

HOW TEACHERS ADAPT TO CURRICULAR AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE: A  
MULTI-CASE STUDY OF THREE MIDDLE SCHOOL LANGUAGE ARTS  
TEACHERS

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Doctor of Philosophy

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By  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

HOW TEACHERS ADAPT TO CURRICULAR AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE: A  
MULTI-CASE STUDY OF THREE MIDDLE SCHOOL LANGUAGE ARTS  
TEACHERS

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examined the experiences of three middle school language arts teachers during a time in their teaching careers where their school district underwent structural and curricular changes. During the restructuring of the grade configuration, curriculum, course assignments, teachers, teams, start time, and schedules, teachers at Smiley Middle School teachers experienced a radical change. Through interviews, blogs, professional learning team observations, and field notes, this qualitative case study examines the experiences of three language arts teachers one and a half years after the transition.

The findings indicated that these teachers were largely impacted by the transition. They relied on their teacher identity to ground their day-to-day classroom changes. Their agency was disrupted, but the teachers were able to rely on professional learning teams and units of instruction to help them build back their agency. Finally, resilience was a large factor in helping the three teachers power through the changes. This study has lasting implications for building leaders, teachers, and pre-service teacher. Understanding and building up identity, agency, and resiliency among teacher may play a role in helping teachers negotiate complex changes in their school structure.

## Chapter One: Introduction

*The best way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance. -Alan W. Watts.*

This quote was printed on the back of Smiley Middle School staff shirts emblazoned with their new middle school logo. It was a positive way to frame change, a tangible reminder that change could be as fanciful as dance, if the teachers were to embrace it. The shirts were passed out the first day the entire new teaching staff met, a new beginning.

Education is full of change and Smiley Middle School was no different. In an effort to increase student achievement, education is constantly trying to figure out ways to be more innovative (Priestly, 2010). Levin (1998) describes educational change in education as an epidemic. Complex and multifaceted, educational change spans national and local leadership where changes range from bureaucratic to teacher-driven initiatives (Anderson, 2010). Educational reform movements such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Common Core State Standards have changed the ways teachers, building leaders, and districts view classroom instruction. Local reform movements such as professional learning communities, reading programming, site-based instructional models, and other district initiatives have added another layer to the expectations surrounding change (Fullan, 2009; McGuinn, 2011).

Through my dissertation research, I studied the change in a mid-western school district. This change involved the structure of the middle schools within the school



district, school grade level assignments, teacher school assignments, teacher course assignments, class length, curriculum, school zoning lines, and school start times. This change is situated in the national and state educational reform movements which were changing all around and within this district concurrent with the internal changes. Thus, the new motto: *The best way to make sense of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance* was the reminder that change was going to tightly hug the faculty at Smiley. Join the dance.

### **The Middle School Transition at Smiley**

During the 2013-2014 school year, the middle schools and junior high schools in the Concord Public School District underwent a transition. Prior to the transition in the 2012-2013 school year, Concord Public Schools had three middle schools which housed grades 6-7 and three junior high schools which housed grades 8-9. Prior to the fall of 2013, students in Concord Public Schools attended elementary K-5, middle school 6-7, junior high 8-9, and high school 10-12. The school district became overcrowded and received bond money to build a new high school.

With the opening of the new high school, Concord Public Schools moved the ninth grade students into the high schools and turned three middle school buildings and three junior high buildings into six middle school buildings teaching grades six through eight. Not only did this help to alleviate crowding, but it also solved the problem of too many transitions K-12. Prior to the transition, district test scores indicated a drop-in scores in sixth, eighth, and tenth grades, the commonality in each of these grades was a new student transition. This is consistent with Alspaugh's (1998) research that noted

achievement dropped when students transitioned to middle school. Concord Public School administrators felt that one less transition would enhance the student K-12 experience. Additionally, high school athletic teams could have their athletes in the same building, and students would have a better understanding that ninth grade report card scores would indeed be on high school transcripts.

Concord Middle School began transition meetings about five years before the transition occurred. Teachers and administrators were in small focus groups that covered the topics such as scheduling, athletics, electives, advisory, and looping. The focus groups met several times throughout the year, read research about best practices, and eventually made recommendations to the superintendent about the findings. In 2009, a team of teachers and administrators was formed to visit middle schools around the state. They also made recommendations about a variety of topics related to the middle school restructuring.

During this same period, the Concord Public School District offered community round table discussions to gain insight from the community about the new middle school structures and boundary lines (Martin, 2011). The issue of boundary lines became a heated topic of discussion. The Concord Public School District redrew the boundary lines for all six middle schools. They published several different boundary plans on their website, in the local paper, and hung posters depicting the boundary choices in the front offices of each of the middle schools and junior highs. The public was asked to give feedback on their choices, and then the school board selected the plan they felt would best fit the needs of the community (Martin, 2012a).

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During the 2011-2012 school year, teachers were asked to rank the top three schools they wanted to work at along with the subjects they wanted to teach. Each of the teachers was then called into one or two “conversations” with a principal from one of the middle schools. After these conversations, the middle school principals met and built their staff. On a Friday in May of 2012, each of the middle school and junior high teachers received a letter in their mailbox detailing their teaching assignment beginning the 2013-2014 school year (Martin, 2012b).

After learning about their teaching assignment, Concord Public School middle school teachers remained in their buildings for one more year. During this year, the new middle school faculties met on all of the professional development days, about six full day meetings, to begin training for the transition the following year.

Concord Public Schools considered this transition a way to start over with their middle school structures and curriculum. During the training year, the new teaching staff constructed a new mission and vision for each of the schools. Mission and vision statements helped the school staff create a shared understanding of the work. They provided a common focus which helped to steer the work of the school, and clarify decisions (DuFour & Eaker, 1998)

Concord Public School District also unveiled the new schedule which added an 18-minute advisory class to the beginning of the school day. The advisory class was in alignment with middle school philosophy as an attempt to provide an adult advocate for every student (Poliner & Lieber, 2004). Administration decided to replace the academic

lab study hall with a Response to Intervention class for all students. The intention of the Response to Intervention class was to target learning instruction based upon the students' needs. Teachers determined through assessments students who were proficient and those who needed additional support. The Response to Intervention class period provided additional support and extension for students with a flexible class roster, so students could enter and leave the class as assessments indicated need (Robertson & Pfeiffer, 2016)

The school district decided to move to a three-tiered bus schedule making the middle school start time 30 minutes earlier than the previous years (Martin, 2013). The new school start time at 7:30 was not in line with research which contended that the later the school start time, the better the academics (Wahlstrom, 2016). At this time the school district decided to eliminate flexible block scheduling in the middle schools and adopt the bell schedule similar to the junior high schools. This strayed from the middle school philosophy as outlined by Davis (2000). Another stray from the intent in middle school structure was the elimination of looping. Prior to the transition, teachers taught a sixth grade loop and then moved with the same students to seventh grade. The thinking behind looping was that teachers would be able to build better relationships with their students over the course of two years.

Concord School district continued teaming in sixth and seventh grades. Each group of approximately 125 students attended classes with the same language arts, social studies, science, and math teachers. The teaming created a school within a school to help students get to know each other and the building while the teachers worked to build their

lessons in an integrated design, keeping in mind the homework assignments and testing dates of the other three teachers (Davis, 2000). Eighth graders were not teamed. They followed more of a junior high structure where the teachers were randomly assigned and the students mixed as a whole grade level between classes.

In the language arts classrooms, the district decided to turn a reading block and a writing block into one single English block. This cut the total teaching time from 90 minutes to 45 minutes. In the previous model, the middle school teachers taught reading and writing, but the junior high teachers taught one block of English. By decreasing language arts teaching time from two blocks to one block, the schedule was able to fit the advisory class with a locker break and add about three to four minutes to each of the content area courses. This decision was discussed in a focus group about scheduling. The language arts coordinator, along with other language arts teachers, did not support the cut in English class time, but the content area teachers wanted a longer period to teach content, and the counselors were in favor of the advisory block. Ultimately, there were more voices for the cut in English than there were to keep the class in double blocks.

Finally, Concord Public Schools decided to fully adopt the Common Core State Standards district-wide and implemented honors English by contract in the eighth grade English classes. The contract by honors was developed to help students feel more inclusive in an honors class. The following chart outlines the changes that occurred from the 2012-2015 school years, including the vision of the new classes and the reality of what teachers taught.

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Table 1

*Changes to Smiley Middle School 2012/2013 to 2013/2014 to 2015/2016*

2012-2013 School Year	2013-2014 School Year Planned Changes (Transition Year)	2013-2014 School Year Reality	2014-2015 School Year (My Study January –June 2015)
No Advisory	Advisory- 18 minutes Curriculum written to meet counseling standards	Advisory- CNN Student News, Independent Reading, Homework, Games	Advisory- 18 minutes
Academic Lab	Response to Intervention (RTI)- Targeted instruction to meet the needs of struggling students	RTI- Study Hall	RTI- Study Hall
90 minutes literacy	45 minutes literacy	45 minutes literacy	45 minutes literacy
45 minute content class	55 minute content class (with 10 minutes embedded content literacy)	55 minute content class- no content literacy	55 minute content class- no content literacy

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6 <sup>th</sup> and 7 <sup>th</sup> grade- 3 Teams Each Grade Level	6 <sup>th</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> grade 2.5 Teams in 6 <sup>th</sup> and 7 <sup>th</sup> grade No teams in 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	6 <sup>th</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> grade 2.5 Teams in 6 <sup>th</sup> and 7 <sup>th</sup> grade No teams in 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	6 <sup>th</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> grade 2.5 Teams in 6 <sup>th</sup> and 7 <sup>th</sup> grade No teams in 8 <sup>th</sup> grade
Regular 8 <sup>th</sup> grade English	Regular 8 <sup>th</sup> grade English with the option for honors contracting	Regular 8 <sup>th</sup> grade English with option for additional assignments on own time	Regular 8 <sup>th</sup> grade English with option for additional assignments on own time
Cohesive teams, supportive structure,	Cohesive teams, excitement, innovation,	Clunky, trying, survival	Clunky, trying, survival
Grade Level Expectations	Common Core State Standards	Common Core State Standards	Common Core State Standards in revision- new standards coming

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The undertaking that Smiley Middle School and the broader Concord Public Schools took on was enormous. Senechal (2015) suggests that for change to be meaningful, it needs to have a layer of constancy along with a strong understanding of what is being done and why it was being done. There was little constancy in the transition at Smiley, but the teachers jumped in when the school year began.

### Events Leading to the Research Question

While in the middle of this transition, I was completing my coursework and comprehensive exams and teaching full time at Smiley Middle School. When it came

time to write my proposal, my initial research interest surrounded critical literacy. I wanted to follow one teacher, [Jim](#), throughout the course of the school year to write a case study on how he wove critical literacy topics into his English language arts lessons. As a colleague, former team teacher and department chair, I had watched Jim write units around critical literacy for years. He found current event articles each week and posted them on the teacher share drive. He was the first person to discuss challenging topics with students including child labor and race in America. He frequently reported to the rest of the English language arts team how the class discussions evolved and what questions to expect, so his colleagues felt comfortable approaching the same topics in their own classroom.

Jim incorporated long units of study focused on promoting social change. In one unit, students studied CNN Heroes segments on TV, segments where individuals try to solve international problems by building programs and contributing positivity to help people. Students then defined “hero”, interviewed a local hero and then completed their own series of random acts of kindness or work to contribute to the local community and presented their work to the class. Jim engaged in long discussions with students during Socratic Seminars on Fridays. They covered topics from the banning of sugary drinks in New York City, to the impact of September 11 on the nation, to gun violence. I wanted to study Jim’s lessons to dig deep into the work of critical literacy and describe how he was able to use his language arts curriculum as a foundation for classroom projects, readings, and discussions about social justice and critical literacy.



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With this idea, I began the process of writing my proposal. I worked on the research question and the literature review. When I was to more formally begin my research, I checked back with Jim about his plans for the upcoming school year. In casual conversation, I asked him about his topic ideas for his critical literacy and social justice units. I wondered what current event topics he would introduce to his sixth grade students, and what edgy new book title he would read to model critical thinking skills. The following conversation, as best as I can remember it, ensued:

Jim replied, “I’m not thinking about critical literacy this year. I can’t do it.”

Trying to hide my disappointment about the potential of having to start over on my own research, I asked simply, “Why?”

Jim responded, “I have too much going on. I can’t do any critical literacy work in my classroom. I have to focus on fitting reading and language arts instruction and meeting the needs of my students. Last year didn’t work right. I tried to do too much. I have to step back and start over.”

And in less than two minutes, I knew my research question was going to have to change. After careful thought and counsel over about a month, I decided to fold Jim’s dilemma into a new research question:

How do selected middle school language arts teachers process curricular and structural change and what is the outcome of that processing?

But, in order to think about this question, I wanted to involve more people. I wanted a variety of perspectives to think about the different ways language arts teachers

processed and adapted to curricular and structural change. I wanted to be able to tell several journeys. [Jim](#) is a mid-career teacher. So I decided to add a new teacher and a later-career teacher, all respected language arts teachers, to my study. The youngest teacher, Molly, was in her third year of teaching during the time of the study. Molly was offered a position at Smiley Middle School while completing a rigorous teacher induction program affiliated with the local university. At the culmination of this program, she was offered the opportunity to continue working at Smiley. Molly is full of energy and creative ideas. The most veteran teacher, Sally, was an outspoken personality at Smiley Middle School. She enjoyed speaking at length about her institutional knowledge of the school, as she was one of the last remaining teachers that opened the building in 1995. Sally's traditional approach to teaching contrasted with the other two teachers, yet all three of them maintained the highest test scores in the language arts department. All three of them were well respected by the rest of the teaching staff, as capable, talented teachers.

With my initial question in mind, I began to think through sub-questions. What did I think I could write about in vivid detail as the outcome of the time I spent with these teachers? I wanted to keep the critical literacy piece in my research question because of my interest in critical literacy. I also felt that the teachers I was studying would discuss critical literacy practices along the way. The Common Core State Standards were a large shift in thinking during the time I was writing my research questions. Teachers in my building were aligning their lessons and units to fit with the Common Core State Standards. Many of the language arts meetings we attended focused on unpacking the

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standards and envisioning the lessons that would teach the standards. So my sub-questions were written as the following:

Sub question: How do these teachers process the Common Core State Standards?

Sub question: How do these teachers process middle school restructuring?

Sub question: How does critical literacy play a role in this instructional change?

Creswell (2007) suggests that case study research should explore the realities of the participants. I was invested in letting these teachers tell their story. While I had written interview questions, I didn't want to put words in their mouths. It was important for me to let the teachers' words take us where they wanted to go. I had faith as a listener that while my questions prompted their thinking, the teachers would lead me. And they did. The three teachers I studied had a lot to say. They spoke volumes. But, they didn't speak much about the Common Core State Standards, even though the new standards impacted their teaching lives. The teachers had accepted the standards as their curriculum and moved on. And, like Jim told me in our earlier conversation, they didn't have a lot to say about critical literacy. It just wasn't the time to think about those things. So, data in hand, my sub-questions changed to:

Sub question: How do these teachers adapt to and/or resist middle school curricular change?

Sub question: How do these teachers adapt to and/or resist middle school structural change?

These sub questions more accurately reflected the data that I gathered while interviewing the three teachers for the study.

I decided to conduct my research study a year and a half after the transition for several reasons. First the transition was so overwhelming for the teachers involved that they were not comfortable with spending any additional time completing interviews and blogging conversations earlier. The teachers didn't want anybody in their classrooms completing observations during that first year, either. Their team members, curriculum, schedule, and course assignments were all new. The teachers needed time to adjust by themselves. Second, the year and a half gave the teachers time to reflect on the experience. They were able to think about things from the perspective of having a full year of experience under their belts. Because of this, they were able to give a solid description of their teaching lives before and after the transition.

Prior to conducting the study, I knew each one of the teachers at a personal level. I served as a language arts teacher, language arts department liaison, and mentor teacher at Smiley middle school. I transferred to Smiley during the 2008-2009 school year. So, I knew Sally for the six years I worked at Smiley; five of those years I was the department liaison. This was not an evaluator role, it mostly involved keeping track of the language arts budget and attending school improvement meetings. I knew Jim for my entire career as we had worked at a previous middle school prior to moving to Smiley. I worked on the same team as [Jim](#) for four years of my teaching career. During that time, we planned units together, discussed students and assessments, and wrote the language arts summer school curriculum. When I moved to my role as a mentor teacher, we still

discussed teaching ideas and best practice on a regular basis. I served as Molly's mentor during her first year of teaching. During this time, I observed her classroom daily offering her a sounding board and feedback. I worked with her on her classroom research project. Over the course of Molly's first year, we developed a mutual trust that has followed us to this day. Upon beginning my research and throughout my interviews, I felt as though I was an insider which is valuable in case study research (Creswell, 2007). Prior to the study, I had a strong respect for each of these teachers which only deepened as I listened to their stories.

### **Rationale**

The rationale for conducting this study is to provide a window into the experiences of three language arts teachers with varying years of employment as they lived through a complete change to their school structure and curriculum. I intended to tell the stories of these three teachers as they worked through the curricular and structural changes at Smiley Middle School. These stories are important because they provide insight into how teachers work through challenging and stressful working situations that involve change. I feel my work gives a voice to the teachers, consistent with the intention of case study research (Creswell, 2007). By trying to understand how these three teachers adapt and process change, I hope to apply this knowledge to future teaching experiences as change is inevitable in educational systems. Further I would like use and share the information gained in this study to benefit teachers and administrators as they encounter changes in their schools and districts.

### **Theoretical Overview**

This study is approached from the social constructivist lens. I believe that meaning is constructed through social interactions (Atwater, 1996). In order for learning to occur, learners need to share understanding with others and participate in group conversations (Ben-Zvi Assaraf, 2011). Coming from the constructivist theory, communities of practice is the idea that individuals should work together in collaborative learning communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Further, new workers should collaborate with veteran workers to encourage peer to peer learning that allows them to develop the necessary skills to work toward the mission of the organization.

My research is based in a middle school. Beginning in the 1960s the middle school movement was designed specifically for the unique characteristics of adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000). It is built like a school within a school where teams of students have the same core teachers throughout the day. Flexible scheduling and an interdisciplinary approach to teaching allows teachers to mold the units and the schedule around the needs of their group of students. Further, the middle school model encourages looping with students, the teacher moves with the students from one grade to the next grade, and an advisory block where there is one adult advocate for every student in the building (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

The three language arts teachers in this study utilized the Common Core State Standards as their curriculum. Adopted in 2014, the Common Core State Standards were a response for the need for educational reform (Shannon, 2013). In the Common Core, the information literacy and literature standards stem from ten anchor standards that are

vertically aligned K-12 (“Preparing America’s students for success,” 2017). The writing standards are structured in a similar way. These standards emphasize informational texts with the ultimate goal for all students to be college and career ready by the time they graduate high school.

Teachers have flexibility within the classroom to teach the standards using their own instructional methods. Reading and writing workshop is an instructional framework that the teachers in my study used at varying levels. The idea behind reading and writing workshop is to give students the opportunity to read a large variety of texts at their reading and interest level and write a large variety of texts where the student serves as a decision maker for his/her own writing craft and structure (Atwell, 1998; Miller, 2009; Kittle, 2012). The class is structured to have a five to ten minute mini-lesson about a topic, and then to have the students utilize the majority of class time in a workshop setting where the teacher serves as a facilitator and coach, conferring with individual students and small groups. The final five minutes of the class is a regroup where students share their learning (Atwell, 1998)

Change in the field of education is inevitable. As teachers experience change from one idea to the next, some find it hard to readily adopt new ideas (Borko & Putnam, 1996). Yet, change is important to keep the field of education from getting stagnant (Lapek, 2017). Sergiovanni (1998) suggests that for change to be lasting, it needs to be linked to the common good. Teachers respond to change in many different ways, but looking at change through identity, agency, and resilience are some ways to think about change. A teacher’s professional and personal life help to form their identity. This

includes personality, families, culture and traditions (Beijaard, 1995, van den Berg, 2002). Teacher agency involves the ability for teachers to make their own decisions, act autonomously, and take professional stances (Etelapelto et al, 2013). Finally, resilience is the ability to withstand change and cope with the variety of challenges teachers encounter in education (Doney, 2012).

### **Methodology Overview**

I approached this study through the lens of a social constructivist. I believe that through interactions with others we construct meaning (Crotty, 1998). I used a case study format for my research (Creswell, 2007). Each of the three teachers were their own case with a discussion of the similarities and differences at the end. I followed those participants for four months, February to May. Consistent with case study research, my data collection included interviews, blogs, field notes, classroom observations and professional learning team notes. My data analysis was borrowed from the grounded theory approach where my themes bubbled up from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). My coding process was recursive in nature as first round coding bled into second round coding, then I referred back to my data as I wrote (Stake, 1995). I would describe my methods as not formulaic, but in line with Saldana's (2013) description of coding data.

### **Significance of this Study**

Change and educational reform is a topic of interest and is well documented (Fullan, 2009; Lapek, 2017; Sergiovanni, 1998; Perkins & Reese, 2014). While many of these studies discuss the variety of teacher reform efforts and the different types of ways to administer teacher reform, few studies outline the cases of teachers as they experience



change. In this study, the teachers' honest perspectives, gathered from an insider, about how they adapted to and processed change places this study amongst the research around change. It provides an up close view of teachers as they lived through structural and curricular change within their school. It offers some human voices to the change and reform literature.

### **Chapter Overview**

Chapter one details the events leading up to my research study and the relevant background information around my research question. It includes a brief summary of the research supporting my work and the rationale statements. Chapter two is my literature review. It is split into four sections. The first section is about my theoretical framework. The second section covers the middle school model. The third section involves research around the language arts curriculum including the Common Core State Standards, reading and writing workshop, and technology integration. The final section is about research around teacher change, identity, resilience and agency. Chapter three outlines my research methodology including information about the site, participants, data collection, coding and analysis. Chapter four details my findings from my data analysis. This chapter is in four parts. During the first three parts, I discuss each teacher as an individual case and then the last part offers a comparison of the teachers as a group along with the themes I drew from my data. Chapter five details the implications of my findings. It includes my ideas of how teachers, administrators, and districts can use this research to think about ways to work through curricular and structural change.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

My literature review is divided into four main sections. The first section explains the theoretical framework that supports this study, the second delineates middle school philosophy that includes the background information about the middle school structure and ideology. It serves as a foundation from which the teachers I study teach.

The next section involves pieces of the curriculum and pedagogy that teachers utilized pertaining to my research study. The Common Core section gives an overview of the changing curriculum and the ever-changing political climate within the Common Core. The section on reading and writing workshop provides the research base for the instructional methods that are described throughout the data analysis section. The integration of technology, with an emphasis on one to one devices, is another way teachers have adapted to new teaching methods, and an instructional tool that teachers were learning to incorporate into their lessons. Critical literacy was included because at the time of the study many of the participant-teachers were interested in moving toward critical literacy, and I assumed it may be an important part of the curricular change as it was an important part of their teaching prior to the transition.

The final section on teacher change provides research on the complexities of teacher change, the value of change, and thinking about the components present in order for systems to successfully implement change. This section then moves to research with

identity, resilience, and agency which I added to the literature review as my data analysis evolved.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Social Constructivism.** Early forms of constructivist theory can be traced to Dewey who argued that experiences don't occur in a vacuum, but involve a connection between the environment and an individual's mind (Liu, 2010). Crotty (1998) contends that a social constructionist's view is that "all meaningful reality is socially constructed" (p. 55). Our ideas about the world are an extension of what has already been constructed, and meaning is made through a social path. The social constructivist perspective maintains that meaning is constructed as we interact socially with others and, conversely, learning is not an individual activity (Atwater, 1996; Palincsar, 1998). Social constructivists believe that learners should share understandings and engage in group conversations in order for learning to occur (Ben-Zvi Assaraf, 2011). Social constructivism does differentiate between knowledge and learning. Knowledge is co-constructed with others while learning happens internally. Learning is what happens in an individual after knowledge has been collectively created (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Theorists who contributed to the social constructivist theory include Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. Their theories focused on social and cognitive constructivism (Liu & Chen, 2010).

Vygotsky was a primary contributor to the social constructivist theory. Vygotsky argued that humans are interdependent upon one another for development from infancy to adulthood. Through social interaction, humans develop cognition. Thus, social

interaction leads to inward development and higher mental functions (John-Steimer & Mahn, 1996). According to Chaitkin (2003), Vygotsky believed that learning should be about what somebody hasn't learned yet, instead of what somebody already knows. Schools should look at the "whole" person instead of a specific task to be mastered. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is based on the ideas that a child can learn more with the assistance of a knowledgeable peer or adult.

**Communities of Practice.** The concept of community of practice comes out of a social perspective of learning. Wenger's *Communities of Practice: Learning Meaning and Identity* (1998) was a foundational work about ways that people learn in work environments. Wenger suggests that people engage in participation activities such as conversations and social groups and people create artifacts such as documents or resources which he terms reification. In order for individuals to learn, both have to be present. Over time, participation and reification create a social history which leads to informal and constantly changing social structure. People within a community have a free-flowing and innovative exchange of ideas that move the organization forward. Central to the social interactions is identity. Belonging to the community and the role within the community can add to an individual's identity.

The communities of practice theory has application to the field of education, specifically in the area of professional development and professional learning communities. Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that in a community of practice, the collaboration of new workers with veteran workers will ultimately benefit both types of

individuals and through their collaborative work, will construct practice, meaning, and identity

An empirical study by Barab, Barnett, and Squire (2002) looked at pre-service teachers in a program designed after the community of practice model. The researchers studied about 15 students each semester over three semesters at Indiana University. In this program, college students attended a seminar, each of the four years enrolled in the education program. The seminar was designed to have a variety of experiences and ages among the students taking the class, while also identifying a mentor classroom teacher to apprentice under throughout the four year seminar. The grounding idea in the seminar was learning as a community. The analysis of the study focused on tensions, or dualities, inherent with the community of practice model. This duality included seminar facilitators that had to be gatekeepers and the tensions between theory and practice in education. The authors argued that these tensions provided rich discussion and ultimately strengthened the community of learners.

**Organizational Change.** The large body of research in organizational change offers additional perspectives on ways schools, viewed as organizations, can embark upon the change process. Harrison (1970) suggests that the intervention strategy should match the depth of the emotional involvement in the change. The closer change comes to a person's identity, the deeper the intervention should be. Harrison suggests several different types of interventions from operational analysis involving the least amount of depth to task group therapy involving the most amount of depth. Nadler and Tushman (1990) outline different types of changes an organization can experience. The change

that most closely matches my research is called a re-orientation change that is both strategic and anticipatory and should allow the time to empower the individuals associated with the change. There is risk involved in a re-orientation change because it requires a leader to be visionary.

Bolman and Deal (1991) developed four frames for better understanding organizations: structural, human resource, political and symbolic. The structural frame sets clear goals, looks at the data and analyses, emphasizes accountability, and adds policies and rules to solve problems. The human resource frame is people centered with an emphasis on shared decision making. The human resource frame works to meet the needs of the people who work in the organization. The political frame views the organization as broken into separate areas that compete with each other. This framework includes power, negotiation, and tension. The symbolic framework involves symbols, rituals, stories, and a shared mission that the organization is working toward. A shared institutional identity is important in the symbolic framework. Bonner, Koch, and Langmeyer (2004) applied these four frames to help analyze an elementary school through five years of reform incorporating a special education inclusion model. They were able to find evidence of all four frames within the school during the transition, and used these frames as lenses to discuss the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of five years of reform.

### **Middle School Philosophy**

This first section of the literature review focuses on the middle school philosophy. My study took place in sixth, seventh and eighth grade classrooms in a middle school.

The middle school movement began in the 1960s when educators began to recognize that adolescents fit in a place that was not elementary and not yet high school. During this time in their lives, adolescents' minds and bodies are rapidly changing. Schools need to adapt their curriculums to the emotional, social, physiological, and cognitive needs of these students (Armstrong, 2006). *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), an expanded version of Carnegie Corporation's 1989 paper *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, outlined ways to improve middle level education and became a crucial text in changing the way in which we educate middle level students.

The middle school concept focuses on the individual student. According to Jackson and Davis (2000), middle schools should be specifically tailored to teach adolescents. Ranging in different configurations including grade five at the lower end to grade nine at the upper end, middle schools are ideally structured in teams where a group of teachers educate a group of students. This is kind of like a school within a school. The team of teachers work together to create integrated units of study that cover the emotional, social and cognitive needs of students. As adolescents grow and mature at different rates, middle schools are designed to adapt to the needs of this ever-changing population (Lounsbury, 2009). In addition to meeting the needs of adolescents, middle schools are designed to include families and the local community in education (Beane & Lipka, 2006).

Units of study emphasize creativity and exploration while adjusting academics to meet each student's individual needs. Teacher teams allow the opportunity to combine classes for extend blocks or produce a staggered testing/homework schedule to help

students manage their academic calendars. Jackson (2009) outlines a school in Denver, Colorado which uses combined classes and the teaming approach to build an international curriculum. At this school students learn an international approach to science, along with literature from around the world both of which support the social studies and world language class. Students are assessed utilizing rubrics that emphasize global competence.

In the ideal middle school model the team teachers have flexible block scheduling throughout the day where they can adjust class times to meet the needs of students. Renzulli (2000) discusses a middle school that emphasizes authentic learning and real life problems through enrichment groups. Utilizing flexible scheduling, students at Johnson Middle School participate in an academy designed to meet their specific interests one afternoon a week. The academies are built around an inquiry model which allows the students to bring in community members, utilize research skills, and communication skills to do such things as form a television company, compete in National History Day or the Math Olympiad.

Part of the middle school model is that students also meet in an advisory group. During advisory, the students explore more social/emotional concepts as an attempt is made to have one teacher advocate for every child in the building. The advisory is like a home base where students build a small family within their school.

Not everyone has seen success with the middle school model. Rodolfo Abella (2005) conducted a quantitative study on the effects of a K-8 center compared to a 6-8 middle school. Abella followed 3630 sixth graders in five K-8 and five 6-8 middle schools through their ninth grade year. The study found that students in the K-8



buildings had higher positive change in academic performance (as measured by the Stanford 9). The K-8 students reading test scores measured 2% higher in the eighth grade while their math scores measured 3.8% higher in the eighth grade. In addition to the higher scores Abella found that students attending K-8 schools had lower absenteeism and lower out of school suspensions.

Beane and Lipka (2006) counter the argument that K-8 schools provide increased academic achievement stating that middle schools have lacked appropriate implementation. Districts were forced to create middle schools to prevent overcrowding and did not provide an adequate foundation to build the systems unique to the middle school model. Beane and Lipka suggest shifting to the middle school model over time, emphasizing all components of the middle school concept instead of just a few. These components include small teaching teams, integrated curriculum, positive relationships with parents and the community, and teacher preparation focused on the needs of adolescents. Further, Beane and Lipka point out that Abella's (2005) study, while showing growth through grade 8, show a leveling off of academic achievement after the students attend ninth grade.

Smiley Middle School follows pieces of the middle school model. Prior to the transition, Smiley Middle school incorporated looping, teaming, and flexible block scheduling into the middle school model. After the transition, Smiley Middle School incorporated advisory but eliminated flexible block scheduling and looping. Teaming was present prior to and after the transition. While the teachers worked to meet the needs of adolescents, content integration happened only in pockets.

### **Curriculum and Instruction**

**Introduction.** This next section delves into the curricular pieces of middle school language arts education. The Common Core State Standards were the standards teachers used in their classrooms during the time of this study. These standards were a large and highly politicized movement whose standing in the educational world changed daily during my research. Some of the instructional methods used to implement the Common Core State Standards were based on reading and writing workshop methods. While not all of the teachers used these methods, they were a thread in many of the interviews. Finally, as Smiley Middle School moved to an instructional format where every student had a computer, technology became an important aspect of instruction as well.

### **Common Core State Standards**

**History/Background.** During the time of the transition at Smiley Middle School, the Common Core State Standards were part of the change the teachers experienced. Language arts teachers were asked to adopt the Common Core in full the same year the buildings switched to 6-8 buildings.

Sponsored by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core State Standards is an educational initiative that outlines the learning expectations of students K-12 in math and language arts. While the final version of the Common Core was written in about 12 months, the Common Core State Standards was the response to about thirty years of calls for educational reform (Shannon, 2013). The intended outcome of the Common Core is to ensure students are college and/or career ready by the time they exit high school. David Coleman, a member

of the English Language Arts Work Team is credited as being the person to pull together people to create the standards. Coleman later became the president of the College Board to align the SAT and Advanced Placement curriculum with the Common Core (Shannon, 2013).

Published in draft form in 2009, forty-five states, the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense have adopted the Common Core to date. States have adopted one of two new assessments that take the place of their current state-wide tests. These assessments align with the Common Core and were field tested spring 2014 with national roll-out spring 2015. The two agencies creating these assessments are the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. The United States government offered a \$350 million stimulus package to help fund the creation of these assessments (Shannon, 2013). While these new tests promise to be efficient, utilizing computers to assess students and quicker score reports, many teachers will likely continue to allow these tests to drive instruction, as their paper/pencil predecessors. Within an era of hyper-accountability, the Smarter Balanced or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers assessments will most likely continue the type of schooling that promotes test taking skills paired with lower level questions (Dudley-Marling, 2013).

To further confound curriculum change in the state of Missouri, Governor Jay Nixon signed House Bill 490 in July 2014. The law was passed in response to perceived insufficient public input on the Common Core; further, critics of the Common Core have expressed an interest to have more state-centered education. Under this law, work

groups of 16-17 education professionals met a new set of standards in English, math, science, history, and government by October 1, 2015 (Singer, 2014). These standards, titled the Missouri Learning Standards were adopted by the 2016-2017 school year. Teachers were asked to teach using the Common Core State Standards with the understanding that the standards would change. The Missouri Learning Standards ([www.dese.mo.gov/college-career-readiness/curriculum/Missouri-learningstandards](http://www.dese.mo.gov/college-career-readiness/curriculum/Missouri-learningstandards)) are similar to the Common Core State Standards, with some exceptions. Because the teachers in my study were using the CCSS during the time of the study, I will continue explaining those standards as the teachers understood them.

***English Language Arts.*** The informational reading and literature standards in CCSS stem from ten similar anchor standards. These standards are broken down by each grade level, each specific strand becoming more difficult as students progress through school. For example, the Reading Standard 1 for sixth grade is, “Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.” In contrast, Reading Standard 1 for eighth grade is, “Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text (‘‘Preparing America’s students for success,’’ 2017). By eighth grade, students are to begin choosing appropriate textual evidence instead of just finding evidence.

The strands are arranged like a ladder from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, adding a level of complexity each year. These standards call for a higher-level of reading comprehension, raising the optimal lexile level for each grade level. Books are assigned

a lexile level based upon semantic and syntactic elements. Teachers are asked to determine text complexity using three factors: 1. Qualitative measures (meaning, language conventions, and background knowledge) 2. Quantitative measures (lexile), and 3. Reader to task match (Is the task a hard task that needs an easier text? What is the motivation of the reader?). Additionally, the Common Core emphasizes increased exposure to informational texts as an attempt to better mimic non-fiction to fiction reading ratios in places outside of school.

Like the reading, the writing standards stem from ten anchor standards. With an emphasis on process writing, the strands focus on narrative, expository, and argumentative writing with equal weight. In writing, instruction emphasizes using textual evidence to back up statements. Writing Standard 9 for grade 6 states: “Support their interpretations, analyses, reflections, or findings with evidence found in literary or informational texts (“Preparing America’s students for success,” 2017).”

***Proponents.*** Proponents of the Common Core argue that the Common Core State Standards have a design that has clear goals and high standards. With ten anchor strands for reading and writing respectively, teachers have the opportunity to teach deeply to a few strands. Because these strands cycle through a students’ education K-12, students have the opportunity to build upon each of the strands year after year.

The expository nature of the Common Core encourages literacy across disciplines with the opportunity to engage teachers in cross disciplinary discussions while literacy becomes an important piece of each content. Math, social studies, science, and the arts

are all encouraged to help students think about reading in their own content area (Calkins, 2012).

While the Common Core outlines standards which every teacher must cover, it also observes that the teacher is the best decision maker for the students she/he teaches. Calkins (2012) wrote, “So what is good about the standards?....The CCSS respect the professional judgment of classroom teachers” (p. 13). The standards are not a scripted way to educate students, they are written for the teacher to insert professional judgment. Essay topics, specific book titles, lesson designs are examples of choices the teacher is able to make during the school year.

***Opponents.*** Interestingly, opponents of the Common Core include both sides of our political spectrum. Both the left and the right have concerns about the implementation of the Common Core, each for different reasons. The right argues that the Common Core is an effort to adopt a national curriculum, taking autonomy away from local schools, while the left argues the Common Core narrows the curriculum decreasing its emphasis on narrative writing, fiction, and student’s individual experiences, and increasing its emphasis on factual information. Compton-Lilly and Stewart (2013) assert that the Common Core does not take into account students coming from poverty or diverse backgrounds. Common standards do not address inequities, or allow teachers to better serve the wide range of students they see in their classroom (Compton-Lilly & Stewart, 2013).

Early childhood educators are particularly critical of the standards stating they are not developmentally appropriate for students. The Common Core was written with the

end in mind. The writers began with tasks desired for college and career ready students and then broke those tasks down each grade level to kindergarten. Educational scholar, Randy Bomer (2013), states kindergarteners have become “college freshman in training” (p. 27). He further argues “It is a radical break to assume that practices for college readiness should be engaged in beginning with five and six year olds, a break that is not supported by one scintilla of research” (p. 25). His argument is that young children have different educational needs than those ready for college or their career. These needs cannot be met by dividing one set of standards across a K-12 continuum, developmental needs should also be a factor.

In the state of Missouri, conservatives are concerned that the Common Core will remove local control over curriculum and teaching, and possibly an attempt by the national government to indoctrinate children (Keller, 2014). Most recently several conservative citizens including a gubernatorial candidate filed a lawsuit against the state of Missouri to stop payments to Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Associated Press, 2014). During this same time, the task force met in Jefferson City to work on new state standards. The debates have involved heated discussions over keeping pieces of the Common Core or abandoning it altogether. Representatives from the Missouri Coalition Against Common Core were well represented and vocally opposed to any implementation of the Common Core (Associated Press, 2014). This adds another layer of change to teachers’ lives.

## **Reading Instructional Practice**

***Introduction.*** While the Common Core State Standards outlined what the teachers were going to teach, how the lesson would be taught was at the discretion of the instructor. Teachers employ a variety of methods to instruct students. The reading and writing workshop structure is one way to think about language arts instruction. The teachers in my study employed pieces of reading and writing workshop methods throughout the school year.

***Overview of reading workshop.*** Reading workshop is grounded on the belief that students need to have the opportunity to read a wide variety of texts that are individually selected. Therefore, in one classroom at any given time, every student could be reading a different title. In her book, *The Reading Zone*, Nancy Atwell (2007) stated we should develop students to be “critical, compassionate, habitual readers” (p.1). In order for students to become critical, compassionate, and habitual readers, they need to read a large variety of texts (Allington, 2001; Atwell, 1998; Beers, 2003; Calkins, 2000; Gallagher, 2009). James Britton (1986) suggests students first learn to read, then be able to read for pleasure, then be able to become involved in the experience books provide for us. Reading workshop provides these opportunities for students.

***Reading workshop structure.*** Workshop based reading instruction has been useful in meeting the needs of middle school students. During workshop based instruction, students choose an independent book to read based upon their individual interest and reading level. The teacher conducts a five to ten minute mini-lesson instructing the students on a variety of topics such as character development, theme, or



contextual clues. The students then work on the application of these concepts along with their individual goals during their independent reading time. While students are reading, the teacher is actively conferring with each student about topics such as the text, their thinking and the application of a large variety of reading comprehension strategies (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 2000).

The reading workshop approach contrasts with a more whole class text approach where the teacher leads the discussion and reading of one book with the entire class and then supplements this learning with reading worksheets and comprehension quizzes. This more traditional approach is preferred by some educational professionals. Barbara Feinberg argues that a workshop approach does not allow for the direct instruction that students need (Feinberg, 2007). However, a reading conference allows instruction to be individualized to meet the needs of each student. The workshop approach allows for students to complete a large number of texts throughout the course of the year. It also supports a student's development as a reader who makes choices about which books to read exploring individual book preferences with teacher support (Atwell, 1998; Miller, 2009; Calkins, 2000; Kittle 2012; Gallagher, 2009).

### **Writing Instructional Practice**

***Introduction.*** Similar to reading workshop, writing workshop tailors instruction to individual students. It is grounded in the idea that students need to write a lot to become better writers, and they need to read a lot to understand how writing is put together. During writing workshop, students are asked to make decisions on topics,

structure, and genre to help build the notion that teachers teach the writer, not the writing (Atwell 1998, Ray 2006).

***The writing process.*** A writing workshop classroom is based on several components: the writing process, mentor texts, and authentic writing experiences. The writing process is not a series of steps that students follow like a recipe. It is, rather, put together to mimic what authors do in their careers. As the students learn each of the parts, collection, planning, drafting, revision and editing, they are encouraged to move back and forth within each phase (Culham, 2003, Elbow, 1973, Ray, 1999, Newkirk & Kittle, 2013, Calkins, 1986). Jeff Anderson (2005) explains this as “moving in and out of all the phases in true recursive fashion” (p. 28). Lane (1993) states, “all successful writing instruction depends on empowering students as writers, not simply following a prescribe formula” (p.4). So if, for example, a student drafts a slice of life piece and then wants to revise a certain section by slowing an important moment and speeding an unimportant one, the student might plan the details of the slower parts before jumping into the revision work. Or a student may revise while free-writing to change a word or phrase that just doesn’t make sense.

***Mentor texts.*** In her book *Wonderous Words* (1999), Ray unpacked the writing of publishing authors. She looked at the structure, word choice, sentence construction of children’s literature and put them into categories that students could study. Ray contended that the best writing teachers were the people who wrote for a living, the published authors. She suggested that at the beginning of any study, students are immersed in the writing they will eventually be expected to write. Ray called these initial

texts *mentor texts*. Students read a stack of mentor texts with a focus of one question in mind. These questions could be: How does a writer construct a memoir? Or how does a writer use punctuation to convey voice? Students then list everything they notice from the stack of mentor texts with the idea that they will have to eventually write something that fits into that stack.

Mentor texts can easily be differentiated within a classroom setting. Within one topic, mentor texts allow teachers to reach the wide variety of students in their classrooms. They are also showing students a life tool. If a student is asked to write something- any something- from a want ad to a menu description to a haiku poem- that student can simply find writing that is like what they are expected to do, read it, and list what makes that writing unique. With a mentor text as a base, the student should then be able to craft something that would fit in the pile of writing they have read (Ray, 2006; Fletcher, 2011; Gallagher, 2011; Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007).

Additionally, mentor texts help students define what it is they are going to write (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007). Teachers can first give students a stack of mentor texts and the students can think about their writing as a piece that would fit in that stack. There is no five paragraph section at Barnes and Noble, nor is there the descriptive essay section, or the expository section. Authentic writing blends modes and structures. Authors tend to write in genres (Ray, 2006; Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012).

***Authenticity.*** Writers need an authentic audience and the opportunity to create real pieces. Weaver (2008) writes, “Finally, we emphasize that writing for publication, for an audience beyond the classroom and in genres not limited to school, encourages

students to enrich their content and enhance their writing to a degree that nothing else can do” (p.5). Writing real things for a real audience makes writing worthwhile. Even with mentor texts and student-driven topics, students need to be able to write for somebody beyond the teacher. Writing is meant to be read. Along with an authentic audience, students need to write for authentic reasons.

### **Technology**

Along with the adoption of the Common Core, schools are making the effort to become technologically literate. As the state-wide assessments moved from a paper pencil version to an on-line version where students toggle between texts and utilize digital tools to measure and calculate, additional pressure was placed on school districts to move toward teaching for digital competency.

With the advent of technology, twenty- first century learning is distinctly different than learning in the past. The current generation of students knows life with the internet, cell phones, Google at their fingertips, laptops and ipads. With the world of information at the fingertips of students, education is engaged in a process of drastic revision. Memorization of facts is far less important than the critique and interpretation of those facts. Because of the abundance of information, educating students for the current labor market is far different than educating students for the labor market a century ago (Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe, & Terry, 2013).

While the adoption of technological devices are school-wide endeavors, the area of language arts and reading has experienced an enormous shift in content. The definition of texts themselves has expanded well beyond the traditional printed texts of

books, magazines and newspapers (Buschman, 2009). With technology come multimedia skills such as negotiating desktop publishing and presentations, writing digital documents for an undefined audience, understanding and applying apps, critically thinking through web resources and navigating the internet. Part of this technology shift is a push to go “one-to-one”, giving every student a digital device to use throughout the school day and at home to complete assignments, readings, and research. Instructional quality, student achievement, and preparation for a future rich in technology are among the reasons schools are going one-to-one (Lei & Zhao, 2008; Zucker, 2004). As technology in classrooms increase, teachers’ and students’ technology skills increase, along with overall student engagement (Dunleavy, Dexter, & Heinecke, 2007).

Technology integration is a complex process. In order for technology integration to be successful teachers, students, parents, and administration have to buy in. Additionally, peer support and technical support helps teachers troubleshoot common technology problems. This support is necessary for teachers to continue using classroom technology as computers require problem solving and trouble shooting. (Cooley, 2001; Penuel, 2006).

Inan and Lowther (2009) studied technology integration in 195 schools across Michigan with sixth grade as the predominant grade level represented. They used path analysis to identify the relationship between support, technical support, professional development, teacher readiness, teacher beliefs, and laptop integration. Inan and Lowther found that teacher beliefs had the most influence on laptop integration with overall support, technical support and professional development playing a part in overall

teacher beliefs. Additionally, teacher readiness played a key role in technology integration.

Cox (2013) studied technology integration in three teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience. Cox conducted one on one interviews and asked the teachers to complete a questionnaire. The four main themes that emerged from the research included: 1. A need to plan for technology. The teachers noted that the professional development available was not focused on the teachers' content areas creating a need to plan for technology. 2. Teachers concerns should be addressed. Teachers have a variety of concerns regarding implementation including management, consequences, and collaboration. These concerns and others should be discussed throughout the integration process. 3. An understanding for technological differences among the staff should be addressed. The teachers noted that social uses of technology vary from educational uses of technology. A person adept at one may not necessarily be adept at the other. 4. A need for collaboration. The most positive way technology was integrated in the content areas of the teachers studied was through peer support and collaboration.

### **Critical Literacy**

With the world at students' fingertips on ipads, phones, tablets, and laptops, critical literacy is one way teachers can incorporate technology while satisfying multiple standards in the Common Core. The recent events in places such as Ferguson, MO have called for renewed classroom conversations about culture, race, and power. Since many

of the teachers I knew were becoming interested in critical literacy, I expected to see it as part of their curricular change.

Critical Literacy adds to language arts instruction by asking students to think about inequality, actively question, take a stance, and pursue additional perspectives. While critical theory first developed in the 1920s (Creswell, 1998), Paulo Friere became widely known for his work with critical theory after the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970. According to Stevens and Beane (2007), critical literacy is “active questioning of the stance found within, behind, and among texts....an emancipatory endeavor, supporting students to ask regular questions about representations, benefit, marginalization and interests.” (p.12)

Friere (1970) believed the current educational model resembled that of an open-up and dump method where teachers hold all the power and knowledge and impart that knowledge upon their students. The poor are put in the situation of being completely dependent upon the rich-information holders (Holzman, 1998). Friere uses the banking system metaphor for education where education becomes the act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat (Friere, 1970).

Friere believed that students should be taught to read the “word and the world” (Friere & Macedo, 1987). Using Friere as a foundation for teaching critical literacy, Fecho (2003), Lensmire (2000), and Christensen (2000) discuss how critical literacy can be the foundation of reading/writing classrooms. While each of them have a different

take on what critical literacy within the walls of a classroom entails, there are some commonalities amongst the classrooms they describe. Students are at the center of instruction. Classes are set up to be democratic in nature with student conversations and questions making up more of the class time than direct teacher instruction.

In *“Is this English?”* Fecho (2003) writes about his experience as a high school English teacher during the 1980s and 1990s. Fecho viewed both reading interaction and classroom discourse that happened in his room as transactions. From Louise Rosenblatt (1978), Fecho applied transactional theory to not only the reader and text, but also to anything that made meaning, such as art and music. He viewed his classroom as a place where many transactions occurred. He also drew upon Friere’s work (1970) to think about marginalized students and power roles inside and outside the classroom. He worked against the banking idea of education while trying to help students construct understanding within each other.

Linda Christensen is a high school history and English teacher in Portland, Oregon. In her book, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, (2000) she writes about how she moves students from community building and self- awareness to discussions of inequity and social justice. Her teaching style encouraged students to find their own voice through their writing and class discussions.

Christensen builds her class community by having the students share their stories. For example, she asks students to read essays about names and then write their own story about the origin of their names; they write poems about their family roots, and personal narratives. Through these assignments Christensen establishes classroom procedures



such as “read arounds” (p. 14), where students share their writing while the class listens and takes notes about the writing process.

Like Christensen, Lensmire (2000) used a critical literacy lens in his classroom’s writing workshop. Lensmire (2000) wrote about the power structures still at play, even when using an approach to teaching that is structured to give students a voice. Lensmire felt that the way students shared their writing created social hierarchies amongst each other, and while they had some say in topic selection, students were still silenced when wanting to write about “taboo” topics such as war and blood.

Lensmire (2000) has suggestions for the writing workshop structure that will help to alleviate these issues. He suggests that individual writing conferences focus on craft leaving voice and perspective to the writer--these are things that make the student unique. He also suggests that both the classroom teacher and the students engage in dialogue with writers, looking at writing as a springboard to ask questions and gain understanding as opposed to critique. Students should be able to group themselves as opposed to teacher selected groups. This allows for students to work within comfortable peer groups. Then students mix as a whole class during sharing time where they converse over writing ideas.

### **Teacher Change and Identity, Resilience, and Agency**

**Introduction.** Facing new middle school structures, new standards, and resulting new curriculum necessitates that teachers must change. The teachers were asked to change their amount of instructional time, their structure of their classes, their curriculum, team teachers, and courses. This last section discusses the research around teacher change and

then ways in which teachers process and adapt to change through their identity, resilience, and agency.

**Teacher change.** Change is abundant in teaching. Whether it is new curriculum, new technology, or world events, change is a daily part of life as a teacher.

Implementing change within schools is a challenge. Change often necessitates that teachers move from one belief to another. The Common Core emphasizes non-fiction (Calkins, 2012), so teachers changed the proportion of class time spent reading novels, articles, research, etc. to reflect this non-fiction component. A new schedule with less teaching time necessitates the way a course is structured. With every new school year, there is change. With district-wide restructuring, change dominates.

Assessment has become a cornerstone for improving instruction (Wiggins, 1998; O'Connor, 2002), so teachers assess students more and study data in small groups to think about instructional methodology. As teachers watch the pendulum swing from idea to idea, they are hesitant to release their old ideals and reach for new ones (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Pennington, 1995). Yet, change is essential in order for teachers to adopt new instructional ideas and approaches to increase student achievement and help students integrate into the modern workforce (Lapek, 2017).

There are two main ways teachers learn about new educational methods. The first is through workshops and formal coursework (Borko, 2004; Gutsky, 2002) and the second is through on-the-job learning (Bryk, Camburn & Louis, 1999). School districts require teachers to attend a variety of formal learning activities throughout the year. Most teachers attend workshops, school-wide in-services, on-line courses or graduate

courses to fulfill these requirements (Desimone et al, 2002). While teachers spend time attending formal learning activities some research suggests conference attendance or workshop attendance are less effective than formal graduate courses because conferences tend to be a one shot professional development while graduate courses span a longer period of time (Feldman & Weiss, 2010; Parise & Spillane, 2010). On-the-job learning opportunities involve the interaction of a teacher with his/her colleagues and supervisors. These include interactions with other professionals such as during professional learning team meetings, peer observations, and feedback (Eraut & Hirsh, 2007).

Researchers who have studied change have tried to categorize the influences on change and the stages of change in a multitude of different ways. Sergiovanni (1998) outlines six change forces that may be at place in schools at any given moment. These are: bureaucratic, personal, market, professional, cultural, and democratic. Each category utilizes different means to bring about change in a group of people. Bureaucratic forces use rules and outlined requirements. Personal forces rely on personality and interpersonal skills. Market forces rely on competition and incentives. Professional forces rely on standards, codes, and professional norms. Cultural forces depend upon shared values and ideas, relationships, and community. Democratic forces rely on a shared commitment to the common good. Sergiovanni (1998) argues that lasting change needs to be linked to the common good.

Melville and Bartley (2012) supported Sergiovanni's work in a study they conducted with teachers and administrators in an Ontario high school. Their case study looked at the roles of people with a variety of responsibilities (i.e., teacher, department

chair, principal) and their contribution to the change forces. They found that professional, cultural, and democratic change forces were the most successful in implementing school reform. Additionally, building a strong work community, even though the work is slow, is essential in developing teachers' willingness to change. The leader needs to clearly build a sense of common good which teachers are working toward and then trust department chairs, mentors, and support people to carry this message.

Scholars, David Perkins and James Reese, (2014) suggest four components of teacher change: frameworks, leaders, community, and institutionalization. While not a research study, their article is written from Perkins' and Reeses' perspectives after years of work as researchers in the educational field. A framework is the vision that leads the way for more effective teaching. It helps teachers have a common language and perspective when thinking about their subject area and curriculum. An example of a framework in a language arts classroom is *The 6+1 Traits of Writing* (Culham & Avery, 2005). Leaders within the school are another component of teacher change. Leaders can help to inspire teachers and guide them toward new thinking. The school principal plays a role as a political visionary making a commitment to change and supporting the decision among school faculty, parents, and community. Teacher leaders are practical visionaries, helping the pieces of change to make its way into the classrooms. The third component, community, refers to the culture of the school. This involves small groups of teachers meeting together with a practical visionary to move forward change initiatives. The final component of teacher change is institutionalization where the change piece has been in place for two to three years and works well. This institutionalization becomes part of the fabric of the school and how teachers describe their teaching or student

learning. Perkins and Reese (2014) emphasize throughout their article that principals and teachers should work together to lead change initiatives in school buildings.

Teachers adopt change within various levels. Johnson (2006) studied six middle level science teachers working in two different schools. These teachers participated in whole-school professional development over two years regarding the topic of standards-based grading. Based upon teacher interviews and classroom observations, Johnson found that while all six teachers utilized more effective practices, the teachers had varying levels of adoption of these practices. Teacher beliefs and administrative support played a role in the ways these teachers adopted new teaching methods.

While change is always happening within the school system, teachers can react negatively to change. New teaching initiatives are introduced yearly, each touting to best the initiative before. Over time, many of these initiatives dissolved as the next big idea is brought to the forefront (Senechal, 2015). Teachers are expected to move from one initiative to the next, constantly rewriting best practice. In a qualitative study involving science teachers in two middle schools, Johnson (2006) found that lack of support, funding, materials and high stakes testing also contribute to reluctance in change. Teachers feel so much pressure to teach student to do well on the test, they are reluctant to try strategies that may not glean the results needed for school measurement reports.

**Introduction to identity, resilience and agency.** Teachers react to change in a variety of ways. One lens to view how a teacher adapts and processes change is through identity, resilience, and agency. The next portion of this section will highlight the literature in each of these areas.

**Teacher Identity.** A teacher's identity involves their professional views and interests. This includes a teacher's view and understanding about how students learn (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Because a teacher's job involves so many things in both the workplace and the community, one isolated idea of identity cannot be identified. Instead, identity involves a myriad of roles in a variety of contexts. Identity is never stagnant, but changes as teachers grow and develop within their own profession (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). With constant changes in curricular decision making and increased accountability has led to a decrease in individual control. Thus, teacher identities have shifted with the increase in public pressure and decrease in autonomy (Day, 2002).

Canrinus and others (2011) surveyed 5575 teachers regarding professional identity. They found that identity is shaped through the interactions of individuals and the context of the situation. Further, job satisfaction, motivation, self-efficacy and commitment to teaching are all indicators of teacher's professional identities. In a review of nine studies about teacher identity, Beijarrd, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) asserted that multiple sources contribute to a teacher's identity. While content and pedagogical knowledge play a role in identity, so does personality, families, culture and traditions. A teacher's personal and professional life both contribute to the formation of identity (Beijaard, 1995; van den Berg, 2002). Additional factors that can play a role in teacher's identity include teaching at a low socio economic or Title I building (Paechter & Head, 1996). In the formation of identity, teachers need to come to terms with opposing ideas such as the need to build a relationship with students while still defining boundaries and exploring content topics while still expecting to be an expert.

In a qualitative study with fourteen new teachers, Morrison (2013) looked at three different ways teacher identities developed. He named these three ways *emergent*, *tenuous*, and *distressed*. Through interviews and observations, Morrison studied the processes for identity formation. He found that the new teachers' sense of themselves and where they were going as teachers were intertwined with their interactions with colleagues, building leaders, students, and the community. The teachers categorized as emergent were continually hopeful in themselves and the future of teaching. The distressed teacher identity was identified in the teachers who were isolated. They lacked confidence in themselves and had negative experiences regarding the profession. The tenuous identity was demonstrated in the teachers who vacillated between emergent and distressed.

In his study Morrison (2013) highlights the complexity of identity. "On the one hand we use identity to explain and describe ourselves in simple ways....On the other hand, identity is infinitely complex and incorporates subtle representations and concealed understandings of ourselves" (p 94-95). In addition to complexity, Morrison underscores the importance of social participation and professional learning groups as strongly linked to the construction of teacher identity.

**Teacher Agency.** In the face of educational reform, teacher agency plays an enormous role in teachers' ability to work, become involved in the reform process, and negotiate their identity (Vahasantanen, 2015). Teacher agency is the idea that teachers are capable of making decisions, acting autonomously and taking professional stances (Etelapelto et al., 2013). Hitlin and Elder (2007) maintain that agency is reflexivity,

making choices to change or to stay the same, and to decide whether to take action.

Agency affects a professional's ability to influence his or her work. Through agency, teachers become actively involved in the decisions that are made. Conversely, the lack of teacher decision-making opportunities, such as through top-down leadership, leads to a reduction in teacher agency (Hokka & Etalapelto, 2014).

Bridwell-Mitchell (2015) studied 21 staff members at an elementary school that was successful in turning around a building that was mandated to reform due to low achievement scores. Bridwell-Mitchell asserted that the school was successful in the reform work because of "The counterbalancing forces articulated in the proposed theory of teacher agency" (p. 156). Bridwell-Mitchell suggested a model where peer-learning, social interaction, and shared understanding were central to teacher agency and thus the reform work at the school. Within peer-learning, social interaction, and shared understanding were counterbalancing forces that helped to stabilize agency, or with too much of one thing, make it askew. But in the right balance, teachers were able to make instructional decisions that increased the rigor and learning of the students in the classrooms.

While Bridwell-Mitchell's study outlined a way an agency can positively impact reform, teachers ultimately make decisions about the reform and engage with the reform. They can act proactively or in resistance, thus agency is not always a positive stance about reform (Pyhalto, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2012). Robinson (2012) studied a school where teachers disagreed with school reform methods such as teaching to the test. She found that teacher collaboration helped teachers to figure out how to meet the



requirements of the schools. Throughout the change in school-wide practices, teacher agency helped the teachers maintain student-centered values.

Similar to Robinson's work, Scholars, Riveros, Newton, and Burgess (2012), argued that teacher agency is an essential component of professional learning communities. Professional learning communities is a method to improve instruction. In a professional learning community, teachers meet regularly in an effort to change instruction through peer collaboration (DuFour et al., 2006). Because they are a venue in which teachers can exercise agency, professional learning communities are a prime example of when teacher agency is used. If a teacher believes he/she can contribute to the knowledge base then professional learning communities can be effective.

Weaven and Clark (2015) encountered the lack of English teacher agency in Australia when the educational system there began a move toward a national curriculum. In this study, six senior year teachers who had not taught poetry in the last two years, conducted semi-structured interviews with each other. The purpose of the teachers interviewing each other was to promote a discussion that was authentic in nature. While Weaven and Clark sought to understand why the teachers don't teach poetry, the interview transcripts uncovered additional findings. They found that the teachers felt a lack of agency in their own teaching. The national curriculum took the decision-making process away from the teachers and created an atmosphere that promoted education for the sole purpose of testing. Weaven and Clark state, "they (teachers) perceive to be a frustrating lack of opportunity to contribute to decisions about what they will teach in their own classrooms" (p. 167). Similar to Hokka and Etelapelto's (2012) findings, the

top down approach to change lead to the article's broader theme of lack of agency amongst the teachers.

**Teacher Resilience.** Under normal circumstances, teaching is a demanding job. The workload and stress are high. Teaching in the face of structural and curricular change adds increased pressures to this position. Teachers who are able to move students forward in the midst of change are resilient. Research in teacher resiliency has grown from research on resiliency in children. With increased demands on accountability and curriculum coupled with a high teacher attrition rate especially in new teachers, teacher resiliency has become a focus of research within the last two decades. While Hong (2012) defines resiliency in association with teacher retention, others add complexity to this definition. Patterson, Collins and Abbot (2004) define resilience as “using energy productively to achieve school goals (even) in the face of adverse conditions” (p. 3). Gu and Day (2013) define resiliency as the “capacity to bounce back in adverse circumstances” (p. 39). Gu and Li (2013) suggest that teacher resiliency goes beyond “bouncing back”. They argue it is an ability to manage the “unavoidable uncertainties” (Gu & Li 2013, p. 300) that happen daily in the lives of teachers. Resilient teachers withstand change and develop coping strategies throughout the challenges of education. Factors involving the desire of teachers to make a lasting impact on the lives of students also play a role in resiliency. The teachers who grow in resiliency develop the ability to stay in a stressful profession when others choose to leave (Doney, 2012).

Resilience is a multidimensional construct. Within a person, resilience is not a fixed state and can be acquired. Yet, a study by Vance, Pendergast, and Garvis (2015)

indicated that even though teachers could identify the skills needed to be resilient, they did not necessary apply those skills in stressful teaching situations. The nature of resilience fluctuates over time depending upon individual and environmental circumstances (Luthar, Cicchertti, & Beckers., 2000). Factors that play into resilience in teachers include the career phase a teacher is in, such as early-career, mid-career, or late-career, organizational structures, and personal strengths.

Much of the resilience research is focused on new teachers likely because of the need to retain these teachers. Resilience can be grown as a part of a teacher education program. Early in a teacher's career, fostering peer support and communication among other similar teachers in the building helps to build resilient teachers (Keogh, Garvis, Pendergast, & Diamond, 2012; & Gu & Day, 2013). Doney (2012) looked at additional factors to support resiliency amongst novice teachers. In addition to collegial support, Doney suggests that stressful encounters in young teachers such as inexperience working with special education students or classroom organization can be balanced with protective factors outside of school such as family support systems, and exercise.

Gu and Day (2013) extended their research to teachers with a variety of levels of experience. They studied 300 teachers in early, middle, and late career stages. They found that teachers in early and middle career phases exhibited a higher level of resilience than late phase teachers. Teacher resilience can lessen over time when leadership lacks trust and positive feedback. In addition to building-wide relationships and leaderships, Gu and Day (2013) added that the calling to teach and a sense of vocation factored into an intrinsic motivation that added to the resilience in young and

mid-career teachers. The values provide teachers strengths that allow them to be more resilient. Late phase teachers were more apt to let work load, student behavior, and extra hours factor into a lack of resilience.

Organizational factors can also play a role in teacher resilience (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011). Gu and Day (2013) found that collegiality and leadership support, played a role in overall teacher resilience. Building- wide culture is also a factor in reliance. Strong leadership that promotes an inclusive staff and building-wide relationships allows the teachers to feel connected to each other (Gu, & Day, 2013; Johnson et al., 2014).

Resilience is a combination of internal and external factors. The previous studies predominately noted external factors in teacher resilience. Benard (2004) identified personal strengths that manifest themselves as resilience. They are: social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose. Within each one of these strengths are qualities that make up that strength. For example, a person who is socially competent exhibits responsiveness, communication, empathy and caring, and compassion, altruism, and forgiveness. A person with problem solving skills exhibits the qualities of planning, flexibility, resourcefulness, and critical thinking and insight. Autonomy includes the qualities of positive identity, internal locus of control and initiative, self-efficacy and mastery, adaptive distance and resistance, self-awareness, mindfulness, and humor. Finally, a sense of purpose includes goal direction, achievement, motivation, and educational aspirations, special interest, creativity, and imagination, optimism and hope,

and faith, spirituality, and a sense of meaning. These individual strengths are indicators of factors that contribute to internal resilience.

When thinking about the protection and promotion of teacher resilience over the course of a career, or during times of institutional stress, Greenfield (2015) asserts that “teachers’ beliefs about themselves and their role sit at the core of teacher resilience” (p. 62). He continues to write that “hope, self-efficacy, and purpose” should be safeguarded when thinking about how to support teachers. Greenfield further suggests that professional development, problem solving, and reflection can help to build self-efficacy within teachers. Relationships also play a valuable role in the promotion of resilience. A connection with others including support with both professional and personal issues, helped to build teachers’ resilience.

### **Conclusion**

Middle school is a complex place. Its structure is unique, specially designed to meet the needs of adolescents and the unique way they are developing. The language arts curriculum in middle school should be student centered and authentic, allowing the middle school students to have a voice in their learning. To instruct effectively, teachers have to have a broad understanding of the curriculum, available resources for student selected texts and mentor texts, and a willingness to adapt those items to meet the needs of individual students. Finally, in the face of change, middle school teachers with a positive identity, a sense of agency, and the components of resilience can move forward with a student-centered focus. As I moved forward with designing my study and

collecting data, the complexities of middle school as outlined in this literature review stayed in the forefront of my mind.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I describe the research methodology. I begin by describing my theoretical perspective. I then discuss the research design and my decision to approach this research as a case study. Next, I state my research question, describe the location and participants in this study. Finally, I discuss the data collection methods and the data analysis methods involved with this research. I end with a section on the limitations of the study and the ethics.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

I approached this study from the perspective of a social constructivist. I believe that meaning is constructed as we engage with the world (Crotty, 1998). As people interact socially, learning takes place within each of them. Thus, language is a means to construct reality. In my study, each of my participants used interactions with students, colleagues, and peers to understand and adapt to the changes within the building, district and state. These interactions occurred throughout the day and extended well beyond contract hours. Application of the participants' learning could be evidenced through lesson design and delivery as well as their new ideas threaded through conversations in professional learning team meetings and their personal writing.

Wenger's (1998) communities of practice concept also fits well with my theoretical perspective. Wenger asserts that people who share a concern or passion about a topic deepen their understanding by interacting with each other over a period of time

(Wenger, 2002). Teachers, for example, share lessons, converse over student concerns, discuss scheduling dilemmas, share calendar information, and organizational ideas. In these and other ways they work with each other as a group with their own developed identity. Teachers find value in their conversations with each other, frequently problem-solving situations and sharing ideas. They are a community of practice.

In an effort to capture how teachers process and adapt to change through the lens of social constructivism and communities of practice, I: 1) conducted interviews with teachers, 2) recorded conversations among teachers, 3) observed classroom teaching methods, 4) collected and read written blogs from teachers, 5) recorded my own observations and memos. These data helped me ascertain how three middle school teachers adapted and processed change.

When considering ontology, I understand that the case study involves not only my own reality, but also the realities for each of the participants (Creswell, 2007). In order to represent the variety of realities within the study, I utilized quotes, actual words, and themes to help represent the differing perspectives of the study's participants. It is important to consider each teacher's perspective to give a detailed description of each of their cases. Their perspectives are essential in understanding the transition and the way three different teachers processed the transition.

From the epistemological standpoint, I understand the importance of becoming an insider. It is valuable to spend time with the participants, or as Creswell (2007) suggests, become a "collaborator". Since Smiley Middle School has been my workplace for seven years, I feel I have achieved insider status amongst this small group. The teachers I



interviewed were more than willing to converse about the building. I was able to quickly build trust with them. I do acknowledge the tension of being an insider to these participants, while still completing a study about them. Because of my insider status, I was careful to make sure that the interviews were conducted in a secure location selected by the participant. The interviews took place at a time that minimized interruptions. I was also careful to not discuss my participant observations with colleagues. I wanted the participants to feel secure in knowing their words were safe. It is because of this tension, though, that detailed descriptions are essential in each of the cases. I asked my participants to check the descriptions as an additional way to check the details. Also, writing about a school in which I may continue employment, may raise ethical issues. The teachers responded honestly in their interviews and blogs. In their honesty, teachers were both complementary and critical of the curriculum, leadership, colleagues, and schedules. I needed to be careful to protect the identity of the participants while keeping the integrity of the positions they held. I did not want my research to affect the way people in the school or district treated the participants in my study.

### **Design**

My purpose in this study was to develop an understanding of how teachers adapt to or resist change as a result of current phenomena in the local school system: structural and curricular restructuring. The events of the past few years have asked teachers to change in a variety of ways. Thus, the topic is a contemporary issue where observations and interviews can be used to gather data. For these reasons, I chose case study as my research method. Yin (2014) suggests case study methodology is appropriate in

contemporary events where the behavior is not manipulated by the researcher. I am working in real time and a real school. I am not choosing to manipulate the behavior of the teachers, but to observe them in their environment and collect data to richly describe the cases in order to describe the how the three teachers adapted to and processed change. Stake (1995) emphasizes the importance of understanding the case by looking at the data again and again, reflecting, and triangulating, but ultimately going back to the idea that understanding the case is the outcome. In my study, as I wrote my data analysis section, I referred back to my data again and again. As I referred back to the data, it was like a layering process, adding additional research to my findings.

This study is bounded by time and place, consistent with case study research (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2007). Creswell defines a bounded system as, “The “case” selected for study has boundaries, often bounded by time and place. It also has interrelated parts that form a whole” (p. 244). In terms of time, the study was four months in length, beginning one year after the school rescheduling commenced. In terms of place, Smiley Middle School was one of six schools where the rescheduling occurred. This timing allowed the teachers to adjust to their new curriculum, reflect upon the previous year, and begin the work ahead. The teachers intended to spend the year continuing the work from the previous year with revisions to their lessons, assessments, and teaching to move forward with the work in the district.

Because the teachers I chose represent different generational and experiential viewpoints, my design has multiple cases (Creswell, 1998). What Creswell means by multiple cases is that one issue is selected to study, but multiple cases are used to show a

variety of perspectives about the issues. My participants viewed teaching from different vantage points. One considered herself a veteran of change. Another never experienced system-wide school change. One teacher grounded himself in current educational methods, while another was traditional in style. These teachers were so different, that I represented them best by treating each teacher as his/her own case and then comparing the individual cases.

While predominately case study in structure, my research borrowed methods of analysis from grounded theory, in particular grounded theory coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In conducting my research, it was important for me to provide an environment where teachers felt safe sharing their stories about a series of changes in their school. I wanted to authentically represent their cases in a way that upheld the honest thoughts and feelings of these teachers while keeping in mind the tremendous contribution they make each and every day to the education of children. In grounded theory research, the major themes and ideas bubbled organically from the words and observations of the participants, which allowed me to describe the cases by trying to make sense of their own words (Creswell, 2007).

### **Questions that Guided the Study**

In 2013, Smiley Middle School mixed and churned with change; teachers found each other in quiet corners, classrooms, and hallways to process their thinking. As a mentor teacher, I witnessed these groups converge and depart. I noticed their fundamental need to make sense of this change in the company of others. I wondered how their teaching would evolve based upon their new classroom structure and their new

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curriculum. Each teacher viewed the transition differently and was poised to take his/her own journey through this process. My initial research questions came out of a desire to dig into their thinking after the dust settled, and try to capture part of their journey. Given this background, the following questions emerged:

Question: How do selected middle school language arts teachers process curricular and structural change and what is the outcome of that processing?

Sub question: How do these teachers process the Common Core State Standards?

Sub question: How do these teachers process middle school restructuring?

Sub question: How does critical literacy play a role in this instructional change?

After conducting my interviews and looking closely at the data, I found that my study participants did not discuss the change to the Common Core at length. It simply was not in the forefront of their thinking. The teachers used the Common Core daily and integrated it into their teaching lessons. Other aspects of the transition were more concerning to them at the time of the study. The same happened with critical literacy. Critical literacy took a back-seat, as the teachers were asked to do a variety of other tasks. Because my data revealed other areas of relevance to my participants, I revised my questions to the following:

Question: How do selected middle school language arts teachers process curricular and structural change and what is the outcome of that processing?

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Sub question: How do these teachers adapt to and/or resist middle school curricular change?

Sub question: How do these teachers adapt to and/or resist middle school structural change?

Table 2 represents the data I collected for the main question and sub-questions. A further explanation of the data is provided at the end of the methodology section.

Table 2

### *Questions and the Data Collection Methods for each Question*

Sub-question	Data Collected
How do these teachers adapt to and/or resist middle school curricular change?	Interviews Blogs Field Observations Reflective Journal PLT meeting transcripts
How do these teachers adapt to and/or resist middle school structural change?	Interviews Blogs Field Observations Reflective Notebook

### **Location**

Concord Public Schools serves roughly 17,000 students in a mid-western town of Carmen. The school district houses four high schools, six middle schools and nineteen elementary schools. Carmen houses three institutes of higher education with education, healthcare, and insurance the top places of employment among residents.

This study took place in a suburban middle school, Smiley Middle, on Carmen's west side. The school serves roughly 750 students 36% of whom receive free and reduced lunch. The school's population is 64% white, 13% black, 9% Asian, 7% Hispanic, and 1% Indian (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014).

### **Participants**

Three teachers were asked to participate in this study. All three of the teachers participated in the restructuring. They were employed at Smiley Middle School from at least the year before the restructuring throughout my research, a year and a half after the restructuring. The three teachers represented many different aspects of teaching. They varied in terms of educational experience and age. One teacher was new to teaching, one is in the mid-point of his career, and the last one is almost to retirement. The teachers varied greatly in terms of educational philosophy and approach. While one was more traditional, another was eager to try the next new thing. The teachers each instructed a different grade level: sixth, seventh, and eighth. All of these teachers instructed students in language arts. I chose teachers from a variety of grade levels and experiences to help provide various perspectives from which to view this case.

***The teachers.*** Molly is a second year, eighth grade language arts teacher. During her first year of teaching, she was a fellow in a rigorous induction program. She spent this year completing her master's degree with the help of a team of people including myself as a building mentor, a district liaison, and university instructors all of whom visited her classroom frequently. During her induction year, her classroom was a revolving door of practitioners, all invested in building Molly's theoretical and pedagogical understanding. Molly is a creative, outside-the box thinker whose main interest is challenging students at an individual level. She utilizes her youth to incorporate current icons, slang, and people in her daily lessons. Her master's research topic was differentiation with a specific focus on advanced learners.

Jim is a fifteenth year, sixth grade language arts teacher. He is a well-educated teacher who spent years working through the intricacies of the reading and writing workshop instructional methods. He attended professional development lead by Katie Wood Ray (2006) and incorporated her writing methods into his daily teaching. He modeled his classroom arrangement and lesson structure after both Nancie Atwell (1987) and Lucy Calkins (2000). He believes in student choice in both book titles and writing topics. He leads discussion-based classes relying on student inquiry to drive understanding.

Sally, a teacher in her sixties, came to teaching as a second career and has been in the classroom for twenty years. Sally taught only writing until the 2012 school year when she added two reading classes to her schedule. She is one of three remaining original staff members at Smiley Middle School, where she proudly holds institutional

knowledge of past experiences. She is an outgoing individual who holds students to high standards while running a tight ship within her classroom. Sally rides the wave of change with consistent adherence to what she knows to work; she is resistant to new methods and ideas until proven otherwise. Her test scores on interschool, district, and state assessments are the highest in the school. She has become the building's editor, as she emphasizes the importance of proper English and grammar both inside the classroom and out. During reading class, she sticks to the traditional works of Edgar Allen Poe or Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech (King, 1963). Sally prides herself on strict rules and well-behaved students while paying homage to the writers, thinkers, editors, and speakers of our past.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection included: interviews, blogs teachers created, field observations, and my reflective journals.

***Interviews.*** Over the course of four months, I conducted eight interviews with each of the participants. The first five interviews lasted 20-30 minutes each with a semi-structured design to help engage the interviewee in a thoughtful conversation (Merriam, 2009). The interviews included pre-written questions. See Appendixes A and B for copies of the interview questions. I reworded the questions slightly and reordered the questions occasionally to help fit the natural flow of conversation. I emphasized the telling of stories and allowed the teachers to talk at length about their stories of teaching. The interviews occurred at the convenience of the teacher two times per month during the months of February, March, April, and May. The first interview in February was the



most extensive in nature, lasting about 60 minutes, utilizing the same format across all teachers. During the first interview, I spent additional time gathering background information about the teaching history of each of the participants. The rest of the interviews lasted about 15-30 minutes.

The interview questions were open-ended questions with the intent that the interviewee would feel comfortable enough to talk extensively about questions or any tangential topics (Hollway, & Jefferson, 1997). I used a digital recorder during the interviews and transcribed the entire interview upon completion. Each of the interviews took place at school, and were conducted individually. After the completion of each interview, I added to my reflective journal. I free-wrote about my interviews with each of the teachers. I reflected on initial impression of the interview and description of the room and overall mood. I then analyzed the data and considered possible emerging themes.

**Blogs.** During the study, each of the participants (except Sally) completed blog entries two- three times a week. Their blog consisted of daily noticings and observations about classroom teaching, curriculum implementation, interactions with colleagues, generalized frustrations and/or celebrations. Most of the blogs had open-ended topics, except for situational events where I asked more directed questions. These blogs gave me further insight into the teachers' thinking. The blogs extended our interview conversations, gave a space for communication in between interviews and allowed the teachers an opportunity to process and respond to questions on their time frame. I replied to each of the blogs to help push the participants further in their thinking and encourage

them. I set up the blogs on a Google Doc and shared the link with Jim and Molly. They accessed them several times a week. The responses were organized by date. The teachers dated the blog, wrote their thinking and then I dated the next entry and responded with questions. I responded to their blogs once a week. See Appendix C for a picture of a blog entry. Sally was uncomfortable with the blog format because she does not like to post anything on the internet. Sally felt like the internet was a violation of her privacy and didn't like the idea of other people potentially having access to her written work. So, Sally shared a spiral notebook from February to May. I wrote in the journal and passed it to her and vice versa, a form of a dialectical journal (Bertoff, 1978). The journal was a dialogue between the two of us to maintain a conversation similar to the blog format. See Appendix D for a picture of her spiral notebook.

***Field Observations- PLT and Classroom.*** I attended each teachers' Professional Learning Team meetings once a week. Following the model of Dufour (1998) teachers met in learning teams two to three times a week. The teachers in the same content and same grade level met, making each meeting about two- three people. Content area teachers had assigned Professional Learning Team meetings embedded in the school day. Elective teachers did not meet in professional learning teams because they held a larger teaching load. During these meetings the teachers discussed assessment data and upcoming lessons and assignments. They split students into groups based upon their learning needs and determined the next steps to remediate and extend curricular strands. The teachers set the agendas for the meetings, with very little administrative oversight. The agendas remained the same when I attended the meetings. Since I was the language arts department chair, it was typical for me to attend the learning team meetings.

During these observations, I looked for consistency between the blogs, interviews, Professional Learning Team meetings and the classroom. My note-taking system was adapted from the two-column graphic organizer outlined in John Creswell's book, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (Creswell, 2007). I labeled one column with my observation and the other column my personal reflections. I taped each PLT meeting while I took copious notes. I listened to the tapes after each meeting and transcribed small sections. During the PLT meetings, I starred the sections when the teachers described the transition, discussed differences between teaching before the transition and after the transition, and times when they showed passion and poignancy. Those parts were the ones I transcribed.

I also observed the teacher's classrooms at least two times throughout the course of the study. Utilizing, again, a two column graphic organizer (Creswell, 2007), I took notes on the teacher's classroom format and instruction to look at consistency between interviews. These classroom observations gave me another piece of data to help me with triangulation during the data analysis. I was looking for constancy between the interviews, blogs, Professional Learning Team conversations, and classroom practice. Also, I was able to observe teaching structures such as book clubs and inquiry projects that the teachers didn't explain fully in the interviews. The classroom observations allowed me to fill in details about the teaching practices, teaching styles, room arrangement, and teacher interactions that gave a broader picture of each of the cases. An image of my field notebook is in Appendix E.

***Reflective notebook.*** Throughout the course of the study, I kept a reflective notebook. This notebook was a place to free-write and think about my study. I used my reflective notebook to try out ideas, write about interviews, memos regarding data, and observations about meetings and class experiences. It allowed me to consider daily observations as well as data across boundaries. I wrote in my notebook once a week during the study. I tried to provide rich descriptions of the teachers, and events surrounding the interviews such as snow days and upcoming parent teacher conferences. This helped to provide more context when I transcribed the interviews. This notebook was organized by date. I used this notebook as part of my data analysis and referred to it multiple times during the writing of my data analysis.

Table 3 demonstrates the time line for interviews, blogs, field observations and reflective journals.

Table 3

*Timeline for Interviews, Blogs, Field Observations, and Reflective Journals*

Month	Interviews	Blog	Field Observations	Reflective Journal
February	Week 1 Week 3	Week 3- 2-3 entries	Week 3- 1 PLT	Week 3- 3-4 entries
March	Week 1 Week 3	Week 1- 2-3 entries	Week 1- 1 PLT Week 2- 1 PLT	Week 1- 3-4 entries

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		Week 2- 2-3 entries	1- Classroom	Week 2- 3-4 entries
		Week 3- 2-3 entries	Week 3- 1 PLT	Week 3- 3-4 entries
April	Week 1	Week 1- 2-3 entries	Week 1- 1 PLT	Week 1- 3-4 entries
	Week 3	Week 2- 2-3 entries	Week 2- 1 PLT	Week 2- 3-4 entries
		Week 3- 2-3 entries	1- Classroom	Week 3- 3-4 entries
		Week 4- 2-3 entries	Week 3- 1 PLT	Week 4- 3-4 entries
			Week 4- 1 PLT	
May	Week 1	Week 1- 2-3 entries	Week 1- 1 PLT	Week 1- 3-4 entries
	Week 3	Week 2- 2-3 entries	Week 2- 1 PLT	Week 2- 3-4 entries
		Week 3- 2-3 entries	1- Classroom	Week 3- 3-4 entries
		Week 4- 2-3 entries	Week 3- 1 PLT	Week 4- 3-4 entries
			Week 4- 1 PLT	

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### Data Analysis

Stake (1995) wrote, “There is no particular moment when data analysis begins.

Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final

compilations” (p. 71). For me, data analysis was exactly this, a stream of ideas and quotes churning through my mind from the minute I began my first interview and lasting long beyond the final printed words. The data analysis quickly became a constant stream of ideas as everyday as my morning coffee or trip home from the grocery store. Further, Stake (1995) wrote: “There is much art and much intuitive processing to the search for meaning” (p. 72). The four main types of data I analyzed, interviews, blogs, observations, and my reflective journal, ebbed and flowed through my brain as I emphasized one aspect, then thought through another. Through the data analysis process, I looked at each piece of data both as its own entity, and how it fits into the whole puzzle. I experienced the processing daily and struggled through the art of analysis as I tried out different approaches to interpreting the data.

*Getting ready for analysis.* Following the guidelines as described by Merriam (2009), I transcribed the interviews and sorted each piece of data into groups by the case. All data were gathered on typed files I double spaced, making sure to leave room in the margins to write my codes (Saldana, 2013). I printed out all of the transcribed interviews on one side of each paper. I printed out Jim’s and Molly’s blogs, which were typed and I photocopied Sally’s blog, which was handwritten in a spiral notebook. I wrote my noticings and notes in the margins of the blogs and in between the lines of Sally’s handwritten entries.

I printed blogs weekly and kept them in a secure binder to compare entries throughout the course of the study. During the PLT meetings, I took notes during the meeting while taping each meeting. I then transcribed sections of the meetings that

aligned best with my research questions. These conversations involved the transition, instruction, frustrations, and celebrations. My reflective journal was also a place for me to note across data observations. I wrote in my reflective journal after the interviews and PLT meetings. I printed out my journal entries as well.

After gathering the transcribed interviews, journal and blog entries, professional learning team notes, and field notes, I copied each case on its own color: blue, yellow, and green. The blue was Jim's transcripts, journal, and notes. The yellow was Molly's transcripts, journal, and notes. The green was Sally's transcripts, journal, and notes. With all of my data transcribed and printed on colored paper, I made the decision to code my data manually because I am comfortable working with paper and felt I could be closer to my data if I manually coded it. Yin (2009) discusses the need to think through the coding because it requires "much post-computer thinking" (p. 128). Saldana (2013) states, "there is something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that give you more control over and ownership of the work" (p. 26). I wanted to feel that ownership.

***Pre-coding.*** After my data was organized by case, I read through my data one case at a time and in its entirety. I took this opportunity to pre-code (Saldana, 2013). During pre-coding I circled, underlined and highlighted parts of my data that struck me. The purpose of pre-coding is to find those quotes and words that I would want to come back to later, those quotes worthy of my attention (Saldana, 2009). It was during this time that I identified the large quote I used to drive the last section of my findings chapter. I wrote the broad categories of what I was seeing in the margins. I also decided

to use an inductive method to my coding, where I let the emerging data drive my coding choices as opposed to defining my coding methods prior to beginning this work (Saldana, 2009).

***Coding.*** With my data in hand and decisions made about manual coding and coding by myself, I began the coding process. Saldana (2013) defines codes as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing” (p. 3) attribute to data. My purpose for coding the data was to be able to chunk the data in groups that I could analyze. These groups had something in common that helped relate back to the bigger picture. Coding the data was a way for me to link the concrete information to more abstract ideas.

Saldana (2013) suggests using two coding cycles. The first cycle is the initial coding into one of seven previously defined categories: grammatical, elemental, affective, literacy and language, exploratory, procedural, and theming. The second cycle requires more analytic skills such as classifying and synthesizing. Further, Saldana refers to the cyclical quality of coding, not a linear one, as data, codes and categories are compared with each other. As I made coding decisions, I kept in mind the suggestions Saldana made for coding emphasizing the uniqueness of my own study which is inherent in qualitative research and the need for flexibility with coding choices. Saldana (2013) states, “Data are not coded,- they’re recoded” (p. 66). This quote emphasizes the importance of trying out different coding methods, the need for flexibility, and the cyclical nature of the coding process.



I marked descriptive codes in the margins of my data. I named what I saw in each of the lines. According to Saldana (2013), this coding method is considered qualitative research's foundation, the "bread and butter". It begins the process for the later work in secondary coding. I then used two affective coding methods: emotion coding and values coding. According to Saldana (2013) "Since emotions are a universal human experience, our acknowledgement of them in our research provides deep insight into the participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions" (p. 107). The emotional coding allowed me to capture the participants' perspective and worldviews. I felt that perspective and worldview helped to paint a picture of the participants and their life conditions as part of the transition experience. The values coding helped me to delve into aspects of identity.

After the first-round coding methods, I transitioned to second round coding. Consistent with grounded theory analyses, I followed the first-round coding with axial coding to organize my data in new ways (Creswell, 1998). The axial coding helped me to sift through my codes, determining the dominant codes and codes that took a more minor role in the research. (Saldana, 2013). It was during this time that I used the coding to determine the more abstract ideas in the research. I looked for bigger ideas that nested nicely into my first-round codes. I went back into the literature for additional ideas. I used clean copies of all of my data and recoded for these abstract categories.

I spent most of the analysis process coding alone, but sought out the advice of my advisor when I needed to think through my codes. These conversations helped me to dig deeper into my codes and to think about connections among the codes. They also helped me to move my ideas from concrete to abstract. Saldana (2013) emphasizes the

importance of discussion with others while coding because of the opportunity to clarify ideas and figure out new insights in the data. I was able to do both of these things when talking through my data.

Once this coding was completed, I thought about how I wanted to tell the story of each of the participants. I then found representative quotes about each of the categories and underlined those quotes in colored pens, each color representing one abstract idea. See Appendix F for an example of this. I discussed the quotes with my advisor, sorted the quotes into an outline and wrote my thinking. With quotes in hand, I made several structural decisions about how I wanted to tell the story of each of the cases. I decided to tell the story of each participant in his/her own section. Consistent with multiple case study format suggestions in Yin (2014), I reported the cases one at a time with the last and fourth section a cross-case analysis of the three cases.

Within each case, I sectioned off the cases based on the main ideas as opposed to a chronological reporting. Saldana (2013) described the sectioning of each case by main idea as a “one thing at a time” strategy. Stake (1995) describes this as a “description one by one of several major components of the case” (p. 127). The big ideas are generally in the same order for each case with nuances due to the differences in each individual.

While my description of the data analysis seems linear, it wasn't. I spent most of my time toggling between my data, the written words on the paper, while also referring to my literature review sections to ground my thinking in the research and definitions. To me, data analysis was recursive, similar to the writing process itself. I would code, underline, write, recode, underline, re-write, read and then do it all over again in a

different order the next day. The conversations with my advisor were crucial in helping me to solidify what I was seeing.

**Memoing.** In order to reflect upon my coding, I used memo writing throughout my coding process as a way to deepen my thinking and search for more specific codes in my data. According to Saldana (2013), coding is just a way to label what is seen in the research. The thinking part is the memos written in response to the codes. Saldana defines memos as “a place to ‘dump your brain’ about participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation” (p. 41). He further suggests that the codes act as a prompt for more in-depth writing. This type of writing is the memo the researcher makes about the code. Working toward reflexivity, the best memos are the ones that challenge the researcher’s own thinking and deepen ideas.

Saladana (2013) provides a variety of examples of memos such as: a.) How you relate to participants, b.) Your study’s research questions, c.) Emergent patterns, d.) Problems, and e.) Future directions. I used his suggestions to reflect upon a section of coded data, possibly writing more than one memo for each section. See Appendix G for an example of the memo.

I used memoing throughout the research process, from my first interview through my drafting of my writing. I typed in a Google Doc, wrote in a notebook, and wrote my thinking at the beginning and end of each draft. These raw notes helped me to form ideas that could be understood by more than just myself.

**Triangulation.** Stake (1995) uses the historical derivation of celestial observation to describe triangulation. Years ago, sea navigators would determine the ships location at

sea based upon the angles between the ship and the stars. The navigator could estimate a location based upon the arc of several different stars in relation to the ship. The purpose for the triangulation of data is to look for similar information from a variety of sources to strengthen the findings. Of the four triangulation methods outlined in Yin (2014), I focused on the triangulation of data sources. Throughout my data and to answer my research questions, I triangulated teacher insights and comments through their interviews, journals, classroom observations, and professional learning team observations, my memos and reflections. As I reported my findings, I made a conscious effort to report that triangulation through the kinds of data that I included.

### **Study Limitations**

In this study, I only worked with three teachers. While the participants provided valuable insight into their teaching process before and after the restructuring, they do not represent all the perspectives discussed within Smiley Middle School, or the broader district. For example, I did not interview the principal or vice-principal, and their perspectives might be very different from that of the teachers. Also, student voices and parent voices are not represented. However, interviewing the three teachers in great depth gave deeper insight into how they experienced the transition. This is consistent with qualitative research. While the study only focuses on the insight of three teachers, and cannot be generalized, others embarking on change in their schools or districts may find it useful. This is consistent with the nature of qualitative research in that it cannot be generalized beyond the immediate situation (Creswell, 2007). This study took place in a middle-class school with a population of diverse students. Teachers from other

environments and backgrounds will have different experiences than those in the study.

The three teachers involved in this study, while selected intentionally, are not representative of other teachers in their field.

I was an “insider;” I knew the participants well. I had been mentor teacher to one, a team partner to another, and the department liaison to all three of them. The role of the department liaison involved managing the language arts budget and attending building and district school improvement team meetings where I reported back the information discussed. This role did not involve the evaluation of teachers. While the interviews were open and displayed a high level of trust, they responded to me because they knew me well. They also knew my role within Smiley Middle School as a mentor teacher and may have answered questions differently because of my role. Because of my role as a colleague, I was extremely careful to protect the privacy of the study participants. I did not discuss my research with other colleagues at Smiley Middle School. I saved research conversations for my advisor and committee members. I conducted their interviews in their classrooms during times that minimized interruptions. Through my actions and care, the participants continued to have open conversations with me throughout the course of the study and beyond.

Some additional limitations revolved around the time and length of the study. I waited a year and a half to begin my study. While I was not able to capture immediate feelings, nuances, and frustrations in real time, I was able to capture a longer term perspective of the participants. Instead of being angry and frustrated, they could recall the emotion, but were more objective in the cause and their resulting behavior. With the

limited four month time span of this study, I was not able to follow the continued change the teachers experienced, but I was able to spend time with each teacher as they recalled in detail their teaching experiences. Like any study that ends, the teaching continued. I was not able to capture those lessons, professional development, or collegial conversations that extended their thinking and learning well beyond May.

### **Ethics**

The three teachers for this study were teachers that I worked with at Smiley Middle School. I asked each of these teachers to sign a consent form emphasizing that the study is voluntary. I maintained the confidentiality of the study through the use of pseudonyms. I made sure all writing and data regarding the study was kept in a secure location as suggested by Merriam (2009). Finally, I used triangulation of multiple sources of data as a way to increase the internal validity of the study (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009).

I was an insider at Smiley Middle School. I was extremely careful to not use the comments of the study participants to sway any decisions I made during my teaching. I worked to separate my data collection from the rest of my work at Smiley.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the research methods for my study. With the theoretical perspective of a social constructivist, I conducted a case study with three participants. These participants were all language arts teachers at Smiley Middle School. They were beginning career, mid-career, and well-established career teachers. My

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research was organized around the question: How do selected middle school language arts teachers process curricular and structural change and what is the outcome of that processing? The impetus for this question was a structural change from a sixth/seventh grade building to a sixth- eighth grade building. This change involved reshuffling teachers, a new schedule, new course load, loss of instructional time, and the adoption of the Common Core State Standards.

My data collection included teacher interviews, teacher blogs, classroom observations, professional learning team observations and transcripts, and my reflective notebook. I used grounded theory to analyze my data. I began with pre-coding then used both first round coding and second round coding to move my data analysis from concrete to abstract. I used memoing to reflect on my coding and triangulation to further verify my findings. In the next chapter I explain the findings from my research study.

## Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter is in four sections. The first three sections describe the cases of each teacher. The individual case descriptions start with the youngest teacher and end with the most veteran teacher. Each of the cases begins with the background of the teacher then delves into beliefs and values as an educator, the classroom environment, teaching practice, strengths/areas of confidence, challenges, and supports to deal with the challenges. The final section of this chapter compares and contrasts the three teachers.

### **Molly: Creative, Technological, and Independent**

This first section introduces Molly, the youngest of the three teachers. After a description of Molly and a bit about her history, I discuss her beliefs and values as a teacher, her classroom set up, teaching lessons, and where Molly draws her confidence. I then discuss the challenges Molly face throughout the transition, especially as a young teacher, and the ways in which Molly coped with these challenges.

**Background.** Molly is a new and young teacher. At the point of my study, Molly was in the second half of her third year of teaching. Her wedding was the summer before my interview. During the previous school year, Molly spent much of her free time making her wedding items, and she began a business after school hours making wedding bouquets out of paper from popular novels. Molly is easily embarrassed and meek on the surface with a strong-willed, fiery streak underneath. She is independent, driven, and energetic. She gets an idea and runs with it, seeing it through to the end. If she has to do it alone, so be it.



Molly spends a lot of time talking about her mom, a single lady who lives on a farm outside of the city where Molly works. Molly takes care of her mom, spending many weekends mowing her acreage, helping with meals, providing financial support and making sure she has everything she needs for the week. On holidays, Molly and her husband pack her mom in her car and drive her to visit relatives, some who live a 12 hour drive from her farm. In my interactions with Molly, I found her to respond with a maturity unusual in somebody in their mid-20s. She is married, settled, and already the caregiver of family members. Molly enjoys creating at school and at home, finding creation a sort of respite from the stresses in her work and home life. She thrives in the uniqueness in her creations. This is seen through her year-long lesson ideas.

**Beliefs and Values as an Educator.** A creative teacher who likes to do things her way, Molly works late nights and long hours to make sure her students benefit from hard work. Molly is tireless in her desire to move students forward in their learning. As a member of a professional learning team, she is happy to share her ideas, but less likely to use somebody else's ideas. She explained: "One thing I like about being independent enough, like um less collaboration. I can meet with the other teachers like 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers and I can say, 'Hey, here's what I'm doing.' Sometimes they do it. Sometimes they don't" (Interview, February 6). She doesn't talk much about the ideas she gained from others on her team, and she is more than happy to plan and lesson design on her own.

Molly prides herself in a project-based instructional style. When reflecting upon her three years in education, Molly said, "Um (I've) probably grown a little bit just

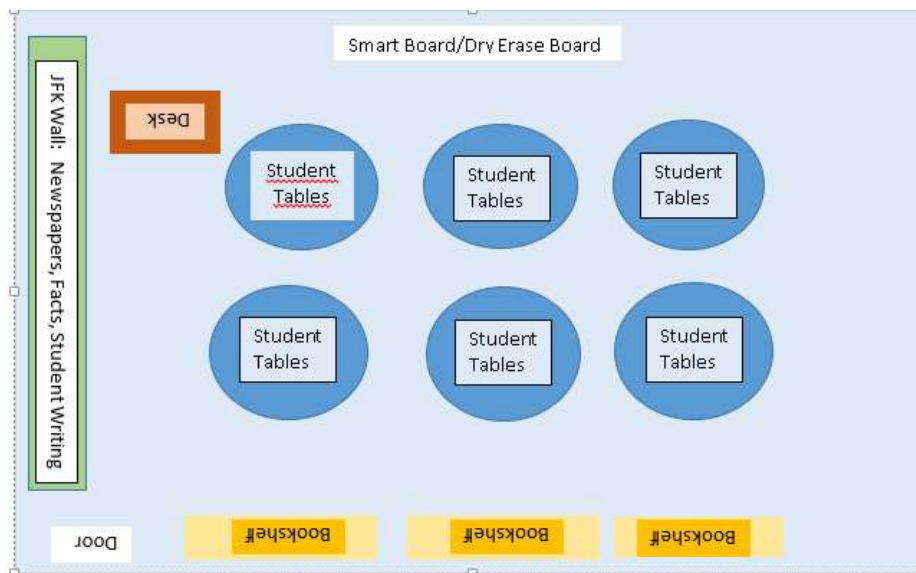
because, um, each year I've tried to make at least one more unit, um, hands on." She continued, "Each year I try and think of one way to make it less desk work" (Interview, February 6). For Molly, the desk work means pre-planned worksheets downloaded from the internet or copied from a book. Throughout my classroom observations and professional learning team meetings I never saw Molly pass along worksheets not created by her for her students or the learning team. During a May 11 classroom observation, I noted: "Kids split up to work on their own. Molly works with individual student questions. Kids were working in the separated parts of the room. During this observation the students were working on a project." They were engaged and interested in the discussions, but there was no scripted plan as to how this day would go, nor were there worksheets that the students needed to fill out by the end of the period. This classroom environment aligns with the middle school philosophy (Jackson & Davis, 2000) where the teacher is working to meet the needs of the adolescents in the classroom through individualized instruction.

One new addition in the transition was that each teacher taught an advisory class. Of this class she said, "They gave me an advisory. Um, I decided I hated the lessons at the very beginning, and stopped doing them" (Interview, February 6). Molly's independence shines through this statement. Her unwillingness to follow a scripted curriculum is consistent with her creativity and uniqueness. Her advisory class benefitted from her desire to plan from a different angle, as with the other classes she taught throughout the day.

**Classroom Environment.** Tucked behind Smiley Middle School were two rows of trailers. Molly's classroom was housed in one of those trailers. Her room took the shape of whatever project she was working on, a creative assortment of papers, scissors, glue, and supplies were often mixed with assignments and a variety of independent reading books. To many observers, it many have seemed unorganized, but Molly owned that space and knew where everything was located. Consistent with Jackson & Davis's (2000) vision of middle schools, Molly's trailer is set up to meet the needs of adolescents by providing them space to sit and move and opportunities for collaborative learning.

Figure 1 represents Molly's trailer.

Figure 1. Molly's Classroom



**Teaching Practice including Units, Lessons and Classroom Moments.** One of the units Molly taught two years in a row was on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This unit spanned three months, March through May, and was the primary unit Molly

was teaching during my research. Molly designed this unit as a way to teach the argument learning strands in the Common Core Curriculum. In this unit, Molly had her students research the assassination and then put Lee Harvey Oswald on trial.

The culmination of the unit was a week-long trial where students assume the roles of attorney, judge, court reporter, and jury. During this trial, Molly decked out the media center to look like the inside of a court room. She used the school's podium and microphone for the students to present their arguments and the students took turns in their roles, reading from scripts to act out the case of Lee Harvey Oswald. At the end of the unit, the students voted if Lee Harvey Oswald was guilty of the crime based upon the evidence presented in the trial. In her May 18<sup>th</sup> interview, Molly said:

I loved how when they (the students) first came in the library and they first saw how I set it up and they're like 'Oh, this is actually a thing!' and not just "oh, we're getting to present." Like it was more formal. They had name tags, there was audience seating and judges. And they actually figured out it was a thing. And they clapped and applauded for each other. So, it was great.

During the JFK unit, Molly introduced economy to her class. Molly's students applied for the variety of roles available to run the trial. Each student had his/her individual position with its own pay level. For example, the judge received \$20 a week while a juror received \$10 a week. The students used this pay for a class-wide economy lesson that was layered into the whole unit. The students rented their own desks and some students saved enough to purchase their desk (and the desks of other students). During a May 11 observation, Molly auctioned chairs for students to sit in at the

beginning of class. She named the students' chair and other students raised their hands to purchase it. Molly advertised the chair by saying, "It's a lovely grey chair with four legs". Students who were unable to rent or purchase their chair ended up standing (this was only for a couple of days).

Celebrations were important to Molly. But, like her lesson plans and larger units, Molly invented her own celebrations. Instead of brownies and punch, Molly planned a color run. Students loved it and wanted to participate. The idea came from a 5K run in the town where Molly lived. In the town's color run, participants trained for the 5K and then ran the race as race workers sprayed runners with a color powder. The end result was the runner's shirt, face, and hair splotted with different colors. In Molly's color run, her students used their classroom money to purchase powdered colors similar to the colors used in the local 5K color run. Molly took the students into the field behind the school, so they could spray the colors on each other. Students were able to take pictures of themselves covered in colors, and post those pictures on social media which encouraged the younger grades to work toward the same celebrations.

Molly spent hours after school and weekends designing the rules, application process, and lessons for this unit (and other units), and the celebrations. During her time with friends, family, and colleagues, she hashed out her classroom plans with them detailing every bit of her lesson ideas. She did this to help think through the incredibly complex structures she put into place in her classroom, and also to help solidify how she defined herself, creative.

Much of Molly's interview focused on her JFK unit. She hashed out the details as I taped her responses.

We finished up our crime boards yesterday for my JFK unit where students all had to research different aspects of the John F. Kennedy unit. I wanted them to finish by the end of class Monday and so I inspired them to, if they finished, I would give them \$15.00 pay, which was almost too much; because it resulted in total chaos and a lot of screaming, And so I offered them, if they finished ½ way through the hour on Tuesday, I would double their pay, but if they didn't finish, I would take their whole day's pay. Every single group finish before their ½ study time.... We celebrated finishing up our JFK unit, and we did that by having the jury announce the winners, winning sides of the Lee Harvey Oswald trial, and then the kids also got to, if they earned \$60.00 in my economy unit, they got to go outside and use color run paint to have a color celebration when they threw it on each other. (Interview, May 18)

Molly reported all of this information as if she was trying to hold onto it. She was proud of her work, and yet wanted it to be even better next year. Talking through her complex ideas helped her to organize her thinking, figure out what had happened, find a way to proceed forward, and verbalize the modifications that would make the lessons run even better. The transcripts of her interviews were filled with the details of her units. As a reflective professional, Molly worked to change and update her lesson ideas daily. She worried about the students' engagement. In her journal on May 19 she wrote: "Nearly everyone was learning, but now that the trial is taking place, the only ones

working are the lawyers and the witnesses. I need to find a way to improve this next year”.

Through Molly’s interviews and journaling, she showed pride in what she had accomplished, and the complexity of her work. She never complained about teaching, the weight of the curriculum, or her students. She just powered through it, similar to how she negotiated the rest of her life.

From an inquiry into the assassination of John F. Kennedy to the economy of her classroom to a celebration involving the paint used in color runs, Molly’s instructional plans were enormous. And...this is ultimately how she defined her teaching practice- as the teacher that goes all out, whose lessons are completely her own, and whose creativity and uniqueness far surpassed other classrooms in the same grade. When the school climate got tough, when other teachers leaned on each other for moral support, Molly instead dug her heels into her work and created lessons.

I encouraged Molly to present her hard work at a state-wide conference the same spring I conducted interviews. She poured hours into the presentation, copying every handout, scanned newspaper clips, and PowerPoint onto an enormous Google Doc for every person that attended. Molly wanted to create a map that anyone could follow. She was so proud of her accomplishments as a teacher and was bursting to be able to share it with a group of teachers. As I watched Molly present, I could see in the faces of the teachers listening and the depth of their questions how impressed they were by the energy and complexity of this new teacher.

### **Strengths/Areas of Confidence**

***Authentic reading and writing.*** Molly is a confident teacher. Her decision-making framework in lesson design was grounded in authentic experiences, and she drew confidence from this authenticity. Molly stated, “I like to teach students background on why we read and why we write, so that they, um have a motivation to do it” (Interview, February 6). Molly then gave students plenty of opportunities to read and write. “I’ve been having students read 20 minutes every, um, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays they know that they come in with a book” (Interview, April 20). And further, Molly wrote in her journal on March 16, “My students come in and know what to do now. MWF- read for 20”. In my observation field notes on February 20, I wrote: “Students are reading”. Molly is talking quietly to a group of students. Room is silent except for pages turning. With independent reading a staple in her classroom, Molly understood that consistent reading was instrumental in students’ ability to read better (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 2000; Kittle, 2012; Miller 2009). In her journal on February 9 Molly wrote,

I have a couple of success stories who are now into a series and don’t like it if reading time gets cut. One boy ate up the I am Number 4 series. Another girl, who always complained about reading fell in love with *Because of Mr. Terrupt*.

By using class time for students to read, Molly was implementing one of the fundamental concepts in a reading workshop based classroom.

***Technology.*** Technology is part of Molly’s literacy and curriculum. Molly is from the generation of digital natives. She is so comfortable with technology that she has developed the flexibility and know-how to use it seamlessly in her classroom. She knows



technology will glitch and regularly figures out work-arounds for these occasions while never giving up.

Molly approached technology in her classroom with an openness, and a flexibility. She understood that technology use was a tool. In her journal on May 6 Molly wrote: “I am trying to use technology more as a tool and not just a replacement for pencil and paper. I have fallen in love with Google Classroom. It utilizes Google Docs so students can get on simultaneously and edit together”. During the month of April, Molly introduced Slice of Life blogs to her students. Any student wanting to write a daily slice of life blog met her in the media center during lunch. Molly wrote as well. On April 29, Molly wrote: “Slice of Life went great. Most of my 12 made it to the end. We are celebrating next Friday with a pancake breakfast”.

If technology didn’t work for the purpose in her teaching, Molly just as easily changed her lesson idea to something else. For example, Molly discussed her use of Google Drive and then when she found it didn’t work for her purpose, she switched to something else.

I did that on Google Drive which I found, I thought would be so easy using my iPad because feedback, because I could talk into my iPad, but then I found out very quickly that it only picks up for 30 seconds and then cuts you off, and it’s usually full of typos, and so it wasn’t helping me go any faster. Um so I ended going back to just pen and paper, rubric grading. (Interview, February 6)

Molly continued to use Google Drive in other more applicable lessons throughout the year, even when students accidentally e-mail somebody else. Repeatedly.

Students had to go into a Google account because they like create a Google account of used their Google account. But they all had to email me with their um, sharing their writing with me...so they would e-mail...but if they dropped off the 8 (of my email), they sent it to some guy named Greg. So, that was a little snag. (Interview May, 6)

Molly didn't see this as an enormous set back, just a snag. She took technology blips in stride tweaking things to make them better.

Molly's flexibility extended to the technology platform. She innately understood that technology is not one size fits all. For some project, laptops may be a better tool, while for others iPads were the preferred instructional tool. "IPads we have used this year, at least for this research unit which, um, aren't the best for typing. It's awesome, because kids can all get on like the same Google Doc and type at the same time and edit it at the same time, but the iPads glitch a lot on it, and so, it would have been better if we had had computers, but I had no access to computers" (Interview, May 6).

Molly views technology as part of a strong language art curriculum which is consistent with current technology research (Kereluik et al., 2013). She views it as a piece of reading and writing. She views social media as a form of communication and a way in which people express themselves in writing. "We're also kind of technology teachers. We need to help kids understand how to speak while on social media and what not to put on social media, um, that once it's out there, it's out there" (Interview, February 6).

Along with the communication piece of technology, Molly understood the fundamental concepts of digital citizenship.

Um, part of what we should be teaching is looking at the, what they're agreeing to when they sign up for Twitter and Instagram. Um, all the things that if they don't pay attention to could be dangerous for them. (Interview, February 6)

She also understood the unique value of technology. She understood that technology makes the world seem smaller, more tangible to students. "Um, so it's looking at writing in the outside worlds, bringing it into the classroom, helping kids understand what's going on in the world around them, um, and how to now integrate technology into that, because the world's changing..."(Interview, February 6).

With her flexibility and understanding of the benefits of technology, Molly expressed confidence and enthusiasm in the use of it in her classroom. "I started using Google Classroom this year which has been awesome. I think once students are one to one, it would be great for a flipped classroom..."(Interview May, 6). She used technology to keep kids abreast of the world.

### **Challenges**

*Understanding Administration.* For Molly, lack of understanding the directives given by building leaders was a challenge for her during the transition. She said:

I know when I first started that Jean wanted me to put these Common Cores into "I can" statements, and I totally messed them up, because I could not figure out what she wanted. Um, I had, I still don't know what she wanted. I put them on

my board. I tried to point to them, I often forgot to point to them. (Interview, April 20)

Molly wanted to do what she was being told by the building leaders, but she didn't understand what that meant. The I Can statements were a building-wide push to translate the curricular strands to student-friendly language, so students could articulate what they were supposed to learn during a particular lesson. Molly simply didn't have the tools she needed to be able to translate the objective to I Can statements.

During my interviews, Molly was in her third year of teaching. In her first year, Molly taught sixth grade. She was told she would keep that sixth grade position during the transition, but then was moved to an eighth grade language arts position a week before school started. The reasons behind the decision to move were complex. A teacher with first through sixth grade certification was pushed into the building from another building, displacing Molly as the least tenured teacher. But, her move to eighth grade was a more stable placement, because the class sizes in eighth grade were larger, so in the long term, Molly's position was guaranteed to be the same from year to year. Also, Molly's master's research involved inquiry-based lessons with a leveling system that encouraged independence and differentiation which was needed in some of the new content eighth grade teachers were asked to teach. Finally, Molly student taught in a high school and holds a high school English certificate, so this move was closer to her area of emphasis in her education degree.

Early in my first interview, Molly stated: "It was my first year of teaching eighth grade which I did after learning a week before school started that I would be teaching

eighth grade” (Interview, February 6). To Molly this was an enormous change, and one of the first things she remembered about the transition between the middle schools. This move happened the same time the building transition happened, so it was another layer of transition for Molly. Molly came back to this during her interview on April 20 saying, “When I was transferred to 8<sup>th</sup> grade a week before school started instead of 6<sup>th</sup>. It sucked, but then I was like, oh well, whatever. And I did my own thing”. Molly worked hard to adapt to the changes being asked of her, but a change in two grade levels the week before school was a large mental shift that impacted the way Molly viewed the transition and the school year.

During the first year of the transition, the eighth grade teachers were given an additional new task. They were asked to teach a contract English honors class. When reviewing the demographics of honors and Advanced Placement classes, the make-up of the classes skewed more Caucasian than a microcosm of the school. District leaders decided that a distinct language arts honors option where students were grouped together in one honors section discouraged a diverse group of students. The administration hoped that students would be more likely to do honors work in a heterogeneous classroom.

Eighth grade teachers were asked to encourage students in every class to sign a contract stating that they would do additional work within the class time to achieve an honors designation on their report card. The teachers were asked to differentiate all lessons in every class period to teach both the regular students and the students who signed the honors contract. The teachers did not meet separately with the honors students beyond the normal class time because before or after school meetings could put some

students at a disadvantage. In her February 6 interview Molly said, “Well for honors, I mean they (English department leadership) said, “We’re going to integrate honors.” And we talked about it that we’re going to do it, but we didn’t talk about what it was going to look like. All the English teachers did it differently and no one was the same coordinated with it across the district”. Like the “I Can” statements, Molly knew that she was supposed to integrate English honors somehow, she just didn’t know how to do it and wasn’t given much direction as to how to move forward with the honors students.

Other parts of the transition Molly found difficult also. Molly taught four classes of eighth grade language arts with the contract honors option. Her fifth class was a class titled, Response to Intervention. In this class, Molly was given students who were not successful as readers. She was asked to remediate reading in this class. The problem was that the counseling department along with the newly hired reading specialist did not have clear guidelines as to who those readers were. Her roster ranged from one to three students. One February 6 Molly said:

I started with three students. They took one away. Maybe I started with two students, they took one away, gave me another one, so like two. Um, one eventually they decided needed more math, even though he definitely needed reading and then my other student, my last student, moved away.

On March 16 Molly continued:

And so, and then teaching to a class or two, not giving me any students was ridiculous. Teaching to two students is a lot harder than teaching to a room full of

students, because you can't keep their focus that well...Yeah. I almost blocked it out. I forgot that. (Interview, March 16)

Having a class that varied in students from one to three was a frustration because she could not treat the class like the others. Molly liked to focus on the work in her other classes that was successful, and didn't want to think about the times during her day that frustrated her. This RTI class was one of those times.

***Isolation.*** One of the elements of the transition was a new team with new teachers. In the case of the eighth grade, most of the teachers at the grade level had previously taught seventh or sixth grade, so they were encountering a new set of lessons and a new grade level along with Molly. Molly did not have other peer relationships in her new grade level, and the veteran teachers were too preoccupied with their new teaching assignments to reach out in the ways they had in the past. She said,

And, um, teaching honors kids within my actual class, which is my research I discovered is doable, but insanely time consuming. And I was suddenly alone with no team and a very small PLT that only met every other day. Um, and no one knew what they were doing with honors contracting. I was the one who had the most experience just by luck. (Interview, March 2)

Molly's team had not jelled. They met as infrequently as they could because all of the teachers were spending their time just trying to survive. The lack of team contributed to an overall feeling of isolation. Even though Molly was independent, she still needed a team. She needed people to talk through her ideas and to provide feedback. She needed people she could trust to share bad days and celebrate good ones.

The transition did not allow a space for new teachers. The administrators valued new teachers and new hires in the way they normally valued them. The young blood helped keep the staff current. But when discussing her role in the transition, Molly said, “my role was to be seen and not heard” (Interview, February 6). Her opinions didn’t matter. Her thoughts didn’t matter. Her company didn’t matter. She retreated to her classroom where she impacted students with the same role as the teachers down the hall, but without the valued input or words that carried the same weight.

### **Supports to Deal with Challenges**

Molly had many challenges as she negotiated her first three years of teaching and the transition which was jarring for even the veteran teachers. But, she was able to cope with these challenges and remain upbeat throughout my interviews with her.

***Independence.*** Molly is self-sufficient. She could take a curriculum document, read it, and design lessons around it. In response to questions about the Common Core she said, “I got a job in Columbia and suddenly we were Common Core, and so I just kind of went with it. I learned, um, I self-taught myself, a redundant statement, but, um, I got the packet that said, “here’s how that we break up the months” (Interview, February 6). In this statement, Molly was referring to a copied portion of the Common Core that she received during her teacher meetings at the beginning of the school year. Along with that packet came a one page map of broad units and common assessments aligned with the Common Core. So, Molly ingested this information and then worked to build her lessons off of it. The nice thing about the Common Core for Molly was the curriculum’s



allowance for individual teaching methods. Molly may have had a different reaction if the Common Core was more prescriptive.

As she worked through her lessons, Molly noted: “Now I’m very much on my own which I don’t hate. Because I like to do my own thing anyway” (Interview, April 20). Her independence supported her through this time in teaching. Molly was fine with designing and implementing lessons without the input of others. Her ability to rely on herself was a strength in her teaching structure.

Molly was not angry about the change to eighth grade, or the addition of the contract honors class. She stated simply, “I had to switch my mentality really fast” (Interview, February 6) She dug in and began teaching through this change by simply moving forward. She began teaching a new grade level with what she knew. Molly said,

Um, I had them write “slice of life” ah, which I would have had my 6<sup>th</sup> graders do, and I just kind of got to see compared, “ok, here is what my 6<sup>th</sup> graders did last year; here’s what these incoming 7<sup>th</sup> graders, now 8<sup>th</sup> graders, can do.” Um, a lot of it just I had to teach them the same kind of skills, and it wasn’t a problem... (Interview, March 16)

By beginning with slice of life, Molly knew she could build upon the teaching that was familiar to her while taking in her new surroundings. She also was able to use this assignment to gauge how to grow the rest of her lessons into ones that would be helpful to eighth grade students. Molly found this part of the transition relatively easy.

***Ignored Challenges.*** Molly’s main method of combating the stress of all the changes was to ignore the things that overwhelmed her: “I just tried to forget that the

transition happened, I guess. It was so above my head. They were completely changing everything, that, like I said, I just rolled with the punches”. She actively pushed forward and didn’t try to understand the pieces that were confusing to her and those around her.

I like change. I like new challenges.....like when the transitions and everything happened, like we were forced to change, that’s a little bit rougher, but at the same time, I just rolled with the punches, like I just. I do my own thing, so I don’t really care. Like when I was transferred to 8<sup>th</sup> grade a week before school started instead of 6<sup>th</sup>. It sucked, but then I was like, “Oh well, whatever.” And I did my own thing. (Interview, May 18)

Molly’s ability to be resilient to the changes in the face of chaos and isolation was a combination of her ability to be independent while ignoring the unimportant details, to focus on the bigger picture. In this quote Molly talks about the challenges and positive aspects of change and the desire to move forward. Perhaps her background as a caregiver which forced her to be independent allowed her to put these changes into perspective.

**Concluding thoughts.** This section of the findings discussed Molly, a new and creative teacher. Molly enjoyed creating complex units that transform her classroom into an authentic experience. Her self-reliance, independence, and drive allowed her to push forward during the transition where Molly felt isolated from other teachers. She maintained a positive attitude throughout the transition even when she was asked to switch grade levels at the last minute and take on a course load that she didn’t fully understand.

**Jim: Relevant, Student-Centered, Professional**

This section discusses Jim, a teacher mid-way through his career. After discussing Jim's background and teaching style, I will explore the areas where Jim is confident during the transition along with the challenges Jim faced. I will then discuss ways in which Jim adapted to those challenges.

**Background.** Jim has a strong background in elementary education. He spent three years as an elementary teacher in fourth and fifth grades. In elementary school, Jim taught reading, writing, math and social studies to the same class of students each day. The elementary school where he worked had the lowest test scores in the district and was a Title One school, reaching predominantly free and reduced lunch students. Jim's master's degree was in Special Education: Learning Disabilities. Married to an elementary school teacher, Jim spends time at home discussing best practice, student issues, and questions about the next step a lesson should take. Jim's wife helps to frame his teaching through thoughtful conversation and curricular suggestions as they push each other through their extended conversations.

After three years in elementary school, Jim then moved to middle school and has taught in two different middle schools for the past twelve years. In the first middle school where Jim worked, the population mirrored his elementary school. The middle school had the lowest test scores in the district with the highest percentage of students on free and reduced lunch. The second middle school was one of the top performing middle school in the district. Throughout his time in middle school, Jim always taught English

Language Arts. Some years he taught sixth graders, other years he taught seventh graders. A few of those years he taught reading, other years he taught writing, but the majority of the time he taught both reading and writing in a ninety minute block class that met every day.

While Jim did not coach or sponsor any after school activities, he actively engaged in conversations with students from the beginning of the school day until the end of the school day. He enjoyed joking around with students and building strong relationships with them that he could take into the classroom and build upon during lessons. In a March 10 journal entry Jim wrote: “My question is this: What is the sweet spot between delivering instruction, providing work time, and just talking and hanging out with the students”. Jim is the teacher that balanced the work and the relationship piece so well that students were engaged, challenged, encouraged and supported. A true sweet spot in teaching.

**Beliefs and values as an Educator.** Jim is passionate about literacy. He worked hard to make sure every student was reading an independent book based on their individual reading level. To do this, Jim was slow and methodical from the beginning of the school year. He began by teaching students how to choose a book that is at their level. They brainstormed lists of ways they could select books. He then took them to the school library, carefully observing the students who easily choose books and those who struggled to find an appropriate book. For students that struggled choosing books, Jim made recommendations for them. As students settled into reading class, he conferred with each student, noting their book title, page number and verbal summaries. He then

encouraged each student to set their own attainable reading goals and worked with the student to modify those goals throughout the school year. In his journal on February 9 Jim wrote: “I am going to teach the students how to think more deeply as we read nonfiction articles, short stories, and confer with students about their independent reading”. In this journal entry, Jim described the variety of texts he used in reading workshop. Jim’s structure for reading workshop is from the work of Atwell (1998) and Calkins (2000), both of whom he studied as foundations to his reading instruction.

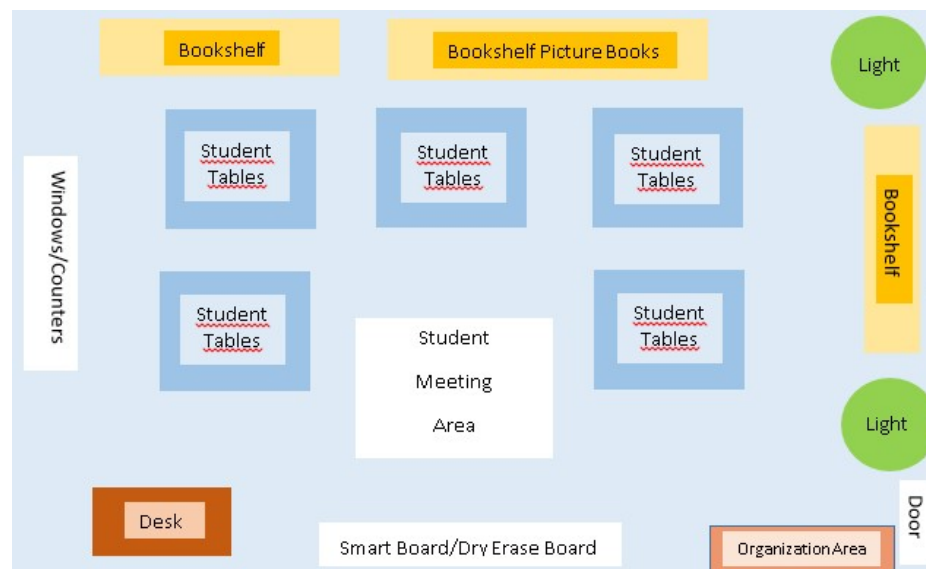
An avid reader himself, Jim spent class time each week talking about the books he read, hoping to model reading to his students while building a toolbox of titles he could use with students who were unable to choose their own book. He kept current titles of books in his own classroom library which he encouraged students to take advantage of, as well as the larger media center in the school where he worked.

Jim used a reading workshop structure in his classroom where students read their books while he conferred with students (Classroom Observations, February 18). He read alongside students, sharing his insight and thinking about the current young adult book he was reading as the students wrote about theirs. In my February 18 classroom observations, I noted that Jim had filled out his own reading log and had it posted on the SmartBoard. He then began class by discussing his reading goal from the night before and the one he was going to set the next evening. It was important that Jim modeled the behavior of a strong reader. As he talked through reading experiences, Jim was able to model the choices he made as a reader, the time and location he read, the idea that some

books take longer than other books to read, or interest students in the book titles he chose to read. Jim provided his class time and space for students to be readers.

**Classroom Environment.** In my field notebook (February 18), I drew a diagram of Jim's class. In this diagram I included lamps, a meeting table, books, and open space. These areas were designed for readers to be thinkers and learners, so it is less institutional, more like a comfortable place that anyone would want to spend time with that piece of writing that needs just the right word, or that sink-into book. Figure 2 is a representation of Jim's classroom.

Figure 2. Jim's Classroom



### Teaching Practice including Units, Lessons and Classroom Moments.

**Classroom Community.** Community set the tone in Jim's class. He worked to build a classroom community. He cleared space in his classroom close to the Smartboard where the students could sit on the floor. He had the class gather in this space daily as he

discussed the schedule and lesson for the class period. Students then dispersed from this space to the rest of the room. Several times a month, Jim had the students make a circle in and discuss non-fiction articles on the carpet. During the discussion students spoke one at a time about the article, asked each other questions, and offered extended comments on the thoughts of their peers. This set-up was student run, as Jim worked to become more and more invisible throughout the year. This student-centered, student-run approach to teaching was important to Jim because he wanted to build students critical thinking skills. He knew that students learn through discourse and allowing them to talk in a natural way will allow them to learn.

***Bookclubs.*** During my February 18<sup>th</sup> observation I noted, “Entire rest of the room reading and working while Jim met with book clubs”. This observation was important because the students were so invested in their reading work that Jim was able to teach small groups of students while the rest of the class was doing something meaningful. Jim dove-tailed reading workshop with book clubs. In book clubs, students choose from five to ten book titles centered around a common theme. Jim grouped the students together for each book title and then met with the groups several times each week to discuss the books. The class discussion on the carpeted area lead themselves to book clubs by the middle of the year. At this point, the students could both discuss written texts and read independent texts with little teacher direction and Jim could serve as a facilitator for the reading and discussions that happened during the class period. Later in a classroom observation on April 3, I noted, “The students are spread all over the classroom, talking in small groups”. For Jim, the moment where students were spread all over the classroom talking without his facilitation was a school years’ worth of

training because students need to learn how to ask questions, how to answer questions, how to dig deeper into a conversation, how to invite quiet students to talk, and how to listen. This takes practice and modeling, modeling and practice, over and over again.

In the reading workshop approach students self-select texts to read and work on a common strategy or line of thinking within each of these texts. This strategy or line of thinking may include identification of a theme or big idea, analysis of a character trait, questioning, or synthesis across texts. Jim stated, “we would read every day and I would confer with kids” (Interview, February 9). This model works well for Jim. In my journal to Jim I wrote (February 18) “I just watched your class this afternoon. There is such a fantastic culture in your room. Students are comfortable, focused, and seem relaxed”. Jim’s room had the low hum of a class of students who were challenged, busy, and working hard to maintain a culture rich in literacy.

**Writing.** Alongside the reading workshop model, Jim used the writing workshop model. Jim believed that by studying the work of published writers, learners can learn to write with insight and complexity. Jim began his year by having students write in a free-write notebook. They studied how to collect ideas, expand upon ideas, and choose the best small idea for an entire piece. They listened to, read, and unpacked published authors. In his writing classroom, Jim introduced each genre of writing with well written mentor texts. These are texts that have been written and published and serve as a model for what the students are expected to write. Then students identified critical components within the mentor texts and wrote a piece in that same genre incorporating strategies that the mentor authors used. This method was written extensively by Katie Wood Ray in



*Wonderous Words* (1999), *What You Know by Heart* (2002), and *Study Driven* (2006), in which Jim's wife was highlighted throughout the first chapter when Katie visited her school for a year.

During a March 10th interview Jim stated: "We've read a number of picture books, and the different types of pieces, and it's just, um, they're envisioning all the possibilities". By reading the picture books and envisioning possible pieces to fit within that genre, he is asking students to use mentor authors as a way to think about their own writing. During this time Jim read the class one mentor text and then the class listed everything the author did to make that text work. The list included text structure, words used, sentence structure, paragraphs, figurative language and punctuation. Jim posted this list on the wall of his classroom. The students would try something the author did in the text. Maybe a student tried a one-word sentence used by the author. Or maybe a student tried a simile, metaphor or personification. Jim called this "envisioning the possibilities"- the possibilities of what the students could try in their own writing. Then, the next day Jim would introduce another mentor author, another inquiry and listening and additional time to try out the strategies. This teaching method allowed students to learn from published authors, using them as models and experts to help elevate their own writing. Ray (1999), Fletcher (2011), and Gallagher (2011) have written extensively on the use of mentor texts. Jim has studied their books and modeled his classroom after their suggestions.

After a week of trying authors, students could choose one of their "try its" to extend into a larger piece. Students would then draft and study revisions, and eventually

push out a final copy. During this time, Jim would offer mini lessons on how to choose a structure that works, how to plan and draft, and many small lessons on the many ways revision could happen. After the five to ten minute lesson, Jim would confer with each writer, taking time for each of them to explain their writing decisions and push them each toward the next step in their own work. This lesson design is part of a typical writing workshop structure that Jim used in his teaching

While Jim is a staunch supporter of the workshop approach to reading and writing, Jim was challenged to apply the workshop model within the new time constraints. He stated

I'm trying to use inquiries in writing to just read mentor textsI'm trying to figure out how to work back in the workshop model, and so my big, one of the big questions right now is 'would it be more beneficial for students if I taught like reading for three to four weeks switching to writing for three to four weeks, and alternating in that way. (Interview, February 23)

Because a unit of study in either reading or writing would take three to four weeks of every day teaching, teaching one day reading and one day writing would extend units six to eight weeks, far too long for a student's attention span. Yet, if Jim concentrated on only reading or only writing for a unit, students would lose fluency. Either way, Jim struggled with the realization that he could only teach half of what had been taught in previous years.

### **Strengths/Areas of Confidence**

***Student-centered approach.*** Jim prides himself in a student-centered approach to instruction using a reading and writing workshop framework. He has worked and reworked lessons over years to best meet the needs of students. At the core of his teaching is his professional stance that students to make decisions as a readers and writers. This means that he allows his students a wide variety of choices such as what book to read and what topic to write and even what structure to write in. While students don't necessarily test better when given choices, many of which are not aligned to standardized tests, Jim believes that students learn to live as readers and writers which in turn, makes them stronger at literacy.

With reading instruction, Jim relied on the power of reading independent books, also part of the reading workshop structure. He stated: "It (the week) started off by just having to get back into the swing of things from spring break. So, I just had the kids, you know, read a lot. I taught them how to preview a text". By asking students to read a lot and then teaching strategy work within that reading, Jim is relying upon what he knows as a teacher. Further in the interview, Jim said, "I did the same thing last year and the year before" (Interview, April 6).

Jim is known for his rapport with students. He worked hard from the beginning of the school year to build a well-managed classroom where students enjoyed learning. His teaching style was calm and quiet, and he spent most of his time working with individual students and small groups. In my observation journal on February 18, I wrote: Jim said:

Today three book clubs are going to meet with me. I'd like to start with *The Skin I'm In*. Bring, packet, books. Rule #4 Choose a spot carefully. Then five girls moved to a round table and talked quietly while the rest of the class read.

Jim worked to set up this environment where students made choices and negotiated classroom space. He did this by building a classroom where students wanted to learn, allowing them the space to learn while supporting their learning through positive interactions and strong management. In my observation journal on April 3 I noted: "The students are spread all over the classroom talking in small groups. Jim sits and talks to one group of three boys". Jim goes to the next groups. He asked them a few questions then I noted "Goes to third group". Jim's classes ran this way. Small whole group instruction, then small group or individual meetings where students received targeted instruction.

***Technology integration.*** Jim is comfortable with technology and easily incorporates technology into his lesson design. He stated:

Videos are a huge part of their literacy now because the students have access to so many and that's what they like to watch, paying attention to the news seems to be, you know, a bigger issue now where students who don't have that, who don't you know, know what's going on are at a real disadvantage. I don't know, I guess, you know, think technology is playing a big role in literacy, too. (Interview April, 6)

His definition of literacy is broad, including how students read the world. Jim's flexibility with technology and its uses adds to his ability to teach students in a way

relevant to their generation. In my classroom notes on April 3, I wrote: “Jim said, ‘All this stuff is in Google classroom’ and Students all have iPads”. The students were referring to a picture on the iPads about an argument they were discussing in class. The technology was seamless and Jim was able to flip in and out of technology tools the same way he uses pencils and markers; it was something that helped his students learn.

### **Challenges**

***Time.*** Prior to the transition, Jim defined his teaching as slow. He stated:

My teaching before the transition was slow, I would say. It was just relaxing those are the words I would use to describe it, meaning that the students would come into the room; I would often have them for the full hour and a half straight, and we would, you know we had time to read aloud a lot. We had a lot more time to just sit and talk about our articles, but it involved other things, just, you know, things going on in the world, or things in our lives. (Interview, February 9)

Jim used the double block time to ease the students into an environment, a habit, of reading and writing. This environment was slow paced providing the opportunity for students to sink in, delve deep into a topic, and then the space to really think about themselves, each other, and the world around them. His daily class was like a coffee and a newspaper on a Sunday morning.....thinking about the news, the world, and how an individual fits into it.

With the transition time for his workshop environment was lost. Jim said, “I can’t teach using true workshop like I would in reading for example, where we would read every day and I would confer with the kids” (Interview February 9). By this quote,

Jim means that he doesn't have the time to use the reading workshop structure in his classroom. It has challenged his agency because the new time structure doesn't allow Jim to do what he believes to be best for students.

As Jim worked harder and harder to employ workshop strategies in his classroom he became increasingly frustrated. He said, "I've tried to do everything I was doing before and I found that that's just killing me from the amount, the work load that I'm putting on myself"(Interview, March 16). The lack of time and thus opportunity to teach the way he knew best made him work harder without different results. In his elementary years, Jim was able to determine the amount of time he wanted to spend on each subject. During his first twelve years as a teacher, Jim was able to secure 90 minute blocks to work with his students. He later stated, "The biggest challenge is just time. Cause I strongly believe that if I had more time with this group I have right now, I would still be able to really help them out, help them grow. So, time is top"(Interview, February 9). After 15 years in education, Jim has experienced a time constraint different from any previous years. This struggle to teach within shortened time caused him frustration and challenged who he is as a teacher. His response was to work harder and try to pack more in because he had nothing else he could do to control the time in class.

Jim saw how the lack of time at school worked against students. He stated, "The literacy piece is huge. They're not getting a time to read anymore at school, so they're not into their books they're reading" (Interview, February 9). The students reacted differently to reading when Jim asked them to read. When students were able to read for a chunk of time each day, the students had the opportunity to sink into a text and then

want more. They built fluency as readers. When reading opportunities became more sporadic, students began to show lack of interest in books. Jim stated:

Kids had time to just get their books out and read every day, you know, then there were days, that they would, you know, just beg to read the entire class period, which I don't find the students this year really wanting to do that at all.

(Interview, February 9)

The less time Jim had to teach the more he put on himself. He described it as:

...trying to figure out how to live up to my high expectations. Just, you know, I knew what I wanted to do, I knew what I needed to do, and should be doing, and trying to figure out how do I do a good portion of that to teach the kids. Just, you know, feel like I am doing a good job and giving them all the skills they needed, compared to the students I've had in the past, which I could never quite accomplish. (Interview, March 10)

Through this quote, Jim's frustration is palpable. He has the experience of a veteran

teacher. The experience that tells him these students are capable of doing X, Y, and Z.

Yet, the schedule is so different, that he is forced to approach it as a novice. The result is the tremendous amount of frustration he feels knowing what the students should be able to do, knowing how to get them there, and yet not having the capacity to do so. As I continued to interview Jim, he was able to pinpoint his frustration. He said,

Time. I was, I was trying to do too much. And that's the problem. You can't teach reading and writing at the same time, and do book clubs really well. You just don't have enough time to get that momentum going. So, so a lot of kids weren't getting their reading done or they weren't doing thinking work.

For a teacher that is slow and methodical in his teaching, the frustration mounted.

He stated:

The students are, their day is a lot faster than it used to be, so they're, you know, they never fully, they never settle anything. They just, you know, which means they never actually get to work, try anything, practice anything. (Interview, March 10)

He was worried about himself, but also for the kids.

***Inundated.*** Jim described himself as exhausted, overwhelmed, and tired for many of the interviews, meetings, and journal conversations. On February 9 he wrote,

At any rate, I feel quite a bit of optimism with the questions I am working to find answers to, but at the same time I am just physically drained. Each day takes all I have to just keep the students on task. As a result, my instruction is not nearly as strong as it is needed especially during the afternoon when I have most of my IEP, ELL, and behaviorally challenged students.

Jim says he is physically drained which hurts his instruction. He is inundated with IEP, ELL, curriculum, staff changes, scheduling changes, everything that surrounds the transition.



The push and pull of teaching during this period inundated Jim because as a veteran teacher, he knew what he was capable of covering and what students were capable of learning. But, his previous experiences have been compromised by the change in his schedule. In his journal on April 7, Jim wrote:

Currently, I am just worn out. The change in our schedule and routine causes students to be a bit more unfocused and disrupts my planning which just adds to this. I am finding the act of staying on my game for the entire afternoon to leave me mentally fatigued. This then causes me to go home and not do any school work which then leads me to fall behind with my work and have it all looming over my head all the time. This is an awful feeling.

During his teaching, he spent so much time trying to figure out how to pack everything in half the time, that he was left with no energy for all the extraneous work that went along with teaching. Jim needed time to process and there was no time to process all the things that had changed.

Along with the inundation of the new curriculum, schedule, staff changes and instructional time, Jim felt like he couldn't build relationships with his students. In a March 10 journal entry, Jim wrote: "I just hate that I Have to pick between teaching everything I believe is important and building relationships with students". For Jim, student relationships were critical. He knew that without strong relationships, students will be less successful.

***Lack of Voice during the Transition.*** While Jim's professional learning team contributed positively to his thinking about teaching, Jim felt like throughout the transition, his voice wasn't heard.

I don't feel like that there, I had any kind of a say. My voice was not heard at all even if I did try to tell somebody. I just think it was just, I think a lot of this middle school transition was all about having a certain kind of a schedule and I think that there are so many other voices that are wanting more time in the class that they outnumbered the language arts department. (Interview, May 4)

The district made decisions that were predominately against the language arts teachers. While the teachers were being asked to absorb a new, some would argue more rigorous Common Core curriculum, the time was cut. The other core contents received more instructional time and administrators were able to push in an 18-minute advisory which provided a place for the counseling lessons and organization lessons. Jim stated further, "if they ask for opinions, they don't really, you know, they don't really want them. It's a show". Jim saw through the obligatory meetings that asked teachers to write their opinions on exit slips and chart paper. He felt his voice was not heard. His ideas were not repeated in the schedules, course offerings, or basic fabric of the new model. He simply felt voicing his opinion was a waste.

### **Supports to Deal with the Challenges**

***Collegial support.*** Jim relied upon his professional learning team as a way to help ground himself in his teaching methods and try out his ideas. As the senior teacher on the team, Jim was able to provide insights to the two other members of the team, a

reading specialist and a first year teacher. This model where Jim, the veteran, met with a novice teacher was example of Community of Practice (Lave and Wegner, 1991) in action. In a journal entry on March 2 Jim discussed a collaborative meeting that contributed positively to his agency.

Today, Deb, Rob, and I had a great discussion during PLT. One (thing) I took away is to design the article of the week like Gallagher does by having the students complete a 1+ page reflection. Only this reflection is broken down into scaffolded sections using the levels of Bloom's. Rob also had the idea to down the road have the students write the questions for the article. Then through discussion we came up with the idea that students could use these questions for small groups discussion and then categorize the level of each question.

Jim and his teammates were discussing the application of Blooms to questions about non-fiction articles. Their PLT meeting involved a highly complex discussion about Blooms Taxonomy and its use in teaching. This kind of conversation helped Jim's thinking to move forward because it gave him something complicated to think about and people to think with. This line of collaboration left him with a community, and didn't isolate him.

In my PLT notes from February 9 Jim, Rob and Deb continued this conversation. I wrote: "Questions in each area of Blooms- next article of the week move (students) 1-3 to 4-6 on Blooms without much prompting". During this meeting Jim continued the Blooms conversation with his colleagues digging in even further in his line of thinking. In my field notes on April 28 I wrote,

Two interesting things to note, First, Jim and Rob were just finishing a conversation about Rob's Slip to Trip lesson. (This was an introductory lesson for argument writing). Apparently, he added some pretty great techniques to it that got the kids to write strong answers. Jim was impressed and wanted to do something like that next year. Second when the conversation was almost over, Rob mentioned his next topic and Jim came up with some great ideas to add.

PLTs helped Jim find a group of people that were in the same spot, doing the same things, where Jim could troubleshoot the rough parts of the day.

*Stayed student-centered.* Throughout the interviews and journal entries, Jim came back to what his students were able to do as a way to bounce back from frustration. In a March 2 journal entry, Jim started the entry by discussing the exhaustion of parent teacher conferences and the frustration of lack of buy in from team members, then started a new paragraph with this: "The PSAs are turning out awesome. They should be completed tomorrow. I can't wait to watch them" (Journal, March 2). PSAs are public service announcements. Jim asked his students to write and film public service announcements as a combined reading/writing assignment. Jim spent about four to five weeks working with his students on their public service announcements. The students could create a video for something they were passionate about, such as care for animals or the environment. This project was student centered because they focused on a topic of interest to the students, civic minded due to the intrinsic nature of public service announcements, and involved technology. This project was a home run in terms of creating something of interest to the students where they could learn about their

community, from each other while working on the skills of writing, speaking and technology.

For Jim, the completion of a big project and student work turned his attention away from the tiring frustrations in the daily grind. The student assignments were the apex. The thing he had been waiting for to validate all those moments when the job did not quite seem worth it.

**Reflection.** Jim persevered by trying to rethink the structure of the class day and week. Throughout his teaching after the transition, Jim kept trying different ways to structure his class so students would maximize their learning time. At the end of a unit utilizing book clubs, he said, “I wanted to do it all again one more time and change up the way I did it, but I’m not so sure I’m going to be able to” (Interview, March 10)

Jim couldn’t figure out if it was better to teach a block of reading and then a block of writing for three to four weeks at a time, or to assign reading days and writing days throughout the week. He said,

I think I’m going to go with the structure of doing a writing study then do a reading study instead of trying to do two things at once so that will allow me to go more in depth. And I noticed my kids this year they did better when we read every day. They started reading more at home, and they started getting more work done. (Interview February 9)

For him the struggle was reading and writing fluency. He knew that when students had large chunks of time to work on a task, they completed more for homework and engaged in learning at a deeper level. With time cut in half, Jim struggled to

determine where to spend the bulk of his time. Was reading more important? Writing? Or should students gain a surface level understanding of both?

I've tried different...And I've tried to have some specific reading days and specific writing days, like a Tuesday-Friday reading, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday writing. I tried planning the days and taking days for writing and reading as needed, so it might be like Monday through Wednesday I needed for writing and I, last two days for reading. I just tried different things like that.

(Interview, February 9)

***Inquiry.*** In a journal entry Jim wrote, "Would students show better growth and a higher percentage of work completion if we completed a 3-4 week study in either reading or writing rather than attempt to do both at the same time?" (Journal, February 9) He bulleted this section separately as if this was the thing that he was focusing on.

For Jim, inquiring about classroom practice, helped to move him forward when he was frustrated. In a February 18 journal entry, Jim wrote,

I'm not sure I would've said that my questions drive me, until you wrote that comment above. But I guess they do. I feel having something to think about and mold into something new or interesting helps me when I am feeling drained, negative, or even stagnant with my teaching. I enjoy researching and learning so this is a tool I obviously use to bring life to my classroom.

Jim used inquiry to keep his thinking focused on student learning and clear the extraneous conversations. He knew that spending time answering inquiry questions such

as the structure of his day is something he could control, and would make a difference in the lives of his students.

*Change in teaching assignment: The ultimate change.* Jim felt students didn't have time in class to complete the work and he didn't have the time to teach the students the things he wanted to teach them. In the spring of the year, Jim decided to change his teaching position in the following school year. He decided to move from a sixth-grade language arts teacher to a sixth grade language arts and sixth grade social studies teacher. With this move, Jim would teach two language arts classes and two social studies classes. He would teach a group of students twice each day. So, while Jim taught about 100 students during this current school year, Jim would teach 50 students twice the next school year. When I asked him about this change, Jim stated,

It's my last-ditch effort to find something that makes me feel like I am doing a good job here. More time and less kids should equal better teaching, I guess. I will be able to do all the things that I think the kids actually need to be good readers and writers, since I'll have social studies to teach reading strategies through, and writing, too. So, I should be able to do more with these kids. So, that's the whole idea of it. So, we'll see what happens. (Interview, May 18)

Jim was saying that he was so uncomfortable with the teaching schedule, he was willing to take on an additional subject area in order to get back the one thing he missed the most, time. He felt as though with half of the students twice a day, he will have more time to teach them the reading, writing, and content strategies he believes will help them the most.

The idea of resilience plays a big role in Jim's decision to make this move as a teacher. Jim realized he could not influence the schedule enough to reinstate a 90 minute reading and writing block. Because of the assignment completion rate and use of class time, he knew his students were not learning because of this decision. But, he was able to figure out a way to see his students for 90 minute blocks anyway.

**Concluding thoughts.** Jim left the school year frustrated. He knew he could do more for his students than he was able to do. On April 28, late in the school year, Jim wrote in his journal:

I kind of feel like this year is a throwaway year. I don't feel like anything has really come from it. I'm sure I'm wrong and just overreacting and it's just my tiredness talking, but this is hopefully the low point of my teaching career.

This is a strong statement from Jim; one that underscores how overwhelmed and exasperated he was. Jim was about ready to quit and find something else to do for the rest of his working career. In my field notes on February 13 Jim told me, " 'Sometimes I think, what am I doing here?' He then said there were so many jobs that would be so much easier". This line of thinking following Jim through the end of the school year and Jim struggled with what to do next. Jim laid his hope on the change in assignment, the addition of a new class to teach, and the opportunity to work with his students for an extended period of time.

### **Sally: Active and Independent**

The final participant in the study is Sally. Similar to the previous sections, I will begin with Sally's background and values and beliefs as a teacher. I will then discuss



Sally's classroom environment, her teaching practices, her strengths, her challenges and how she overcame those challenges.

**Background.** Prior to teaching, Sally traveled the country with her husband as a musical team. He sang and she played the piano. They played gigs at bars through the night. They cut a record. They made a living going from place to place. When their time to perform came to an end, Sally and her husband settled in the Midwest. His health didn't allow him to find other work. So, Sally decided to find another career. In her interview on February 13 Sally stated, "my friends were all saying you're like living with an English teacher". She took stock of her talents and thought, "What do I love to do? I love to read, I love to write, and I love kids, and I can't keep my mouth shut around them". With those thoughts in mind, Sally started down the journey of becoming a teacher.

She began her student teaching in an elementary school in Concord Public Schools. During her first experience in the classroom Sally knew that teaching was her passion, her new life, she was home. Sally stated, "I just fell in love the kids and absolutely loved what it felt like walking in a building and I remember how much I loved school as a kid. It's kind of like all the pieces fell together". And further, "It's a natural talent" (Interview, February 13).

For Sally, teaching is who she is. She defines herself in the world as a teacher. Her identity stems from her second career in teaching. She said, "It felt like coming home and putting on a robe, so there was never a conscious thought, but when I got there it was like. Yea, now I'm home. And I have loved it every day since then" (Interview, February 13).

After her initial career choice, Sally found her grade level niche. “Sixth grade was really the age I loved”, Sally said during her interview. She began teaching sixth grade in the elementary school where she student taught and then moved to open a brand new middle school and has taught at this same school for twenty years. Sally is proud that she holds institutional knowledge about her school.

Sally is driven by her work. Sally’s husband passed away, she has a tepid relationship with her stepson and the rest of her family lives out of state. She pours everything she has into her job. She stated, “Today. I love what I do. I have fun with these kids every day. My job as a teacher. My first job is to keep them safe, and I take that to heart. And then what I really try to teach them is how to think” (Interview, February 13).

During my interviews with Sally, I noted in my field notes:

She (Sally) was excited to reflect upon the years she spent as a teacher and thought into things that she would say to me. Never at a loss for words, Sally easily filled the time with her memories and ideas about teaching then and teaching now. She expressed her love for the field and her love for kids. (Field notes, February 13)

Sally is living the dream. She explored music and the country in her first career and then found a second career that has shaped her identity and given her a place to settle down. On one particular day in mid-March, when everything had gone just as it was supposed to, Sally said, “There’s the kind of days you teach for, you know, when you have those other days which are always there, these are the days you hang onto ”

(Interview, March 18). Sally hangs onto teaching because it gives her purpose, meaning, and a reason to start each day with a smile.

“I believe teachers have more of a mission, we are trying to grow the next generation”. (Interview, March 18). For Sally, who is deeply religious, teaching is a mission, a calling. It is her opportunity to leave an imprint on the next generation.

### **Beliefs and Values as an Educator.**

***Music foundation.*** Music grounds Sally. Throughout my interviews with her, Sally quoted songs to explain her feelings. For Sally music is a second language that expressed life in a way no words could describe. She stated, “And so much of my life came from music and I always, always, always find a line in a song, you know, I can’t tell you which song it is, but there is a line in one of them ” (Interview, April 10). When times in school got tough, Sally turned to music as well. In her journal Sally wrote, “Music has always been a big part of my life so it isn’t surprising that all of life show up somewhere in a song’s lyrics. The phrase for this year is from an old Paul Simon song: ‘what to leave in, what to leave out’ (Journal Entry, February 25).

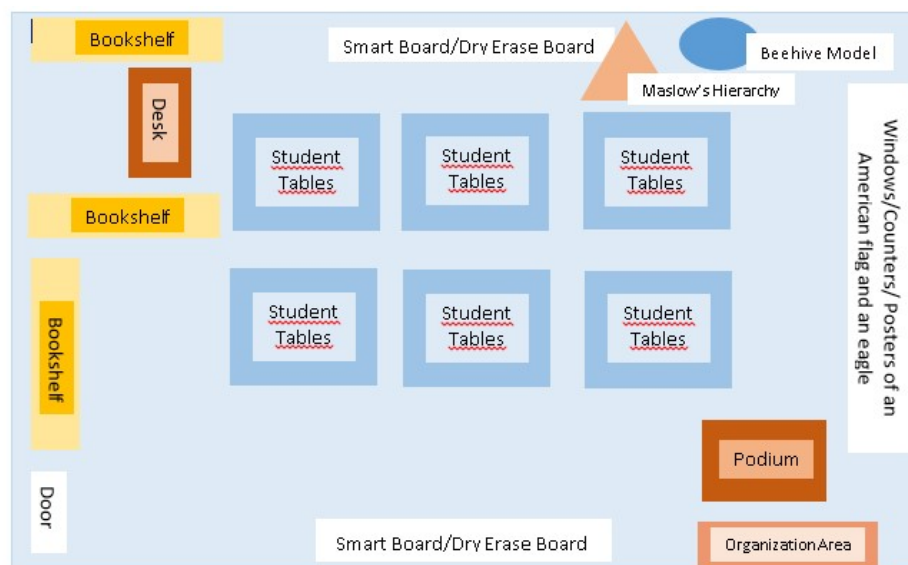
Sally extends this music into her classroom. I was taking field notes in her class at the end of the school day when she asked each student to sing with her. I wrote in my field notes: “At the end of the day, and the end of everyday- I believe, Sally had each student stand, put their hand on their hearts and sing *God Bless America*” (Field Notes, March 10).

***Back to the basics.*** Sally prides herself in being a back to the basics teacher. She stresses grammar instruction that is based out of grammar workbooks where students read sentences and identify the parts of speech. She spends a portion of each school year

teaching classics by Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Dickens. Sally reads the books to the students out loud, pausing every page or so for discussion and interpretation.

**Classroom Environment.** Sally’s classroom is an archive of teachers past. When teachers are ready to retire, they give their treasured items to Sally. In my field notes I wrote, “Sally’s classroom houses the prized beehive from Mrs. Jones, who, upon retirement, gifted it to Sally for safekeeping. Her classroom also holds bookshelves from another team teacher and the posters from another.” (Field Notebook, February, 20). Her brain archives the changes Smiley Middle School has endured. She remembers what it was, what it is, and how tough it has been to move a building from one idea to the next. She is a witness to time change, curricular change, and structural change over the course of a career. Figure 3 is a drawing of Sally’s classroom.

Figure 3. Sally’s Classroom



**Teaching Practice including Units, Lessons and Classroom Moments.** Sally relied upon her background with a Mid-Western upbringing along with her work ethic and strong sense of character to be the foundation for her classes. She believes that she is one of few teachers to uphold these standards within her classroom. The lessons she teaches build upon her fundamental beliefs. During her February 13 interview Sally said,

I may spend an entire day following where a discussion will go. For example, December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941, a date which will live in infamy, has been on that board since the week before it occurred. And, I don't draw attention to it; I wait for someone to notice it, wait for someone to ask about it. And in my classes that day, two classes asked and two did not. In the two that asked, that was the entire lesson. I was showing them the Pacific Ocean and we were talking about, well, why is this Pearl Harbor so important anyway.

To Sally, teaching about Pearl Harbor, to those students who are interested, is why she teaches.

***Teaching the Basics.*** Along with being strong supporter of classic literature, Sally discussed the elements of literature such as characterization, plot, climax and conclusion. Sally said, "I just harped all year on the elements of literature and I've pointed them out at every opportunity hoping I wasn't doing overkill" (Interview, May 4). Throughout her interviews, she referenced a unit she teaches on the works of Poe. She stated,

And what I did when I gave the kids the Poe test this year was make it real clear; either it's legible and it's in complete sentences; and I held up a test and it had a big red mark right down through the middle of it. (Interview, May 22)

Sally had marked up a test that she could not read as a way to deter other students from doing the same thing. Not surprisingly, Sally coupled the classics with traditional classroom discipline. My observations included a quiet classroom with students who gave their full attention to their teacher. They worked silently, independently and raised their hands when wanting to speak (Field Observation, February 20, 2015).

In the late part of the school year, Sally had her students complete a reflection over the entire year called a Memory Book Assignment. During an interview on May 22, Sally stated,

So, I feel kind of cranky some days. I'm not cranky, but I feel like I was with the kids, because I make sure they understand, No, this is not appropriate. And sometimes that means saying things like, 'I am furious right now.' And a couple of the memory books taken and flinging them down, just pounding them down on the desk to make a noise. And they're like 'Well, did you listen to the instruction I just gave you?

When students didn't understand or follow the instructions Sally gave them, she did things like fling their work down to make her point. This was one way she managed her class.

Sally prided herself in being the building expert in grammar instruction. She taught grammar throughout the school year and was quick to point out adults across the building who could use her seventh grade grammar lessons. In regards to a district-wide reading assessment Sally stated,

I threw a fit, one of the test questions has not properly matched subjects and verbs. It's matched the subject to the object, not catching that it was the object of

the preposition. So, I'm pointing out an error in the language arts test.

(Interview, March 18)

Sally spent considerable time on grammar instruction prior to the transition when she had more time to teach writing. Her students made grammar handbooks to use throughout the year. Unfortunately, with the change, Sally has given up some of this grammar instruction. She remembered, "I am not able to spend the time on grammar instruction that I could before the transition" (Interview, February 13). Sally just didn't have the time to spend on the grammar handbooks.

Yet her love and appreciation for grammar had not been lost. She still taught grammatical structure. During one of her interviews she said, "The 10 point grammar open-note gives me the "high" when so many kids get it right" (Interview, April 6). This indicated that she was able to get in some of the grammar that she loved and see results that made her proud of her students.

Sally believes in hard work, and core values and wants to pass those values from her generation to the one she is teaching. She is from the generation of "pull up your bootstraps and dig in". Sally brings this to her classroom and imparts these values on her students. She said,

But I was this old lady when I was 20. I think it's my generation. I think it's being raised by a man who valued work and honesty above all else. And he insisted that we were members, active members of our household. We had chores, we had jobs, and I've worked my whole life. And I had to work hard to get understanding of stuff. (Interview, May 4)

Just as she was raised, Sally expects honesty and hard work from her students.

***Higher Level Thinking/Questioning.*** Perhaps the apex of Sally's instruction, is her emphasis on high level thinking and questioning. From the beginning, Sally emphasizes Blooms Taxonomy, focusing on the top levels of thinking with her students. She believes, "I can't really teach them anything until I can teach them how to think and how to be critical thinkers." And further, "I am trying to teach the kids to be critical readers and to vet their sources" (Interview, February 13). According to my field notes on my classroom observation on February 20, Sally asked a lot of questions about the book *The Last Book in the Universe* (Philbrick, 2008), which was their class read aloud. She asked, "What are we getting in this chapter? Do we learn anything? Why is it that Lania (a main character) is changing? When you say her attitude changes what examples can you give me of that?" Then Sally pointed to a chart of Bloom's Taxonomy displayed in her room and said, "This is what we call critical thinking. Down here- you know- he gives us this piece in the title. Why do we read the chapter?" She then pointed to the upper parts of Blooms Pyramid and said, "Make deeper inferences." It was clear that Sally pointed to the Bloom's Pyramid throughout class discussions. The students were familiar with it and the leveled way of thinking. She kept asking the students to think deeper by pointing to the pyramid. Sally and the class had their own way of communicating, questioning and responding that became a rhythm, almost a code, by the time I observed them.

During my classroom observation on May 7, Sally was reading from Edgar Allen Poe. She was holding a whole class discussion and I came in during the middle of the discussion. She asked, "What is the evidence to your claim? What kind of evidence?" Class answered (collectively): "Textual." Sally then went on to discuss claims saying: "I



am going to make a claim and you can refute it. When have you written a paper about something you are against? Do you know what alliterative means?” Sally’s teaching went like this. She discussed big ideas the whole class. She jumped from topic to topic getting students to follow her with each turn. Her class was silent as she spoke, as if they were hang on her every word.

Sally’s work with questioning and thinking has paid off. Her student scores were at the top of her grade level. She stated, “As we scored the CR (constructed response) from ELA #2 I was even more please to see the overall caliber of answers! Some days it DOES pay to get out of bed” (Interview, April 20). For Sally, those test scores validated her as a teacher and her teaching style.

### **Strengths/Areas of Confidence**

***Instructional decisions.*** Sally is an autonomous teacher. She regularly makes decisions regarding students and her instruction. She makes those decisions on the spot, autonomously. And, it is individual decision- making that is the strongest pillar in Sally’s agency. In Sally’s interview on February 13 she stated: “My first job is to keep them safe, and I take that to heart. And then what I really try to teach them is how to think.” The teaching her students to think part is where Sally’s decisions come into play. She will improvise an entire class period when answering a question that a student asks, working to build thinking skills while fully utilizing her capability of spending class time on a tangent. In her February 18 interview Sally continued,

I’ll pay attention, if I have them I keep going, if I don’t I won’t, don’t waste my time. But if the kids are interest in this topic, it’s up to me to figure out how to present those teachable things while I have their interest in whatever topic it is.

Sally would talk until the subject needed to be changed. It was part of how she entertained people for so many years. She would read her audience. And, she was good at it. During this same interview Sally continued, “I want them to be observant, and I come at them from place that most teachers don’t.” Sally actively and independently made decisions about her students and what to teach them. Even though her lessons may have taken a turn in the middle, it was always because she wanted to teach something that she felt wouldn’t be covered anywhere else.

Sally spoke about her history as a teacher as if she has taught so many times, she could predict what students were going to do or say next. She relied upon years of experience to figure out her classroom road map day in and day out. During my initial interview with her, Sally acted out parts of her class saying what she’s said year after year and saying what the students would say in response to her students. For example,

I know what the typical mistakes are that the kids are going to make, and then I’ll start kind of trying to keep them on their toes. “Oh, do you think you have them all?” and they’ll say, “Yes.” And I’ll say, “Are you suuuuuuuuuure?”. (Interview, February 13)

This kind of confidence comes from the capability of making instruction decisions during years and years of teaching. She was able to predict what students would say or do depending upon the lesson she put in front of them.

Further in her interview Sally continued:

For me to pick a topic and come in here and say “OK, today boys and girls we’re going to learn about the placement of commas.” I’m gonna put them all to sleep. So instead (what) I’ll do is pull up my cartoon that says ‘Let’s eat Atilla’. And

Atilla the character is seen hanging a comma in the strips....And this is how I teach. (Interview, February 13)

Sally covers traditional components of teaching in non-traditional ways such as the use of a cartoon to teach grammar.

Sally acts confidently and autonomously in her instructional methods, but she felt her work was just simply her work. In my notes reflecting upon a conversation with Sally in February I wrote, "When we were done she mentioned, I probably gave you nothing." She said this because her work is so ingrained in her way of living she doesn't find it unusual.

Sally continued discussing instructional methods from the perspective of writing. She stated: "So, I'll take them out of where we are and try to give them a story board in a conversation and I'll pay attention if I have them, I keep going, if I don't I won't, don't waste my time"(Field Notes, February 13).

During these times in her classroom, Sally is the instructional expert. She is saying that she'll read her students and then figure out on the spot if she should continue with the writing lesson or move on. Sally has taught this so many times, she has an internal barometer of what works and what doesn't work and she knows to move on to something else or not.

Sally supported this further in her journal when she wrote, "Most teachers freak out if their cores don't line up every day but I think that's less important." (Journal, March 12). Here she is stating that her classes can end up in different places, and she'll be able to pick up the next day, wherever they left off. She tailors her instruction to the individual needs of her classes. She teaches each class as if it were a whole group,

moving with the ebb and flow of the conversation and questions of the students. She is the entertainer. They are her audience.

### **Challenges**

***Reading instruction.*** While Sally showed confidence in her lesson ideas and instructional methods, Sally also highlighted moments where her confidence was challenged. For the majority of her career, Sally taught writing. Another teacher on the team-taught reading. The transition was the first time Sally was assigned to teach both subjects in the same amount of time she previously taught writing. Reading instruction challenged Sally. In her February 13 interview, Sally said, “I would rather do that (teach more kids) and stay with the writing than double everything and put me in an area where I had less confidence about my expertise.” She didn’t know where to start with reading and didn’t know how to break down the curriculum. Sally didn’t actively read young adult books and struggled suggesting books to students. In her February 13 interview, Sally continued, “Between you and Deb, I wasn’t a miserable failure at the (reading) workshop. But I relied on both of you to guide kids reading choices and pick just right books, which is the foundation of a workshop.” Sally was uncomfortable teaching reading, and because she was so independent in her teaching, reaching out for help was an uncommon practice for her.

***New teams and structures.*** Sally was frustrated with the way the transition caused everything to start over. Sally was a founding member of the faculty at Smiley Middle School. During her April 30 interview she stated, “We’re starting over. We had it right. We had it figured out. It was working.” She felt like the kinks were worked out before the transition. In the same district, in the same building, in the same classroom,

Sally completed her job each day with a structure that she had already perfected and she felt she had already worked through the rough spots. Sally and her team had created a system that worked. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses and they trusted each other. When the transition happened, Sally found herself in the same place with completely different people and with a completely different schema of how things were going to work, and the new schema wasn't working nearly as well. Later in her April 30 interview she said,

We were working in teams with a group of teachers that didn't change and a group of kids that didn't change. And we kept them for the looping time, and we got to know our kids, and we showed growth that was unbelievable working within the daily structure in our building.

Everything but her physical space changed, and Sally didn't feel the change was to the benefit of the students. This challenged Sally's confidence and autonomy. During her interview, Sally thought about the time she spent working with a cohesive group of teachers and with students for two years in a row as almost a Golden Age of teaching. She felt capable of taking professional stances because of the support she had from fellow teachers along with substantial background knowledge of her students.

**Time.** In addition to curriculum, teaming and structure, the change in teaching time worked against Sally's perceived ability to teach the Common Core Curriculum. In a February 13 interview she said, "Last year I struggled a great deal. Ummm, it wasn't my best year in terms of did I give the kids what I felt like they needed, 'cause I was trying it figure out." The new teaching schedule and curriculum almost put her back at the beginning in terms of her lesson ideas and plans. In addition, Sally worked on a

two year plan. She looped with her students sixth grade to seventh grade, sixth grade to seventh grade again and again and again. Whatever Sally didn't get to the first year, she was able to get to the second year. In her May journal Sally continued, "I really miss looping. No matter how long I have with my kids, I ALWAYS run out of time before I run out of things I want to teach" (Journal, May 12). At the end of the year, Sally wanted more time with her students, and she realized that with the new structure, she was done.

The continued lack of time haunted Sally throughout her second year after the transition. In an April 30 interview Sally said,

I am already worried about what am I leaving out next year. This year was article of the week that got sacrificed. That's important. If I can't put it back, how do I put the same elements, the same learning opportunities back.

In her journal she wrote,

The phrase for this year is from an old Paul Simon Song, 'what to leave in, what to leave out.' That describes my planning and the decisions I make about instruction. (February 25)

The lack of teaching time frustrated Sally because she knew her students weren't receiving the amount of instruction she was about to give them prior to the transition. On April 10 she wrote, "Last year the free writes got slighted, this year its articles of the week. I truly believe we need to restore the fifth teacher and do both reading and writing every day." By restoring the fifth teacher, Sally means that the schedule should be returned to 90 minute reading classes.

***Professional Development Frustrations.*** During the year before the transition, the school district held a series of all-day meetings during teacher work days to help

make the transition smoother. For Sally, these meetings were not effective in supporting her professional decision making. In regards to professional development Sally said,

(I've had) every kind that the District could shove down my throat. Um, we have had professional development in all of the different behavior systems where we trip all over ourselves to use different vocabulary, but essentially mean the same thing. Um, I've had some professional development in what was expected in our new transition that didn't really touch on much of the items that needed to be dealt with in terms of teaching... We're so busy chasing data and entering data and analyzing new testing documents that we're overlooking the people part of the puzzle. (Interview, February 13)

To further support this in her journal Sally wrote: "The data driven district approach does NOT apply because I'm comparing apples and oranges. I can't know how well a plan works because I can't "guess" what the outcome might have been if I had changed the input" (Journal, February 26). Sally is astute here to realize that data-driven results don't work if the curriculum changes from year to year.

### **Supports to deal with the Challenges**

***Collegial Support.*** While Sally experienced challenges, she also looked at ways to rebuild her confidence with her new schema of what instruction looked like. She relied on building mentors, both current and in the past, to help her determine what was valuable in her teaching lesson along with her strongest approaches to teaching. This is consistent with Melville and Bartley's (2000) research that found that a strong work community is essential in a teacher's willingness to change.

In a May 14 journal entry Sally wrote, “But I think we miss the point if we only talk about kids. I have made some life-long friends in this job and truly believe if we don’t have good relationships with co-workers, our jobs are harder.” Throughout the transition, Sally relied on her co-workers both present and in memory to decide which steps to take in her instruction.

Sally chose specific topics and units from influential people of the past to keep in her instructional arsenal. For example, Sally decided to keep working with students in character education. She stated, “Leo Downy, the computer teacher in those years, had a character education curriculum, and we had a character trait for each week” (Interview, May 4). Also, Sally made a memory book at the end of the school year, relying on the lessons from an old colleague. She said, “And this goes back to something that Donna Howell was doing years ago.” (Interview, May 4) And Sally relied on her PLC to support her with the new approaches to teaching and grading. In her journal she wrote: “At least my PLC is doing it right. We are anchoring our work so that the scores are useful” (Journal, February 26).

***Maximizing the best lessons.*** For Sally, the most difficult part of this period was trying to figure out how to teach two full curriculums, writing and reading, in one class period. As an experienced teacher, Sally knew the expectations of her including curricular strands, testing, and what students are capable of achieving if given the opportunity for instructional time. She stated,

I’ll be honest with you; I was trying to figure out how to do the impossible. How do you double your curriculum when you didn’t have time for it last year? So, based on what happened last year, I went back to the “I don’t care what else has to



get left out, that so-called warm-up time, the free reading and/or free writing cannot get left out.” That’s where everything good happens, that’s where it all starts. (Interview, February 13)

Sally was never going to be able to teach in the way she taught previously. She defined what was important: free reading and free writing. She felt that she got the most out of her students during this time and decided to build up her classroom with free writing and free reading as the starting point. Sally wrote in her journal about this as well. “Are the kids missing out on something? Oh my! Are they ever! I am not able to spend the time on grammar instruction that I could before the transition” (Journal, February 15). Sally decided on the parts that she values and felt she needed to teach students and then worked from there.

In a later interview, Sally came back to the “I’m getting a better handle on being able to present both reading and writing, but I feel like I know what I left out last year, I know what I’m leaving out this year, and wonder what I’ll leave out next year” (Interview, May 4). For Sally, there was always a hole, something she was not covering well enough. That feeling of not teaching something was a constant line of thinking throughout the semester. She wrote in her journal, “What got left out? Non-fiction work like articles of the week. I’ve only done one this year, and should be doing one every week” (Journal, February 15). It was like she was never finished with her students and her job. A month later, Sally wrote,

What have I left out? This year it’s been Articles of the Week. I really love those things! Non-fiction reading and thought-provoking question on kid-friendly

topics. I've also given up on agendas. I used to check them every Monday, but not in the last two days (Journal, March 8).

She spent a lot of time thinking about the holes instead of celebrating the successes.

When comparing her current school year to the previous year, there was so much she wasn't able to finish with her students. Sally needed several years of teaching with this new schedule to reset her teaching equilibrium and then work from the vantage point of adding in instead of leaving out.

Sally hung on to the pieces of her curriculum that provided the most for her students. In a March 12 journal entry she wrote, "It's such a joy to do read-alouds....I decided this year I love the read alouds and will continue them." She followed this up with an entry on March 13 that said,

I have seen the kids really get into this story and we are having discussions that are showing higher-level thinking from the kids. These are my favorite kinds of classes. Kids are using story boards and another sheet for words/questions etc. and they're taking really good notes.

The season is spring. Sally has built community in the beginning of the year, and taught all fall, taught all winter, and now is in the last push before a break. During this last push, she has focused on the students, the tangible learning that she can attribute to her effort as a teacher, and her love for the unique group of students that she teaches.

Sally started with her most important teaching strategies, free writing and reading, and then built the rest of her lessons from there. In her interview she stated, "I don't care what else has to get left out, that so called warm-up time, that free reading and/or free writing cannot get left out. That's where everything good happens" (Interview, February

13). She followed up in her journal writing, “Last year I cut the SSR and free-write time. Couldn’t live with that again, so this year I’ve put them back in” (Journal, February 21).

Sally also stuck with familiar books and units from the past. She taught *The Last Book in the Universe* for several years prior to the transition. In her interview, she discussed the inclusion of this book in her teaching.

I know more what I’m after instead of just trying to get them to pick the thing in the story they want to focus on. I know I have to direct their focus. Um, it’s probably the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> time for this book. Um, and what it’s made me realize is that I can apply what I’m learning teaching this book to *The Giver* and to *The Poe* that I do. (Interview, March, 13)

Sally was able to plant seeds in this book that were harvested later in the year via *The Giver* (Lowery, 1993) and *Poe*. These seeds involved digging deeper into the themes of the text and using contextual clues to infer vocabulary and the personality traits of the main characters.

***Student Centered Focus.*** Part of Sally’s ability to adapt was her focus on students. Throughout the year, Sally stayed focused on her students and the opportunity she had to impact their lives. She said,

Everybody worried about the teachers, everybody worried about the teams, everybody worried about attendance zones, but nobody got down to looking at the kids sitting in the classroom, and asking, “Ok, what is all this craziness look like to the kids, what are they thinking?” We’re not giving them a chance to talk about it. My job was just to hang for dear life and survive the year.

And my attitude was you're a first year teacher; survival is your only goal.

(Interview, February 13).

Through her survival mode, Sally pinpointed the students that deserved the opportunity for a "put together" teacher. She remained stoic in the face of chaos around her, so her students could learn. This must have been a tremendously challenging place to be. Sally had a new curriculum, a new schedule, new colleagues, new, new, new. Her instincts as a veteran teacher told her she wasn't covering enough and she felt that the structure of the school wasn't supporting the best interest of student learning. She had no control over the changes. Yet, she held it all together day in and day out, so the students in front of her could get the most polished, professional teacher she could muster in the face of the chaos. The composure it took for her to do that must have been exhausting.

Sally always came back to the students. After writing in her journal about what she didn't have time to teach them, Sally wrote, "but I have such a great group this year that I think they are the reason for growth" (Journal, February 15). Sally repeated this sentiment in a later entry when thinking about the book she was teaching with her students. "It's getting really exciting to hear the kids' conversations. They're asking some good questions and making thoughtful (and correct) predictions" (Journal, March 12).

To stay focused on her students, Sally shut out the world beyond the classroom.

Well, I can stay positive because my classroom has a door and I leave it closed.

This is my fifth paradigm in 20 years. My fifth boss in this building. Each came in with a different vision. Each came in making changes very slowly the first year and opening the flood gates that second year. Ok, I'll be here when they're all

gone, too. The more frustration I feel, the more motivated I get to stay and do what I can. I can't change the world, but if I can get one kid thinking today and another kid thinking tomorrow, why not. IF I'm gonna gripe, have to try to do something about it. I can't change the building, but maybe I change some kid's perspective. That's the best I can hope for. (Interview, May 4)

The students are truly Sally's motivation behind her work. When she discusses the change in administration, it is as though administrators come in with a different vision, different idea and the more that this happens, the more Sally is inclined to remain focused on the things she knows to be best about teaching and the students, which prove to be more reliable in personality than the variety of administrators she has encountered over her career.

**Concluding Thoughts.** Sally's transition was a challenging one. With her breadth of experience, she focused on helping students progress forward in the face of enormous changes within Smiley School. Throughout the changes, Sally worked to negotiate her school days incorporating her improvisational style with a mix of back to the basics and independent reading and writing.

### **Molly, Jim and Sally: The Toboggan Ride**

**Introduction.** In the previous sections of the data analysis, each case, Sally, Jim, and Molly, were introduced and discussed individually. In this final section of the data analysis, I will compare and contrast the cases and further unpack my data analysis into three broader themes that I saw between the cases. The quote at the beginning of this section was one I identified early in my coding as capturing the feelings and emotions in the stories of these teachers.

You know it was just such a cluster, it was like this toboggan. This 30 foot toboggan with all these teachers piled on, hanging on for dear life. And my role was to stay on the toboggan and not get my hands broken. I was going to get cold, I was going to get bruised, but I had to hang on whatever that meant. If it meant tying a rope around my foot, if it meant tying a rope around my wrist, if it meant tying a rope around my neck, I had to hang on. I felt like my job was twofold: the first one was to figure out how in the hell to give my kids what's best for them when the district had put itself in a position where it truly didn't know. And I'm not necessarily being critical-change that big can't be seamless. You're going to make mistakes, you're going to figure out what worked, what didn't work, but I felt like my job was to provide the only stability those kids might have in a school day. And my second job was not to get crushed under the weight of the transition and the stress level of all of my superiors. And the board office and in our office here, the stress level was; I love this word palpable. And so, I really did feel that part of my job was to be a buffer between what they were going through on that end and what was happening in my classroom; because the transition was never thought about in terms of the kids. (Interview, February 13)

That was Sally during an interview in February. She said these words at the very end of a 60 minute interview, a summation of sorts. Her words described her journey. Imagine this toboggan, 30 feet long with teachers all over it, hanging on in the middle, the sides, bumping along the tail end, a pile of bodies headed somewhere unknown. The farther the toboggan went the faster it got picking up pieces along the way. The cold,

white ice and snow surrounded the pile of teachers as they worked to move forward, stay upright, and shield the students from the worst part of the fall.

What allowed teachers to hang on to this toboggan? What allowed them to come in day after day to teach a group of students when their teaching lives had drastically changed?

**Identity Grounds Teachers During Times of Change.** My research suggests that teachers' beliefs and values were central to their thinking about the transition. For Sally, in her interviews, teaching is her life. Her husband has passed and her family lives several states away. Her home is situated on acreage outside of the school district where she works. Besides church, school provides her with most of the socialization she gets during the week. She lives to teach.

Sally teaches to help students understand their place in history to tell students about the way life used to be. She helps them learn about the value of hard work, the benefit and responsibility of being an American and the power of a well-thought out, grammatically correct written statement. She teaches to instill a sense of self discipline, and to help students understand the value of Charles Dickens and Edgar Allen Poe. She teaches to emphasize questioning and thinking beyond the surface-to emphasize that the higher you can ask questions on the Blooms Taxonomy pyramid, the better job you will have. These elements are so much woven in to who Sally is, that the line between what she teaches students and how she lives the rest of her life is blurred.

Jim is different. His beliefs and values are tied to his years of experience. He has built a career on years of asking questions of his colleagues, reading books about best

practice, thinking through high level teaching methods, and then implementing a plan. Jim hangs on to this toboggan knowing that he is grounded in reading and writing workshop practices. He has studied the works of Nancie Atwell and Katie Wood Ray. He thinks about the ways to structure a learning environment that grows passionate and critical readers and writers. And then rethinks about these structures. Then he thinks some more. His teaching varies widely from one year to the next, as Jim constantly searches for teaching equilibrium, that sweet spot where his new group of students- with their unique personalities- are learning and thinking as Jim acts as a facilitator. Jim teaches in a way where his lessons are tailored to each individual student, relying on independent texts and conferring. He has studied student talk, and values individual perspective and diversity, while growing his classroom into a community of independent, creative thinkers.

Our new teacher, Molly, brings in another set of beliefs and values. She is young. A trailblazer. While the toboggan of teachers is careening down, Molly is skiing alongside. This path is not easier, just different. She may have casual conversations with the mass on the toboggan, yet she is blazing her own way. Her beliefs are grounded in uniqueness, creativity, and grit. Molly relies upon herself and her ability to make it up as she goes along. She created units, such as the JFK unit, entirely on her own. While she incorporated the necessary curricular elements in this unit, Molly focused more on the unit as a whole and the authenticity inherent in the assignment. Inspired by the idea of argument, she developed a court room simulation, a classroom economy, and a variety of entry points for struggling and advanced students. Her intelligence and ability to create complex assignments are her skis moving her forward.



In many ways Sally, Jim, and Molly dealt with this transition uniquely. But, grounding each one of them is a steadfast reliance on their values, beliefs, and uniquenesses. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) discuss this phenomena in their definition of teacher identity. They state that identity involves personality, families, culture and traditions. These values and beliefs are connected by the idea of identity. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) add that identity is constantly shifting, like in situations such as Smiley's transition.

Sally's pick yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps personality combined with her religious grounding and experience as a bar performer culminate in a more traditional approach to teaching by introducing students to the works of Poe and Dickens. She believes students should be critical thinkers to effectively negotiate a world that is sometimes cruel and never fair. She believes students should have pride in their country, and pay homage to those who suffered before all of us to protect freedoms. In many ways these two ideas collide when thinking about education structure. Friere (1970) discusses the tendency of educators to view students as a vessel waiting to be filled. To some extent, Sally does work to fill student's mind, but she also wants them to inquire, to question, to think. This tension, makes her three dimensional and sometimes contradictory. The life she's lived in all of its contradictions is how she teaches, her identity.

Jim's education and family background mimic the middle-class upbringing. His reliance on researched-based instructional methods is a natural segue from the type of family that relied on traditional education to support thinking. Further, Jim's father

worked as a journalist for Sporting News which allowed Jim to see the real-life application to writing strategies. As Jim grounded his teaching in the writing workshop philosophy and the writing cycle, he could help students mimic the work he witnessed his father do throughout his childhood. Jim's mom's background in art education allowed him to approach lessons and students with an eye for the variety of perspectives and experiences each student brings to the table. He tried live Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading as he worked to figure out each student and how that student read a particular text, knowing each reading conference through the day would be different (Rosenblatt, 1978). This way of authentically educating students in a process that models the work of readers and writers in our world grounded him. He felt at home with this instruction. It was his identity.

And then there is Molly. Molly is a fighter who supported her mom as she pursued a master's degree. She was stoic in the face of family dysfunction. She relied on tenacity, grit and perseverance to get through tough times. She created her path independent of others. And, she used her creativity as an outlet not only for her students, but also for herself in a world that she knew was not fair. Tenacity, grit, and creativity stem from Molly's roots- her identity.

**Challenges Both Destroyed Teacher's Agency and Gave Them an Opportunity to Rebuild.** Sally paints this picture of a toboggan careening downhill. Teachers are "piled on, hanging on for dear life." They were trying to survive, as if they were first year teachers again. Many obstacles stood in the way of the teacher's ability to proceed.

***Time Challenged Teacher's Agency.*** One of the biggest obstacles was time.

Over and over again, Sally, Jim, and Molly discussed the impact of time on their ability to teach. Sally stated, "No matter how long I have with my kids, I ALWAYS run out of time before I run out of things I want to teach," but Sally also made a decision to always keep independent reading time and free-write journals in her daily lesson plans. Sally knew that the concentration of learning that happens in those moments is worth the time spent on them. In Jim's first interview, he said, "So I think the, the biggest challenge is just time. Cause I strongly believe that if I had more time with this groups I have right now, I would still be able to really help them out, help them grow. So, time is top" (Interview, February 9). Lack of instructional time affected the depth of content and the units of study because they could not teach as much as in previous year. It also affected the fluency in a topic. Jim struggled the entire semester with how to teach reading and writing. He tried to figure out if he should teach a unit of reading then a unit of writing, or Monday, Wednesday, Friday writing and Tuesday, Thursday reading. In her first interview, Molly discussed time constraints as well. When I asked her about what teaching was like during the year before the transition, her first year of teaching, she said, "I think it was less jam packed, because I had reading and writing split. Um, which I never knew was such a wonderful thing until I had to jamb it all together, into one fifty, forty-five-minute period" (Interview, February 6).

***Lack of Support Challenged Molly's Agency.*** Another obstacle for Molly was lack of building-wide support. While Jim and Sally had established groups of teachers with whom they could discuss issues, Molly was still fairly new. She was not as steeped into the school culture as Jim and Sally. During her first interview Molly said,

The teachers have broken apart. I don't know if that's my perspective and how much of a community there was before, and it might have been like my rose - colored glasses, because I loved my team so much. But I don't see that many great relationships in our building. Other buildings have it maybe, so maybe it's just people in here. But there's very little time spent together collaborating, there's no, sixth to seventh to eighth grade collaboration on what's going on. I just feel like it broke us apart. Or at least maybe that's because I'm so isolated.

(Interview, February 6)

After the transition, Molly felt as though she needed to do things on her own. Where the year prior to the transition, a team of teachers worked together, Molly did not experience that same collaboration after the transition. This left her feeling isolated.

In many ways the obstacles of time and lack of collegial support stripped teachers of what they knew to be best practice in their teaching world. They were asked to follow a new curriculum, schedule, and instructional class length in which they had no personal investment. This negatively impacted their belief that administration was partnering with them as decision makers and autonomous thinkers. This impact affected their agency. According to Etelapelto et al. (2013) teacher agency is the idea that teachers are capable of making decisions, acting autonomously and taking professional stances. Thus, the toboggan. They were just hanging on without somebody steering or a group of knowledgeable adults helping to control the situation. They were just piled up, picking up speed and headed downward.

***Ways Teachers Rebuilt their Agency.*** How did they get out of it? Sally and Jim relied on the support of peers to get them through. For Jim, this took the form of his PLT meetings where he was able to ask questions and share thinking about Blooms taxonomy. These conversations were as much to support his depth of thinking as it was to help students become more critical thinkers. For Sally, it was the casual conversations of trusted peers, people she knew she could rely on to support her through the teaching of reading which was tangential to her writing lessons the years prior to the transition. For Molly, it was simply plowing forward, she said, “I just tried to forget that the transition happened, I guess. From my first to my second year they were completely changing everything, I just rolled with the punches” (Interview, February 6).

Each of these teachers relied on large units of study to move them forward. Within these units the teachers could do each of the things defined by Etelapelto et al. (2013): make decisions, act autonomously, and take a professional stance. For Molly the unit was her JFK unit which she poured a tremendous amount of time and effort. For Sally, the unit was her end of the year books that served as a reflection of learning and tangible evidence that her students were learning. And for Jim, the unit was the literature circles and the way the students were able to hold a discussion about a topic without the direction of the teacher. In their discussions, they showed him evidence of critical thinking that he worked so hard in his PLT to define.

Agency includes self-efficacy and initiative (Etelapelto et. al., 2013). Within the idea of self-efficacy contains what the teachers did not say. None of them told me that they were not good at teaching, nor did they say they could not handle their subject. The

teachers mostly talked about the units they were doing. Molly discussed JFK, Jim discussed book clubs and writing units, and Sally talked about her end of the year notebooks. Within these conversations they demonstrated self-efficacy and initiative. The project helped move them forward, gave them a focus and a sense of agency.

In addition to these moments where all three teachers activated their agency, Molly incorporated technology into each of her lessons. Perhaps she did this because she is of the generation of being a digital native and technology integration was easy for her. But in my interviews, Molly's technology use stood out. For her, in addition to her creativity and her grit, her classroom filled with technology application as they used Google classroom, learned about the appropriate use of social media and blogging. She was able to act autonomously and make decisions as somebody whose knowledge of technology is worth valuing.

**Resiliency Pulled Teachers through the Transition.** Sally said, "I was going to get cold, I was going to get bruised, but I had to hang on whatever that meant. If it meant tying a rope around my foot, if it meant tying a rope around my wrist, if it meant tying a rope around my neck, I had to hang on." Whatever it took, Sally was going to hang on to that toboggan. All three of the teachers were hanging on in a variety of ways. They looked for ways to redefine their identity, gain back their agency. They dug deep to hang on. This is resiliency. Gu and Day (2013) define resiliency as the "capacity of bounce back in adverse circumstances." The transition year was a complete change of many structures. The schedule changed. The curriculum changed. The teams of teachers changed. The grade level of the school changed. The content changed. The classes

changed. And many of these changes were deemed less beneficial than the years before the transition. It took teachers resiliency to figure out how to make their new normal work for the students and themselves.

The look of resiliency varied depending upon the teacher. Molly skied down her hill at warp speed making decisions as she went along. When her teaching assignment switched from sixth grade to eighth grade the week before school started, Molly didn't complain she just skied forward. When her students accidentally send e-mail messages to an adult other than her, Molly brushed it off as a technology moment, and she skied. When her RTI class went from two students to one student to two students, Molly continued on. Her resiliency was grounded in her ability to continue forward, regardless of what was being thrown at her.

Like Molly, Sally plowed forward as well. She kept at the forefront of her thinking the strong desire to hold up her students. On her toboggan with teachers piled all around, Sally wanted to make sure the students weren't left on top of the mountain. She worked each and every day to ensure that even the students during the transition received the best of what she could give. Resilience, for Sally, came in the form of the looks on her students' faces each and every time she stood up to teach.

Jim was resilient in a different way. When he struggled to schedule reading time and writing time in a way that he was confident that students were able to learn, he tried rearranging his schedule. He rearranged lessons, units, and structures until he exhausted all possibilities. Then, Jim started thinking outside of the box. In May, at the end of my research, Jim decided to teach social studies and language arts. This decision solved the

time equation because he could teach the non-fiction curricular strands during his social studies class. In effect, Jim was able to recreate the classes he used to have. For Jim, this was redefining what he taught.

Benard (2004) lists four main personal strengths found in resilience: social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. Even with their differences, the resilience in Molly, Jim, and Sally contained each one of these qualities.

According to Benard (2004) compassion and empathy are some of the components that make up social competence. Each of these teachers showed compassion and empathy as they spoke about their students. Sally stated, “I love what I do. I have fun with these kids every day.” (Interview, February 13) Later, she wrote, “Kids need a fresh start EVERY day. That is hard for some teachers, but it shouldn’t be. They’re kids” (Journal April 30).

All three of them were problem solvers every day. Jim figured out a schedule, re-figured that same schedule, and then went for a whole new position to make a schedule work. Molly trouble shot technology, an added response to intervention class, and contracting honors English. She solved problems quickly and skied to the next run. Sally, solved problems as well as she figured out how to negotiate a new schedule and an added reading class to her already full writing curriculum.

The final piece of resilience according to Benard (2004), is a sense of purpose. This is the foundation for resiliency in these teachers. They have a common sense of purpose: teaching and all that encompasses that task. Throughout the interviews, Molly,



Sally and Jim described at length their lessons, their ideas, and their impact. For Molly, Sally, and Jim, their sense of purpose drives their work, even on toboggans.

**Summary.** This last section of chapter four looked at the similarities and differences in Molly's, Jim's, and Sally's data analysis sections. I introduced Sally's metaphor of a toboggan as a culminating metaphor for the whole transition experience. Then, I showed my thinking around the themes that emerged through my second round coding and synthesis of my data. As I looked closer and closer at my data, identity, agency and resilience were the large themes that evolved. Each one of the teachers showed a strong identity, acted with agency at times and without agency at times, and throughout the experience depended upon their resilience to move them forward and continue their work. For each one of these themes I highlighted the parts in the data that supported this theme along with the similarities and differences between the teachers.

On a side note, I am in awe of these teachers. They figured out how to negotiate their toboggan under undesirable conditions. In my mind, this toboggan is large- very large- with these teachers on the outside, the top, the front, and hanging off the back, making new trails along the side, throwing everything they knew to keep everyone upright. And in the middle of this toboggan are the students, protected, sheltered, and warm, because of their teachers' strong identity, fight to maintain agency, and tenacious resilience.

## Chapter Five: Implications

### Summary

Smiley Middle School underwent a major transition, changing from a sixth/seventh grade building to a sixth-eighth grade building. Teachers were reassigned buildings and teams via a district-wide letter sent the year before the transition. During the transition, the language arts teachers adopted the Common Core State Standards for reading and writing instruction. The language arts instructional time was cut in half from 90 minutes a day to 45 minutes a day. Finally, additional classes were added to the teachers' schedule including advisory, response to intervention, and for eighth grade teachers, contract honors.

My research began a year and a half after the transition where I conducted a multiple case study on three language arts teachers from Smiley Middle School. The first of these teachers was an eighth grade language arts teacher, originally assigned to a sixth grade classroom, but reassigned to eighth grade the week before school started. Molly was in her third year of teaching when I conducted my study. She taught her class using large units of study which she spent hours creating herself. As changes happened, Molly just went with the flow. She was so inundated with the newness of teaching and the opportunity to create large assignments that she blocked out the changes occurred outside her door, and she taught inside her classroom.

Molly's independence was foundational to her during this time. She did not rely upon the expertise of other teachers. When administration asked her to complete a task, such as run the advisory curriculum or English honors, she got it done. Molly had little understanding of life at Smiley before the transition. She believed that she was going to

make mistakes and life was going to be confusing, but she worked to figure it out.

Throughout my interviews with Molly, she spoke of large projects and the hills she needed to climb to continue along her journey.

The second of the teachers I researched was Jim, a mid-career veteran. His student-centered approach to instruction was punctuated by the long hours he spent designing his class. Jim encouraged his students to be independent thinkers, and discover their own understanding through inquiry and group conversations.

Prior to the transition, Jim taught both language arts and reading in 90 minute blocks. When his instructional time was cut in half after the transition, Jim struggled with having enough time to teach the Common Core State Standards, and build relationships with students. He worked through this struggle by asking questions to deepen his teaching and reworking the daily and weekly schedule to figure out the most effective use of his instructional time. By the end of the year, Jim was clearly frustrated by the new schedule. He decided to take on a social studies block the following year to get more time with his students.

The last of the participants was Sally. A veteran teacher and someone who proudly opened Smiley Middle School twenty years prior to my study, Sally's teaching methods were more traditional in nature. Sally enjoyed teaching the works of Charles Dickens and Edgar Allen Poe, interspersed with units on grammar. Sally worked to teach students to be critical thinkers referring daily to the Blooms Taxonomy chart hanging in her room. Sally also valued free-write time as well as giving her students an opportunity to read during class which made her teaching methods stray from an exclusive traditional approach. Sally coped with change by digging her heels in and working through it. She

tried to shelter her students from the stress that the faculty was under by giving her best to them every day.

When analyzing my data, I found that identity, resilience, and agency played a role in how the teachers processed and adapted to curricular and structural change. The teachers' identity grounded them. This identity went beyond their work as teachers in a classroom. Teachers' identity encompassed their background, family, and culture in addition to their work as teachers. For my participants, their identity were like their fingerprints, unique. Molly's creativity and independence allowed her to have the drive to continue moving forward. She worked on units independently and plowed ahead during times of confusion or frustration. Jim's family background with a writer and an artist as parents helped to form his identity as a reading/writing teacher who incorporates and values seeing the world from different angles. Finally Sally's identity was formed through her upbringing and early career that focused on self-sufficiency. Each of the teachers' brought their identity to the table, and their strong identity was the foundation for their teaching as they moved through the transition.

The teachers struggled with agency. Some aspects of the transition tore apart their agency while others built it back up. For all three teachers, time challenged them. They were used to 90 minutes of instructional time for reading and writing. When the instructional time was cut to 45 minutes to incorporate both disciplines, the teachers struggled to figure out how to teach the content. This was especially challenging for Jim who taught both reading and writing prior to the transition and knew all of the instructional holes he had left by the end of the school year. The lack of time also impacted student-teacher relationships. Teachers did not have time to slowly get to know

the students. Their focus shifted from relationship building to a need to fit the curriculum into half the time. Jim, especially, felt this shift as his 90 minute double block class switched to a 45 minute class, relationships were slower to form. The teachers utilized their professional learning teams as ways to trouble shoot the tough areas of teaching during this time. They also relied on the best instructional methods they knew to propel them forward. The teachers pulled out the units where they had the most self-confidence, and taught those units.

Finally, resiliency pulled the teachers through the transition. Jim focused on the questions he had about the units he was teaching. He worked and re-worked the schedule to try to make it cohesive for his students. All of the teachers relied upon big units, a JFK trial, memory books, and book clubs, to get through the year. Keeping students at the forefront of their thinking was the biggest piece of resilience. Each of these teachers taught for the students, and their resilience was grounded on making the years after the transition as successful as the years prior.

### **Looking at this Study through the Lens of Critical Theory**

Since I expected my teachers to use critical literacy and they didn't have time to focus units around critical literacy, I decided to use Critical Theory as a lens for looking at this study. Like any social dynamic, the stakeholders in the transition such as administrators, teachers, parents, and students, all viewed the transition through their own perspective and vantage points. While the decisions that were made impacted all the stakeholders, some people benefitted more from the decisions than others.

While the district administrator gave teachers an opportunity to voice their preferences in scheduling, school and grade assignment, and the structure and framework

of the middle schools, the administrators held the power in the final scheduling and assignment decisions. The letter that was sent to each teacher that listed their teaching assignment for the transition is an example of the power-role that administrators took in making the decisions. The teachers who held capital in the school district were able to voice their opinions on committees, yet the language arts teachers felt their preferences were not heard as loudly as other groups. They were the minority group in comparison to the other content teachers who voiced themselves as a whole group.

The math, social studies, and science teachers benefitted from the additional class time. Language arts teachers were asked to teach twice the curriculum in half the time. This matches current trends (noted in the Common Core State Standards) in non-fiction texts taking priority over the work in language arts. Administrators worked under the assumption that content teachers would pick up the additional instructional time in their areas. However, this never occurred.

Bourdieu and Thompson's (1991) idea of capital is seen through the decision-making process. The system of decisions emphasized those teachers and administrators who held cultural capital in an institutionalized state and social capital. Those people who held educational qualifications belonged to the class of people deemed worthy of making a decision. The people who held capital did so partially because of the relationships they had formed with the decision makers in the school district. In many ways the teachers that lacked capital, were left on the sidelines as the decisions were being made.

The decision-making process helped some groups of students while hurting others. Students who came into the building who needed additional time with reading were not helped by the decision to cut reading instruction. Many of these students were

not able to catch up in their regular language arts classes. Some received additional support in an additional reading class, but with that placement they lost the opportunity to learn in an elective class.

Freire's (1968) ideas of oppression can be connected to the additional reading class. The students who took the class were grouped together and treated differently than the other students. They missed out on opportunities to take classes such as art or robotics. Teaching the reading class (and all classes) in a way that allows students to honor their own culture, pose critical questions, and use dialogue as a way to think through problems are all some teaching techniques Freire suggests to honor the background of all students.

### **Implications for Further Research**

There are many places to take this research further. Another study could interview more teachers, especially teachers in the content areas. Time was not as much of a factor in their transition as it was in the language arts teachers' transition. Language arts teachers went from two blocks to one block. Math, science, and social studies teachers stayed at one block from the old model to the new model. Relatively similar teaching times from one year to the next, might impact the way teachers felt about the transition overall.

Gathering the perspectives of principals and upper administration could be another area of research. This study looked at the perspectives of the teachers. The principals and upper administration wrestled with much of the decision-making process, and ultimately the scheduling choices that made up the new middle schools. Their

insights on their choices and how they reached the final decisions would be another angle of interest for a study.

Yet another area to research could be the application of identity, agency and resilience principles in a district implementing structural and/or curricular change. If professional development were centered around identity, agency, and resilience, how would the teachers respond? What would that professional development look like?

Finally, additional research could be done with promoting the emotional well-being of education faculty. Teachers and administrators spend most of their time focusing on the students. I wondered through my interviews, who was supporting them? How might teachers benefit from listening companions? What other programs could be put into place to build the positive emotional well-being of all school faculty?

### **Implications for Principals and District-wide Administration**

The principals had a difficult task restructuring the middle schools. Together, they opened six new middle schools during the same year. There were many details to work out from bussing to classroom moving to curriculum. The concrete needs of supplies and room assignments take a natural precedence over the intangible needs such as building the well-being of a staff. Some of my implications for principals and administrators include those intangible needs and may be worth considering in future transitions.

### **Identity**

*Honor the Identity of the Teachers.* Identifying and promoting varied identities of the teachers could be springboard for the strengths in a building. This would be a place to start the change work while allowing everyone to feel like a contributor.



Identity is so much more than being a teacher, it's familial, cultural, and rooted in life experience (Beijard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). The uniqueness of a staff that is valued and tapped into will take a life of its own as they embark upon the challenges in change.

***Teachers Naturally Work to Protect and Educate Students.*** One of the biggest assets in schools are the teachers. They are the last stop to educating the students in the building, and the first line of defense when buildings are restructuring. Sally stated:

Everybody worried about the teachers, everybody worried about the teams, everybody worried about attendance zones, but nobody got down to looking at the kids sitting in the classroom....I really did feel that part of my job was to be a buffer between what they were going through on that end and what was happening in my classroom. (Interview, February 13)

Honoring the identity of teachers as the people that will do whatever it takes to help a child will help the teachers support their students. While the assigned positions of the teachers were a concern to make sure every school was appropriately staffed, the way teachers educated and protected students was less of a concern. In the middle of the transition, few people were interested in how teachers were maintaining strong teaching and management methods in an effort to keep students as far away from the stresses of the changes. One way to do this is ask teachers about what they are teaching. This keeps the focus on what a teacher is doing to help students. My interviews were filled with detailed descriptions of the lessons they were teaching. Molly spoke about JFK, Sally spoke about books they were reading and her memory books, and Jim discussed his book clubs. A piece of a teachers' identity is wrapped up in those lesson plans and

activities. Conversations about lessons are easy to strike up and show concern and interest in teachers.

***Keep instructional teams intact.*** When the teachers lost their instructional time, and their curriculum and course offerings changed, an intact group of teachers that supported one another would have helped the teachers work through the changes. My data analysis indicated that even with professional development offerings, even with opportunities to interact with leadership, teachers relied upon colleagues most for instructional support. In the case of the transition at Smiley Middle School, the teaching positions were reassigned, which took away the teachers' "go to" people. Some teams lost their biggest asset of each other during a time of change.

### **Build Agency Among Staff Members.**

Melville and Bartley (2012) argue that a strong work community is necessary in teachers' willingness to change. This includes assigning teachers who the building staff trusts to take on the roles of department chairs, coaches, and mentors. Ideally the entire building should feel that everyone in their place is working toward a common good. Starting with the mission and vision of the school was one way Smiley worked toward this goal. Developing teachers with a strong agency could be another way to work toward creating this community.

***Make Veteran Teachers Part of the Decision-Making Process.*** One way to build agency is to make teachers part of the change process. Perkins and Reese (2014) suggest that teachers and building level administrators should work together to lead the change initiatives within a building. Bridwell-Mitchell (2015) supports this notion by

suggesting that peer-learning social interaction, and shared understanding helped to build teacher agency. The two veteran teachers I studied did not feel as though they had a stake in the decisions being made about how the schools were designed. Hokk and Etelapelto (2012) found that a top down approach to change lead to a lack of agency among teachers. Jim and Sally's reaction mirrored the findings in this study.

While the school district formed teacher decision groups to help with the decision-making process, this was not enough for these teachers to feel as though their ideas were a part of the final decisions. Perhaps the district-wide decision groups needed to then break into smaller school-wide decision groups. The lack of school autonomy, perhaps, played a role in the lack of input the teachers reported.

It is important that during periods of instructional change, the people who hold institutional knowledge need to be in charge of something big. Maybe this is scheduling, or advisory, or celebrations. If the teachers were in charge of something visible to the whole school throughout the year, there may be more of a sense of ownership in the process. They have a unique understanding and perspective. They need to be able to share this information to bring everyone else up to speed. Perhaps a panel for a year throughout the transition would be a way to integrate the teachers into a new building model.

***Vary the professional development between new teachers and older teachers.***

Sally had been through transitions before. She knew the drill. She had learned about middle school philosophy during the first restructuring twenty years prior. She is an asset. Tapping into her knowledge through a series of conversations, or providing her with an opportunity to lead professional development would help to build her agency, and

honor that she had background knowledge about this topic. In many ways the district administration reached out to veteran teachers during the focus groups. They asked for feedback at that time. But moving forward, extended Sally's understandings to benefit the entire school during the year before and year immediately following the transition would benefit teachers and administrators.

***Keep Giving Teachers Time and Space for Instructional Conversations.***

Knowledge is gained from social interactions. The school district administrators provided teachers with professional learning team time. This time was valuable to the teachers. It helped them continue building their agency. Robinson (2012) found that even when teachers disagreed with school reform measures, teacher collaboration helped the staff figure out how to meet the new school requirements. In their interviews, the teachers valued their professional learning communities and used that space to think about instruction and problem solving.

***Establish a Strong Mentoring Program.*** Along with time for instructional conversations, a strong mentoring program can benefit both new and veteran teachers. Gilles, Davis, and McGlamery (2009) discuss a model for a teacher induction program that is effective in mentoring new teachers. This model is a collaboration between the school district and university program and includes the support of a mentor during a teacher's first year. The mentor teacher is released from classroom duties to mentor a first year teacher, work with the local university, and complete projects within the school as assigned by the principal. During their first year of teaching, the new teachers also complete coursework towards a master's degree along with an action research project. The benefits of this program include a new teacher retention rate of 82-91% after at least

five years after the completion of the program, and the development of teachers who take on leadership roles early in their careers. A mentoring program such as this one can work to build the agency of new and veteran teachers. A strong foundation for new teachers can follow these teachers throughout their career.

***Keep Change to a Minimum.*** During the transition year, many things changed. The building schedule, the curriculum, the grade levels, the teaching teams, the amount of class time to teach reading and writing, the school start time, the student body through redistricting and the addition of English honors were all new additions to each of the six middle schools. The changes truly impacted teachers to the point where veteran teachers were hanging on to toboggans for dear life. They did not write creative lessons, they did not read new books, and they did not reach out to the new teachers in the building. There is a lot to say for making these changes all at once because it seems like a once and done endeavor, and then everyone can just settle in and learn the new structures and curriculum. But, education doesn't ever work this way. Once the teachers had swallowed the changes from the transition year, new ones were on the horizon. Building administrators changed, curriculum changed again, teacher performance evaluations changed. The list never ended. So, a gradual change into the transition may have been less negatively impactful.

### **Implications for Teachers**

#### **Identity**

***Know Who You Are.*** Identity is made up of both a teacher's professional and personal life (Beijaard, 1995). It is important for teachers to spend time thinking about

who they are and what makes them teach the way they do. It is okay to include personal background mixed within the teacher identity. All too often, the professional is stressed over the personal, but there are aspects of everyone's person life that seep into teaching. A strong sense of identity will help to move teachers forward in the face of change.

***Teacher Leaders Were Not Present.*** Molly kept saying she was alone. She planned alone. She figured out problems alone. She made it through the confusion alone. Morrison (2013) suggests that isolated teachers have a distressed identity. For Molly, the teacher leaders in the building, the ones that normally take the new teachers under their wings and show them the ropes were not present. They weren't there to support Molly through curricular decisions and classroom management issues. They weren't sharing their lesson plans, even the old, dusty ones. They weren't checking in on her or helping her with an extra coffee refill, a second run to the copy machine, or advice on how to approach the administration about a challenging issue. Simply, they weren't present. Molly was left to fend for herself. Her independence allowed her to negotiate the teaching world in the absence of teacher leaders. But, teacher leaders should always be available to step up and help the new teachers hang on.

In a way, teacher leaders are the glue that keeps the school together. They set the tone and mood in the teacher's lounge and help to form the vision of what the new school, the new curriculum, or the new teaching staff could strive to be. These teacher leaders have the opportunity to take any situation, create a team, and move forward in the best interest of students. This was a missed opportunity to build Molly into a stronger contributor in the school community.

### **Agency**

***Build your Agency.*** Agency is not static, it can be built. Bridwell-Mitchell (2015) suggests that peer-learning, social interaction and shared understanding help to increase teacher agency. These ideas stem from interacting with other individuals and talking practice. School districts that employ the professional learning team structure provide an environment rich for this type of interaction. Education courses at a local college or university is another way to find a group of colleagues with whom to discuss ideas. Another way to build agency is through professional development (Maulucci & Maria, 2015). Taking charge of professional development by signing up for local and national workshops along with local teacher groups that focus on individual interests is another way to build agency.

***Actively Participate in Opportunities to be Part of the Process.*** Change is hard, but it is inevitable, especially in the field of education. By taking an active role in the change process teachers can positively influence reform (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015). In Concord school district the district-wide administration gave teachers opportunities for the teachers to participate in the changes taking place. Utilizing those initial opportunities may open doors for other opportunities later.

### **Resilience**

***Practice Resilience.*** Resiliency should be part of teacher preparation. Changes in structure, schedules, curriculum, leadership, colleagues, class assignments and assessments are inevitable and will be more difficult to incorporate into the daily job requirements without resilience. In a review of studies Mansfield et al. (2015) outlined factors that make up resilience. In all, 51 factors were separated into four categories;

personal resources, contextual resources, strategies, and outcomes. Individual factors include motivation (personal resources), school leaders and colleagues (contextual resources), work-life balance (strategies), and wellbeing (outcomes). Some of these factors like mindfulness, setting boundaries, time management, and mentors can be learned or developed within a school. Building a support network was highly suggested as a way to build resiliency. The entire 51 factor list is a good place to start when thinking about building resilience.

### **Implications for Pre-Service Educators**

Teachers experience change throughout their careers. New teachers are not immune to the changing tides of education. Molly's experiences are an example of this. Pre-service teachers with the help of university education programs can work to prepare for the inevitable waves of change.

**Identity is Inclusive and Dynamic.** The first part of this process is understanding and allowing life history and personal experience to be part of an overall teacher identity (Beijaard, 1995). With that in mind, it is important to find a balance between personal experiences and professional expectations (Pillen, Beijard, & Brok, 2013). In their work with pre-service teachers, Beltman, Glass, Dinham, Chalk, and Nguyen (2015) stress that identity is dynamic, it changes depending on the pre-service program and teaching assignments. The researchers had the pre-service teachers draw themselves to represent who they were becoming. The drawings showed confident and caring future teachers. Beltman et al. (2015) suggest that maintaining this identity when faced with classroom challenges may be a struggle, but supportive mentoring and school communities can help to maintain positive identities.



**Building agency.** Teacher agency is the ability to act autonomously and make decisions (Etelapelto et al., 2013). This can be challenging for teachers who are new to the field because they are novices (Price & Valli, 2005). One way to actively build agency is to seek out opportunities to co-teach. Co-teaching is teaching alongside a veteran teacher. There are a variety of different structures for co-teaching. The veteran teacher and pre-service teacher can determine which structure best fits the lesson and the students (Guise, Habib, Thiessen, & Robbins, 2017). Kerin and Murphy (2015) studied co-teaching on pre-service music teachers. They found that pre-service teachers who employed the co-teaching method when compared to a more traditional styled showed marked growth in agency.

Another approach to building agency is to attend professional development opportunities. This could be in the form of workshops and conferences. This could also be in the form of a professional learning community whose goal is to promote collaboration (Dufour, 1998). Or, it could be a more informal approach for professional development through social media, such as Twitter which provides a non-threatening learning space (Rehm & Notten, 2016).

**Resiliency.** Resilience involves building a support system and the perseverance needed to negotiate the problems and contradictions of the first year of teaching (McCormack, Gore & Thomas, 2006). Cormu (2008) argues that pre-service teacher perseverance could be built through a university professional learning community that embedded collaboration between the pre-service teacher, a university mentor, and the practicum classroom. This learning community could provide peer support, opportunities for explicit teaching and mentoring which helps to empower and develop courage within

the pre-service teacher. Castro, Kelly, & Shih (2008) suggest that pre-service teachers learn about micro-political literacy, or the ability to know how to appropriately interact with colleagues. This would prepare teachers to make social connections and seek out positive peer groups. Finally, choosing a district that has a teacher induction program is more likely to be a supportive environment that builds resilience within the new teachers (Keogh, Garvis, & Pendergast, 2010).

### **Final Implications**

**Learning Happens in the Spaces.** Throughout my interviews, learning happened in the times where teachers had the opportunity to breathe. I interviewed teachers, they answered, and then would find me in the hallway or my room a day or two later to answer again. During the open spaces in their lives, Jim, Molly, and Sally thought through their responses and modified, changed, and learned.

This same thing happens with students. In the classroom, they learned in the spaces. Those opportunities where they could read a book and think, or pause and listen to a classmate. The spaces in which learning happened are hard to measure, but I witnessed it. The teachers felt it, too. In the chaotic year that ensued after the transition, life happened at a frenetic pace. There was little pause, little open space for learning. In the language arts classroom that went from 90 minutes to 45 minutes, the spaces closed. Molly, Jim and Sally tried and tried to fill every second with the teaching they did before the transition, but without the space to learn. Part of the beauty of time in a reading/writing workshop is a place for students to breathe. This space allows them to

dig deeper into texts and writing at their own pace. Maybe the content being taught is the same, but the breathing time allows the students to learn it better.

When the teachers take a moment to breathe with their students, and begin to build spaces into their classrooms again even with a 45 minute block, the learning and thinking that they live for as professionals will return.

**My Role as a Listener.** In some post-modern picture books, the author has the narrator strike up a conversation with the reader. It lifts the invisible wall between what happens in the book and starts to blend the world of the book with the world of the reader (Hellman, 2003).

In some ways, my role of a listener felt like the invisible/visible wall in a post-modern picture book. My role was to be present only as a listener, and describe their stories as accurately as possible. But, my listening became something that the teachers sought out. They would see me in the hallway and stop to chat a bit longer about a question I'd asked, or when the tape stopped they'd ask me a question about a problem or concern and the talking would continue. My role as a listener was something that the teachers I interviewed seemed to need. It helped them to pause and think through the complexities of their jobs. I found this to be an interesting side noticing of my research. Perhaps, teachers, and perhaps all of us, could use more listeners in their world.

## Conclusion

*The best way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance. -Alan W. Watts.*

### The Dance

I couldn't leave this writing without an update on our teachers. They plunged into the changes using a toboggan at times, moved through the challenges, and designed their own dance.

**Molly.** Molly left Smiley Middle School the same year I completed my research. Her new husband found a job in a bigger city and they relocated. She was hired as a high school teacher the following school year. With a scripted curriculum, the cannon of already selected literature, and pre-made assessments, Molly did not fit in well in the culture of the school. Mid-way through the year, she decided she wanted to study journalism and get out of teaching altogether. But by the end of that school year, Molly decided to change buildings and give teaching one more chance.

Molly was able to secure a position working for a past administrator from Smiley, who had also relocated to the same city. This administrator was excited to have her as part of her teaching staff, valuing her energy and creativity. Ironically, this new district was in the process of structural change at the middle school level.

Molly just concluded her fifth year of teaching. She has turned her classroom into an escape room, written children's books, created writings for science fair projects, created tangled webs to show hidden connections, and showed students how to cook a turkey in the style of Emeril. If the future of our teachers lie in the hands of Molly, we

are in good shape. Her innovation, determination, and strong love of teaching will easily elevate our profession.

**Jim.** Jim is still employed at Smiley Middle School. His risk of taking on two sections of social studies with English paid off. During the past two years, he taught English and social studies to the combined 50 students a year. His new way of double blocking the curriculum has allowed him to build better relationships with his students, and tackle the issue of time. Jim has folded the non-fiction reading and writing curriculum into his social studies curriculum, so he can spend time in his English class reading and conferring with students.

Jim still visits me several times a week to discuss curriculum. This year, his topic has been social justice, which he was considering three years ago when the transition began. After reading *Upstanders* (Daniels & Ahmed, 2014), Jim has worked to incorporate critical literacy and reading for social change back into his curriculum. He is excited about teaching, and enjoying the opportunities he has been given to use a more student-centered block schedule with his sixth grade students.

**Sally.** With her poster of the eagle and American flag still in her room, I see Sally almost every school day. Her honesty has not changed from our interviews. Some days are fantastic and other days she is riding her toboggan. Sally proudly still holds the institutional knowledge of the school, a rapidly waning badge of honor amongst the rest of the staff. As we embark upon another change in leadership during the upcoming year, Sally will make sure our new leadership team understands where we've been and how we got to where we are now.

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At the end of this school year (2017), I passed by Sally's door and noticed her memory books piled on the counter of her classroom. For a moment, I was taken back in time to an interview two years earlier in May where she proudly showed me her students' work, a culmination of their experience in her classroom and one of her favorite projects. Her words spun their way through my brain, now interspersed with more layered ideas of identity and the like. In that moment peeking in her door, I paused, missing those months in her room. I missed those times that I sat in a chair still warm from the previous class, just listening, soaking it all in. I missed the varied perspectives, a synchrony of voices. I missed the conversations about the frustration and exhaustion of a day of instruction interspersed with the beautiful high of being a teacher. The toggle between stress and teaching joys mostly ended in the joys, the punctuation mark of dedication, perseverance, and a genuine desire to make a difference.

The hours upon hours that Sally, Jim, and Molly spent in interviews and writing occurred during a chapter of their lives where time was the rarest of commodities. What an honor to be in the presence of such dedicated professionals.

In some way, I hope my listening helped Sally, Jim, and Molly solidify their views of education, and understand their own perspectives a little more. I appreciate the variety of insights within each of those teachers, and find myself seeking the varied perspectives in others, ultimately valuing-even more- the eclectic quilt we create as professionals.

I am endlessly thankful for the courage and honesty shown in Molly, Jim, and Sally. Their raw voices were rich with depth and insight. Their words carried weight, and I hold close the responsibility to shine light on the gift of themselves they so freely shared with me.

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Appendix A

**Interview Questions- 60 Minutes**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself as a teacher.
2. How has your instruction change or remained the same in the last two years?
3. Take me back in time. What was your teaching like before the transition?

During the first year? In the fall? Now? New Schedule? New Standards?

Curriculum

4. What does it mean to be a literacy teacher in 2015?
5. Describe your role in the middle school transition.
6. What has been the impact of the transition on student learning?
7. What has happened since the transition?
8. What has been the impact of the Common Core on student learning?
9. Discuss student responses to the new structure and curriculum.
10. What role does critical literacy play in your classroom?

Appendix B

**Interview Questions- 20 Minutes**

1. Describe your week. What are the celebrations and challenges?
2. What is your instructional focus? Is that similar/different to previous years?

## Appendix C

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in questions that I could answer even though I wasn't in the same state. I guess right now, technology is providing a connection between me and my students.

Being flexible allows me to roll with the punches - because they are inevitably coming. It has helped me be less stressed as a teacher. Sometimes, yes, I still freak out when things aren't going to plan, but then I just modify the dates. Really, there isn't much harm in it. I just try to make sure students are always working because I don't want to give them extensions when they are just being lazy or unmotivated. But if work is getting done and learning is happening, there is no harm in giving more time.

5/19

To my surprise, yesterday I found out our class schedules were being changed for finals. I suppose I would or could have known this, but I never give a final because I don't believe in tests. I like to do culminating projects. Right now I am finishing up my JFK unit. I know last year's classes did better with it. At the beginning, my students this year seemed to be doing just as well. Nearly everyone was learning, but now that the trial is taking place, the only ones working are the lawyers and the witnesses. I need to find a way to improve this next year. I told the students that the spare time at the end of each class was to be used to break back up into teams to help with lawyers, but no matter how many times I have said to do it, not a single class has.

## Appendix D

25 Feb 15

music has always been a big part of my life so it isn't surprising that all of life shows up somewhere in a song's lyrics. The phrase for this year is from an old Paul Simon song "....what to leave in, what to leave out that describes my planning and the decisions I make about instruction. Since we transitioned to this model, I simply cannot get everything done Period. Impossible.

26 Feb 15

so how to decide what to leave in, what to leave out? The data-driven district approach does NOT apply because I'm comparing apples & oranges. I can't know how well a plan works because I can't "gu" what the outcome might have been if I had changed the input. I don't trust our writing scores because we teachers can't even agree on what is acceptable. I miss the days of double-blind scoring. At least my PLC is doing it right. We are anchoring our work so that the scores are useful, but that only applies to 2 1/2 teams at best. And we're trying to compare growth when test scores are still coming in incomplete.

## Appendix E

		Field Notes
		Q:
1:13-	Discuss drugs -	How a
	Girls still talking -	the b
	Sharing off paper -	select
1:14-	Where you can go to <u>change</u>	fr b
	things	club
		Q:
1:15	Wrap up -	Did
		find
1:16-	Calls up 2 students (Mike &	comes
1:17-	Brian)	usefu
	They go up to melt	Critical
	He signs passes for two girls -	litera
	They are reading... Island by	time
	Poster: "Team Activists get ? in	Is th
	different ways"	the s
		of ho
1:21	Discussion is @ plot	club
	Set goal for Friday -	What
	Boys leave -	Is th
1:22	Four more students up -	an
1:23	Group starts talking -	artic
	Another student gets a pass signed	Q: Why u
		the girl
		discussion
		so much
		longer



## Appendix F

How did the social issue papers turn out? Did students think through issues /were inspired?

February 18, 2015

First off, I'm ignoring the first sentence! Second, holy cow, you asked a lot of questions. And not easy to answer questions. Well, at the moment, I am very stressed out with conferences looming and the set of social issue feature articles to grade. And yes, I still haven't graded them. But I will know soon! Grading will be my next few nights. Especially since the first disc of the latest "Game of Thrones" season is arriving at my home tomorrow. At any rate, my initial impression from seeing drafts and hearing kids talk throughout this project is that they were inspired and learned quite a bit. As for the quality of the writing, I'm not completely sure.

I'm not sure I would've said that my questions drive me, until you wrote that comment above. But I guess they do. I feel having something to think about and mold into something new or interesting helps me when I am feeling drained, negative, or even stagnant with my teaching. I enjoy researching and learning (ask Jen about my vacation planning skills!) so this is a tool I obviously use to bring life to my classroom. I also have to admit that I see a pattern in the questions. They seem to fit rather logically even though these questions didn't come to me in any kind of systematic manner. I can't wait to dive into my four week plus reading study on "thinking deeply" using the Bloom's stuff. I am now planning on returning to book clubs at the end (only different and better than I just did) as kind of a final assessment of this study.

February 18, 2015

Appendix G

3/19/17

What did these teachers do for resilience?

For ■■■ this was hanging on to whatever basics she knew to be the best about teaching

For ■■■, this was redefining what he taught

For ■■■■■, this was hanging on and flying downhill at warpspeed.

Throughout the transition, each of the teachers hung on to things that would help them make it through the process. How does this tie into the definition of resilience? Where does agency come into play? It takes agency to be resilient?

■■■ said *I felt like my job was to provide the only stability those kids might have in a school day.* This is identity because of her role as a teacher.

In each of their ways, all of the teachers did provide stability and quality instruction to their students.

Strengths

■■■■■: technology

■■■: reading workshop

■■■

This was how the teachers applied their agency to make sure the students had stability and a quality education

4/2/17

■■■

: My struggle is to stay motivated in May, because the end of the year is in sight, and so I really try to plan ahead for that and prepare for that. And that's why Poe is the unit I use at the end of the year. I stay interest and the kids stay interested.

Where does this fit?

VITA

Stephanie Wightman was born in Manila, Philippines. She spent her early years living in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Colorado. Stephanie attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where she received her Bachelor of Science in Family and Consumer Sciences with an emphasis in nutrition. She then pursued her Master's and Doctoral Degrees in education at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Stephanie lives in Columbia, Missouri with her husband, Matt, and her two children.