change will not occur. Reflection forces individuals to examine their practice and make the necessary changes.

Essentials of Method

John Dewey has been seen as the father of education and teaching. His work and research in education has dominated our culture and has influenced our institutions of education. Therefore it would not be appropriate to speak about teaching, instruction,
and reflection without looking to John Dewey’s views on these topics.

“The sole direct path to enduring improvement in the methods of instruction and learning consists in centering upon the conditions which exact, promote, and test thinking,” (Dewey, 1916, p. 167). Dewey continues to say that thinking is the method of intelligent learning, of learning that employs and rewards mind. When teachers reflect, they are thinking. If a teacher is reflecting on a conversation with a colleague or how a student performed on an assessment, that teacher is thinking about the “next steps.” Meaning, how will I adjust my instruction to meet the needs of my students? Is there another way that I can present this material to my class?

Dewey continues to say that, “no experience having a meaning is possible without some element of thought. But may contrast two types of experience according to the proportion of reflection found in them” (p. 158). As our discussion of teacher reflection continues, the experience that teachers have greatly influences how it will impact their instruction and student learning.

**Reflective Practitioner**

One key component that seems to be apparent in high quality teachers is their ability to reflect on what they do each and everyday. This reflection allows teachers to modify and adapt their instruction and lessons. Teacher reflection also allows teachers
to look inside their own thinking and evaluate themselves. Current professional
development rests upon the ability for a teacher to critically reflect upon their teaching
and make adjustments accordingly. Schools across the nation have taken this notion one
step further by implementing professional learning communities where educators are
given time to meet in groups and reflect on instructional practice.

Donald A. Schon (1983) states that a practitioner’s reflection can serve as a
corrective to over learning. “Through reflection, he can surface and criticize the tacit
understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized
practice, and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he
may allow himself to experience” (p. 68).

Schon continues to say that practitioners do reflect on their knowing-in-practice
(p. 68). Sometimes, in the relative tranquility of a postmortem, they think back on a
project they have undertaken, a situation they have lived through, and they explore the
understandings they have brought to their handling of the case. They do this in a mood of
idle speculation, or in a deliberate effort to prepare themselves for future cases. “When
someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not
dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new
theory of the unique case” (Schon, 1983, p. 68).

Schon emphasizes context and experiential knowledge, and focuses on
practitioner-based intuition (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2006, p. 6). Schon
believes that teachers must reflect and act upon distinct knowledges: pedagogical content
knowledge (knowledge about teaching) and related technical understandings essential to
teaching effectively. Reflection on practice after it is completed, however, is not
sufficient. To improve the quality of teaching, educators must practice “reflection-in-action” as they reflect on practice while teaching and after teaching. Reflection–in-action has a critical function, questioning the assumptive structure of knowing-in-action (Schon, 1983, p. 49). This reflection-in-action refers to observing thinking and action as they are occurring (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. 6). Schon also speaks of reflection-on-action, referring to the process of looking back on and learning from experience or action in order to affect future action.

Reflection and Action

Van Manen (1991) writes about the relation between reflection and action. “It is important to keep in mind the difference between being actively engaged in teaching children and being disengaged through reflecting on a past, present, or future situation” (p. 98). Van Manen continues to say “reflection is possible in those moments when we are able to think about our experiences, about what we did or should have done, or about what we might do next” (p. 98). As we think about the importance of reflection in a teacher’s life, he highlights possibilities where this reflection can occur. “Reflection is a fundamental concept in educational theory, and in some sense it is just another word for thinking. To reflect is to think” (p. 98). I find this definition of reflection very empowering whether we are talking about teachers or their students. To develop into thinkers one needs to be able reflect.

Van Manen (1991) writes about the difference between reflection in action and reflection on action. Reflection in action occurs through constant decision-making. In this decision making the professional is guided by the theoretical and practical principles
of his or her discipline, even though these principles may be operating in a more or less tacit fashion (p. 105). Van Manen refers to reflection on action as recollective, meaning that it occurs after the situation has passed (p. 115). I think the description of the two types of reflection is important. Effective teachers are able to reflect both in action and on action. Effective teachers are constantly making informed decisions to aid in instruction, but they are also participating in discussions with how things went.

**Reflection and Teaching**

Reflective practice requires a pause. Sometimes the pause is intentional—a purposeful slowing down to create a space in which presence and openness can emerge. Sometime the pause happens unexpectedly in response to a crisis or dilemma. According to York-Barr et al. (2006) there is a systematic process of reflection. Individuals go through several stages with the end result being enhanced student learning. The processes are: pause, openness, inquiry, thinking, learning, action, and enhanced student learning. The ultimate desired outcome of reflective practice is enhanced student learning.

Reflective practice is an active process. It serves as the foundation for continuous learning and more effective action in educational practice so that children are successful in school and life. It is a complex process that requires high levels of conscious thought and commitments to change practice based on new understandings.

Teachers who are reflective about their practice use data systematically to make judgments about the specific aspects of instructional strategies that may be hindering learning. They look for explanations of learning success or failure, and especially for teaching decisions that may be the cause (Shepard et al., 2005, p. 292). In professional
learning communities teachers are able to analyze, discuss, and make informed judgments with the use of classroom data. Data can take many different shapes and forms depending upon its purpose and role; meaning that it does not have to be a test. When educators are clear on their intent with data it can be an extremely powerful tool.

**Meaningful Reflective Practice**

For reflection to have a purpose it needs to be meaningful and relevant to a teacher’s life and a student’s life. The purpose of reflection serves as the focus for modification or change in instruction. When a teacher engages in meaningful reflective practice not only is his/her teacher affected, but student learning will be as well. When we talk about student learning the word meaningful plays a role in many curriculum programs and instructional designs. Looking more specifically at meaningful reflective practice York-Barr et al. (2006) identify four influences on meaningful reflection. They are topic (content), type of reflection, opportunities to strengthen relationships, and opportunities to learn.

Topics for reflective practice can vary, but need to be connected to student learning. This can morph into various scenarios. A teacher might be frustrated with the level of engagement of her students, a group of students continues to excel with a certain math concept and needs to be challenged, or a particular curriculum unit needs to be tweaked. All of these are examples in which reflection has a topic as its focus. What I think is important to illustrate is that a “topic” does not need to be a huge event in a teacher’s or student’s life. Topics for reflection can occur from a word or action that allows for pause and thinking.
When we think of the types of reflection, this refers to the specific aim of reflection within a given topical focus (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. 56). This form of reflection takes a more theoretical approach to the discussion of teacher reflection. Whether the reflection takes on a technical, conceptual, or critical focus, guiding questions help foster quality reflection. Examples of various questions are, “What practices are and are not effective in the classroom? Does current practice appear to foster or diminish student attentiveness to assigned tasks and learning? How should schools be reordered and restructured” (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. 59). These guiding questions are what effective teachers ask themselves everyday. Effective teachers are not okay with the status quo; they are continually looking at ways in which to improve their instruction and teaching.

Looking at the last two influences on reflection, opportunities to strengthen relationships and opportunities to learn are closely aligned. Through collaboration, teachers are able to develop relationships that are professional with the focus on student learning. Through thoughtful and meaningful staff development, teachers are able to learn together with colleagues to help students succeed. Quality staff development is an on-going process and not a once a year occasion. Throughout a school year, teachers need to be given time to discuss, challenge, and help each other navigate their way through teaching and student learning. One way to accomplish this is through professional learning communities. In this model teacher collaboration and the relationships that are developed because of it can be strengthened over time while learning occurs simultaneously.
Continuing on with the work done by York-Barr et al. (2006), they have developed a framework for reflection titled “Theory of Action for Reflective Practice.” This framework illustrates the process that teachers travel through as they fine tune their reflective practices to enhance student learning. It consists of several steps that weave together in an active format. These steps map the linkages between thinking, action, and student learning (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. 9). The steps in the reflective action process are: pause, openness, inquiry, thinking, learning, action, and enhanced student learning (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. 9). If we take a moment to look at this framework, it becomes apparent how each level of the reflective process works in conjunction with each other with the end product of student learning.

At the ground level is pause. This is something that has been discussed previously, but is worth mentioning again. The pause that a teacher makes, whether it is made purposely or subconsciously, drives the reflective action. The pause, deliberate or not, sets the reflective practice framework in motion. This pause can stem from numerous interactions with teachers and students and sets the groundwork for improved student learning.

Following pause in the framework is openness; an open perspective and open heart, (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. 10). I find this step in the process interesting. Simply put, it asks are we with learning something new or doing something different? Individuals in the education world sometimes have trouble understanding that there are other ways to tackle a problem or find a solution. However, effective teachers know the importance of keeping an “open mind” for the benefit of their instruction and student learning.
Once teachers are open to the reflective process, inquiry and thinking can occur. When teachers are involved in the inquiry process they are questioning and thinking about their teaching. In these two steps, teachers are scrutinizing their practices and looking for ways to make them better. Effective teachers seek out colleagues or individuals with more experience to help them sift through the data they collect on themselves. During these steps, teachers are thinking about their thinking and setting goals to continue checking for improvement.

When teachers are thinking and questioning their instruction, learning will occur. Without the learning piece, reflection basically serves no purpose. I look at this step as the data has been collected, now what? If teachers have not learned through the reflective process, student learning will not be impacted.

Lastly, all decisions and actions that effective teachers make will ultimately impact students. Those of us in the education field want this impact to be positive on students and their learning. When we talk about enhanced student learning, it does not mean that everyone scores 100% on their spelling test. Enhanced student learning can be the level of engagement and motivation, the ability to self-assess, and/or the ability to question the instructional process.

What is important to realize about the reflective process is that it is active. It is fluid and dynamic and will look different for each teacher. The steps and processes in the above framework are not meant to be cumbersome and prescriptive. Effective teachers know and understand that reflection is something that allows them to look at their practices under a microscope and study them. While studying and analyzing their practices, teachers make adjustments, decisions, and actions that improve their
instruction while simultaneously improving student learning.

Reflection in Schools

Why has reflection become so prevalent in today’s educational system? According to J. John Loughran (2002) “reflective practice has been the adoption of reflection as a foundation for many teacher education programs, a consequence of this large-scale uptake of reflection as a shaping principle for teacher education program structures is that the cynic may well argue that participants are simply encouraged to reflect” (p. 33). What ramifications, if any, does this have on our current school systems? If we are hoping, better yet expecting, our teachers to become reflective in their work, how, when, and why will it become genuine? Think of your own life and what happens to you on any given day. Do you spend time after each event reflecting on what just happened? Most likely not, however those few things that are important to you or carry some meaning might force you to step back and think a little. This is what we want happening in our schools right now. Are teachers going to reflect on each task that is set out before them? Probably not, but when it comes to those decisions that will impact a student’s learning or success, high quality teachers reflect upon their own thinking to make informed decisions.

Reflection continually emerges as a suggested way of helping practitioners better understand what they know and do as they develop their knowledge of practice through reconsidering what they learn in practice. Reflection, then, places an emphasis on learning through questioning and investigation to lead to a development of understanding. (Loughran, 2002, p. 34)
Good teacher reflection and the ability to use it properly will only come with time and practice. In a study of literacy teachers who were asked to reflect several times on their experience it became apparent that “learning to act on reflection is complex” (Wold, 2003, p. 66). Actions based on reflective teaching raise important and sophisticated questions about teachers’ understandings (p. 65). Wold believes that change in deep-level teaching and learning happens when teachers become aware of what is needed to make themselves “smarter” about effective teaching. This awareness of their own strengths and needs helps teachers act on improving practice once they have decided to monitor the effects of their teaching. How do we as educators help teachers become aware of their own thinking? It appears that high quality teachers are able to make this leap from being told how to change to changing themselves. However, these teachers need ample opportunities to develop and hone their ability to reflect on their teaching and change accordingly. Like learning anything new, teachers need good coaches of reflection and time to practice reflection in their daily lives.

Reflective practice is a powerful approach to professional development (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). It is an integrated way of thinking and acting focused on learning and behavioral change; it is individuals working to improve organizations through improving themselves. Reflective practice is based on the beliefs that organizational change begins with us, that unless we change behaviors organizations will not change, and that many blocks to change are rooted in unexamined assumptions guiding our stable behavioral patterns (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). Reflective practice takes a more optimistic perspective toward change: Organizational change is possible and individuals have the power to create it. “Reflective practice, like an orchid, requires special
conditions to thrive. One of the most important elements in the environment is trust” (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, p. 43). Another condition that supports reflective practice is open communication: people speak freely to one another about their ideas, concerns, successes, and failures (p. 178).

Quality teacher reflection has the potential to not only impact student learning, but how schools improve as well. If one was to imagine all of the possibilities for school improvement through teacher reflection, one might become inundated with opportunities. Some examples of school benefits are guidance for new career teachers, bridging theory and practice, consideration of multiple perspectives, embedded means of formative assessment, deepened understanding of role and identity, strengthened relationships and connections among staff, and greater professionalism and voice (York-Barr et al., 2006).

The Connection

*Instruction, Assessment, and Reflection*

Before I begin discussing how I see teacher reflection, assessment, and instruction play into my future research, I think it is important to discuss the relationship between these three entities. In many current teacher education programs, classroom management, knowledge of curriculum, and professional development are examples of domains that teachers need to show proficiency in. Along with these competencies, teacher reflection is also part of many teacher education programs. Solid, quality instruction would be the end result of many teacher education programs. However, do our schools of education adequately prepare young teachers for the reality found within the walls of schools? Is teacher reflection something that can be taught sitting in a classroom or do some
people intuitively just know how to do it? If we are to think of assessment, are teachers expected to reflect on assessment results and modify their instruction accordingly?

I make the claim that if assessment, both formative and summative, is put into practice accurately, teacher reflection is a natural succession, and instruction should be affected. According to Atkin, Coffey, Moorthy, Sato, & Thibeault (2005) reflecting on assessment quickly spreads to other aspects of teaching, such as curriculum, planning, and management (p. 79). Reflecting on the various activities and programs that occur in a classroom allows the teacher to differentiate his or her instruction to meet the needs of all of his/her students. In a differentiated classroom, a teacher continuously examines ongoing assessment data for individuals as a means of adapting “up-front” teaching plans so that they address particular learner needs (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 71). Reflecting on student assessment in particular is necessary for formative assessment to be implemented successfully.

If we look at some of the guiding questions behind formative assessment, reflection is used to help search for answers. “Where am I now? Where am I going? How can I close the gap?” Now these are questions that can be answered by both teacher and student, and should. The idea that learning is a meaning making process that requires active participation is strengthened when investigating the above questions and searching out answers. Since formative assessment is an active process resulting in an active reflective process, the ability to make on the spot instructional judgments will occur.

*Changing Classroom Practice*

As I have shown earlier, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam have done extensive
research in the area of formative assessment. In an article written by Wiliam (2008) he organizes several pieces to the assessment process that support my claim that instruction, assessment, and teacher reflection are inextricably linked together to improve student learning.

Wiliam (2008) refers to a previous written article where he identifies criteria that teachers must follow. Clarify and share learning intentions, and criteria for success, engineer effective classroom discussions, questions, and learning tasks, provide feedback that moves learners forward, activate students as the owners of their own learning, and encourage students to be instructional resources for one another (p. 37). If we examine these tasks, teachers and students are being asked to do several things to improve instruction and learning.

Again I make the claim that one cannot set out to clarify and share learning intentions without pausing and reflecting on the process. If I the teacher am attempting to engineer effective classroom discussions, I need to stop and think (or reflect) how do I want this to look, and what do I hope the students will gain from this? To provide an illustration to this process it is similar to the result when someone braids hair. To create a braid you take three individual pieces of hair and intertwine them until there are no more single strands but one larger unified braid. Instruction, assessment, and reflection become the braid. They flow together creating one unique design.

Teaching is inextricably linked to learning; therefore, teaching is a two-way process. Teaching about teaching should extend teachers’ and students’ views of teaching and learning, and this extension is dependent upon reflection on both the teaching and learning that occurs; it follows that reconsidering one’s actions reframing (Schon,
1983) problematic situations, mulling over the flow of suggestions, and reasoning through implication of alternative views and testing hypotheses (Dewey, 1933) are the cornerstones of reflection (Loughran, 1997, p. 63).

Chapter III: Research Methods

Open any educational journal and you will find numerous articles that are grounded in research. The authors of the articles highlight their research methods and data collection and how this will impact the analysis and conclusion of the article. In this chapter, I will introduce the research method that my dissertation is centered around and how it will be used during the data collection and analysis sections of this paper.
I will be honest when I knew that I wanted to pursue my doctorate, the thought of conducting research on a topic seemed intimidating and daunting. This is not to say that I do not value research; on the contrary I find educational research fascinating and worthwhile. However, conducting a research project myself seemed like something way out of my league, like something only professionals with degrees in educational research do.

It was during my class in Interpretive Research where I had to interview someone, transcribe that interview, and then analyze it, that I started to realize that I enjoyed the personal component, the connection, of interpretive research. This is not to say that I excelled at asking the “right” questions and finding appropriate themes to pull out. I actually had to do two different interviews because my first one was so pitiful. Having to conduct a second interview allowed me to focus on my listening skills and how to ask questions to get more meaningful answers. I enjoyed listening and visualizing someone’s experience. It was then that I knew I needed to do something that would involve close contact with others.

Another aspect that has influenced how my research has developed is my desire to learn more about teaching; what are some of the nuances and tricks of the trade that people speak of. As classroom teachers, we do not have the luxury to go into each other’s classrooms and see how things work and what approaches to use in various situations. It is the times that I have visited other rooms that I have found to be most rewarding. I am one of those people who needs to read something and see something before I can do it myself. I began to wonder if there were others out there like me who also need that first hand experience. This was another reason to use an interpretive lens to conduct
Methodology and Method

“Research methodology refers to the logic and theoretical perspective for a research project” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In contrast, “Research methods are plans used in the pursuit of knowledge. They are outlines of investigative journeys, laying out previously developed paths, which, if followed by researchers are supposed to lead to valid knowledge” (Polkinghorne, 1989). Looking at it from an educator’s point of view, methodology correlates to the objectives whereas methods would be the activities used to master the objectives.

When people think of research the words qualitative and quantitative are used to describe what kind of research is being done. Individuals assume data that involves numbers or low participant participation is considered quantitative. In contrast, research that both investigates subjectivity and relies heavily on engagement with participants is considered qualitative.

“Qualitative research refers to a particular perspective on the nature of the human realm and is not simply a category of research designs. From the qualitative perspective, the richness and profundity of human reality is seen as closely related to the structures and meanings of natural language.” (Polkinghorne, 1989, pp. 45) Polkinghorne continues to say that qualitative research uses natural language descriptions (for example, unstructured interviews) for its data and usually presents the results in natural language.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) qualitative research is multimethod in
focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials-case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals’ lives.

Creswell (1998) continues to define qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.

In other work done by Polkinghorne (1995) he suggests that the term narrative is used by qualitative researchers with a variety of meanings. He argues that narrative within narrative inquiry is “a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot” (p. 5). Polkinghorne also suggests assuming that narrative is one of the operations of the realm of meaning and therefore the examination of this realm would aid in the understanding of narrative. He concludes that:

Narrative meaning is one type of meaning produced by the mental realm. It principally works to draw together human actions and the events that affect human beings, and not relationships among inanimate objects. Narratives create its meaning by noting the contributions that actions and events make to a particular outcome and then configure these parts into a whole episode. (p. 6)
When professionals are discussing research techniques and designs, the word rigor may surface in certain conversations. From an historical perspective, qualitative research, or more specifically interpretive research, has not been perceived as having as much rigor as more positivistic forms of research because it does “not make data and explanatory schemes as public and replicable as possible” (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Politicians and individuals who are charged with making educational decisions and law often look for numbers. People want to see clear cut examples of improved education or correlations between academic programs and academic success. Some of these people believe that results come in the form of numbers, charts, or graphs. I disagree that all research needs to employ numbers and charts. Some of the best research comes from examining the interactions and language between individuals and/or groups, and this is best pursued in an interpretive style of research.

What interpretive researchers bring to any situation, particularly an educational one, are the meanings, beliefs, feelings, emotions, and frustrations of people, specifically educators, and how this affects their work within the classroom. The information gathered from interpretive researchers within an educational context can have implications for current and perspective educators.

*Interpretive Research*

Qualitative research for education takes many forms and is conducted in many settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Some might even say that qualitative research forms an umbrella over several methodologies that share similar methods of research. However, I do not think those definitions alone provide enough information to us, the readers about the researcher’s intentions. In work conducted by Frederick Erickson (1986) he speaks
to this very issue. “What makes such work interpretive or qualitative is a matter of substantive focus and intent, rather than of procedure in data collection, that is a research technique does not constitute a research method” (p. 120). I think this is important for us to remember, whether we are conducting the research or just reading the results. Erickson continues to say that there are two major approaches to classroom research, positivistic/behaviorist and interpretive.

Interpretive research according to Erickson (1986) is the whole family of approaches to participant observational research. Erickson continues to say that this type of research is more inclusive, avoids the connotation of defining these approaches as essentially non-quantitative, and focuses on human meaning in social life (Erickson, 1986). Wolcott (1994) states that, “qualitative researchers need to be storytellers. That, rather than any disdain for number crunching, ought to be one of their distinguishing attributes (p. 17). I like the comparison of a qualitative researcher to storyteller. When you think of a storyteller, you think of detail, meaning, and emotion. That is what many researchers set out to do when they are looking at research through an interpretive lens. These researchers accept the ambiguity that might come from their work and the real possibility that no one right answer will emerge. This is a delicate line that is walked in interpretive research.

Erickson categorizes qualitative, observational, and case study research as examples of interpretive research. Erickson states “objective” analysis of “subjective” meaning is thus of the essence in social research, including research on teaching, in the view of interpretive researchers (p. 127). Therefore, the term interpretive research will be used throughout the remainder of this paper when discussing research that involves
personal relationships between participant and researcher. In an interpretive approach, it views knower and known as being much more closely involved with one another (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982).

Erickson (1986) believes that the primary significance of interpretive approaches to research on teaching concerns issues of content rather than issues of procedure.

If interpretive research will have a significant role in educational research, it will be because of what interpretive research has to say about its central substantive concerns: a) the nature of classrooms as socially and culturally organized environments for learning, b) the nature of teaching as one, but only one, aspect of the reflexive learning environment, and c) the nature (and content) of the meaning-perspectives of teacher and learner as intrinsic to the educational process. (p. 120)

Looking at this from an educational framework, effective teaching is seen not as a set of generalized attributes of a teacher or of students. Rather, “effective teaching is seen as occurring in the particular and concrete circumstances of the practice of a specific teacher with a specific set of students ‘this year,’ ‘this day,’ and ‘this moment’ (just after a fire drill)” (Erickson, 1986, p. 130). You ask any teacher how things are going and the likely response is, “So far, so good.” Schools are dynamic institutions that are in constant change. What might happen in a classroom today may never again occur in that very same classroom. Through interpretive research, a picture can be painted that utilizes color and shade so the reader feels that he/she has just stepped into that classroom, on that day, for that specific time.

Moustakas (1994) has identified several features that bond interpretive
research together. The first feature is recognizing the value of qualitative designs and methodologies, studies of human experiences that are not approachable through quantitative approaches. Another feature of interpretive research is the ability to focus on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts. Interpretive researchers spend their time searching for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations. The fourth feature that Moustakas identifies is the ability to obtain descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews. Moustakas continues to say that the data of experience is imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations. The sixth feature in interpretive research is formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher. Finally, interpretive researchers view experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole (p. 21).

Wolcott (1994) asserts that the “real mystique of qualitative inquiry lies in the processes of using data rather than in the processes of gathering data” (p. 1). He continues to say that the problem is not getting the data, but figuring out what to do with the data you get. I think it is important to stop and think about these two statements. Almost any individual can go into a school and observe what is going on; how the students interact, what the teachers are like, and how the administration is run. What is gained through research of an interpretive style is the complexity and dynamics of school situations. For example, if an individual observes student interactions within a classroom for several months numerous field notes will be collected on those observations.
However, it is the researchers’ job to dig even deeper, analyze, and interpret those interactions among students. What do the interactions say about the classroom community or even the larger school community?

In what might seem trivial to some in educational research lies the depth of an interpretive experience to others. What is fascinating about interpretive research is that it can take on numerous forms and look different to different people. The analysis of the data collected in interpretive research is based upon the experience of the researcher. An interpretive researcher strives to collect enough “moments” and “snapshots” to provide readers with a visual understanding of an experience.

Wolcott (1994) also defines qualitative research in another way. “In the very act of constructing data out of experience, the qualitative researcher singles out some things as worthy of note and relegates others to the background” (p. 13). With each visit to a classroom or discussion with a teacher, I had the opportunity to draw out experiences that I felt were worthy and beneficial. My data collection was skewed with what I felt were the “important” things to discover. The choice of words I used to describe the various observations and the voice I attached to them helped strengthen my argument to use qualitative research within a school setting.

“Description is the foundation upon which qualitative research is built…Here you become the storyteller, inviting the reader to see through your eyes what you have seen…Start by presenting a straightforward description of the setting and events. No footnotes, no intrusive analysis—just the facts, carefully presented and interestingly related at an appropriate level of detail” (p. 28).
Wolcott continues to say, “interpretation is well suited to mark a threshold in thinking and writing at which the researcher transcends factual data and cautious analyses and begins to probe into what is to be made of them” (p. 36). This statement is at the heart of what an interpretive researcher sets out to do; taking data collected and make analyses of them.

Why Interpretive Research

With the basic understanding of interpretive research and its importance in an educational context, I would like to share how it fits with the data I have collected. Throughout my dissertation journey, I have focused my data collection around these few questions: How do teachers utilize personal reflection and how does it play into their teaching? How do teachers plan for and make use of assessment data? How are teacher reflection, assessment, and instruction linked together in classroom practice and the improvement of student learning?

Along with these central, guiding questions, several others have arisen. When teacher reflection and assessment are studied does it help to guide instruction? If reflection and assessment are used for instructional purposes, is that important and/or necessary? Finally, does the learning environment that both teachers and students work in impact reflection and learning?

When I look at these questions, I feel that I am searching for something that expresses meanings, emotions, and desires, rather than something that is quantifiable. This is why I chose to do my research within the interpretive framework. I have stepped into classrooms and experienced what it is like to be in that certain place at that certain
time. I wanted to study teachers at an in-depth level and analyze what it means to use assessment and reflection. I wanted to critically examine why one teacher says or acts in one way and another teacher does the opposite. With the energy and time spent on assessments, I wanted to see how teachers viewed assessments and how they integrated them into their classrooms. If I were to look at this from an epistemological perspective, I wanted to strengthen the relationship between the research participants and myself. Qualitative researchers interact with those they study, whether this interaction assumes the form of living with or observing informants over a prolonged period of time or actual collaboration (Creswell, 1998).

Knowing that I am instruction, assessment, and reflection it would be natural to become a reflective practitioner throughout the data collection and analysis of my research. Reflection is an integral element of effective research, and incorporating a reflexive account into social research essentially means clearly explaining and deconstructing exactly what is going on in the research process (O’Connor, 2007, p. 256). While I observed, listened, and analyzed the collected data, I reflected on my own teaching experience, the research questions that frame my work, and the future goals I have as an educator.

Research Design and Purpose

Purpose of Study

With the background information and research methodology in place, the purpose of this study needs to be vocalized. Not only am I studying teachers in their classrooms and the reactions they have with students on a daily basis, but more specifically I am
looking at the connection between instruction, assessment, and reflection and what, if any, these three concepts have on student learning. With the illustrations and descriptions from my research participants, it is my intent to show that instruction, assessment, and reflection are woven together to produce highly effective learning environments.

Setting

I was fortunate to have had an already established relationship with an elementary school that agreed to help me with this research project. Some might say that this was a double-edged sword. Having been a teacher working alongside individuals who have agreed to work with me could have become a sticky situation. I have relationships that were already created with these individuals so professionalism and trust were crucial components of my research.

In addition to only working with teachers, I only worked with elementary teachers. I do think it would be interesting to look at the similarities and differences between elementary and secondary teachers, but for the purposes of this project I remained at the elementary level. I did research in kindergarten, second, third, and fourth grade classrooms. I worked with these classroom teachers during the school day with the intent to gain as detailed a picture of instruction, assessment, and teacher reflection as possible.

The school where the data collection took place was an elementary school in the Midwest area of the country. The building had a student population under 500 at the time. This specific building was similar to many elementary buildings in that it had kindergarten through grade five. In addition to general elementary classrooms, there
were also special education, English as a Second Language, and Title I classrooms that served parts of the student population. This building was a pilot site for the district’s role out of specialization at the fourth and fifth grade level.

The demographics of this school were as follows: 78% White, 3% American Indian, 7% Asian, 11% Black, and 1% Hispanic. The percentage of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students was 7%, percentage of students receiving special education services was 14%, and the percentage of students who participated in the Free/Reduced Lunch program was 31%.

In comparison, the demographics for the entire district are as follows: 1% American Indian, 6% Asian, 9% Black, 4% Hispanic, 79% White, LEP 7%, Special Education 12%, and Free/Reduced 26%.

I feel it is important to take note of the demographics first at the school level and then at the district level. The school where this study took place was similar to the larger district in that the majority of students were white with a smaller percentage of non-white students. The make-up of the student population might be representative of that particular area, but not necessarily state wide or even region wide. This information might be important to individuals reading the teacher descriptions and analysis sections as they try and find similar trends in their own districts and/or classrooms.

Along with the building description and demographic information, it is important to note the building climate and administrators’ expectations of teachers. To some individuals this building may seem like a figment of the imagination. This particular building administrator had high expectations for both teachers and students. Teachers were expected to collect data at the grade and classroom level and adjust instruction to
meet the changing needs of students. Teachers looked at data including demographics, ESL and special education information to plan instruction accordingly.

Staff meetings centered on instruction and assessment data and what needed to improve to have the greatest impact on student learning. Teachers were given latitude in their instructional planning and design as long as it was meeting the needs of the students.

Participants

Since I was already working in this school I looked to my colleagues to help support this research study. Initially I sent out a survey to classroom teachers explaining the expectations and desires for this project and the work that it would involve. Out of a staff of 15, five individuals expressed a willingness to participate in the study. I worked closely with these five teachers during the second part of the school year. These teachers ranged in experience and grades taught. Even though the school housed several different programs for students, including enrichment, ESL, and special education, I chose to work only with classroom teachers for this project. The individuals who worked with me understood the nature and desire of my data collection and future research goals. These individuals were excited and eager to work closely with me to study their classrooms and teaching practices. I worked collaboratively and closely with these teachers to thoroughly involve them in my research project. Here are snap shots of each participant.

Lois at the time of this study taught third grade and has been teaching for 30+ years. She has taught grades first, second, third, and multi-age 1-3. Lois holds a PhD from an accredited university and also works as an adjunct professor in literacy at two

1 All Names Have Been Changed
local colleges. Lois is a professional of the utmost caliber. Walking into her room one will find students busily interacting with each other, conversing over books, or reworking a story. Lois spends a great deal of time creating a classroom culture where it is apparent that each child is valued and respected. One might say that Lois gives her students a great deal of leeway in their daily activities, but the children are extremely engaged in various academic interests.

Mary, like Lois, has been teaching for 30+ years. She holds a Masters in Curriculum and Instruction and a K-12 administrative certificate. In addition to teaching in Minnesota, Mary has spent time teaching overseas. At the time of this study, Mary taught fourth grade and before that she taught 4/5 multi-age. Upon first glance, one might find Mary intense and intimidating. She has a commanding presence inside and outside of the classroom. In my frequent meetings with Mary I learned her true passion for teaching and her desire to help her students succeed. Mary has extremely high expectations, which she does not shy away from, but that parents have come to admire and respect.

At the time of this study Tracy was a kindergarten teacher who had been in the classroom for three years. Tracy teaches the all day every day kindergarten class. In addition to teaching kindergarten, Tracy has also worked with our Title I students. Every time I see Tracy, teaching kindergarten never crosses my mind. I guess I think of kindergarten teachers as people who wear jumpers and themed sweaters. Tracy is nothing like that and her classroom is not your typical kindergarten room either. Her students are given books from day one and the importance of literature is instilled in them throughout the school year. Tracy is extremely compassionate and nurturing and students thrive within her classroom.
Jennifer is another kindergarten teacher, who taught all day every other day. Jennifer had two sections of students. Jennifer was in her second year of teaching and she came out of a school with a strong education program. Similar to Tracy, Jennifer at first glance does not seem like your standard kindergarten teacher. Jennifer expects a great deal of work from her students each day. Jennifer has high expectations for her students and maintains a safe and positive environment for her classes.

Sue was a second grade teacher who was finishing her first year of teaching during the study. I was blown away every time I entered Sue’s classroom. Her knowledge of child development and curriculum were like someone who has been teaching for years. She has a great deal of empathy for each of her students and helps each child achieve his or her potential. Sue is constantly reflecting on her teaching and in ways she thinks she needs to improve. Sue was a very willing participant in my project and offered rich insight into a teacher’s mind. I often found myself looking at my notes from discussions with Sue when I was teaching my own classroom.

I feel fortunate to have such a wide range of experience and knowledge with each of these participants. The differences between the teachers is wide, which made for some great discussions during our focus group sessions.

Data Collection

There are four basic types of information to collect: observations, interviews, documents, and audio-visual materials (Creswell, 1998). Each of these types of data has the unique potential to build a rich, thorough descriptive narrative that can tell a story. Through this intensive data collection, individuals will be able to “see, hear, and feel”
what it is to be a teacher in a classroom making instructional judgments day after day.

Having the background and experience of a classroom teacher, I entered each classroom with a framework that I had formed around my teaching. This framework had also been shaped from my background knowledge of assessment, reflection, and instruction. To ensure I collected data accurately, I needed to be as deliberate as possible (Erickson, 1986, p. 140). This process unfolded through my observations of classroom teachers in their classrooms as well as in in-depth interviews. I have taken notes, writing down what I saw, heard, and felt. I recorded conversations so I could go back and listen to certain phrases and ideas. “A major strength of participant observation is the opportunity to learn through active participation—one can test one’s theory of the organization of an event by trying out various kinds of participation in it (Erickson, 1986, p. 144). Through interviews and observations I have actively collected rich, detailed data.

Through these visits to the classroom, either to speak to the teacher individually or observe her in action, I was bombarded with data. I could sit and talk with teachers all day. I also think teachers enjoy the opportunity to express their thoughts, frustrations, triumphs, and joys. It has been rewarding to step into classrooms and watch teaching in action. The participating teachers and I agreed that I would not tell them exactly what time I would be in their classrooms. We all agreed that just “popping in” would be much more authentic and valuable to our goal in collecting this research.

What has also been interesting during these classroom visits is the reaction of the students. The first few times I entered the classrooms you could tell there was a little more “excitement” occurring. However, once the children realized that I was coming in frequently and I was not something special, the normalcy of classroom activity
commenced. One would say that things were not prescribed at all. I witnessed outbursts from students and frustrations from teachers. I felt like I gained a great deal of information in the sessions.

In addition to interviews and observations, I also held focus groups with all of the participating teachers. What transpired from the focus groups were rich discussions of what it means to be a teacher in the 21st century. Instruction, assessment, and reflection were topics that were discussed in great length. These times were ones where we shared joys and frustrations with regard to what was happening in each classroom. So often, teachers do not have the opportunity to share with each other in an environment that is safe and understanding. What is important to note is that in both the classroom observations and the discussion group, teachers were not been evaluated in any sort of way. What I reiterated to them is that my presence was to collect data and analyze that data so other teachers can benefit from their wisdom.

I think the focus group meetings were where I learned the most from the teachers. Watching and observing them in action with each other was fascinating. I came to the meetings with a few pre-selected questions. I did this to make sure we had something to talk about. These questions came from my observations within the classrooms. What normally happened during our discussions though is we got to one of my questions and then the teachers started asking each other different questions and talking about their own experiences. I just sat back and listened to all of the dialogue that occurred. I think what made the discussions so powerful is the differences among the teachers themselves. Their individual experiences and knowledge greatly impacted how they felt and responded to various situations.
Here is an example of a discussion our group had centered around assessment.

M: We are constantly testing students! Yes, it can beneficial to gain information about students, but when does it get to be too much?

T: Well for me I don’t have the assessment data you do. I have to rely on observations and interviews with five and six year olds.

L: I feel that the formative assessments that I use within my classroom provide much more information about student progress than anything else. Having students take the MCAs really doesn’t help me as a teacher because I don’t get the results until the summer and the students are no longer in my classroom.

S: I do like the MAP tests that we took in the fall. I was able to break down my students strengths and weaknesses by strands in reading and math. This helped in my planning, but it was also a great conversation tool to use with parents during conferences. (Focus Group 3/23/07)

In addition to my questions, I had the teachers bring assessment examples and asked them to read three different articles on assessment and reflection for further discussion. I could not have asked for a more enlightening way to collect data. A couple of the teachers were even interested in keeping this group going through the next school year to see if any of our thoughts and feelings had changed.

While the above examples may be classified as formal methods of data collection, there were also opportunities for informal data gathering. Since I was teaching at the same school where I was collecting data, I had many conversations with the research participants outside of the regular data collection. These opportunities came from conversations in the teacher’s lounge, while we were in the copy room, or even just
walking into the building in the morning. I feel I was fortunate to have had the relationships built between myself as the researcher and my five teacher participants. This allowed for more data to be collected in the most interesting places.

To collect the necessary data for my work I made a set schedule for observations and interviews. The need for high frequency of data collection was important in order to pull out key linkages amongst the participating teachers as well as look for connections between assessment, reflection, and instruction. I met with each teacher once a week for either an interview or classroom observation. I had hoped that through our discussions in the interviews, the teachers would want to show me examples of their practice, resulting in a classroom observation. With this set up, classroom observations and interviews alternated weeks. Our focus groups met bi-monthly and we followed an agenda that I created through our comments from our previous meetings. Taking into consideration the frequency of my data collection this is what has been collected during a period of five months:

1. Field notes of observations in classrooms and of experiences with teacher interviews and focus groups.

2. Audio tapes of interviews and focus groups.

3. School documents, including student work, teacher plans, and formal assessments.

Below is a table that shows the number of hours that were spent with each teacher during the data collection process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Classroom Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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### Data Analysis

According to Erickson (1986) when completing a written report of the data, there are elements that allow a reader to do three things. First they allow the reader to experience vicariously the setting that is described, and to confront instances of key assertions and analytic constructs. Second, these elements allow the reader to survey the full range of evidence on which the author’s interpretive analysis is based. Third, they allow the reader to consider the theoretical and personal grounds of the author’s perspective as it changed during the course of the study (p. 145).

As I collected my field notes, I prepared analytic memos. Simply, analytic memos are summaries of field notes over a given period of time. To help me organize and collect my data, I used the analytic memos to help me find linkages during several parts of the data collection process rather than waiting until I collected all of my data. As the analytic memos accumulate, they are likely to become the heart of the final set of ideas.

During the analysis of the data, I looked for key linkages among various items of data (Erickson, 1986, p. 147). A key linkage is key in that it is of central significance for the major assertions I want to make. The key linkage is linking in that it connects up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Hours/Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lois</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1
many items of data as analogous instances of the same phenomenon. In searching for key linkages I looked for patterns of generalization within the case at hand, rather than for generalization from one case or setting to another.

Along with looking at key linkages, analytic narratives are the foundation of an effective report of fieldwork research. The narrative vignette is a vivid portrayal of the conduct of an event of everyday life, in which the sights and sounds of what was being said and done are described in the natural sequence of their occurrence in real time. The moment-to-moment style of description in a narrative vignette gives the reader a sense of being there in the scene (Erickson, 1986, p. 150). The way the vignette is written up should match the author’s interpretive purposes and should communicate that perspective clearly to the reader. The vignette fulfills its purpose in the report to the extent that its construction as a narrative presents to the reader a clear picture of the interpretive point the author intends by telling the vignette (Erickson, 1986, p. 150). Examples of narrative vignettes in this dissertation can be found in chapters five and six.

With all of these different tools to look at the data, I have been able to write about what it is like to be in a classroom and the various dynamics that occur in a teacher’s day. From creating analytic memos, linkages, and vignettes, I am able to illustrate to others what a teacher’s life is like on a daily basis. With the collected data and the analysis that follows I have also been able to show how instruction, assessment, and reflection work together to better student learning.
Chapter IV: Veteran Teachers

What We Can Learn From Their Experience

Throughout chapter four, I introduce two of the five teachers that my dissertation is based on. When meeting these two teachers, one might assume that their only connection in teaching is that they have been doing it for a long time. However, it is through their years of experience, knowledge of various curricula, and how children learn best that ties them together.

Lois

“Teaching is all about engagement, keeping the learner engaged at their level in a meaningful lesson” (Interview, 2/6/07).
The first time I met Lois was at a first grade teacher’s workshop where she was
presenting. I was a brand new first grade teacher attending this workshop with my
colleagues and still unsure of myself as a teacher. Lois was presenting breakout sessions
on guided reading and the benefit of using guided reading within the classroom. She was
confident and knowledgeable about reading and inspired me immediately.

Lois is a tall woman, with gentle blue eyes and a heart the size of Texas. Lois has
her PhD., in literacy education, but has chosen to remain doing what she loves, teaching
children. Lois’ love of teaching, especially reading, is evident in the vast amount of
books she has all around her room. Lois’ calm and welcoming presence helped ease my
nerves as I entered her classroom the first time.

During my first interview with all of the participants, I posed the same question:
“What is your philosophy of education?” I thought this question would be a good
icebreaker as well as something to connect each of the participants. That is what I
expected.

“Students learn better through personal connections, especially with the teacher. I
feel it is my job to nurture this relationship constantly, always being aware of what my
students are doing and what I need to do to help them move along” (Interview 2/6/07). As
I listened to this response, I could tell that Lois’ compassion and love for each of her
students was evident. “My students come to me with a wide range of experiences and
opportunities. I need to take where my students are and help them move along.”
(Interview 2/6/07)

Lois continued to say in the interview that the need to build a classroom
community is crucial. Students need to feel safe to make mistakes and this needs to be constantly reminded to students. Lois helped foster classroom community by having morning meetings and using a responsive classroom approach to management. Lois also knew the strengths and weaknesses of her students. Lois gets to know her students on a personal level and shares a lot about her life with them. An example of this is Lois’ obsession (yes she would call it that) with Walt Disney World and Mickey Mouse. Lois’ classroom is filled with pictures from trips she has taken with her family. Each one of Lois’ students could tell you who was in the picture, where it was taken, and why. In turn, Lois’ students share their personal lives with her. Students invite Lois to baseball games and dance recitals. In addition to teaching, Lois also develops a strong bond with her students and their personal lives.

During my next interview with Lois I wanted to get more information about her teaching. Below are some of her responses to my questions.

A: How do you modify your teaching?
L: It’s a combination of many things. I redirect, continually check for understanding, I am touching base constantly. I need to see where we are as a classroom and where I need to provide more support in my instruction for students.
A: What happens when a student just does not get it?
L: I look at my instruction first. I firmly believe that I can modify how I am teaching to meet the needs of my students. I might rephrase a question or provide some guiding thoughts to my students. (Interview 2/22/07)
Lois welcomes everyone and anyone into her classroom. This includes district curriculum specialists; on several occasions Lois’ classroom has been used for district staff development. She stands at the doorway each morning greeting her students and inviting them in to learn. Students pass through the door with smiles on their faces and excitement visible through their body language. No one is turned away or made to feel unwanted. One of Lois’ best traits as a teacher is how she instills respect in each of her students. Lois works extremely hard in instilling respect for others with her students.

A: What do you hope your students will learn in your classroom?
L: Not only do I want my students to learn the appropriate curriculum, but also I want them to learn the importance of respect for others and their beliefs. I want my students to develop a sense of compassion for each other with the intent they will grow into productive members of our community. (Interview 2/22/07)

Do not get me wrong, learning is occurring all day long. Students are organized into table groups that are of a diverse make-up. Students are taught from day one that everyone has something of value to contribute and that everyone will feel safe. In all of my visits to her room, Lois never raised her voice, sent a student down to the office, or asked someone to stay in from recess. Lois modeled what treating others with respect looks like with each of her students. However it is important to say that Lois’ classroom is well run and efficient. Lois’ classroom management begins with the classroom community she has created.
I was in awe of her. My classroom never looked like this. Lois even has park benches in the corner where as she says, “we do most of our learning.” How couldn’t someone enjoy reading when you feel like you are outside at the park? During one visit students were utilizing the benches for a discussion about a text that they were all reading. Students were in groups of three or four with each member of the group using parts of the text to emphasize a point he/she was making. When students were not discussing the book they were writing down their own responses in their reading journals. It was like a grown-up book club in third grade!

I used my next interview with Lois to dig a little deeper into how well her classroom is run and how her students manage themselves around the room. I wanted to learn more about the social atmosphere that is apparent in her classroom.

A: I noticed that the students in your classroom are always busy; they are walking and talking with each other while you are walking around monitoring.

L: Learning is a social experience. Whether we are reading books or discussing how to attempt a multiplication problem, I want my students to rely on each other. I am not going to sit up and lecture to them. I also do not see myself as the expert in the room on everything. Each child has a gift to bring to our room and it should be treasured.

(Interview 3/5/07)

As I continued spending time in Lois’ classroom, it became very apparent how information is passed to students. There was very little whole group instruction happening. Instead, Lois was often moving around the classroom between individual
students or small groups. Lois conducted numerous interviews and conferences with her students to “check in” and see how they were doing. When I asked Lois about this at a subsequent interview she said, “I use those check in points to gauge how the students are doing as well as myself. I do not need a formal test to know if my students are on the right track or if we need to go back and revisit something. I am constantly modifying my instruction and adjusting it where I need to.” (Interview 3/12/07)

This statement by Lois made me think about reflecting on teaching. Again I asked Lois about reflecting on her teaching and she responded by saying that “I don’t do anything formally, but I am always thinking about what I am doing and what I need to do next.” This response fascinated me for two reasons. First, Lois made it seem like reflecting and teaching go hand in hand, something that is not apparent in every classroom. Second, Lois made the reflection process manageable and doable for her classroom. To reflect, from Lois’ point of view, was just “what good teachers did.”

I think this comment from Lois also emphasizes the importance of formative assessment. Lois is able to do a “temperature check” of her class in an informal way while still gathering information about her teaching. I saw first hand Lois converse with students about reading and writing. Lois’ students shared their knowledge and where they were individually while Lois guided the instructional process. Lois listened first and gave feedback second. While giving feedback, Lois would guide students to what she actually wanted them to do without telling them. Lois’ instruction allowed for students to think for themselves under parameters set up by her. The students felt like they were making their own choices about what they were learning, but Lois created the boundaries to
ensure they were learning what she wanted them to.

One morning I entered Lois’ room for a classroom observation. Since Lois places such an emphasis on classroom community and how that impacts student learning, Lois thought it best that I observe a morning meeting. As I stood in the doorway, it was evident that students knew what they were supposed to do and how their day would begin. Two of the students were working at the calendar board. Another student was passing out papers on desks. Two more students were taking attendance and lunch count. However, when the school morning announcements were finished, each child completed his or her job and made their way to the rug at the front. Students began greeting each other and discussing the daily schedule. The students were actively participating in the morning routine and it was apparent that this was a daily routine for all.

One might think Lois must have a small class size for her to provide such individualized instruction, but that could not be farther from the truth. Lois had 27 energetic, highly enthused third graders. Below is a small narrative vignette of one particular classroom observation that I witnessed.

As students gather on the carpet for morning meeting Lois waits to greet them all. “Good morning friends. I am happy to have you here today. I know that today will be a great day.” Students proceed to greet each other and say hello. Lois reviews the classroom pledge with students and then shares the schedule for the day. The transition from morning meeting to math is seamless. Students are asked to solve several problems individually and be ready to share with the whole class. Lois begins her discussion with, “show us your thinking.” The students remain where they are from morning meeting and begin to discuss math strategies. Lois calls on students who are willing to share “their
thinking” with the rest of the class. This process allows students to think out loud as well as question each other. Being that it is March, I can tell that the students spend many opportunities thinking and questioning together.

As I listen to the responses, I watch what Lois is doing as well. After she calls on a student, Lois sits back and lets the class take over the discussion. Lois has modeled and practiced thinking and questioning with her students so frequently that they can do it by themselves. What is important to know is that the discussion is not superficial or made up. I can tell that students are engaged and using their brainpower to construct meaning.

During this particular discussion, students are sharing their strategies for how to solve area problems using multiplication. Some students share the traditional approach of length multiplied by width, while a few students use some creative ways to solve the problems. Instead of telling the students they need to complete the math problem a certain way, Lois welcomes all of the students’ thoughts and makes each student feel like he or she has something worthwhile to contribute.

As this particular observation progresses, I continue to watch Lois and her interactions with the students. Lois never sits down for very long. She is moving around the room and monitoring students and their learning. What I also notice about Lois’ teaching is that many problems she poses to the class, be it math, science, social studies, or reading, are connected to real life. Lois uses examples within the classroom, school, or students’ lives to illustrate what she is teaching. For example, in the above math problem, Lois is explaining that she is trying to build a closet in her house that would hold the most “stuff.” Most of the students in the classroom have closets and understand the importance of having a big one. Not only do students benefit from this type of
teaching, but students who are struggling with concepts are able to apply the real world context to what they are working on. (Observation, 3/6/07)

Anyone who has worked with children or has children of their own knows how high their energy level is. Lois’ third grade class made me tired every time I stepped through the door, but Lois never appeared tired or drained. Since I was fascinated by her enthusiasm and energy level I decided to ask her about this and how it relates to student learning.

A: How do you maintain such a high level of energy with the students?
L: I feed off of the energy the students bring to the classroom. I make a conscious effort to provide real world opportunities for the students and let them construct their own meaning. When students are given opportunities to make their own meaning the learning becomes so much more powerful. This allows for excitement for all of us.

A: There has to be times though that a student brings an issue or a problem to class that has not been resolved and it is pushing into their academic life. What do you do then?
L: I have to remember that I am with these children for only seven hours a day. I cannot control what happens before or after school. All I can do is show my students that I care about them deeply and want them to succeed. (Interview 3/20/07)

As I continued to work with Lois and watch her teach, I continually thought of my knowledge of instruction, assessment, and reflection. How does Lois’ teaching compare and align with best practices and current research? I think one of the most important
pieces of my time with Lois is how prevalent all three pieces-instruction, assessment, and reflection—are within her teaching. Lois is able to weave the three concepts in many parts of her day. Each concept was not a separate entity in Lois’ classroom. She used reflection, assessment, and instruction in a thoughtful and purposeful way.

Knowing that part of my research interest focused on assessment, I wanted to learn more about how Lois assesses her students and how the assessment results play into her teaching. Below are Lois’ responses.

A: How do you assess students frequently during your teaching?
L: Questioning is a huge factor in how I am able to know exactly where my students are. I love open ended questions that lead into great discussions. I try extremely hard to stay away from questions that only allow for a one word response. It is important to be aware of how I ask a question and the wait time I provide. This helps bring everyone into the process. (Interview 3/5/07)

I liked Lois’ comment about bringing everyone into the process. This is exactly how you would find Lois’ classroom. There is a process to how she interacts with children and how she uses information to provide meaningful instruction. To help facilitate her questioning and how she uses it for her instruction, you will often see Lois with a clipboard in hand jotting little notes frequently as she makes her rounds throughout the classroom.

During the time that I spent working with Lois I thought of the work on 71
reflection, particularly “reflection-in-action.” This type of reflection occurs simultaneously while the teaching is occurring. Lois is a skillful teacher who understands the district curriculum backwards and forwards. She has been teaching for over 30 years and has accumulated an enormous amount of first-hand experience.

Another reason that I believe Lois is able to reflect simultaneously with her teaching is that her knowledge base of teaching and learning is large. She has devoted time and energy in her professional development to these topics because she knew it would impact her students. Third, Lois has been on several district level curriculum-writing teams. The experience of writing curriculum documents that you will eventually teach forces one to critically look at your own practice and make modifications.

Lois has been able to take all of these experiences and tailor them to impact her classroom instruction. I believe this is why Lois is able to reflect so well, so frequently, with so much impact on student learning. Her students enter the classroom knowing that their minds will be challenged both intellectually and emotionally within an environment that is nurturing.

A: Do you think your varied experiences impact your current teaching?
L: I would sure hope so! I would hope that I am not doing the same thing I was doing twenty years ago. That would be such a disservice to my students. If I expect them to become life long learners then I should better do the same. Have I witnessed a lot of trends and changes in education? Yes, and these certainly cloud my judgment and decision making, but I really hope for the better. When I first began teaching all of my students sat in straight rows with little interaction with each other. This style of
teaching completely contradicted who I am as a person. Since I am a social individual who needs to talk through learning, I need to provide that opportunity to students who might be similar to me. I also need to be cognizant of students who perform better alone in a quiet environment and support their learning that way as well. Teaching is such a work in progress. The day that I feel that I finally have mastered the job is the day that I need to retire. (Interview 3/22/07)

Along with Lois’ ability to reflect, her knowledge of how children learn best is something that I take away as well. This knowledge comes from a variety of areas, but one that stands out for me is when she was doing a mini-lesson for writer’s workshop. Prior to this lesson, Lois had spent quality time conferencing individually with students on how their writing was coming along. Lois noticed that a few students were having difficulty staying focused on one thought. Lois needed to make the decision about whether the rest of the class would benefit from the larger discussion. While reviewing other students’ stories she thought it best to come back as a group and discuss the writing process.

This was an example of using assessment (stories created by the students) to help guide instruction. Some of Lois’ students needed more clarification on the idea of one topic so she modified her teaching. Like in the previous example Lois also needed to reflect on this topic. What would be best for the students and their learning? What was impressive about this observation was that Lois did this in a non-threatening manner. From my perspective, it seemed that none of the students felt like they had done something wrong, but were given the chance to make their writing better.
Assessment can be a powerful force in classroom instruction. Sato and Atkin (2007) speak about the difficulty of, but necessity for, formative assessment. Their article highlights the students’ and teachers’ roles in using formative assessment to guide instruction. I think that Lois’ writer’s workshop time is an example of this process. Students were reflecting on their writing and understanding of the process and Lois was there to help them along. The article continues to speak about the opportunity for teachers to discuss and collaborate on formative assessments. Through Lois’ work at the district level she has been able to highlight her classroom practices for others to see.

Lois’ many different ways of assessing her students is done with a great deal of authenticity. Authentic assessment, like learning, occurs most naturally and lastingly when it is in a meaningful context and when it relates to authentic concerns and problems faced by students (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 96). Lois works tirelessly to foster individual construction of knowledge and assesses them accordingly. By having students work within the writing process, Lois is able to promote individual learning in an authentic way.

During another classroom observation Lois and her students were using their “learning logs” and making T-charts for a math activity. Since Lois was the only participant in my project that used learning logs, I wanted to learn more about them and their purpose in her classroom. I asked Lois a few questions about this.

A: How do you incorporate learning logs into your instruction and assessment?
L: The learning logs are a great tool of communication between the students and myself. They are almost like personal journals. Students can write notes, strategies, and
reflections and I read them weekly to see how we are doing as a class. These logs are very informal, but provide a great deal of information for me. I write little comments back to the students to stretch their thinking and the dialogue grows from there. I use the learning logs as conversation tools at conferences and parents sincerely appreciate being able to see concrete evidence of their child’s progress. (Interview 3/5/07)

Lois and her students have offered a great opportunity to learn about instruction, assessment, and reflection. Lois’ knowledge of teaching and learning intertwine instruction, assessment, and reflection on a daily basis. In addition to formal assessments, Lois places a great deal of emphasis on the informal opportunities that each day brings to learn more about her students and the progress they are making. Lois takes what she learns each day about her students to frame what will happen next. Lois uses curriculum documents, but also utilizes what her students bring everyday to school. Lois’ students drive her instruction and how it will be implemented. According to Lois, “I begin each day with a sketch of what I think will happen. Does this mean that things will go according to plan? Sometimes, but what often drives the day is what my students bring into the classroom.” (Interview 3/20/07)

Mary

“A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”

-Henry Adams

“To furnish the means of acquiring knowledge is…the greatest benefit that can be conferred upon mankind.”
Mary is someone who stands out during staff meetings. She has an opinion on many things and I think she enjoys hearing herself speak. Mary has taught for over thirty years in different places with different students. She can be a force to be reckoned with and does not expect anything but the best. I will admit that she made me nervous the first few times that I interacted with her. However, Mary’s knowledge of how children learn best has developed over the years to the point where she could teach with her eyes closed.

A: What is your philosophy of teaching?

M: I want to develop life long learners. I want my students to be self-motivated and I feel it is my job to stimulate that love of learning. I have taught all grade levels and know that motivation to learn can be difficult for some. I try to bring my experiences and mesh them together with student experiences. We are a team in this learning experience.

A: How do you approach the curriculum?

M: I continually look at research for best practices in teaching. I use the inquiry method with my students to help them develop critical thinking skills and question their world. I want to provide opportunities for my students to explore and investigate their learning. Since I teach the science and social studies piece of specialization I have an advantage. Students know when they enter the classroom doors they will work hard and that I have high expectations. At the same time, my students know that I will support their learning and growth in whatever ways possible. (Interview 2/26/07)
delivers it to her students. In comparison to Lois’ classroom, Mary does not spend as much time doing the “fluff” stuff as she says. “I love my students but I want to spend as much time teaching them about the world as possible” (Interview 2/26/07).

Knowing how important the curriculum is to Mary I wanted to learn more about her philosophy when it comes to assessing students and their learning.

A: How do assessments play into your teaching?

M: I use the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments or MCAs and Measure of Academic Progress or MAP tests to help my instruction, but I rely on what happens with my students day in and day out. Tests are such a prevalent piece in our system whether we like it or not. Can it be stressful and intense? Yes, but my students and I work together. I meet with students individually to discuss their performance on different assessments. I want them to be responsible for their learning. For example, we can use MAP results to help guide instruction. I break down the MAP results into strand distribution for both reading and math. Together students and I look at where their strengths are and what areas they need to work. At each step in this conversation students are involved. At conferences I also let families know test results because that home to school connection helps students see the importance of learning. (Interview 3/12/07)

During one of my classroom observations (3/6/07) Mary was sharing a story with students about her teaching career. Mary began teaching overseas and her stories fascinated not only her students, but me as well. In addition to Mary’s experience
teaching around the world she also has several advanced degrees that shape who she is as a teacher. I asked Mary some questions about her experience and education and how it impacts her current teaching practices.

A: Please talk about how your experience and education.

M: I have my bachelors, masters, gifted and talented certificate as well as administrative license. Many would think my experience in years helps, but I think it is my desire to improve my teaching. I have taught many different grades and have even taught overseas. I think all of these opportunities have influenced who I am as a teacher. I have spent a majority of my time in this district and believe me I have seen many things come and go. Curriculum, initiatives, and even students are always changing. I guess that is what keeps me young. I can not afford to become stagnant in my teaching. And at the same time that is what I love about teaching. Each year a new group of students enters the door and a new journey begins.

A: You mentioned to your class that you have taught in other places. Could you talk about that?

M: When I graduated college, I wanted to travel and see the world. I thought I could use my teaching degree to help me accomplish that. I spent some time in Western Africa as well as teaching for the Department of Defense schools in Europe. Both of these experiences allowed me to see how other countries value education and its role in the greater society. My teaching work overseas also shaped who I am as a teacher. I try and teach my students that there are many people who live on this Earth and each of us is just a small piece of a larger puzzle. (Interview 3/7/07)
In one of our conversations Mary mentioned the term specialization. The term specialization within the district that Mary teaches in means having teachers teach only certain subjects. Teachers participating in the specialization project are no longer responsible for the entire grade level curriculum, but focus and “specialize” in one particular area. The school where Mary teaches was one of four pilot schools for this project. Mary’s focus areas are science and social studies. Mary would begin the day with her “homeroom” class and then would rotate two other times during the day. In this framework, Mary was able to delve deeper into science and social studies. She was able to concentrate her time and energies on two curriculum areas instead of five or six.

Mary will be the first to admit that she was not happy about the “opportunity” to specialize her teaching. Mary takes pride in her knowledge of subject areas and wants to share that with her students. However, in one of our interviews Mary stated, “This specialization thing is the best idea the district has mandated for us. I am able to pour my soul into two curricular areas and feel that I am making a difference” (Interview 3/15/07).

Since Mary has such a wide array of experiences it was interesting to learn her perspective on the specialization of teaching within the elementary walls. This method of instruction seems to be more commonly seen in the secondary setting, but Mary has found a great deal of success with it in fourth grade.

A: What makes specialization of teaching successful in your room?

M: There is so much information that teachers need to cover in the nine months we have students. The standards that we use to guide our instruction cover so many things that
curriculum can be daunting to say the least. I became an elementary teacher because I liked being able to teach all the subject areas. I have taught in the middle school setting where I had to focus my teaching and really didn’t enjoy that. When the “opportunity” for this project came to our school it seemed to defeat the purpose of elementary education. I also felt like it would force my students to grow up a little faster than they would have to. However, now that we are entering the spring time of the school year and I have been doing this project for a few months my thoughts have changed. Am I still busy working with curriculum? Yes, but I only have to focus on two subjects instead of five. I feel I have grown as a teacher because I can put my heart and soul into my teaching and get more of the depth and understanding that I want my students to have.

( Interview 3/15/07 )

Mary’s experience in being one of the pilot classrooms for this project has allowed me to see curricular areas in greater detail. Educators’ days are so jam packed with things to do that some subjects don’t receive the same attention. Mary felt that she is strong in science and social studies and felt these two areas would serve her student’s best. An example of this passion comes in the form of the fourth grade regions book. Fourth grade students traditionally study the regions, states, and capitals of our country. These units take time, research, and energy from both students and teachers. With Mary’s block of time she can go in-depth with these units and have students create more meaningful projects. Below is a small vignette from a classroom observation during a fourth grade social studies lesson.

*Students are working on their region books. Each book needs to have maps.*
pertinent information, and student reflections. Mary uses these books as her assessment, both formatively and summatively, for the region units. Students are able to gain feedback on their progress and modify pieces as necessary. At the same time, Mary is able to gauge her instruction and adapt it when necessary.

“Now class, what do you think are some of the critical pieces that I should see in each book? Think about the rubric we looked at together. This does not need to be a guessing game. All of you are aware of what “has to be” in each book. You are given the freedom to decide how things are presented. Utilize the knowledge that your group members bring. You can always ask them clarifying questions. I want each group to produce a region book that is well organized and shares factual information about the particular region your are studying.”

After listening to Mary talk about the region book one of the groups asks some clarifying questions about the assignment. Another group is huddled together in the corner reviewing the rubric that Mary has discussed. Still another group is trying to organize their materials and resources to make the best use of their time.

As I sit and observe the activity in the classroom I can tell that the students are engaged. They are seated in table groups discussing each other’s progress. They question each other on what should or should not be included in the book. Students also share travel experiences with each other to gain a better picture of the region. One individual group has accumulated postcards from the region they are studying and are trying to figure out how best to use the postcards in their region book. Throughout the class period, Mary can be seen crouching near student groups to formatively assess progress. Mary asks open-ended questions about the region books to make sure that students are
on the right track. If a group is missing a specific piece of the assignment, Mary steers them in the right direction.

Students understand that once the books are completed they will share them with the entire class. Group members begin to assign roles for the class presentation. It will be at this point that Mary gives a summative assessment mark. Mary assures the students that there should not be any surprises when it comes to presenting the book and getting a final grade. “You all have been part of the learning and assessing process from the beginning. I want all of you to get A’s for this assignment. I am doing periodic check-in points to make sure groups are on the right track. If you are listening to the feedback given and make the necessary adjustments, no one has anything to be nervous for” (Observation 3/21/07).

The following week Mary invited me into her classroom to observe a science unit from the beginning. The fourth graders were taking care of crayfish, which to a fourth grader is a big deal. Along with the care of the crayfish, student groups needed to develop an investigable question pertaining to their crayfish and then conduct an experiment. Student groups needed to gather data and be able to present that data to the larger class. Mary established the boundaries for the experimentation, but students were given the task of creating an experiment.

One of Mary’s strengths as a teacher is her ability to provide her students with an inquiry approach to learning. The students knew that they would be working with crayfish, however the what, how, and why were unknown. One group wanted to see if the type of lettuce mattered to the crayfish. Another group looked at the water in the
crayfish container. This was a unit driven by the students. Mary facilitated the class, but
spent most of the time walking around and reading what students were writing in their
science journals. (Observation 3/26/07)

This inquiry method of instruction allowed students to be engaged and active
while learning at the same time. I used this classroom observation to facilitate our next
interview.

A: Is it hard to release that control of the class and just monitor how students are doing?
M: I will be honest, when I started teaching my classrooms never operated like this. It
was a minor miracle if we did any kind of experimentation. Things have changed and
there is research to support this change. Learning is an active process. I cannot expect
nine year olds to sit in desks all day with me lecturing. I as an adult cannot handle that.
Does this type of learning get noisy? Yes, but it is under control. We as adults talk
through things all the time, why can’t students do the same thing? I have seen my
students more engaged since I have made an effort to implement an inquiry approach to
my teaching
A: What about all of the excitement coming from the students? How do you handle that?
M: Obviously the crayfish help with the excitement of the lesson, but that isn’t the only
reason. The students appreciate the chance to investigate something that is important to
them. I did not set them totally free, we did set up some parameters for what was
expected, but it was their questions that were driving the experiments. I try to have
students construct their own learning and make meaning from it. (Interview 3/30/07)
In an inquiry-based classroom, one of the goals is that students are continuously engaged in learning opportunities. The teacher provides an open-ended opportunity for students to interact with through purposefully selected materials. The classroom environment allows for students to discover and explore in meaningful learning experiences. Finally, students apply their new found knowledge to different real world situations. Mary provides these experiences for students on a daily basis and incorporates students into the learning process.

I returned to Mary’s classroom to see how the region books were taking shape. I entered the classroom and at first could not find Mary. I walked to the back of the room near a group of students and heard Mary’s voice on the other side of the room where she was sitting with students. “Why do you think it is important to include that information in your region book Matt?” Mary and a group of students were talking about the progress of their region books. Mary saw me in the room and walked over. “I am so thankful that I can monitor how the students are doing before they turn this project in. It allows me to guide students in the right direction. (Observation 4/9/07)

In the above observation, Mary mentions being able to monitor student progress. I used this statement to initiate our next interview together.

A: Do you feel it is effective to informally assess your students frequently?
M: Most definitely. The group of students I was working with earlier is a prime example. They needed a little clarification on the requirements of the book. I don’t want my
assessments to be a guessing game. I am not trying to trick them or make them goof up. The purpose of the region book is to assess their knowledge. If I have to repeat directions or reword something I feel it is my job as the teacher to do that. The need for clarification might be something that should be shared with the larger group. That is another reason the work time is so valuable. I am able to walk around and check progress. (Interview 4/10/07)

One day while I was at the copier in the morning, Mary ran up to me to show me what her fellow grade level members had been working on. Our building administrator was having us look at our classroom data and plan for interventions with students who appeared in need. Mary and I sat down and looked over the fourth grade MAP scores, current reading levels for students, and spelling test scores. With the fall MAP scores, vocabulary and word recognition were areas where students were low. Developmental Reading Assessment, or DRA tests were also administered and showed students lacked vocabulary skills. Spelling was included in this documentation because prefixes and suffixes added to root words comprised a great percentage of the spelling words. Mary and her two teammates came up with intervention plans for students who showed need in those areas. Since Mary was specializing in science and social studies, she would focus on vocabulary that would come in her curricular area.

To say that Mary and her teammates were energized by going through this data would be an understatement; Mary’s team felt that with the assessment information they could plan appropriate interventions. This was an excellent example of using data systematically to guide instruction. I needed to learn more about using data to make
informed decisions.

A: Is this approach to analyzing data different than in previous years?

M: Yes and no. We are always looking at how students are doing and how we can help them move forward. I think what is different is that my other two colleagues and I are working together to create an intervention plan that looks similar across the disciplines. It is the hope that students will see the connection throughout the day and slowly pick up on new words.

A: Why vocabulary and word recognition?

M: Historically these are areas where we have struggled with as a building and even at the district level. Our students are coming to us with a smaller word base and do not have the tools available to learn words systematically. Is this something that can only begin in fourth grade? No, but at least it is a starting point for some of our students. If things go well this is one intervention we could share with the entire staff.

A: What is the longer plan of your intervention?

M: Our building does a lot with writing grade level and individual goals. Our focus has been on reading and writing. As a staff we meet quarterly to discuss our goals and the progress we have made. At first it was uncomfortable to do this as an entire staff, but the more experience we have had with it the easier it has gotten. It has also allowed for cross grade level discussions on what is and is not working. Our building believes that each student belongs to each of us and we are responsible for all students. (Interview 4/13/07)

Mary is a talker and especially loves to talk about education. I say this because
Mary got into the focus groups. Mary enjoyed the opportunity to discuss with other teachers about their classrooms and the happenings inside. Mary was able to share her experiences with others, but as she states, “I really get into these focus groups! Sometimes I forget that there are other grades besides fourth grade out there. What I mean is that we often get so focused on our little space.” Even Mary would admit the collaboration that occurred during our meetings was amazing.

A: What do you enjoy about the focus groups?

M: We never have enough time to sit and talk about what is going on. We might see each other at the copy machine in the morning and at bus duty in the afternoon. What is nice about this format is that we can just talk about what is going on and brain storm some solutions.

A: Do you think having more focused learning groups would benefit teachers and students?

M: Part of the expectation with the specialization project is that teachers meet in Professional Learning Communities or PLCs and discuss student learning. We meet cross grade levels, which allows for a deeper level of conversation. I can share what is and is not working with my grade five counterpart. We are able to share strategies with each other to help diminish the feeling of isolation. Since our school is not that large there is only one of us at each level. It helps to have a friend as I begin to learn this process.

(Interview 4/13/07)

During the spring while Mary and I worked together she was also getting ready for the MCAs. In addition to using the district curriculum, Mary was attempting to
prepare students to take a high stakes test that can certainly be overwhelming to some. Mary is adamant that teaching to the test is not something that she condones, but is part of today’s reality.

A: What happens when the district curriculum doesn’t prepare students for test taking? M: I trust that the curriculum that the district has provided for us will meet the standards set forth in the test. However, not all students know how to take one of these tests. Even just bubbling their answers correctly can impact the score of the test. I need to provide my students with enough background support so that piece won’t interfere with anything else. Is this the right thing to do? I don’t know, but it is the reality. When it comes down to it, no one wants to read the paper and see that his or her school did poorly on some state test. When the public looks at test results they don’t have the whole picture. They don’t know the history of the children like I do so I feel it is my job to give as much as help as possible.

A: Sounds like you have to walk a fine line.

M: The two philosophies, high-stakes testing and inquiry-based learning, are like two frameworks butting heads. Do I think it is important to assess where students are? Yes, but to have so much pressure on a test is rather backward when we look at it from a teaching and learning perspective. Will every child be proficient in reading and math? Most likely not. Does that mean those children should be punished or feel inferior? Of course not, but our current system sets them up for failure. Something needs to give and I just hope it isn’t the kids! (Interview 4/13/07)
Mary’s frustration with how our educational system operates is heard quite frequently in schools across the county. Because testing often drives teaching, many teachers will eventually cease much of their teaching and prepare students for the reality of having to pass a multiple-choice test. Tests, then, particularly multiple-choice tests, are structured to determine whether students know information related to a particular body of knowledge, usually a curriculum guide or syllabus (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 96). Mary feels that she does a disservice to her students when she has to drop the curriculum to prepare for a test. “I want my students to achieve success, but I do not know if taking a standardized test will help promote this” (Interview 4/13/07).

Pollock (2007) has created a framework that highlights Mary’s frustration. One piece of that framework deals with external measures. Under this section are the many assessments and tests that are found within our schools. These assessments are what hold schools and districts accountable for Adequate Yearly Progress. As Mary struggles with improving her students’ abilities to think critically, she has to be cognizant that her students are going to be evaluated frequently using external measures. Mary also needs to balance her assessments with ways in which she will evaluate her students at the end of marking periods. Elementary school is slightly different than secondary in that grades are not distributed the same. Most elementary schools rely on satisfactory or progressing marks. Even so, Mary has a major philosophical dilemma that she is constantly struggling with.

Mary has a passion for education that stems from experience and knowledge. Mary is also highly knowledgeable in the legislative piece of education. For many
years Mary was the sole Union representative from our building. She has sat on many committees and has overseen negotiations between the district and union representatives. Mary understands the complexity of the No Child Left Behind legislation and how it impacts our school. What is at the heart of many decisions that Mary makes is her students and what is in their best interests.

Experience

Experience is what ties Lois and Mary together in the teaching profession. If one was to enter either classroom, you would find two different women who approach teaching and learning in two different ways. However, both women utilize their time of service and experience to enhance their teaching and to promote student learning.

Lois’ experience ranges from primary age students to adults wanting to become teachers. Lois uses stories and real life experiences to make connections with students. Lois shares her passion for learning with students and how learning can transform their lives.

Mary has spent most of her teaching career with intermediate age students as well as students over seas. Similar to Lois, Mary has honed her expectations for these students and what they should be able to do. Mary has high expectations for all of her students, and part of this approach to teaching has been developed through her years of experience.

Both Lois and Mary use reflection, assessment, and instruction in their practice everyday. Lois and Mary use their experience and knowledge of assessment, instruction, and reflection to guide classroom practices. Lois and Mary have experience in years as well as on the job training. Both women have taught many different curricula and have
experienced the pendulum swings of education. Lois and Mary use their experience and knowledge to inspire students and their learning.

Chapter V: Everything We Learned, We Learned in Kindergarten

In chapter five I introduce two kindergarten teachers whose knowledge of how children learn best and what is developmentally appropriate for students stands out compared to many of their colleagues. Both Tracy and Jennifer use their love of children and learning to create classrooms where high expectations are held even for our youngest learners.

*Tracy*

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”-Albert Einstein

When I think back to my year in kindergarten, I can remember two distinct things. One, I spent quite a bit of time playing with my classmates. Two, I did an awful lot of coloring and I am not a good colorer. I think some people even today might believe that kindergarten classes still operate in this way. This could not be further from the truth.

Entering Tracy’s classroom I did not find a lot of toys and things to color. What I found were five and six year olds actively working on writing, reading books, or
finishing math patterns. I was literally blown away with how hard the children were working. As I continued to take the class in, I found Tracy walking around to different tables and having legitimate conversations with these little people. These conversations centered around comprehending stories that the students were reading and creating Venn Diagrams to compare them. Even though Tracy works with students who are in kindergarten she provides them with experiences that will stretch their thinking.

When you first look at Tracy, you would never guess that she teaches kindergarten. Tracy’s appearance seems better suited for a model runway in New York. She does not wear jumpers with ladybugs on them or have sweaters to go with each holiday. Tracy is extremely sophisticated and glamorous and in my opinion, a magnificent kindergarten teacher. I sometimes chuckle when I see Tracy walking by with her little ducklings in toe.

I was already teaching at the school when Tract arrived. She was fresh out of college and eager to take on any assignment that came her way. She began the school year teaching reading in the Title I program, but then replaced a kindergarten teacher mid-way during the school year. For many people, getting your first real classroom four months after the school year began would be challenging, but Tracy took everything in stride. Within weeks, Tracy had the children sitting and listening while she read stories. The children were starting to write during writer’s workshop and work together in cooperative groups. This group of children made a tremendous amount of improvement with Tracy compared to their earlier months in kindergarten. Students who could not hold a pencil properly were now writing multiple page stories. Tracy’s nurturing demeanor and attitude transformed the students.
Maybe knowing this background about Tracy’s beginning teaching career has clouded my judgment, but I find her a remarkable teacher. Even though the word remarkable is my opinion, there is no other word to describe her. While Tracy and I worked together during this project she often brought up her first few months in the classroom she took over. “I was scared and I felt so much pressure to get these kids up to speed. I guess I have taken what I learned in that experience and used it with all of my students since then.” Tracy goes on to say that what she learned is that teaching, even if it is just kindergarten, requires content knowledge and knowledge of how children develop. “Knowledge of child development is so important in kindergarten because children are all over the place” (Interview 2/6/07).

Tracy knows children. Tracy knows when to push her students and when to pull back. Tracy knows which activities are developmentally appropriate for five and six year olds and which activities might need to wait until the following school year. Students entering kindergarten come with various experiences and abilities. Tracy is able to take each student where they are and move them forward. She does this in a caring and loving manner that would make any parent want to have their child in her classroom.

A: What do you believe is your philosophy of education?

T: I set up my classroom where the kids are. The environment that the students are in needs to be safe and the students need to feel nurtured. I want my students to know that they are cared for every time they step into our classroom. Each child has a gift they bring to us.
A: How does instruction look in a kindergarten classroom?

T: My instruction is guided through assessments. In addition to district-mandated assessments, participation and student interviews provide me with a great deal of information. This information allows me to differentiate my instruction to meet the needs of my students. In reading for example, I have some students whom are still working on learning all of the letters of the alphabet while I have another group of students reading a level 6 book independently. Since my students are all over the place, thorough formative assessments are critical. (Interview 2/6/07)

As we continued to talk Tracy went back to her philosophy of teaching. She sat and pondered this question and then replied that it is always changing and morphing. “What I keep at the center are my students and their achievements. Everything I do and say needs to impact them in a positive way.” I was simply amazed. Tracy has only been teaching for three years, and already she speaks like she has been in the profession for decades. “Pencils have erasers on them for a reason, we can make mistakes and learn from them. Nothing is ever permanent or final” (Interview 2/6/07).

As I continued to spend time in Tracy’s classroom, I quickly realized that her students were not coloring all day. They were reading and writing and not just some of the time, but most of the time. Students were creating books, finding words in the classroom, and writing Small Moment Stories. I sat down at one of the tables and listened to the children read a book and then discuss it; very similar to an adult book club. There was also a nice “buzz” in the room. It was not loud, but it was the sound of pencils
moving, voices sharing, and minds working. Just listening to the conversations that were occurring one would never know that they were in a kindergarten classroom.

One powerful way students come to change or reinforce conceptions is through social discourse. Having an opportunity to present one’s own ideas, as well as being permitted to hear and reflect on the ideas of others, is an empowering experience (Brooks and Brooks, 1999, p. 108). Learning is a social process. Students at any age benefit from the discourse they participate within the classroom. Tracy understood the importance of engaging students in dialogue and centers her instruction on it. I decided to use the social piece of Tracy’s classroom as our next focus area in our interview together.

A: How do you manage all of the students while they are working in these small groups?
T: Students of kindergarten age physically cannot sit still for more than five to ten minutes at a time. Knowing this fact, my instruction needs to accommodate how kindergarteners learn, by being active. Our class has spent a great deal of time learning routines and processes that will help all of us be successful. Learning is an active process so I need to provide my students with these opportunities to practice this in productive ways.

A: Your classroom might sound and look different than some of your colleagues, how do you justify the way your classroom runs?
T: I do get some slack because of the age of my students. Most teachers know that five and six year olds are a little busier. However when people actually walk by and see what we are doing they are a little surprised. My students are productively busy and not just doing activities for the sake of doing them. I try to balance the type and amount of
work we do. I do not have the luxury of long attention spans so I need to make the most of my instructional time. (Interview 2/16/07)

One of Tracy’s strengths as a teacher is her compassion for her students. Each student in Tracy’s classroom is valued and respected and they know this. All of Tracy’s students enter the classroom knowing that they will contribute to whatever it is they are doing in the day. Tracy holds high expectations for all of her students even if they are five and six years old. One example of having high expectations is how Tracy and her students create and journal in their math notebooks. She believes these journals provide valuable information into what students do and do not know. Tracy uses these math journals as a way to formatively assess her students. Student drawings, words, and numbers are found within the journals and allow her to see if students are understanding various math concepts or if there are areas where some students need more support.

Tracy has an extremely calm manner and “aura” about her that children are attracted to. When she moved in the classroom, she often had an amoeba of students following. Rather than become annoyed or frustrated, Tracy acknowledged the students and helped steer them in the right direction. Tracy would get down on her knees and look each of her students in the eye when she talked to them.

In another interview I had with Tracy she spoke about the way she manages the students and their learning. “In kindergarten we use small groups for everything. This allows for more differentiation in instruction and I can meet the needs of more students” (Interview 2/24/07). Students are placed in leveled reading and writing groups. For math, Tracy is able to place a few students in a separate group to challenge their thinking.
Tracy’s instruction transitions smoothly between concepts and the students are unaware of anything different. Tracy is constantly moving around and students do not spend more than ten minutes on one activity. The change of activities for students keeps them engaged in their learning.

During a classroom observation, Tracy was modeling “how to read” a story. Tracy was pointing out the parts of the story and asking for students to volunteer information they knew about reading stories. They talked about authors and illustrators and their role in the creation of the story. This discussion moved into the making of a Venn Diagram of two Little Red Riding Hood stories. Honestly, how many kindergarteners do you know that can compare and contrast stories? Yet, the students did just that and the discussion continued with students making connections to either or both of the stories. When I asked Tracy about this activity, she proceeded to tell me that working on these comprehension strategies does not have to begin in third grade. “If I take real world items or concepts that my students are familiar with there is no telling what we can accomplish” (Observation 2/12/07).

As I continued to work with Tracy, I began to take ideas for my classroom and students. I enjoyed how she incorporated the district’s comprehension strategies into lessons with the whole class and in small reading groups. I listened to the language she used with her students to help push them a little more. I also paid attention to how Tracy used questioning strategies with her students. This is an area where I am continually trying to improve. During one of our interviews Tracy spoke about how she models questioning for students in a “risk free environment where no one’s ideas are right or
Many elementary teachers know the importance of developing literacy skills in students at an early age. Depending on the experience of each child, the teacher is responsible for instruction on the alphabet, sight words, and even story comprehension. To help students develop comprehension skills, Tracy used the “I wonder” phrase. This worked exceptionally well with her class because children are naturally curious about life. In one instance a student had a prediction that did not relate to the story, and Tracy responded by saying, “I see where you are coming from, but…” Tracy did not tell the student he was wrong, but encouraged him to keep thinking.

Tracy expects that students will be “reading and comprehending” even if this looks different for each child. Tracy’s students develop the ability to think and respond during the course of the school year. For many children kindergarten is their first experience with school so learning how to think and respond appropriately looks different for each child. Because Tracy knows what is developmentally appropriate for students she is able to modify her instruction according to their needs.

While I watched Tracy teach her reading lesson, several questions popped in my head. How does one know what a child is ready for? Will this look different in kindergarten compared to other grades? I used my next interview time with Tracy to explore responses to these questions.

A: What do you do to help find out where your students are at developmentally?

T: I rely heavily on classroom observation. During those first few weeks of school we
are all getting to know each other. I walk around and watch how each child interacts and how they respond to tasks that I give them. I also try and incorporate the families as much as possible. For families, kindergarten is the first school experience they will have. I want my families to feel like they can offer information to me about their child that I can use on a daily basis. A child’s parents know more about their child than I can possible learn by observing. I also want my families to know that I value their thoughts and welcome their comments. We are in this journey together.

A: Did you always think you would teach kindergarten? Why do you feel kindergarten is so important?

T: Yes and no. I love kids and I love being able to help them discover who they are as people. Kindergarten is such a fundamental age. Some kids come with many experiences and some kids have none. I have some students who have been to the library and know what books are and how to enjoy them while at the same time I have had students not know what a book is. What I try to do is learn about each child individually. Every child has a gift to share with us. (Interview 3/8/07)

Tracy is a firm believer in knowing where each of her students is at developmentally and using that as a springboard for their learning. Tracy takes developmental stages into account and knows when to push and when to let children just “experience.” Tracy helps her students use their strengths and experiences to help foster their learning. She spends time assessing their prior knowledge about concepts and using that information to plan her instruction. Since kindergarten students come with such varying degrees of experience and knowledge, Tracy’s job of knowing where they are
can be a challenge.

A: Assessments seem to run our educational system. Since kindergarten does not have as many assessments how do you know where your students are at?
T: Even though my students do not take the MCAs or MAP tests, I still assess them both formally and informally. The district has certain benchmarks that my students are expected to attain throughout the year. Students need to show proficiency in letter recognition, concepts of print, and phonemic awareness activities. My students also have a writing assessment and several math assessments that I need to report to the district. Are these different than my third grade colleagues? Yes, but kindergarteners are also developmentally different than third graders. In addition to the required assessments that I give I am always observing and monitoring where my students are. Six and seven year olds can show so much growth in so little time that I need to always be ready. (Interview 3/8/07)

Tracy currently teaches All Day Every Day kindergarten. Her two colleagues teach All Day Every Other Day. The three women spend their mornings planning together because they do not have a common prep period during the day. Tracy has mentioned that while planning together is nice, it is also difficult because their schedules are so different. “Even though our schedules are not alike the three of us are great friends who feel very passionately about what we teach. We are able to collaborate and share ideas that we have already tried in our classrooms. Since the three of us want all of our students to succeed it makes more sense to share ideas of what works and doesn’t
work” (Interview 3/8/07).

In contrast to Lois and Mary, Tracy has not been teaching for thirty plus years and she is fully aware of that. While Tracy and I were working on this project together she was finishing her Masters of Education at a local college. We also talked about her desire to continue her education with the intention of teaching at the university or college level. Tracy utilizes the workshops and staff development opportunities that our district provides. She has also taken a leap into district curriculum writing with the math program that was adopted this past year. Tracy would be the first to admit that she has a great deal to learn about teaching and learning, but this admission I think places Tracy in a select group of teachers who are truly continual learners.

A: Do you see yourself teaching for 30+ years like some individuals in the building?  
T: I don’t know. Right now, I love what I do and I love the opportunity to work with young children. This school is also a wonderful place to be in with a supportive staff and a strong administrator. With that said, having the experience of doing some higher level district things has been intriguing. I feel I have learned more about my own teaching with the different experiences. Being part of the math writing team has forced me to look at my own instruction and what does and does not benefit students. I guess I do not have an answer for you. Ask me in another five years. (Interview 3/26/07)

Most individuals who become teachers have a love of children and learning. All of the teachers that worked with me during this project are no different. Tracy is one
example of how a caring teacher and a caring environment can positively impact a student and their learning. Tracy is always searching for new and innovative ways to meet the needs of her students. Since kindergarten children have a variety of strengths and weaknesses, Tracy’s job is never done.

For many students, kindergarten is their first experience with school. For many parents sending a five year old on a large school bus can be scary and intimidating. Because of this phenomena Tracy is not only working with her students, she is working closely with the families as well.

A: How do you help families become part of your classroom?
T: It begins with an open line of communication. Not only do I want my students to feel safe when they pass through the classroom doors, but families should as well. I utilize parent volunteers, send home notes, update my classroom website, and provide my classroom number to contact me. Parents and guardians know that they are welcome in our room any time. This has been especially important for families that are sending their first child on to school. I want the transition to be as smooth as possible for everyone. Since I teach kindergarten everyday I have an advantage my colleagues do not. I can focus all my energy on my one class and their families.

A: When you work with families how do you help them understand all that is expected of a kindergartener?
T: School is certainly different for students now compared to even five years ago. We are asking our students to do way more at younger ages. This can be overwhelming for some families. Along with solid family communication, I want parents to know that the door
to my classroom is always open. Parents are welcome to come and volunteer or observe
the daily routines that we do each day. As a child, I had a great schooling experience, but
not all of my students’ families have. I work very hard to create a welcoming
environment not just for my students, but their families as well. (Interview 4/10/07)

Tracy tailors her instruction to where her students are developmentally. Placed in
a nurturing and loving environment, kindergarten students can soar academically,
socially, and emotionally. The difference between Tracy’s students in September and
June is night and day. Kindergarteners are exploring their surroundings and learning
about themselves as individuals. Tracy understands this about her students
developmentally and provides opportunities for her students to stretch their
understandings. Similar to the phrase “Everything I needed to know I learned in
kindergarten,” Tracy uses her knowledge base to expand her students’ base. Even though
Tracy works with students who are just beginning their educational career, she strives to
instill a love for learning, whether they are reading or solving mathematical problems.

Jennifer

Tracy’s colleague in kindergarten is Jennifer. Jennifer is similar to Tracy in many
ways. She is young and ambitious and wants the very best for her students. Jennifer’s
position came to be in a slightly different way than Tracy’s. Jennifer was hired during
teacher workshop week because the woman who was originally hired for the position
decided to decline the job offer. Jennifer basically had two days to get her room ready,
learn how the school operated, and figure out the names of both sections of
kindergarten students. Needless to say, Jennifer had a steep learning curve.

My classroom was directly across the hall from Jennifer’s, so in the morning, as the students came down the hall, she and I would always chit chat. Jennifer graduated from a local university like myself so we often talked about classes and professors who we had. Our before and after school conversations turned into great opportunities to collect data about Jennifer and her philosophy of education.

Like Tracy, Jennifer does not look like your stereotypical kindergarten teacher. Jennifer dresses in hip clothes and even wears jeans to school on Fridays. Jennifer has an outgoing personality that students love to be around. She is not afraid to sing and dance with her students and her upbeat attitude helps her students feel comfortable in the classroom. For anyone who walks by, it is very apparent that Jennifer loves her job teaching kindergarten.

Unlike Tracy, Jennifer had two sections of kindergarten. Jennifer was considered the every other day kindergarten teacher. Jennifer had a Monday-Wednesday group and a Tuesday-Thursday group. The two classes then rotated the Fridays during the school year. With this schedule, Jennifer usually had the special education students in one section and the English as a second language students in the other section. This meant that students were leaving periodically during the day for extra help.

No matter what was going on in her classroom, Jennifer greeted her students enthusiastically and treated them with respect. With the different needs that were present in her classroom, Jennifer had a full-time paraprofessional in the room everyday. Even though Jennifer’s class list might have looked small in numbers, the needs of the students demanded more support.
A: What do you believe is your philosophy of education?

J: I want my students to know that when they enter my classroom they will be loved and respected no matter what differences they bring. I try to instill in students that being different is okay, whether it is how we look, talk, or act. I tell my students from day one that everyone has a right to be here and a right to learn. Even though I might work with five and six year olds all day long, I have high expectations for how they act and treat others. I firmly believe that teaching and learning will not occur until we have this in place.

A: How does instruction look in a kindergarten classroom?

J: It can vary depending on whom you ask. I believe that students, even as young as kindergarten, need to be introduced to reading, writing, and math. Yes, there will be time for play, but it needs to be done in a constructive manner. I use my play time to observe how my students are developing socially, which is just as important as developing academically. For some of my students who did not attend any formal preschool, our classroom is their first time in a setting where rules and boundaries are placed on them. Students are learning how to interact with their peers in positive ways, which for me is just as vital to their development as how to make an ABAB pattern with cubes.

(Interview 2/2/07)

As Jennifer and I continued our morning talks, I began to learn more about Jennifer and her teaching. One particular morning in early February, Jennifer’s “B” kids were coming down the hall with all of their snow gear on. Jennifer’s “B” group was a
tad more challenging than the “A” group. This group consisted of students with special education needs including two students with Autism. One of the students with autism was screaming and throwing his arms all over the place. From what I learned later, this behavior started even before he got on the bus. When seeing this child, Jennifer did not get upset or angry. She calmly went to the little boy and helped him get to his locker and then into the classroom. I basically stared at the whole thing. With each passing minute the boy gradually got his body under control and made his way into the classroom on his own. Jennifer looked up at me and smiled and said, “He does not like things touching him and the snow was hitting his face.” Jennifer stood up and went into the classroom to get the day started. (Observation 2/6/07)

I asked Jennifer later on during the day what she was thinking when she was helping the little boy. “It isn’t going to do me any good to tell him to be quiet and quit shouting. He doesn’t have any control over what is going on. All I can do is help him calm down,” she said. Jennifer continued to say that, “I want all of my students to be in the classroom no matter what. Plain and simple. If this means that I need to adjust how I think about things or how I teach things, then it is my job to adjust and modify. I can’t expect my students to do that” (Interview 2/6/07).

I went home that night and thought about what Jennifer said. So often we as educators are looking for some other reason or excuse for why our students are not performing and living up to our expectations. That little boy in Jennifer’s room could not be expected to change how he was acting coming down the hall. Therefore, Jennifer
took it upon herself to adjust her thinking for the needs of her student. Jennifer acted quickly in a proactive manner rather than reacting in a more negative fashion, to ensure that her student had a positive experience with school on that day.

The next day I went into Jennifer’s room and asked her some more questions. Not only was I still trying to wrap my head around yesterday’s events, but how Jennifer knew what to do? How did Jennifer know how to react the way she did? This is how our conversation began.

A: What do you do to help find out where your students are at developmentally?
J: I don’t think there is one single way to learn more about my students. I do rely heavily on observations. Whether it is while students are working at the tables or playing outside at recess. I will write down my observations on a clipboard and use this information while I am doing report cards as well as talking points during conferences. Parents are always interested in learning how their son/daughter is in relationship to his/her peers. It really helps to have some specific examples to share with them.

A: Speaking of report cards, how do you assess students?
J: In addition to observations, I like to conduct periodic interviews with students. I might sit next to a student while she is writing and conference with her about her writing. Not only can this type of conversation help me assess how the student is doing, but it is also a springboard for my future instruction. I know first hand where a student is and what I need to do to push them further. It is not quick like a multiple choice test is, but developmentally it is right on target with this age group. (Interview 2/7/07)
Both Tracy and Jennifer utilize observations as a way to gather more information about students. This “data collection” can be used in multiple formats instead of solely for giving a grade. Jennifer is able to use classroom observations to help guide her instruction and teaching. These observations occur frequently, in a formative manner, allowing for adaptation or modification of instruction.

One particular day, I went into Jennifer’s room during writer’s workshop time. In addition to Jennifer and her paraprofessional, the ESL teacher was present to work with identified ESL students. What follows next is a small narrative vignette of writer’s workshop time in Jennifer’s room.

*Students are seated near an easel with Jennifer next to it. Jennifer is talking about what a small moment is and how it looks in writing. The ESL teacher is sitting next to a group of students, taking her own notes while Jennifer finishes up her minilesson.*

Jennifer reads her story to the class and asks for help in making it “even better.” Jennifer’s story is about when she went to watch a soccer game the night before. One student raises her hand and says, “You didn’t tell us if you went to the game with anyone.” Another student says, “What was the score of the soccer game?” Many hands begin to shoot up with suggestions for Jennifer and her writing. Jennifer uses some of the ideas and puts them into her story for the students to see. Jennifer then asks students to think about a small moment as they began their writing for the day.

*The students seat themselves at their tables and began to write like crazy. As I walk around I see little tongues hanging out of mouths in concentration and pencils moving swiftly on paper. The ESL teacher clusters her group of students at a circle table and has them writing their own small moments. While students are busily writing,*
Jennifer walks around and conferences with different students about their stories, asking for clarification and sometimes giving advice. I am sitting next to one little boy who is writing about a birthday party at Chucky Cheese he has recently gone to. During the 30 minutes of writing time, students are engaged in the writing process and Jennifer rotates throughout the room. (Observation 2/12/07)

During our after school chat that day I asked Jennifer how she manages the writing workshop time with all of her students and their needs.

J: I created a calendar of sorts to help me make sure I meet with every student each week. This gets a little tricky because my groups meet every other day. I am extremely fortunate that I have help in the room for one of my groups. Since some of my ESL students are still having difficulty with the language piece of writing, having the ESL teacher in the room is such a bonus. Cheryl [the ESL teacher] and I meet weekly to plan out how writer’s workshop will look for the upcoming week. This allows Cheryl some time to review lessons and vocabulary with students prior to using them in the writing time. Cheryl and I try to use the same language with the ESL students so they are not learning two different things. So far it has been working well.

A: What about the other students who might be struggling?

J: Even if a student in my class has a label of some type, I still expect them to work. The work might be condensed or modified, but I still expect everyone to be writing, for example. This expectation also works for my high fliers. If I have students who can
write more than a page, then I will push them to write two or three. In my classroom there are 23 different ways of learning. I need to differentiate my instruction to meet their needs, not make my students change to my teaching. (Interview 2/12/07)

During a classroom observation in March I witnessed how Jennifer teaches math. In Jennifer’s room math centers were set up for students to explore a range of activities. One center had pattern blocks while another center had students using string to measure the length of objects. When Jennifer noticed me in the room she came over and said, “Kindergarteners need time to practice the skills we have been learning the last few weeks. About once a month I set up centers with activities that align with concepts we have been working on. Since most five and six year olds cannot sit through an assessment, I walk around and monitor how students are doing. I use the report card indicators to monitor how each child is progressing to the goal that has been created. In addition to math centers, I use my parent volunteers to do some quick checklists with students. These checklists are quick, but show me if a student has mastered a concept or is still progressing towards mastery.” Each center consisted of a group of four students. The students worked together to accomplish each task before moving on. When I asked the students what they were doing they replied, “We are just playing around right now, isn’t that cool?” (Observation 3/21/07)

Compassion and Development

Tracy and Jennifer work hard to meet the needs of their students. They monitor and adjust their teaching to ensure that all students have the chance to learn. Tracy and
Jennifer place an emphasis on academics, but also on the emotional side of learning. Tracy and Jennifer create classroom environments that are safe and nurturing. Students know that when they walk into their kindergarten classroom they will be respected and cared for.

Along with a compassionate environment both women understand that things need to be developmentally appropriate for students. This may look like math centers for assessing student learning or using Little Red Riding books to complete a Venn Diagram. Neither Tracy nor Jennifer made the curriculum easier, but they modified it so it was appropriate for kindergarten age students. Tracy and Jennifer hold high expectations for their students; even if students think they are “playing.” There is a purpose and a reason behind what Tracy and Jennifer do in their classrooms. Both women illustrate the necessity of knowing how to teach so it is developmentally appropriate for students.

Tracy and Jennifer utilize the strengths they have as teachers to create communities of learners who care about each other. Students are actively engaged throughout their school day participating in activities that are at their level developmentally. Along with communities of learners, students are immersed in classrooms where safety, trust, and respect are common vocabulary words.
Chapter VI: A First Year Teacher

“Education should consist of a series of enchantments, each raising the individual to a higher level of awareness, understanding, and kinship with all living things.”

-Anonymous

In chapter six the story of Sue and her teaching is shared. Sue is similar to Lois, Mary, Tracy, and Jennifer in many ways. She loves children and learning. She is passionate about student success and strives to help students achieve. What makes Sue different from the other four participants in this study is that Sue is completing her first year of teaching. While there have been numerous studies and articles written on first year teachers, this will not be the focus. We often make the assumption that first year teachers lack the necessary knowledge and skill set to be effective within the classroom. In my opinion, Sue counters that assumption. Utilizing interviews and classroom observations, I will show the many strengths Sue brings to her classroom.

I like to think of myself as a fairly good teacher. I work hard to stay current with research for the benefit of my students. I feel that my classrooms have been orderly and respectful communities where students feel safe and respected. It was not until I stepped into Sue’s classroom that I realized how much learning and growing as a teacher I still have to do.

During our work together, Sue was completing her first year of teaching. To say that Sue is a phenomenal teacher would not do her justice. During her interview, Sue’s
responses to questions were articulate and well thought out. Sue carried herself like a professional who had been teaching for years. In the forty-five minute interview, Sue was able to explain her philosophy of education, why she is a capable individual, and what her strengths are as a teacher. Sue was more than willing to teach whatever grade level was assigned to her and promised to do her very best with her students.

Sue’s background in education stems from her family. Both of Sue’s parents are teachers as well as an older sister. While in college and high school, Sue taught swimming lessons and was a park and recreation leader. In addition to these part time jobs Sue also nannied for a family over the course of several summers. From a young age Sue has been surrounded by children and learning.

Sue graduated from a small school in the Midwest that has a strong background in education. In addition to Sue’s degree in elementary education she has a minor in mathematics. Sue completed her student teaching the spring before she was hired at our building. Sue completed a few substitute teaching jobs, but was basically brand new when she arrived at our school.

I think what first impressed me with Sue is her knowledge of curriculum and how best to implement it within her classroom. Elementary teachers have traditionally been generalists when it comes to curriculum. Because of this generalist philosophy, elementary teachers are expected to know many subjects well for the benefit of their students. Sue is no exception. Each lesson I observed seemed better than the one prior. An example of Sue’s knowledge is how she implemented mathematics with her students. She has students doing number sense work that many teachers would wait until students are in fifth grade to do. Sue does all this with a demeanor much like Mary Poppins.
She kind of smiles and floats around the room while students are speedily scribbling things in their math notebooks.

I began my interview with Sue similar to the other participants. I wanted to see if Sue would respond any differently to my initial questions because she was brand new.

A: What is your philosophy of teaching?
S: Students need to construct their own understandings and thinking. Learning needs to be hands on and active. If you are in my classroom you will see students conversing with each other and working in small groups. I arrange the student desks in groups to help facilitate discussions. I value what each child is able to bring to the classroom. Each of us individually can contribute to the whole group.
A: How do you establish your classroom?
S: Routine is everything. We begin and end each day the same. The students know what to expect. Everyone feels safe and respected. My students learn quickly that their voices will be heard whether it is during Morning Meeting or math sharing time. I also do a lot of modeling. I do not assume that my students know what I am asking them unless I show them. If I want students to work in small groups then it is my job to help show them what it looks like. If I want my students to use questioning in their work then we need to work together to establish guidelines.
A: How do you tackle the curriculum?
S: Anytime we are doing something in the classroom I am constantly asking questions and checking in with students. I try extremely hard to relate things to students in terms
that they will understand. Even if we are doing something small I want my students to realize that it can be transferred into something larger. There is a lot of curriculum that I am supposed to cover during the school year, it becomes tricky to balance the amount of material and the time to get it all in. I guess that is what most teacher’s say, huh?
(Interview 2/15/07)

During one of my observations, Sue was teaching math. There was definitely a “buzz” in the air. The students were sitting in table groups and having conversations with each other that focused on their individual math notebooks. As I walked around to see what was happening, the discussion among the groups was amazing. The students were sharing strategies on how they subtracted two-digit numbers without using regrouping. The practice of sharing their strategies was a practice that began at the beginning of the year and has continued. By sharing strategies, students are able to explain their thinking. For those students who are struggling, they can hear the thought process and apply it to their work. (Observation 2/27/07)

Sue has a deep enthusiasm for teaching and learning, especially in math. This enthusiasm supports positive relationships with students and encourages student achievement. With Sue’s enthusiasm for math she is able to motivate her students by encouraging them to explore ways in which math helps them in their daily lives.

As Sue’s math lesson continued, she was very much aware of all of the children and their levels of participation. Sue would ask a question, provide a great amount of wait time, and rephrase the question if students needed a little more support. What amazed
me (along with the many other things) is how calm and patient Sue was during her discussions with students. Even when it was apparent that students had difficulty with pieces of the lesson, Sue continued to scaffold her instruction to meet the needs of her students. Sue was practicing what Schon describes as reflection-in-action because she was constantly modifying and adapting her instruction. Sue was able to gauge how the class was doing and make some instructional decisions based on the feedback she received.

Each of my individual conversations with Sue made me realize how much I still had to learn about teaching. She is able to delicately balance all parts of being a teacher. She is truly one of a kind. When we look at effective teachers, one thing that many of them have in common is the ability to balance knowledge of curriculum and child development. I like to think of it as knowledge of child development + science of curriculum = Art of teaching.

During one of our interviews, Sue talked about how she uses questions and responses as part of her formative assessment. Any time students are doing something, the expectation of them is that they will need to explain how or what they got. For some teachers this may be common practice, but not in all classrooms. In Sue’s classroom students worked on formulating responses to answers and explaining their thinking to others. This practice forced students to really “know” what they were doing. Sue continued to say that she uses questions as a guide to where she wants the learning to go. Students still shoulder most of the responsibility for learning, but Sue is there to help facilitate this.
A: I noticed that you utilize higher level questioning within your classroom. How do you feel it impacts your instruction?

S: It is easy to answer yes or no. The tricky part comes when one actually has to think about their response. There needs to be some processing and think time between question and response. These types of questions also force students to synthesize information that is in front of them. Even if the answer is “wrong” having a child explain their thinking provides insight into what I need to do as the teacher. Student explanations allow for a variety of points to be heard. I am not the only one who has knowledge in the classroom; often times students’ thoughts help classmates understand something better than I could ever explain. I need to ask a question that allows for all students to respond. Students also help guide what kinds of questions need to happen. Students are formulating questions while they are working in my classroom. (Interview 3/6/07)

Questioning is an important instructional strategy for improving academic achievement in students (Stronge, 2007). Questions and answers, from teachers to students and back again, represent much of the academic interaction that takes place in schools. This process supports student engagement in learning and a teacher’s ability to monitor the learning process (Stronge, 2007). Sue makes a conscious effort to think about the type of questions that she asks. Sue spends time while she plans her lessons on the questions she wants to use with students. Sue is explicit about her questioning and how it plays into her teaching and assessing of students. Below is a small narrative vignette that illustrates Sue’s use of questioning.

As I walk into the classroom Sue is finishing up her mini-lesson. Students are
gathered up front near the easel listening to Sue model a questioning strategy. Students interact with Sue and respond to her when asked. Sue dismisses the students to their individual reading workshop activities.

As students get up from the front of the room they spread themselves out. Even though students are all over the room they are strategically placed and working on meaningful things. One group of students is reading with Sue at a small table. They have their reader’s notebook out and are writing responses to their guided reading book in their notebooks. Sue is asking them questions about their book and they respond accordingly. Another group of students is rereading a reader’s theater story and practicing their parts. Several group members ask each other about the reader’s theater story to understand it better. And another group of students is quietly reading in areas away from everyone else.

As I walk around and observe the students, their level of engagement is high and they are doing “real work.” I also hear several students asking and answering questions with each other. What impresses me is seeing my former students who struggled to read in first grade actually sit and read independently now. I can tell the instruction and environment they are in supports their learning process. (Observation, 4/23/07)

While I watched Sue teach there were several moments when I reminded myself that this was a first year teacher. Many first year teachers do whatever they can to survive each day. Many first year teachers are simply finding ways to control a classroom, let alone teach a subject area. Sue, on the other hand, managed her classroom and taught the curriculum as if she had done so for years.
A: How do you balance the fact that you are a new teacher with the intensity teaching can bring?

S: Answering the part of the question referring to my “newness” I am fortunate to be in a grade level where there are two veteran teachers who I heavily rely on. I am constantly asking them questions and looking for resources from them. They have been huge supports. With regards to curriculum I refer to the documents and materials that have been supplied to me from the district. Does this mean that it is perfect? No, but I use it as a stepping point for my teaching, and then rely on feedback from my students. My students drive my instruction so if that means I need to adapt the curriculum that is what will happen.

A: What do you do if your students are showing you they just don’t understand something?

S: Everything is a work in progress. If you look at my desk you will see my lesson plan book that is done in pencil. Things are never really final in my classroom. When we began our writing unit on “All About” books, the students were exposed to the framework in first grade. Knowing this I kind of assumed students would have a little more background knowledge than if it was something brand new. While I was circulating in the room, I noticed that a majority of the students were just copying information straight out of the books we were using as references. I stopped the class mid-way through the lesson and called them back to the carpet. We talked about the assignment at hand and began to create a list of what the writing should look like. If I had not done this sooner rather than later no one would have given me the finished product I was looking for. You have to be flexible and adaptable to survive in this profession. No two days
will ever be the same; students are pulled out of the classroom, teachers are sick, and an art project lasted longer than originally planned. I guess knowing this ahead of time helps me as I work with my students. (Interview 3/29/07)

Most research on teaching will state that experience plays into the effectiveness of a teacher. Many of the mentor teachers found in our schools are individuals who have been teaching for several years or even decades. As I have worked closely with Sue my thoughts on teaching have changed. Today’s teachers are entering our buildings with more experience and knowledge than ever before. Teaching positions, especially at the elementary level, are extremely difficult to come by. The opening at our building that Sue eventually was hired for had over 500 applicants. Sue was one of ten candidates who were interviewed and narrowing the decision to three finalists was difficult. Individuals wanting to become teachers know that securing a job is tough. Therefore, perspective teachers, such as Sue, come prepared with a great deal of knowledge.

Effective classrooms operate with the premise that certain strategies and designs are occurring. If we use Sue’s classroom as an example, her use of effective instructional strategies and effective curriculum designs is above and beyond many teachers let alone beginning ones. Sue’s ability to question students and use the feedback to modify her instruction greatly benefit student learning. Sue also uses the district provided curriculum and adapts pieces of each subject area to best meet the needs of her students.

During one of our last official meetings together I wanted to get Sue’s thoughts on her first year and how she feels that it went.

A: Knowing that you are finishing your first year of teaching, do you have any advice
or recommendations on how you would do things differently?

S: I really have tried to be true to who I am as a person and how I feel about teaching and learning. I am a product of this district so I feel that gives me a little edge. My mother and sister are also teachers in this district so I feel that I understand the mission and vision fairly well. Have some things changed since I was in second grade? Yes and no. I feel fortunate that I had teachers who strived to help me develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Having that background is what I use with my students. Do I still have a lot to learn about the teaching profession? Most definitely yes, but I think I will always be learning something new. I have watched my mother get ready for many school years in August and nothing is ever the same. She is always tweaking and adjusting her classroom. I once asked her why she just doesn’t keep her room the same. She replied, “My students are never the same and I change each year as well. I learn and grow right along with my students.” I have taken this comment to heart as I have begun my teaching career. (Interview 4/16/07)
Now that classroom descriptions and teacher interviews have been presented, I will look at how things are connected together between teacher participants. Throughout this chapter, I will pull pieces from the portrayals presented in the previous chapters to continue analyzing the data and answering my research questions.

Reading through the descriptions of the participants, a few unique linkages or themes emerged. Even though the participants had different levels of experience and taught different grade levels I was able to pull out some commonalities amongst them. The first theme that will be discussed in this chapter is the use of assessments. Each teacher utilized assessments, in various ways, to help inform and guide instruction as well as determine where students are. Whether the teacher was conducting an interview with a student or asking guiding questions, assessments and their uses were prevalent in all classrooms.

The next theme that will be discussed is teaching and learning. Each teacher knew the importance of developmentally appropriate activities as well as curriculum that was student centered and allowed for increased student engagement. In Mary’s classroom she utilized an inquiry method of teaching with her students. Her students were expected to think and respond to things critically. In Tracy’s classroom students were developing their reading and comprehension skills in a safe and nurturing environment. While teaching, all five teachers placed an emphasis on learning and created environments where students could learn and grow.

It would be difficult to discuss assessments and teaching without mentioning reflection. This is the third theme that was present. Each teacher used reflection and reflective practices to meet their individual needs. Whether it was jotting notes down
in a notebook or making on the spot instructional changes, reflective practices were found in each classroom.

The final theme that will be mentioned in this chapter is the passion for children that each teacher exemplified. Even though this concept was not explicitly addressed in my research questions or literature review, I will make the case for how passion for children impacts instruction, assessment, and reflection.

Regardless of which room you stepped into, students were at the center of everything. “The student is the focal point of our work as teachers. We believe the lives of students should be shaped in dramatically better ways because of the power and wisdom revealed through high-quality curriculum” (Tomlinson and McTighe, 2006, p. 12). According to John Dewey (1902) “The child is the starting-point, the center, and the end.” Even if teachers have disagreements or differing political views, these should be put aside for the best interests of the students. Lois, Mary, Tracy, Jennifer, and Sue are all different in their own right, but care deeply about their students. They are willing to go the extra mile to ensure student success. Does it look different in each room? Certainly, but we are all different. Each teacher begins and ends the day finding ways to tweak their instruction to help students develop mentally, socially, and emotionally.

Assessment

The importance of assessment is a theme that showed through in this project. The research participants in this study understood the need to continually assess their students to see what they understood and if modification to teaching needed to occur. Assessing students occurred both formally and informally, both producing results that helped
guide instruction to promote student learning. Whether I was in a kindergarten classroom or a specialized fourth grade room, I saw first hand how important teachers feel about assessment and how it impacts their teaching.

Assessment is a central element of the teaching process. Assessments are used to determine the effectiveness of a lesson in terms of student learning and student engagement, to evaluate student progress, and as a basis for continuing instruction (Stronge, 2007). Whether the assessment was an observation of student groups, writing samples, or experiments all five teachers employed assessments to gauge student learning and their own instruction. Utilizing student feedback and assessment results, Lois, Tracy, Sue, Jennifer, and Mary adapted their teaching to benefit the students in their classrooms.

For example, Sue utilized questioning in her classroom. Sue modeled how to phrase questions to her students and modified her instruction according to their responses. As the students became more comfortable with questions, they began to formulate their own. While Sue met with her reading group, she posed questions to the students to help guide their thinking. As the students were responding and writing, Sue informally assessed their understanding of the book.

In Mary’s classroom students spent a great deal of time working together in groups. While the groups worked on their region book or crayfish projects, Mary circulated the room observing and asking questions. Mary carefully phrased her questions to check for student understanding. Even when students just wanted her to tell them an answer, she would just modify the question. If many student groups were struggling with the same concept she made sure it was addressed to the whole class.

Brooks and Brooks (1999) speak to the connection between learning and
assessment: “Think of how different the learning and assessment processes in school would be if teachers came to view themselves as cognitively linked with the students they teach. Rather than using assessment results as indices only of individual student knowledge, such information might shed light on the relationship between the student and the teacher” (p. 96). This statement highlights the connection between learning and assessment, but more importantly the relationship of the student and the teacher. Both teacher and student work together during the learning process and view assessment as one piece of the puzzle.

Each of the teachers highlighted in the previous chapters used formative assessments with their students. Each teacher understood why it was necessary to check in with students frequently rather than waiting until the end of a unit. In Lois’ classroom she had students complete learning logs at the end of the day. Lois would ask several open-ended questions that students could respond to. Lois then collected the notebooks to see how students were doing. If a number of students were struggling with a concept or skill, she met with them to help with their understanding.

The frequent check in that formative assessment affords to instruction can help students succeed. Formative assessment also allows students to be part of the learning experience, which is dramatically different than traditional approaches. Students are able to begin to take ownership for their learning and offer advice to teachers on how best to support learning opportunities. “Effective formative assessment arises when teachers or students or both use assessment evidence to make decisions first about whether to make improvement-aimed adjustments and then about what sorts of adjustments to make” (Popham, 2008, p. 113).
Popham (2008) has illustrated how formative assessments take shape within the classroom. If we look at the two columns, Popham explains how classrooms currently operate to how they should operate. Popham explains that both teacher and student are responsible for the learning process in the classroom. What I find extremely imperative is that “all students” are part of the learning process. Students are not separated from the learning process because of their aptitude, background, or experience. In the classrooms that I visited this belief that all students can learn was clearly evident. Whether it was how Lois let students show their thinking or how Tracy introduced comprehension strategies to kindergarteners, all students had the chance to learn.
Referring to Popham’s chart above, all five participants expected their students to learn. Jennifer did this when working with her ESL and special education students. By utilizing an inquiry approach to teaching, Mary had her students assume more responsibility for their own learning. Because each teacher had high learning expectations and held students responsible for their learning, classroom assessments were visible in
Regardless of the form of assessment, there needs to be a purpose. If one is just assessing students because that was the plan for the day, the heart of its implications are lost. To collect data on students for the sake of collecting data is wasting time and energy. Teachers need a purpose for assessing students, both formally and informally, and students need to understand this. A clear example of this was Mary’s work with her region books. I sat in her classroom while she worked with the students on the requirements for the project and the rubric she would be using to assess each child. This assessment forced students to think “out of the box” and throw out how they might traditionally prepare for a test. Students needed to research and synthesize the material so they could compile it together for others to understand. If we were to look at Bloom’s Taxonomy, Mary incorporated many of the higher level thinking components.

Teaching and Learning

Another theme that arose throughout my discussions and observations with the participating teachers is the importance of teaching and learning. Knowledge of teaching and learning may come in the form of curriculum or child development or both. “At its core, teaching is an art that calls on its practitioners to work simultaneously in multiple media, with multiple elements. Central to teaching is what we ought to teach—what we want students to know, understand, and be able to do” (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 12). I make the claim that each of the participants highlighted in the narratives had a great deal of knowledge. The teachers understood the importance of content knowledge and how best to share this with students. The teachers also understood that students’
developmental needs need to be taken into account if learning is to occur. Understanding children, how they develop, and how they learn is critical for effective instruction (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005, p. 9). The fine line between mediocre teachers and effective teachers is having a deep understanding of both as well as how to use it within a classroom.

Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Showden (2005) have created a framework, below, for understanding teaching and learning (p.9). If we are to look at teaching as a profession similar to medicine and law, knowledge of children, teaching, and subject matter is vital. When I go to the doctor I expect my physician to have the most up to date
knowledge of current practices of care. Shouldn’t we expect the same from individuals who are working with our young?

When we look at the framework above the various circles of knowledge are equally distributed. All five teachers who I worked with had varying knowledge of teaching, curriculum, and development. In Tracy’s classroom, she created a community of learners who began to think and question the world around them. In Mary’s room she used her experience as a specialization teacher to provide solid instruction in social studies and science. Sue’s strength in mathematics allowed her to push her students to higher levels of thinking. All five women used their various forms of knowledge to impact student learning.

Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005) continue to say that much of teaching relies upon anticipating and preparing for student understanding ahead of time. Being prepared to teach subject matter requires deep knowledge of the content itself, the process for learning this content, and the nature of student thinking, reasoning, understanding, and performance within a subject area (p. 17). Having the opportunity to step into classrooms and see first hand how instructional decisions were made has been powerful. I watched Lois tweak her math lesson on area to accommodate her learners. I listened as Jennifer used a personal story to illustrate a small moment during writer’s workshop. These two examples highlight the importance of strong teacher knowledge of teaching and learning.
In a similar framework created by (Popham, 2008, p. 99) he describes the classroom climate that should be present in our schools. Learning expectations, assessment, and responsibility for learning are three pieces of this puzzle. However, to effectively implement these pieces a teacher's knowledge needs to be high. Knowledgeable teachers are able to understand the relationship between assessment and learning and how this translates into high expectations for students. Teachers and
students work mutually to achieve this balance of learning.

*Reflective Practice*

If we want teaching to be in the same circle of professionals similar to medicine and law, reflective practice needs to be part of a teacher’s daily life. Reflective practice can be thought of as the careful review of and thoughtfulness about one’s own teaching (Stronge, 2007, p. 30). The benefits of reflective practice on teaching and learning abound. When teachers monitor their teaching and how students are learning, reflection is occurring. When teachers are formatively assessing their students and making informed judgments, teachers are reflecting. Lois, Mary, Tracy, Jennifer, and Sue all illustrated how reflective practice can improve their own teaching while enhancing student learning.

One example of reflective practice is the conversation I had with Mary in the copy room. We were discussing her MAP results and the interventions she intended to implement within her classroom. Mary used student results to gauge their progress and question her own teaching. In creating classroom interventions to use with students, Mary needed to reflect on her teaching and modify it to best meet the needs of her students. Instead of forcing her students to change their thinking, Mary looked or reflected on her own teaching to help students succeed.

Another example of reflective practice was found in my conversation with Sue when she referenced her writer’s workshop time. Sue began her lesson with some assumptions about her students and their previous learning. However, as Sue circulated throughout the room she noticed that many of her students were not writing the type of story she expected. Instead of watching her students complete the assignment
incorrectly, she had the students pause from writing and meet with her for more direction. Sue was able to monitor how her students were doing, reflect on it, and modify her instruction to meet their needs.

All five teachers exhibited reflection in action quite well. Since a teacher’s daily life is never the same, being able to reflect while teaching becomes a helpful tool. An example of reflection in action is how each teacher circulated throughout her classroom. All five teachers had students working in groups a majority of the time. This allowed each teacher to observe and question how students were progressing. Listening to their discussions each teacher then decided (in the moment) if the instruction was satisfactory or if changes needed to occur.
In the above figure York-Barr et al. have identified the steps in which teachers pass through during thoughtful, reflective practice. The first phase, pause, is where the course of action begins. With each activity, lesson, or assessment comes a pause in thought and or action. This pause is the stepping stone for reflective practice. As the teacher modifies and tweaks his or her instruction they travel though the remaining phases resulting in enhanced student learning. I would argue that each step, regardless
of the time spent on it, is a prerequisite for improved professional practice in teachers ensuing in increased student achievement. “Reflection is a highly personal practice that offers great potential for illuminating meaning, purpose, and learning in our professional lives. To be reflective means choosing with intention ways of thinking, being, and doing” (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. 65).

**Passion for Children**

The last theme that needs to be mentioned is how each teacher cared for her students. Teaching is more than a job for them; it is a lifestyle or passion driven by something from within. Teaching can have long hours with little recognition and inadequate pay. One might say it is the polar opposite of how the business world operates. Yet, Lois, Mary, Tracy, Jennifer, and Sue all know this and continue to do this job every day from September to June, and most of June, July, and August.

To love children is not normally a requirement of teacher education or applying for a job. However I make the claim that having a passion for children is vital for success. Research on teaching will focus on the nuts and bolts of knowledge and content, but will only briefly touch the passion an individual has for children. You can step into a classroom and instantly know how the teacher feels about his or her students. It does not matter how well a lesson is designed or how neatly a bulletin board is put together. If the teacher in the room is only there in space the students immediately know this.

Effective teachers care about their students and demonstrate that they care in such a way that their students are aware of it (Stronge, 2007, p. 23). Teachers show that they care about their students in many different ways. Listening, learning about students’
lives and interacting on a daily basis are just a few ways that teachers illustrate to students how they care about them. When I think about my own schooling experience, it was the teachers who showed genuine concern and care to me that I remember the most. When a teacher asked me about my family or Saturday’s basketball game, I knew that my teacher cared about me as a person.

Whether in a personal or academic sense, compassion about students’ well being has been highlighted in the five narratives. All five teachers had high expectations for their students and helped students reach those expectations through a variety of instructional tools. Caring teachers are ones who will go the extra mile for students; whether it is staying after school to tutor or make a phone call home. These connections that teachers build, especially the five in my research, not only helped students succeed, but helped them develop into caring citizens. “Effective teachers believe in their students and expect all of them to learn, regardless of their skill levels or starting points,” (Stronge, 2007, p. 56).

All five teachers showed their students how they cared in many different ways. Jennifer helped a student calm himself down in the hallway enough to join the class for morning meeting. Sue attended several hockey games during the year to connect with students and their families. Lois shared stories with her students about her own family. Each teacher, in her own way, connected with students to show that they were cared for and loved.

Can anyone learn how to be a teacher? Yes, many universities and colleges across the country offer teacher education programs. With a certain number of volunteer hours and a good GPA many individuals can enter education. Does that mean they should?
That is certainly up for debate, but along with knowledge of teaching and learning there is a need for love of children. Even though teachers have three months off during the summer, no teacher will tell you that teaching is easy. However, the rewards that teaching can bring are numerous.

I also make the claim that not everyone has the passion for or love of children to survive a career in education. Some individuals enter the educational field because they see it as an easy degree with a nice work schedule. On paper, education might appear easier than a degree in business, but the daily demands of teaching certainly become evident as one begins his/her career. If one listens to the news or reads the paper, the students entering our schools now are so much different than they were even five years ago. All of our students need teachers who love and respect them for what they bring to the classroom and who value the differences that they share with us.

**Linking Instruction, Assessment, and Reflection**

I chose to look at assessment, instruction, and reflection because I feel they are critical pieces of education that are woven together in an intricate pattern. I certainly feel that I witnessed each of these entities embedded together in each classroom. Did it look exactly the same? No, each teacher had strengths that she incorporated into her own teaching. Each teacher added a little something of herself into her classroom. This personalization allows students opportunities and experiences that otherwise might not happen.

In my opinion you cannot have assessment without instruction and reflection,
and vice versa. I found research on assessment, on instruction, and on reflection. Each piece contributes to the greater teaching process. I also feel that each concept is closely aligned. Because teaching is a fluid and dynamic process, assessment, instruction, and reflection weave themselves together. As a teacher I need to assess my students to help guide my instruction, and then reflect on what might happen and how will I adapt things along the way. If we are giving our students assessments and not reflecting or modifying of our instruction, the purpose and goal is lost. From a theoretical standpoint, I feel there is an inadequacy in educational research when it comes to the connection of assessment, instruction, and reflection. Scholars tend to break down each concept into separate pieces and I have shown through my work with my five participants that teaching does not happen that way.

The idea of incorporating and involving students in their own learning might seem logical, but is not always part of teachers’ practice. Students need to be active participants in the learning and assessing process. As we look to prepare future teachers and retain current ones, the idea of teacher and student working collaboratively in the education process is one that needs to be developed. Students need to learn how to take ownership and responsibility for their learning, which should happen within the walls of the classroom with the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher.

Limitations

What do people say, hindsight is 20/20? Would there be things I would change because of things I know now? Yes and no. Being a beginning researcher can be an overwhelming experience. I feel fortunate to have done this research in a setting in
which I was comfortable. Yet, some might say that objectivity can come into question. Conducting research alongside people I worked with on a daily basis can produce awkward moments. However, the individuals who worked with me knew and understood the importance of this project and were highly professional in every way.

The size of my participation group might also be a limitation to some readers. I do make the claim that conducting qualitative research on large groups can be daunting when it comes to the data analysis. Would I have been happier with a few more participants? Yes, but the number in my group afforded me more time to spend in their classrooms and conduct in-depth interviews.

One serious limitation is that I only had white, female teachers as participants. This might be traditionally how elementary education has looked, but the demographics of our students are changing. The faces that our children see each day should also reflect their culture and background. Conducting a study similar to with a more diverse group of teachers will be important for continuing to learn about assessment, instruction, and reflection.

Purpose and Significance

One of the main motives behind this research is that I wanted to become a better teacher. This is not where the impetus for my research ends though. Along with my improvement, I want to help others become better at what they do. One can read all about great teachers and what they do, but to actually experience this first hand would be far more beneficial. I plan to use my research to help others, at both the college and district level with regard to teacher education and improvement. I want to work with novice as
well as veteran teachers in their own quests to be the best that they can be. I can take my first hand knowledge of teachers and use that to help illustrate and highlight qualities of good teaching for others. One can only learn so much from reading. To have the chance, though, to experience quality teaching will have greater impact on educators.

In my current role as assistant principal I oversee teacher evaluations, staff development requests, and using data to help us meet building goals. I still think of myself as a teacher, I just have a different classroom. When I walk into a classroom to observe a teacher teaching, knowing what to look for with regard to instruction has been powerful. I am able to discuss classroom practices with teachers to help improve student learning. I also think having this background of instruction, assessment, and reflection gives me a little credit with veteran staff. I am able to say that I observed and witnessed first hand what this should look like; will I see that in your classroom?

As the administrator in charge of the building staff development program I help determine where our building’s priorities need to be to enhance student learning. I help the staff development committee look at requests that allow staff to practice and hone their craft while learning a little more about themselves as teachers. Our committee utilizes the expertise of our instructional coach to model and help implement instructional practices that are research based and proven to be successful with students. I have been able to share with my building that there are more things we can be doing to promote student learning. Sharing my experiences from classrooms where instruction, assessment, and reflection are evident everyday has proven a successful starting point for a reluctant staff member.

In graduate courses that I have taught I have been able to share this knowledge
with others as well. While I am teaching, I am able to discuss and reflect on research regarding assessment and instruction and how that may look in different classrooms, in different districts. During these classes, I am able to form a community of learners where we can share other experiences of teachers, similar to my research participants, and how they have influenced our learning and way of teaching. Through this continual learning approach my students and I have modeled what a collaboration of teachers might look like in a school setting.

I feel blessed and honored to have had the opportunity to be in classrooms and study teachers. My research participants actively worked alongside me to help answer my guiding research questions. Together, we looked at classroom practice and how it impacts student learning. These observations and interviews were first hand accounts of actual teachers teaching actual students in actual classrooms. I did not include statistics or graphs, but I included thoughts, emotions, and feelings. These are powerful, qualitative descriptions that illustrate what it means and feels like to be an educator in today’s schools. It has been my intention to make you think and reflect on your own learning and teaching and how it has been modified or adapted to impact student learning.

I hope that teachers, whether seasoned or just beginning, will read the stories of my teachers and think about their practice. What does it mean for me to be a teacher? How do I approach student learning and thinking? How do I feel about assessment and reflection in my own practice? The stories from my teachers are not intended to be an end, but a beginning into studying instructional practices. If we want to change and reform our schools for the better we need to study them with a critical eye and ask tough questions. It’s great to be good, but what can we do to be great?
There is a lot of literature out there on assessment, effective teaching and effective teachers, and why reflection is so important. One would only need to read the literature review to see this. What I attempted to show through my teacher descriptions is how all three of these concepts are intertwined and linked to student learning. Through detailed classroom observations, interviews, and my own reflections I have provided five examples of what teacher reflection, assessment, and instruction actually look like. I get excited talking about my experiences in these classrooms and have this urgency to share this information with others. I want teachers to know what powerful research tools they are and what we can learn from each other. One does not need to complete a major thesis to look at instructional practice. This drive for improvement comes from within, but has an end result of helping our students succeed.

Our current educational system is in quite a state of confusion right now. When I look at the data that I collected through observations and interviews it became apparent that what should be happening in classrooms is not always the case. The push for larger school and district accountability has forced some phenomenal teachers to abandon their constructivist, inquiry-based learning to teach to tests. It has become a conundrum between those individuals who make decisions and those individuals who are responsible for carrying out the decisions. As educators, we need to critically look at what our hopes and intentions are for our students and see how that balances with what “has” to be done. The needs of our students become lost in the shuffle and we are doing a disservice to them. In my opinion, teaching and learning must have the students’ needs at the center of everything.
Chapter VIII: Final Thoughts

“Let us think of education as the means of developing our greater abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation.” –John F. Kennedy

As I sit and reflect on my work with these teachers, I am brought back to the current literature on assessment, reflection, and instruction. These five women, as different as they are, are able to assess, reflect, and modify their instruction to meet the needs of their students. Each classroom was a completely different experience, with a different philosophy of teaching and learning. With that said, students were learning and growing at successful rates and developing a love of learning at the same time.

What was clearly evident is that students were learning, growing, and developing, at their own pace. Each teacher was able to provide an environment where students were celebrated and valued and cherished. Once this environment was established, students were able to “take off” on their own. This is what we want our students to be able to do. We, as teachers, will not be there forever holding the hands of our students. Children need to learn the skills to think critically and respectfully. They need to develop coping skills and learn how to make friends. When they are placed in environments where teachers are purposeful in their teaching, this type of learning will occur.

As educators we want our students to develop a curiosity and inquisitive nature with regards to learning. We want our students to become critical thinkers and even
challenge and question traditional ways. These five classrooms, as different as they were, have this philosophy in common. Each classroom forced the students to not accept a yes or no answer, but rather to search and explore for many different answers. Not all teachers have this gift, but I claim that the five who are highlighted in this study do just that.

Another similarity between these five teachers was their passion for learning and for students. You knew once you entered the classroom that you were there to learn because the teacher loved to learn. You also knew that your teacher was there to support you throughout the process. As a student you were even encouraged to make a mistake and learn from it. What has been shown to be important is the process not the solution. Along with that, multiple ways to tackle problems were presented and shared with the whole group.

As I sit and reflect upon this dissertation several things come to mind. I feel that studying teachers through an interpretive lens allows for great discussion and learning opportunities for future as well as practicing teachers. As a practicing teacher and budding researcher, I see my role as two fold. I went into the education profession because I wanted to help students succeed at school and develop a love of learning similar to myself. As a novice researcher, I see that my role in education is to help study and question the status quo. Using my experience as a classroom teacher and my experiences with teachers at my school has allowed me to delve into the relationships and meaning making opportunities that come from interpretive research. It is important to look at assessment, in particular assessment for learning, and teacher reflection and how they can shape our education profession. By stepping into the rooms of thoughtful
educators, I will be able to transform the thoughts and actions of teachers into a story that needs to be told.

“Today’s classrooms are a different place. We celebrate diversity and open the doors of public schools to all children, regardless of race, origin, ability, socioeconomic status, or gender. Appropriately, the focus of our curriculum has expanded to suit this more varied student population, and our school improvement efforts are driven by a commitment to help all the students in our classrooms learn and make progress.” (Pollock, 2007, p. 16)

As I complete this project I would like to end with some lines in a book that I have read to student teachers and graduate students of education. I have shared this book at staff meetings and during workshops. It captures the essence of what it means to be an effective teacher day in and day out. The title of the book is, Mrs. Spitzer’s Garden, by Edith Pattou.

She makes sure the soil is right-light and well-drained, with plenty of room for sprouting. Then Mrs. Spitzer plants the seeds. She waters them, feeds them, and makes sure they get plenty of sun. The seeds begin to sprout. As the plants grow, Mrs. Spitzer watches them closely. She checks daily for weeds and pests. She knows that different plants need different things. And that each plant has its own shape. Some of the plants grow quickly, pushing upward, eager, impatient. Some grow more slowly, unfolding themselves bit by bit. Some plants sprout thin and tall. Some are bushy and wide-spreading. Some bold, showy. They are brightly colored, saying “Look at me!” Some are silvery and quiet, the color of the earth. A few are like wildflowers and will grow
anywhere you put them. And some need gentle care, a special watching-over. As the seasons change, Mrs. Spitzer tends her garden. And then the year is over, and her job is done. But the plants will keep growing, uncurling their stems, stretching their leaves outward, and showing their faces to the sun.
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