

PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES
OF SUCCESSFUL TEACHERS IN DIVERSE RURAL
SOUTH TEXAS HIGH-PERFORMING HIGH-NEEDS ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

Texas rural schools, educating more than half a million students annually, and rural schools across the nation have been under scrutiny for the inability to provide quality education through course offerings, facilities, and qualified teachers. To address this issue, the investigator utilized Spradley's (1980) seminal work, *Participant Observation*, as a guide to examine two third-grade and two fourth-grade effective teachers within two high-performing, high-needs rural South Texas elementary campuses. Data collection included interviews of principals and teachers as well as classroom observations focused on classroom management, instructional approach/style, reading/writing instruction, and assessment over a five-week period during reading and writing class instruction.

The application of Spradley's 12-step method, Developmental Research Sequence, revealed that effective rural reading/writing teachers used motivational techniques, scaffolded and extended lessons beyond the scripted curriculum prompting critical thinking skills, authentic reading/writing literature and experiences to promote student success, and data analysis and self-reflection to meet the diverse needs of their students while maintaining the place of community. Implications from the study are relevant to administrators, educators, and community members, as these successful rural schools with vested and effective teachers are models of how rural education can meet and exceed the needs of its students.

DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to my family: to my daughter, Katy, my son-in-law, Mitchel, my two lovely grandsons, Hayden and Corbin, and to my parents of whom all have been my silent supporters during this process. Their patience and understanding guided me to continue through the arduous journey and enjoy the rewards that follow.

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Chapter I

Introduction

A school's success is reported to the community through the state mandated test results of its students. Students' success is dependent on the expertise of teachers. Teachers benefit from the effectiveness and leadership qualities of their administrators, while administrators work with state agencies and school board members to create a plan of action and communicate goals. School board members are elected by the community to represent the community's best interests in the function and success of the school. Because the needs of each community vary, so will the needs of each school located within that community. Therefore, a school's success may reflect the success of the community and vice versa because education is a tool that enhances the health not only of the community but also of the state and the nation (Kanapel & DeYoung, 1999; Stern, 1994).

Students attend private schools, charter schools, and public schools located throughout the nation. Education agencies of each state, such as those in Texas, classify school district types by indicators such as student enrollment, growth of enrollment, and location to nearest urban center (TEA, 2012). The Texas Education Agency (TEA) defines eight district type categories from major urban to rural. Texas, the second largest U.S. state in geographical area, has more rural students than any other state in the nation. Jimerson (2004) reported:

Over four million children go to public schools in Texas. Of these, almost half a million (474,000) students attend school in rural areas. Thirty-six percent of rural Texas students are members of a minority group, 46% are poor, and more than

31,000 students in rural Texas do not speak English well. These are Texas-style large numbers that begin to reveal some of the challenges of ensuring that all students in Texas receive an excellent education. In a huge state like Texas, where more than 80% of the population lives in urban and suburban areas, it is easy for rural children to be neglected or discounted. It is important, therefore, to investigate the extent to which the needs of rural children are being met in Texas schools. (p. 7)

To these “Texas size numbers” is the fact, as reported in *Why Rural Matters 2011-12*, that the graduation rate of Texas’ rural students, at 74.6%, is below the nation’s average, 77.5%. Yet, there are rural school districts that have established success rates as measured by the state’s test, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS); therefore, it is important to investigate and share these success stories. There is a need to explore and highlight successful rural schools in order to reveal the methods used to overcome the inequalities, hardships, and negative scenarios presented by much of the research.

Rationale

Research has indicated that rural schools have a history of deficits and diverse negative issues (Arnold, 2000; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; DeYoung & Theobald, 1991; Howley & Howley, 2004; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). These issues have frequently revolved around the inability of rural schools to effectively and sufficiently provide the community. Inadequate funding was the causal factor for the schools’ inability to provide current resources, competent and highly qualified teachers, needed course offerings (high school), and proper facilities. In addition to these noted

difficulties, researchers have attributed the remoteness of rural schools as a limitation in attracting highly qualified personnel and in capturing the interest of researchers. On the other hand, according to DeYoung (1987), the problems within rural education appeared to the nation as “minimal because of an overemphasis on urban education” (p. 124).

While researchers have isolated the needs of rural schools and their students, and governmental policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001), have been enacted to provide guidelines and expectations, other researchers have revealed successes in rural districts (Barley & Beesley, 2007). D’Amico and Nelson’s (2000) study on three Exemplary rural schools noted several factors in their success: small size and the strong link between community and school. D’Amico and Nelson (2000) noted that rural educators might not perceive themselves as doing anything remarkable or noteworthy because “they feel they are just doing what needs to be done. And their humility about their remarkable accomplishments is keeping their wisdom, expertise, and experience from others who really could use it” (p. 191). Therefore, additional studies to uncover practices and perspectives of successful rural schools, including their effective teachers and leaders, will provide current information relevant to the rural education sector, especially when these high-performing examples are from successful high-needs districts.

Rural schools have received attention from researchers such as Arnold (2000), Howley (1997), and Theobald and Howley (1998). Several publications focus on the needs and status of rural schools, such as the *Journal of Rural Education Research*, *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, and *Rural Educator*. However, the majority of the research interest has focused either on rural school consolidation due to financial deficits or for technology use in rural schools. Other topics of investigation include providing special

education services, securing highly qualified teachers, migrating populations, and addressing socio-economic issues. Yet amid the negative issues raised in the operation of rural schools, there exist successful rural schools.

An issue of particular interest in the rural context is what successful rural teachers do to promote successful readers and writers at the third- and fourth-grade levels. These grade levels have been selected for this study first, because the investigator has taught each of these levels over a 17-year period and, second, to look into the national controversy about the dreaded “fourth-grade slump” that continues to raise a concern among researchers (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Goodwin, 2011; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009; Willingham, 2009).

Fourth-Grade Slump

Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990) coined the term “fourth-grade slump” after noting decades of a phenomenon that occurred in students around the age of 9 or 10 from predominately low-income families. Goodwin (2011) compared this phenomenon to “education’s Bermuda Triangle” (p. 88). Chall et al. (1990, 2003) hypothesized this slump period in some students’ academic performance as related to the shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Students begin this transition in third-grade as the difficulty of content-specific vocabulary and text become more abstract in fourth-grade. The gap also became more apparent as students entered the fourth-grade due to the type of tests administered. It has been hypothesized that these testing protocols are focused on identifying a student’s ability to read in earlier grades and not reading comprehension (Hirsch, Jr., 2003).

The following sub-sections will provide researchers' speculations as to the causes of the "fourth-grade slump." The topics gleaned from studies included the type of genre, a student's fluency and automaticity with text, vocabulary exposure and acquisition, and the amount of time a student actually spends reading.

Genre. Sanacore and Palumbo (2009) explored the half-century long achievement gap between students of low-income and middle-income families. In addition to the change in the purpose of reading, they concluded one probable cause agent of the "fourth-grade slump" was the change in genre. Students were "expected to comprehend large amounts of expository (or informational) text and related vocabulary across the curriculum" (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009, p. 68). This expository text structure, compared to the typical storybooks students were exposed to in earlier grades, as well as the more content-specific vocabulary challenged students' comprehension (Chall et al., 1990; Chall & Jacobs, 2003).

Fluency. Willingham (2009) explained the value of a reader's automaticity and fluency during this transitional period. When a reader does not require spending time or mental capacity decoding specific words, and words flow into sentences and complete thoughts, then reading comprehension is enhanced and reader frustration is eliminated. Willingham (2009) adds, "The difficulty is that there's only so much room in working memory, and if we try to put too much stuff in there, we lose the thread of the ... story we were trying to follow" (p. 86). After achieving reading fluency, the student's "learning to read" period came to a close and an abrupt expectation to read for meaning and comprehension became the norm for instruction. A fluent reader has the ability to

comprehend the text; however, a fluent reader with a lack of domain specific knowledge may suffer the “slump” phenomenon (Hirsch, 2003).

Vocabulary. Hirsch (2003) reported an agreement in research based on three principles for improving students’ reading comprehension. These were fluency, vocabulary, and prior knowledge. Rural schools are located in remote areas and may not have access to quality resources; however, many of these schools have been identified by the state as successful. What procedures and practices do these successful rural schools follow that lead to high student performance on state tests? They could be “teaching to the test” as Johnson and Johnson (2010) have feared, lamenting that “the joys and discoveries of working with words have taken a backseat to preparation for standardized test questions” (p. 5). These rural classrooms could be filled with outdated resources such as dictionaries because any funds available are being spent on test preparation materials instead (Johnson & Johnson, 2010)? Chall et al. (1990) provided earlier insight to possible contributions of the “fourth-grade slump” to a deficit in vocabulary-rich instruction among low-socio-economic groups.

Time allocation. Goodwin (2011) suggested countering the “fourth-grade slump” with increased vocabulary or word study, fluency, and activation of prior knowledge “while developing a positive peer culture, in which learning comes first, throughout the school” (p. 89). Providing more time immersed in word study and exposure to texts can influence reading habits (Allington, 1983; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007). The type of reading program implemented and the amount of time spent in a reading or English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms affects rural schools and low-socio-economic or disadvantaged learners (Coleman, 1966). However, studies have

indicated that there were minimal to few opportunities for classroom reading (low-socioeconomic/disadvantaged) (Foorman, Goldenberg, Carlson, Saunders, & Pollard-Durodola, 2004). Therefore, this study will investigate teachers' perspectives, as well as the use of reading programs and procedures in third- and fourth-grade reading/writing classrooms.

Technology. Since the marketing of home computers in the early 1980s, school districts throughout the country have been integrating technology to varying degrees. Some classrooms are fully equipped with a one-to-one ratio of computer to student while other students, mainly those located in low-socio-economic rural areas, may have access to only two or three computers in their classrooms. Some districts have put in place fully operational computer labs with an assistant or paraprofessional to assist students through various programs. However, having the technology in a classroom does not automatically improve teacher or student performance. This technology must be “more than just a teacher explaining or modeling” (McKenna, Labbo, Reinking, & Zucker, 2007, p. 346).

Gordon (2011) explains that technology, in any form or capacity, technology has become an “invaluable tool for overcoming the problems created by sparse and remote populations. But these same districts often face barriers to effective implementation of technology, from lack of infrastructure and funding to a shortage of tech-savvy teachers ... and potential community partners” (p. 20). Thus, the rural location of the district contributes to its difficulty in providing experienced technical support for teachers and students.

The amount of technology in a classroom is reflective of the funds available for the investment; however, the extent to which technology is used depends upon the teacher. McKenna et al. (2007) posited, “teachers can help children create a rich schema for employing technology in ways that quite naturally involve many literacy-related activities” (p. 346). Howley and Howley’s (2008) study concluded rural teachers were not fulfilling their potential technological teaching abilities due to either a fear of operating the equipment or the thought that using technology took more time away from instruction. These teachers found their inhibitions to technology were due to the lack of time to prepare and implement the technology, inoperable equipment due to function failure, or personal insecurity or inability to apply technology into the lesson.

The dilemma for some rural educators is to actually “use technology-mediated instruction to replace or augment traditional forms of teaching in rural schools” (Howley, Wood, & Hough, 2011, p. 1). Some teachers may use new technologies such as a document camera or PowerPoint slides to deliver instruction; however, expanding technology into the hands of the students may be thwarted. Howley et al. (2011) stated “teacher attitudes toward technology influence not only the extent to which they integrate technology into instruction but also the attitudes of their students toward using technology as a tool for learning” (p. 7). Therefore, to what extent do rural third- and fourth-grade reading/writing teachers implement or integrate technology within their instruction and what is the capacity of technology availability for student-use within the two rural South Texas elementary campuses selected for this study?

Research has been conducted to connect technology-assisted instruction to the “fourth-grade slump” phenomenon. Suhr, Hernandez, Grimes, and Warschauer’s (2010)

study explored the effects of a one-to-one laptop program among fourth-graders in an ELA setting. Their interest was to determine if the dreaded “fourth-grade slump” could be curtailed via technology. Suhr et al. (2010) believed that technology had the potential to engage students, to “spark their interests and motivate their learning” (p. 7). Their study did suggest that laptop use over multiple years may “have a small effect on increasing... [test] scores” (p. 39).

Highly Qualified (Effective) Teachers

Studies have shown that student achievement is closely linked to instruction from a highly qualified teacher (Berry, 2004; Curran & Goldrick, 2002; Huang, Yi, & Haycock, 2002). Under the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001), a landmark reform aimed to close the student achievement gap, highly qualified teachers were defined through excellence in three general areas of competency: a conferred bachelor’s degree, full certification as regulated and defined by state standards, and demonstrated competency in each subject he or she teaches, which is defined by the state’s expectations (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). With the exception of the first expectation, a conferred bachelor’s degree, each of the states had been given the flexibility to define their own expectations. The federal educational intervention was implemented to eliminate or “correct one of the most egregious injustices in the U.S. public school system: Poor students and those of color are the ones most likely to be taught by inexperienced and under-qualified teachers” (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006, p. 15).

Highly qualified teachers were those who adapted the curriculum to apply the experiences and prior knowledge of their students to relevant learning while also helping students make connections between their environment and the larger world. Eppley

(2009) expressed the concern that “[R]educing quality teaching to characteristics that can be standardized and quantified would be counterproductive for rural schools” (p. 1).

Theobald and Howley (1998) claimed that rural teachers have the responsibility to situate curriculum and instruction to position their students to develop not only a global knowledge, but also to foster their sense of place within their local environment.

However, is a teacher who is “highly qualified” also known to be highly effective? Policy makers and school leaders may describe an effective teacher as one who sets high expectations and exceeds the basic content so students learn and are successful (Rothman & Barth, 2009). Parents may claim an effective or good teacher is one who understanding, caring, and concerned for the well-being of their child. A student may describe an effective teacher as one who is humorous, makes learning fun, is fair, and prepared (Thompson, Greer, & Greer, 2004; Walker, 2010).

Rural schools have the challenge of attracting “highly qualified” teachers to meet NCLB mandates due to the remote nature of the schools or the district’s inability to fiscally support qualified teachers. However, for those teachers who do enter the rural scene, will their qualifications meet or fit the specific culture of the community? Eppley (2009) documented a conversation with a teacher who had once worked in a rural setting. This teacher “made it clear that successful teaching in a rural school is different than successful teaching in other settings” (Eppley, 2009, p. 1). Darling-Hammond and Berry’s (2006) answer to this disparity is to fund the induction of a federal program to “grow your own” because “many young teachers strongly prefer to teach close to where they grew up or went to school” (p. 18). They estimated substantial savings in federal funds by providing such professional development and preparation programs. Hence,

rural schools could be infused with highly qualified teachers who are familiar with the community and have chosen to remain there.

Therefore, what are the qualifications of a rural teacher? Are there rural-specific characteristics of an effective third- and fourth-grade ELA teacher? Are these qualities based solely upon documented achievements or are they also infused with a personal connection to the community?

Plight of Rural Education

Rural education has been scrutinized since the turn of the 20th century. Compared to their urban counterparts, rural schools “were viewed by many reformers as ineffective, inefficient, and hindered by provincial attitudes and local politics” (Arnold, 2000, p. 3). In the early 1900s, Cubberley’s (1925) monograph revealed the problems of rural schools, ranging from lack of money, proper organization, ineffective or unqualified teachers, and a need for better supervision. Butterworth and Dawson (1952) continued research into rural education and revealed the marked differences between rural areas that included, but were not limited to, the community’s occupational interests, social composition, and cultural, economic and educational levels. They found factors such as the number of students, educational ideals, use of science and technology, and the processes used to educate students to be varied among rural communities. Butterworth and Dawson (1952) felt that what was done “through our governmental policy no doubt [held] the answer to the future prosperity and effectiveness of our rural society” (p. 58).

According to the U. S. Department of Education (2007), the National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, reported that more than half (56%) of all operating public school districts in the United States were located in rural areas for the academic year

2003–04. In that same academic year, of the 48 million documented public school students in the United States, over 10 million were enrolled in rural schools (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Although student enrollment is in the millions for rural schools across the nation, Jordan and Jordan (2004) stated that rural schools are not researched as frequently as urban schools due, in part, to their geographical locations and small populations. Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) also maintain that rural schools are like the stepchildren of education because researchers are not able to get the federal funding or grant opportunities to perform research queries into rural school settings. Not only is funding an issue, researchers view the small numbers per locale as not definitive enough for research matters. Therefore, there is a need to provide additional research to support the functions of rural schools within America's educational system.

Historical Background

Historically, the majority of the nation's schools were classified as rural schools. There were many one-room schoolhouses across the nation that opened their doors to educate the youth of the country based on the needs of the community and the nation. As the United States grew, inventions provided more efficient farming and ranching methods (Butterworth & Dawson, 1952), and the Industrial Revolution provided means to earn a livelihood other than owning a piece of land to support a family (Cubberley, 1925; Foght, 1912; Mueller, 1926). During this transitional period, large numbers of rural families migrated to urban centers. By the early 1900s, concerned investigators began to explore how to improve rural school conditions and performance. Ellwood P. Cubberley (1925) wrote that rural schools needed reorganization in order to match the quality found in the urban schools. These rural schools were greatly lacking in materials, facilities, and highly

qualified educators. Cubberley (1925) even posited the need for all public schools to educate for globalization and societal needs. To add to the nation's view that rural schools were to be condemned, a 1924 survey of the needs and academic performance of rural schools by Orvil Brim found that rural schools did not have the same financial means as urban schools to operate. Brim's survey posited that consolidation was the answer; however, at the same time, the small rural schools were found to be academically superior to their urban counterparts.

By the 1950s, two extreme perceptions were fighting for dominance over how to approach the education of United States' children. As documented by Butterworth and Dawson (1952), these approaches diverged in the difference between the education of rural and urban children. Some felt that children were children no matter where they were reared and the desire to produce productive young citizens only required them to gain "general understandings and abilities that enable them to adapt themselves to the world in which they live" (p. 117). In opposition, Butterworth and Dawson (1952) continued to describe the opposing position that rural children did differ from their urban counterparts. Environment, life styles, and resources provided the diversity between the placements of the school culture. Yet, Bouck (2004) compiled research that concluded rural schools were more similar to urban schools regarding educational impact, especially when compared to more affluent suburban districts.

The factors of lower socioeconomic status, fewer course offerings, and lower quality teachers continued to echo through this research. Through his research on effective schools, Edmonds (1982) defined a good school as having strong leadership, a climate of safety and order, a commitment to monitoring progress, high expectations for

every student, and a focus on teaching important skills. Lowe (2006) documented other studies that:

have expanded this list to include the following attributes of an effective school: (a) a safe environment that fosters teaching and learning; (b) a clearly identified school mission developed and shared by the staff that amplifies the school's commitment to a set of goals for instruction; (c) assessment procedures and accountability; (d) school administrators who are authentic instructional leaders; (e) high expectations for the learning of every student; (f) high time on task where students participate in planned activities to help them master basic skills; (g) frequent monitoring of student progress; and (h) a well developed program that involves parents in the basic mission of the school. (p. 28)

The Specific Rural Communities

The first rural community investigated in this study lies at the junction of a U.S. highway and a farm road, 22 miles from a coastal metropolitan statistical area of South Texas, and holds the county seat. Flat farmland surrounded the township and was mostly cultivated with corn, cotton, or milo. A grain cooperative was located in the center of the town next to an operational railroad that passed through the community.

The community was located in the south central portion of the county and was established in 1904 when a railway line was built and a station was established on donated ranchland. The owner of the ranchland named the site after himself, and by the early 1950s, the town was incorporated and had a population of 500.

By the 2010 U.S. Census, the population was reported to be 739 inhabitants with 21 businesses, including a post office, volunteer fire department, public school, and

charter school. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the town has a total area of 1.16 square miles. The racial demographics of this community were 84% Hispanic, 15% White, and 1% other. The most common industry for males was construction (33%) with low percentages of other common production occupations including supervisors (9%), vehicle and mobile equipment mechanics, installers, and repairers (8%), and engineers (6%). The most common industry for women was educational services (37%), with the most common female occupation being cashier. Forty-six percent of the population has less than a high school education, while 30% attained a high school or equivalent education and 23% attended college to varying degrees.

The county that the community is located in was founded in 1846 and was named after the river that passes through it. The county has a land area mass of 836 square miles with 331 square miles of water. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the racial demographics of the county's 340,223 inhabitants was 61% Hispanic, 33% White, 4% Black, and 2% other. In 2009, six percent of the county population lived in a rural area.

The second rural community investigated lies approximately 50 miles from the first selected rural community and 60 miles from the same coastal metropolitan statistical area in South Texas along a state highway, which passes through the township. The community is located in the central southern half of its county. Similarly, the township was established when land owned by a real estate dealer/cattleman donated the town site, right-of-way, and alternate blocks of land to a railway in 1886. The railway built a station at that location, and soon thereafter a post office bearing the name of the land donor was also built. The township was in steady growth by the turn of the century, but three large fires and the declining importance of the railroad dampened continual growth

in the first third of the 1900s. Many of the businesses relocated to the nearby township ten miles further north and the community was not able to regain its strength (Caldwell, n.d.). By the mid 1980s, the railway was abandoned and the tracks removed.

The rural community is ten miles from the county seat, a township with a population of 12,863 (U.S. Census, 2010). The Texas Legislature founded the county in 1858, and early settlers were farmers and ranchers. In 1929 the discovery of oil and gas led to that county's major employer. The county's 32,487 inhabitants are racially composed of 56% Hispanic or Latino, 33% White, 10% Black, and 2% other. The county's 880 square mile area included a 31% rural classification.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the rural community's population was 925 with 63% Hispanic, 34% White, and 3% other. The township has a land area of 10.5 square miles with a population density of 88 people per square mile. The most common industry for males was mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction (27%) while the most common occupation for males was building, grounds cleaning, and maintenance (17%). The most common industry for females was educational services (35%) with the most common occupations being cooks and food preparation workers (43%). There are nine businesses located in the township plus a volunteer fire department, post office, justice of the peace, public school, and six churches. Thirty-four percent of the population has less than a high school educational attainment while 36% met high school educational standards and 29% has attended college to varying degrees.

Comparison of these two rural areas revealed that, especially for females, the school within each of these rural communities was the major employer. For each of the rural communities, the school became the "heart and soul" of the community. The racial

demographics were very similar in the relation of Hispanic to White percentages between the two communities. In addition, farm and ranch lands that have a historical background with a philanthropic family surround both townships.

The Specific Rural Districts

The following sections will describe each district that employed the third- and fourth-grade teacher participants and their principals. Both district's mission focused on a simple phrase, "para los niños," meaning "for the children," with the common goal to provide all that is necessary for their students to become successful and productive members of society.

District One. Corbin Independent School District (pseudonym) serves students in pre-Kindergarten through 8th grades and has been rated "Exemplary" by the Texas Education Agency since 2009. Currently the district encompasses two schools, an elementary and middle school, and serves students in a 46.439 square mile area or 29,721 acres of total land area (L. Fisher, personal communication, May 29, 2012). The Texas Education Agency's Snapshot 2011 District Detail reported the district employed 24 teachers and served 294 students. At the beginning of the 2011 school year, the elementary served 192 students with 15 teachers. Students' racial demographics were composed of 89% Hispanic, 11% White and 1% other. The district reported to have spent \$8,070 on total instructional expenditures per student in 2011.

Historically, the district was founded on a portion of ranchland that was donated by a philanthropist who was made famous for her determination to save The Alamo, a historical structure in Texas. Originally, Corbin ISD served students through the eleventh grade and in the 1930s, the community attended roller skating nights in the old gym.

Teachers used to live in teacherages (houses owned by the district), just north of the present school and others east of the highway. Another interesting fact about the district is that there was an area below the main building once designated as a shelter during WWII in case of enemy attack (R. Simnacher, personal communication , October 4, 2011). Therefore, the formal intention of the district's founding was to educate the youth of the community, but the school was also the center of activities for the community itself as well as a place of protection.

District Two. Hayden Independent School District (pseudonym) covers 268 square miles in the southern portion of the county and is one of four school districts in the county. The Texas Education Agency's 2011 Snapshot District Detail reported 65 teachers served the 814 students in the district from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. At the beginning of the 2011 school year, the elementary campus, pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade, had an enrollment of 375 students served by 23 teachers. The student racial demographics were composed of 66% Hispanic, 32% White, 1 % Black, and 1% other. The district employed a total of 65 teachers and spent \$5,228 on instructional expenditures per student.

Historically, the first school established in this rural community had its beginnings in the early 1880s in a small three-roomed wooden frame structure next to the first store. The school building was also used as a church for all denominations. By 1909, a two-story brick structure was built; however, by the late 20s the structure was condemned and replaced in 1929 with a more modern seven-classroom school that included a library and auditorium. By the 1950s, due to consolidation of several smaller surrounding school districts, a new high school, gymnasium, and elementary school

buildings were constructed to accommodate the growing number of students and the original structure became the Junior High campus. By the 1960s, a new cafeteria and homemaker's buildings were erected in the district.

Structural facilities added since the district's beginnings have been a Junior High facility in the mid 1980s after the demolition of the 1929 structures. The construction of a district-wide library and additional gymnasium and cafeteria structures were also included in the district's expansion in the 1990s. The district has recently completed a new elementary campus west of the original site; the new school is set to open for the 2012-2013 school year. The 1955 structure has been marked for demolition.

Academically, the district has achieved various accolades. The elementary campus received national honors in 2003 when it was honored with the Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education. Other than the elementary scoring "Exemplary" in the last three school years on the state mandated test, the district itself was the only district in the area to have all three campuses labeled as Higher Performing according to the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) ("... schools earn NCEA honors," 2011).

Significance of the Study

Research has indicated a need to explore rural teachers; however, because of the small size in numbers, lack of accessibility, and feasibility, traditional research has overlooked rural schools as a participant base. Although there have been studies revealing what rural schools lack, there has been little research performed that has shed light on the successes of rural schools. Currently, any research similar to this topic has been found in the Midwest and Appalachia areas, as provided by Theobald and Howley

(1998) and Barley and Beesley (2007). Therefore, providing in-depth case studies of four South Texas rural reading/writing elementary teachers that showcase models of academic success will add to the existing literature in an attempt to provide clarity regarding characteristics of effective (reading/writing) reading teachers in rural districts. These characteristics are valuable to U.S. education system because rural teachers have a significant impact on the future of our nation's intelligence capital.

Purpose of the Study

This case study investigation was designed to explore third- and fourth-grade reading/writing teachers in exemplary elementary schools in two rural South Texas Title I school districts. The three research questions used to guide this study were as follows:

1. What are the perspectives of third- and fourth-grade reading/writing teachers' toward effective literacy instruction?
2. Which instructional practices do third- and fourth-grade reading/writing teachers utilize in two Exemplary rural South Texas Title I school districts?
3. What are the similarities and/or differences between the perspectives and practices of rural third- and fourth-grade reading/writing teachers'?

In sharing the success stories of these rural teachers and answering these guiding research questions, these stories can become an inspiration for other rural school districts that wish to learn what constitutes a high-achieving, high-needs rural elementary school. Success is defined as earning an "Exemplary" rating for a minimum of two consecutive years on the state's report card. Even though these districts face a multitude of hardships like many other rural districts (e.g., limited funds, teacher retention rate, course offerings,

facilities), it is hypothesized that these two districts will reveal a commonality that results in high educational accolades.

Definitions and Acronyms

Accelerated Reader (AR). A learning information system that enables freestanding computer-assisted assessment of student comprehension of “real” books. Students select from a collection of titles, which are assigned a point value based on the number of words and reading difficulty. After reading the text, the student takes a computerized multiple-choice comprehension test (Renaissance Learning, 2012).

Analysis and interpretation. An investigator’s set of notes that include “brainstorming” of ideas as fieldnotes are collected (Spradley, 1980).

Authentic assessment. An evaluative tool, such as a teacher created rubric, used to score a student’s project or written work.

Componential analysis. The “systematic search for attributes ... [or] units of meaning people have assigned to their cultural categories” (Spradley, 1980, p. 131).

Concrete principle. The use of specific language to describe a social selection instead of generalizing or summarizing the description (Spradley, 1980).

Condensed account. The “phrases, single words, and unconnected sentences” (Spradley, 1980, p. 69) documented by the investigator during field observations.

CSCOPE. A web-based source for a curriculum system in the State of Texas. The goal of the Texas Education Service Center Curriculum Collaborative (TESCCC) is to create the CSCOPE curriculum/program to impact classroom instructional practices with TEKS/TAKS aligned lessons (TESCCC, 2010).

Dolch word list. A list of commonly used words that cannot be sounded out or be prompted with picture cues; therefore, the words must be recognized by sight.

Domain analysis. The search for patterns through the discovery of the “elements of cultural meaning and ... how they are organized” (Spradley, 1980, p. 87).

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The 1965 provision of the ESEA established laudable goals including setting high standards and accountability for student achievement. It stressed the belief that all children can learn, regardless of ability or background.

Exemplary. The basic performance standard where all students and student subgroups achieved 90% or better passing rate on all TAKS subjects, a minimum graduation rate of 95%, and a drop out rate of less than 2% (Texas Education Agency, 2009).

Expanded account. The investigator’s completed thoughts and recordings of an observation that are filled in after leaving the social situation (Spradley, 1980).

Fieldwork journal. Like a diary, the investigator records personal thoughts, feelings, “ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that arise during fieldwork” (Spradley, 1980, p. 71).

Formal assessment. An evaluative tool used to score a student’s knowledge on exams such as a state standardized test.

Grand tour. The major features in a descriptive observation that give an overview of the “*place, actor, and activities*” (Spradley, 1980, p. 78).

Informal assessment. An evaluative tool used to score a student’s knowledge on tests (e.g. weekly blackline masters, unit tests, or reading inventories).

Language identification principle. A researcher's method to identify or differentiate between speakers in written fieldnotes (Spradley, 1980).

Mini-lesson. A brief lesson, lasting five to ten minutes, to re-teach a skill.

Mini tour. A collection of observations that include detailed descriptions (Spradley, 1980).

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This federal act of legislation enacted in January 23, 2001 served to close the gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers.

Round-Robin reading. A reading strategy where the whole class silently followed along while one student read a short section orally until another student was called to read. This reading continues until the selection is complete.

Rural schools. Any incorporated place, Census-designated place (CDP), or non-place territory designated as rural; excludes places that are within a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Self-contained classroom. Students are assigned to only one teacher for all core subjects taught throughout the day.

Semi-departmentalized classroom. Students are assigned two teachers for course instruction and switch classrooms for course delivery. One teacher provides instruction for two core subject areas while the second teacher provides instruction for the remaining two subjects.

Snapshot. A TEA term that provides statistical information on each district in the state (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

Socioeconomic status (SES). The Free and Reduced Lunch Program collects family data, i.e. income, education, and occupation (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002).

STAR. A component of a computerized assessment used by *Accelerated Reader Program* through *Reading Renaissance* to determine students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Taxonomic analysis. The search for "relationships among ... smaller units, the included terms in the domain" (Spradley, 1980, p. 116).

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). A criterion-referenced test used in Texas' primary and secondary schools to measure knowledge of minimal skills attained in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies as required under the Texas education standards. These tests begin in the third-grade and are administered yearly through Exit Level (Texas Education Agency, 2011).

Texas Education Agency (TEA). A branch of the state government responsible for public primary and secondary education. Headquarter offices are located in Austin, Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2011).

Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI). An early reading, one-on-one, assessment designed to identify the reading development of students in kindergarten through third-grade (Children's Learning Institute, 2010).

Texas Education Service Center Curriculum Collaborative (TESCCC). Includes a team of Education Service Centers that represents all areas of the state.

Title 1. Part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This program, authorized by Congress, provides supplemental funds to school districts to assist in closing the achievement gap. Schools are held accountable for the educational needs among low-

achieving, high-poverty (based on free/reduced lunch program), and minority students as documented on state assessment (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Verbatim principle. Writing or recording exactly what the speaker says word for word (Spradley, 1980).

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Historically, the original goal of schools was to produce active, educated citizens who would be able to contribute to the growth of our nation both economically and patriotically. This goal is still evident in schools of the 21st century, and as Spring (2006) has analyzed educational goals, today's schools also include a variety of additional goals that range from globalization to family.

This chapter reviews the history of the nation's rural schools. Additional Texas rural public school historical accounts are provided as well as previous research pertinent to rural school education. The chapter continues to discuss the needs of rural schools and its diverse communities. In addition, the chapter discusses effective reading and writing practices: classroom management, instructional approaches/styles, and reading/writing instruction. A brief discussion on the types reading programs utilized by the two rural districts is presented. Finally, the chapter concludes with a review of the effective teacher's use of assessment and preparation.

History of Rural Schools

Rural education has served as the backbone to American education as it is known today. As elementary students study American History, they learn that when Pilgrims and European settlers first landed in the New World, one of their first orders of business to establish schools among the community. Thus, the nation's first schools began as "rural" until certain community clusters began to flourish, especially during the Industrial Revolution. During this period of American industrial growth, a migration from farms to cities began. Farming operations were beginning to improve due to advancements in

farm machinery, requiring fewer man-hours on the farm. Also, the “call of the city,” or the lure of the city’s amenities such as electricity, higher paying jobs, and cultural events (museums and theatre), enticed some families to seek a better and more comfortable life. By the 1900 United States Census, the proportion of children living in the cities was only about two-thirds of those living in the country. In the south, the number of children living in cities was barely half as great as the number of children living in the country (Department of Commerce and Labor, 1905). Therefore, rural education had a major influence on the brainpower of the nation throughout the 19th century.

The beginning of the 20th century marked the growth of education in our nation’s history, as well as growing differences between rural and urban public education systems. The wealth of the cities, the growth in centralized population, and concentrated businesses provided the financial situation that initiated the inequalities between rural and urban education (Butterworth & Dawson, 1952). During the early 1900s, studies emerged documenting the sweeping successes of public education in cities and villages and revealing the needs of rural schools with solutions to the problems (Cubberley, 1925; Foght, 1912; Gillette, 1929; Mueller, 1926). Rural schools, once known as efficient providers of knowledge, were now treated with neglect by the U.S. education system.

With these differences arising, N. B. Henry (1952), editor of *The Fifty-First Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Part II Education in Rural Communities*, expressed the need for educators in cities not to discount education in rural America. He stated that these educators must take note of “the dependence of cities upon persons educated in rural schools” (p. 1). Henry (1952) also went on to state that one must be aware of the

problems and needs of education in rural communities and its importance in the national picture. Since urban centers reap the harvest of rural education, they should continue to contribute heavily to the support of education in rural communities. Rural life is no longer, if it ever was, completely distinct from urban life. Dividing lines between country and city are broken down by the two-way migration of farm people to cities and of city people to suburban and rural areas. (p. 1)

National reports, such as *Status of Education in Rural America*, have collected and analyzed data to compare the composition of rural schools to their counterparts in cities, suburbs and towns. According to the 2007 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the 2003-2004 academic year recorded “over half of all operating school districts and one-third of all public schools were in rural areas” educating 10.3 million rural students in the United States (p. 8). Of those rural students, 7.8 million students attended rural schools with less than an 800-student body.

Texas Rural Public School History

Similar to the schools founded in the original 13 Colonies and later the United States, Texas also sought education among its land. As history has illustrated, the early Spanish conquistadors conquered the land and lay claim for the king and queen. As the search for gold was the main purpose, Catholic padres accompanied these ventures to provide religious support and “taming” of the Native Americans. As missions and presidios dotted the rugged Texas lands, schools within these missions had the intent to teach the Natives the Spanish language, farming, ranching, handcraft skills, and religion. Frederick Eby (1925), a well-known Texas philosopher and educational historian, noted

that during this time in Texas' history, the first school on Texas soil, other than a mission, was established in Laredo in 1783 with the same goal as the missions, to educate the Natives.

Even before Texas became a state, the Texians desired better education systems from the Mexican government. Due to cultural conflicts between Spanish, French, Mexican, and German influences with that of Anglo-American cultural patterns, the public school system soon became a public battleground and was included as one of the points in the Texas Declaration of Independence. It was from this time until 1854, Texas experienced growing pains with its public education system. Frederick Eby (1925) provided an historical account of this growth, which was later republished in *Texas Public Schools Sesquicentennial Handbook* in 2004. It was in 1854 that Texas established the first public school system in conjunction with a need for transportation across the massive state.

Just as in the growth of the nation, Texas' growth resulted in changes for public schools. By 1910, the "Biennial Report of the State Department of Education issued by F.M. Brawley placed the spotlight on rural schools as follows: The seating capacity of the rural schools was only 373,027 for 598,618 children" (TEA, 2004, p. 22).

Today, Texas educates more than four million students in its public schools. Of these, more than a half million (834,000) students are served in rural systems. Rural students comprise only 15% of the state's total public school enrollment, yet Texas educates the largest percentage of rural students in the nation (Johnson & Strange, 2009). English Language Learners (ELL) and mobility rates are the highest in Texas compared to other states in the nation; Texas also has the highest percentage of minority students,

43.9% (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Texas rural schools showed an enrollment increase of 138.5% in Hispanic student population from the 1999-2000 enrollment data (NCES, 2008-09). Texas also ranks first in the nation in the increase in “rural student enrollment” (p. 70). Finally, the data documented that the rural high school graduation rate was 74.6%.

The data documented the numbers, percentages and locations of rural districts and students, yet the “invisibility of rural education persists in many states” (Strange, et al., 2012, p. 19). After 50 years, researchers still value Henry’s (1952) reflection:

Children from all these different rural environments have needs that can best be met by teachers and administrators with an understanding and an appreciation of rural life and education. Rural education is indigenous to the local community and is influenced by the traditions, customs, and mores of the people. (p. 2)

Strange et al. (2012) analyzed the growth in rural school enrollment and documented its complexity “with increasing rates of poverty, diversity, and special needs” (p. 21). The data indicated widespread intensity in the South, Southwest, and parts of Appalachia that can be traced back to 1999. Strange et al. (2012) continued to restate others’ findings (Butterworth & Dawson, 1952; Henry, 1952; Howley, 1997; Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Theobald & Howley, 1998) that rural education cannot be conformed to mirror urban education. Instead, rural education must be addressed as; it is “becoming a bigger and even more complex part of our national educational landscape” (p. 21).

History of Research

The body of research into rural settings or situated places has the unfortunate quality of not being attractive to many researchers (Arnold, et al, 2005; Howley,

Theobald, & Howley, 2005; Sherwood, 2000). DeYoung (1987) noted an increase of educational historians' interest in "the lack of earlier scholarship on American rural education [due to] ... an overemphasis on urban education" (p. 124). Much of the earlier research focused on the problems within rural schools and state departments' visions of "making rural districts more professional, efficient, and, in many cases, vocationally relevant" (DeYoung, 1987, p. 126). DeYoung (1987) commented in his report on research of rural America that "the best scholarship in this area was carried out by anthropologists and historians rather than by educational researchers more indebted to psychological or sociological foundations. Rural education has been minimal and marginal" (p. 141).

Two teams of researchers had differing views on the worth of rural education, yet each set of researchers worked to attain goals for the importance of rural education. Howley et al. (2005) stated that the first hurdle in the study of rural schools was the complicated definition of rural. They claimed that outside researchers lost interest due to the complexity of the term, but they suspected that it was not a lack of simplicity, but a lack of motive.

Reviewers for the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* have noted receiving numerous quantitative manuscripts, which "fail to engage rural meanings" (Howley et al., 2005, p. 2). This meaning, according to Howley et al. (2005), is lost between the quantitative factor and the inability to confine rural education research because of the wide array of what defines rural. Howley et al. (2005) assert that if "research expands to 'what works for rural communities,' and simultaneously allows the 'what' under scrutiny

to include a wide array of local ways of being – and not just products brought to the market” (p. 3), then they would welcome the research.

Howley et al. (2005) stated a personal interest in rural education research as they lived in rural settings and understood meaning with the culture, the people, and the environment; however, Arnold’s (2005) team of researchers looked into the types of research conducted. The dispute lies in the classification of what was deemed as high-quality research. In Arnold et al. (2005) classification of the types of research conducted under the auspices of rural education, terms such as “rural specific” and “rural context only” were used. Arnold et al. (2005) defined “rural specific” a comparative study between rural and their counterparts or “specifically aimed at understanding a rural education issue” (p. 2). Where as “rural context only” were studies that could have been conducted anywhere but happened to have been done in a rural setting. Regardless of the differing opinions, research studies in rural educational settings were hampered by the lack of a consistent definition of rural, the lack of funding, and quite possibly the lack of interest due to small group sizes and an inability to generalize across diverse rural cultures.

Arnold et al. (2005) reviewed research conducted between 1991 and 2003. Their findings revealed the 10 most researched topics, with programs and strategies for special needs students as the largest literature base. The beliefs and practices of teachers beliefs came in tenth on the list of topics, of which only four focused on classroom techniques and practices and three researched reading programs and strategies in the rural specific category. Therefore, Arnold et al. (2005)’s research base of previous works provided a synthesis and classification of the types of research compiled.

Needs of Rural Schools

As city or urban amenities “called” rural families to their “welcoming arms,” the migration of country peoples left voids in the rural communities. Gillette (1929) attributed this void in rural communities and the migration to cities or urban areas to the improvement in the fields of science and industrial innovations. He stated that the industrial innovations were “disturbing its balance and producing a state of mobility and fluidity” (Gillette, 1929, p. 1090). Many of the educational inadequacies in rural schools noted by Gillette in 1929 continued to be contributing factors in decades to come. Some of these issues revolved around the lack of finances. Small rural schools have historically lacked the funding to attract and retain qualified personnel as well as the ability to fund and provide “state of the art” facilities or even offer a variety of courses. Because of these deficits, Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) concluded, “that rural schools were wasteful and inferior” (p. 67). Jordan and Jordan (2004) discuss the fact that the conditions of rural schools is “under scrutiny,” as “[t]he school accountability movement has become a two-edged sword for rural schools” (p. 1). Jordan and Jordan (2004) explain that one edge offers the deficits or dilemmas of rural schools (e.g. isolation due to geographical location, smaller enrollment size, overlooked by federal agencies), while the other side financially benefits rural schools from court decisions.

Although there are inadequacies in the composition of rural schools, early and current research concur that rural schools have the capability to outperform their urban counterparts. In 1924, a survey conducted by Orvil Brim found rural schools to be inferior financially, but academically sound. More recent studies have concluded that small rural schools provide better social adjustment and the enhanced ability to overcome

the effects of poverty (Howley & Bickel, 1999). A study done by Robinson, Blaine, and Pace (2004) concluded that amid the burdens upon rural schools, the small rural school's size contributed to the overall safety of students. This safety feature was enhanced with more personal relationships between students and between students and teachers, thus promoting academic growth.

Although the needs of rural schools have been documented for several decades, little has been done to rectify their plight. Michael Arnold (2005) stated in his commentary that although documentation and concerns are visible to governmental agencies, because rural schools “represent a substantial minority of U.S. students, ... unique educational needs of rural communities have been largely ignored by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE)” (p. 1).

Diversity of the Rural Community

Merriam-Webster (2012) defines diversity as “the inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization.” Rural communities encompass two aspects of diversity: (1) the diverse ethnographic background of the students within and between locations and (2) the diverse locations of the rural community as they are unique even though they are collectively labeled “rural.” The following section discusses these two aspects of diversity among rural communities.

An individual rural community may not be as diverse within as its urban counterpart, yet diversity exists between each of the rural communities. Within the boundaries of Texas, communities were founded by specific groups of people such as the German communities in Fredericksburg and New Braunfels; Czech communities in Hallettsville, Flatonia, and Shiner; and Irish communities in San Patricio County and

Refugio, to name only a few of 32 cultures in the State of Texas (Gallery of Texas Cultures, 2011). In addition to European descendants, Spanish and Mexican people made their mark in history as conquistadors, mission priests, and settlers, thus sharing their influential culture. Texas' history has thrived on the immigration of numerous cultures that have made many contributions throughout history. Many of the culturally isolated areas remain distinguishable by the architectural designs of buildings, the food, and the names on buildings, streets, and rivers. Family names in one particular area may go back to the founding members of that particular community.

In addition to the diverse cultural groups that make up various rural communities in Texas, the geographic and physical location of a particular area is also diverse. Rural communities can be surrounded by large spans of farm or ranchland in the plains of South Texas or in the plateau areas of the Panhandle or in the Hill Country. A rural community may be experienced by small coastal communities of shrimpers or by lumber millers in the Piney Woods of East Texas. The diversity of the people is just as diverse as the state itself. Despite the influences of television and communication technologies, such as the Internet, and cell phones, many rural communities have remained intact due to the small size, isolation, and limited resources (Ayalon, 1995).

According to *Why Rural Matters 2011-12*, Texas rural schools are a host to student and family diversity, with 43.9% minority students and 9.4% English Language Learners (ELL) students. In addition to this cultural diversity, 43.6% of rural students live in poverty while 13.9% of the rural students migrate between districts or are highly mobile. Therefore, because schools are the focal point of rural communities and serve as the integration tool for diversity, the acceptance and creation of a safe and friendly school

environment becomes the social relation builder of the rural community (Ayalon, 1995; Smithmier, 1994; Thurston & Berkeley, 1998).

Thurston and Berkeley's (1998) study discussed the importance of diversity found in rural schools and highlighted how the intimate learning community of small rural schools served as a positive model for other schools experiencing violence. The central theme was that of Noddings' (1988, 1995) "paradigm of caring" or what Thurston and Berkeley suggested as "developing a language of consistency about caring and ... [the] attempts at moving toward this kind of peace" (p. 77). Bustamante, Brown, and Irby (2010) posited in their study of three Texas rural schools the continued caring aspect toward immigrants or migrants into the rural communities. The rural schools observed in this study involved all students as a means to foster cultural awareness. Showcasing the cultural diversity in the school became the starting point to welcome and include all students. Hence, the rural educator and leaders are influential in the changes to cultural diversity and academic achievement not only for ELL students or students who are struggling, but also for all students within the school.

Studies over the last several decades have revealed the nature of rural communities Ayalon, 1995; Howley & Howley, 2008; Howley & Theobald, 1998; Oliver & Howley, 1992). Ayalon (1995) found that rural residents were found to be more conservative and "less tolerant toward civil liberties, sexual nonconformity, religious and political nonconformity, support of minority office-seekers, and racial and ethnic groups" (p. 8). Therefore, teachers must be aware of the diverse cultures of their own classrooms before they expose the children of one community to surrounding and differing cultures (Oliver & Howley, 1992).

The Gallery of Texas Cultures in Austin and the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio are two such places to display the cultural groups found in Texas. The goal of both of these institutions is to develop an appreciation for the cultural diversity of Texas. Yet, for the rural student whose school district has limited funds or travel is too distant, these two physical educational resources may not be accessible. Again, it is up to the teacher to bring this information into the classroom and to the community through informed students.

Effective Reading/Writing Practices

Effective reading and writing practices are those practices teachers possess to promote positive and successful academic attainment for their students. This section will be sub-divided into effective practices as found in classroom management, instructional approach/style, reading/writing instruction, and assessment.

Classroom Management. Effective instruction begins with sound and effective classroom management. Effective teachers plan before the school year begins and anticipate needed tasks from the beginning to the end of the year (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008). Teachers who effectively conduct the “business” of the school day experience fewer discipline issues and less time off task. Although effective behavioral management does not guarantee effective instruction, it allows for continual instruction (Emmer & Stough, 2001).

Classroom management is only one component of effective instruction. Although definitions vary, classroom management is composed of teacher actions to create organization, establish order, and engage students. Duke (1979) defined classroom management as “[t]he provisions and procedures necessary to establish and maintain an

environment in which instruction and learning can occur” (p. xii). However, Emmer and Stough (2001) noted the expansion and complexity within classroom management included strategies, procedures, and the teacher’s goals to manage student behavior (Doyle, 1986; Jackson, 1968; Oliver & Reschly, 2007). Simonsen et al. (2008) researched the literature to identify evidenced-based classroom management practices and categorized their findings into five features of effective classroom management: “(a) maximize structure; (b) post, teach, review, monitor, and reinforce expectations; (c) actively engage students in observable ways; (d) use a continuum of strategies for responding to appropriate behaviors; and (e) use a continuum of strategies to respond to inappropriate behaviors” (p. 353).

According to Emmer and Stough (2001), effective teachers are skilled in maintaining the daily flow of events or schedule even if there is an unexpected change. Veteran teachers begin the first day of classes establishing procedures and expectations with their students. Time is set aside to ensure student performance through the established routines. Some simple routines, such as an orderly procedure to lining up or daily morning routines established at the very beginning of the school year, set the expectations within a classroom. Effective teachers establish daily routines such as attendance taking, daily sponge activities, and homework reviews. An effective teacher establishes management within lesson organization and its delivery.

Effective classroom management encompasses the emotional aspect of teaching. Noddings (1984) inserted the nature of caring and nurturing into the aspect of effective classroom management. Noddings (1992) stated in a later work, “[A]t every stage we need to be cared for in the sense that we need to be understood, received, respected,

recognized” (p. xi). Stough and Emmer (1998) found that students reacting negatively to test results could be managed through effective classroom management to control the negative emotions. Effective teachers incorporate highly structured approaches to control student interactions. They are prepared with a planned design in responding to appropriate or inappropriate behavior (Oliver & Reschly, 2007; Simonsen, et al, 2008). These systems vary from verbal to tangible forms of praise or constructive feedback, either to acknowledge individual and/or group behavior or correct behavior toward a desired response. Stough and Emmer (1998) concluded from their study that varying periods during instruction could be emotionally charged, especially during test feedback. A teacher’s anticipation and construction of various strategies were able to effectively manage classroom behaviors. “Teachers in this study were attuned to students’ behaviors during the feedback session that had the potential for negative emotional arousal, and took action to manage such behaviors to prevent their escalation or contagion” (p. 360).

Therefore, effective teachers manage schedules, behaviors, and classroom design. The physical arrangement of the room is not only functional for ease of movement, but also displays the teacher’s personality and demeanor as an outward sign to his/her students. Effectively managed classrooms are a reflection of effectively planned lessons and engagement of students. Throughout the instructional day, effectively managed classrooms reflect the success of lessons as well as the behaviors of students and teachers, thus building a community of learning.

Instructional Approaches/Styles. Closely related with classroom management, effective teachers demonstrate effective instructional styles in the delivery of lessons and through the accomplishment of course objectives. A teacher’s instructional style or

approach is reflected in the manner of instructional delivery. The initial phase lies with the teacher's decision-making practices and attitude toward instructional approaches (Guskey, 1988). A teacher's decision also reflects his/her acknowledgements of each individual student's learning style. Therefore, an effective teacher builds his/her instructional approach from knowing not only the strengths weaknesses, and prior knowledge of his/her students, but also from understanding how each individual student prefers to learn. Zhang's (2004) study compiled scholarly works in an effort to "adopt the term *teaching style* to refer to teachers' cognitive, learning, and thinking styles in teaching" (p. 233).

This study yielded predictive results as to thinking styles of students and their preferences in teaching styles. Studies have shown that student learning is affected through the interaction of their preferred thinking/learning style and that of the teacher's instructional style (Saracho, 1990). Zhang (2004) had based her work on Sternberg's (1988) proposed theory of mental self-government, meaning, "that just as there are many ways of governing a society, there are many ways of governing or managing our activities" (p. 234). Zhang's (2004) results confirmed her prediction that a particular type of learner preferred instruction from the same type of instruction style. However, the results also documented a teaching style that encouraged creative thinking and complex information processing to be preferred among all students' thinking styles, thus indicating students will cross outside their thinking style to this nearly universally preferred teaching style. However, the study showed that students with "Type 2 thinking styles" exclusively preferred teaching styles that encouraged rule following and simplistic information. Zhang postulated:

that although teachers should diversify their teaching styles so that students with different learning styles can benefit from their instruction, teachers do not need to be overly concerned about matching their teaching style to every single learning style among their students. Instead, teachers could accommodate the learning styles of the majority of students by using Type 1 teaching styles. (p. 248)

Zhang's (2008) later study compared secondary students to her earlier university student subjects to investigate the comparability between teaching and learning styles. The results were remarkably similar and students revealed the most ineffective teaching style. Students were least receptive to a conservative and monotonous style as well as those that required "students to deal with several tasks simultaneously without communicating a sense of priority and to work alone" (p. 622).

Effective instruction addresses the needs of all students. Studies that were initially conducted to determine methods or procedures for certain students, such as students with disabilities or English Language Learners (ELL), have since been conducted holistically for all students. One such method is the Visual Auditory Kinesthetic Tactile Strategy (VAKT). Stange and Ponder (1999) explained a set of stages were developed to assist learners with severe reading challenges through first tracing words, followed by stages of writing, reading, and recognition. VAKT strategies have expanded into subsection strategies such as visual strategies to promote pictures or illustrations of meaning as well as kinesthetic and tactile activities such as using bodily movement to commit information to memory (Dunn, 1988; Tight, 2010). Auditory learners prefer instruction through lectures, role-plays, oral directions, and conversation.

A recent study by Tight (2010) confirmed previous studies to report the “most common preference is for visual learning techniques, followed, in order, by auditory and tactile/kinesthetic learning techniques. Almost as many participants . . . revealed a preference for more than one perceptual modality” (Tight, 2010, p. 820). Therefore, effective teachers acknowledge the varied learning styles of their students and are aware of their own teaching style. Effective teachers do not only teach the way they were once taught as students. Instead, effective teachers incorporate activities into daily lessons to address the varied modality preferences of their students. According to the statistical findings published in *Why Rural Matters 2011-12*, Texas ranks third in the nation in percentage of rural ELL students, and 44% of the rural student body are minority students. Hence, addressing the learning style and teaching style to enhance effective learning will promote successful students and successful schools.

Reading/Writing Instruction. All children’s reading abilities are different to some extent, yet similar in some ways. Farstrup (2002) emphasizes the importance of reading teachers arguing that “Every child deserves excellent reading teachers because teachers make a difference in children’s reading achievement and motivation to read” (p. 1). Therefore, effective teachers know the stages learners pass through in learning to read and the various strategies to promote reading to learn. Reading acquisition passes through stages of attainment just as a child passes through the developmental stages of growth. However, just as every child assumes growth a bit differently, so do readers.

Farstrup (2002) continued to explain that reading instruction is both an art and a science. He along with other researchers in reading - Allington, Au, Duke, Graves, Guthrie, Leu, Pearson, Samuels, and Shanahan to name a few:

emphasize the importance of solid research evidence – the science of teaching and learning – as well as a deep and abiding respect for the skill, intuition, and dedication of the excellent and artful reading teacher. . . . Qualified and talented teachers are essential if effective, evidence-based reading instruction is to occur. Teaching is more than a technical process; it is a complex human process in which the teacher’s knowledge of the reading and learning processes intersects with his or her knowledge of the needs, interests, and individual characteristics of learners. (pp.1-2)

Shanahan (2002) implored the need for continued research and its use among teachers and principals along with challenging one’s beliefs while working to study and understand the implications and limitations during the process of promoting responsible literacy education.

Whatever the label for the type of practice, the goal is to effectively and successfully promote literacy - the comprehension of the written word, as well as the love of the written word as a means of life’s long and thoughtful journey. These broad descriptive labels include “literature-based instruction,” “integrated language,” “natural learning,” “student-centered instruction,” “whole/holistic learning,” “comprehensible input,” “problem-based learning,” and “whole language” (Cambourne, 2002).

Effective teachers provide learning environments that are conducive and set the stage for learning to occur (Cambourne, 2002; Oliver & Reschly, 2007). A learning environment that is safe, organized, and appealing. These are not the only factors; they also include the personal aspect or interaction of the learning community. Cambourne (2002) formulated the following Principles of Engagement:

- Learners are more likely to engage deeply with demonstrations if they believe that they are capable of ultimately learning or doing whatever is being demonstrated.
- Learners are more likely to engage deeply with demonstration if they believe that learning whatever is being demonstrated has some potential value, purpose, and use for them.
- Learners are more likely to engage with demonstrations if they are free from anxiety.
- Learners are more likely to engage with demonstration given by someone they like, respect, admire, trust, and would like to emulate. (p. 28)

The teacher's knowledge of each learner's thought processes, the ability to initiate and maintain learner engagement, and the commitment to follow through with metacognitive skills exemplify a constructivist's discourse through communicated expectations and reflective learning. By gaining and understanding of effective teaching methods in reading and writing instruction, the unique rural culture has the potential to flourish.

Effective teachers are capable of making the connection between home and school. They are able to communicate the importance of reading skills to their students' parents and solicit their assistance and support. It is a common belief that parents are their children's first and foremost teachers. Therefore, a knowledgeable and effective teacher becomes the leader in the use of parental involvement (Briggs & Elkind, 1977; Clark, 1976; Durkin, 1966; Epstein, 1986; Huey, 1968; Paratore, 2002). Understanding

the culture of the community and knowing familial backgrounds become the tools that teachers can use to promote literacy within their classroom and beyond.

Writing. Reading instruction is not an isolated skill. Children progress through literacy stages that include writing. Once a child begins to recognize that talk can become print, he/she attempts to reconstruct self-made symbols through scribbling as a means of communication to reveal his/her inner voice (Graves, 1975, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus these initial stages begin writing readiness as well as the process of progressing through the remaining stages to the writer's ability to expand and add detail to their piece (Spandel, 1996).

Effective teachers make both personal and text-to-text connections to demonstrate fluid writing, first through oral discussion then by conducting a written reflection. "Social interaction around a shared experience is the foundation of the language experience approach. When students talk about an experience and that talk is transcribed, they can then read the written story or report" (Bromley, 2007, p. 245). This scribed oral description followed by the reading of the passage demonstrates the reciprocal nature of reading and writing. Authors write, and then readers read what is written and respond. In turn, students create authentic written pieces for an audience to read and respond to.

Understanding the basic writing process of brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing was first attempted in the early 1970s. By the early 1980s, teachers began a search for better models to teach writing, and implemented a 6+1 Trait analytical model. Since then authors such as Graves (1983), Lane and Bernabie (2001), and Spandel (1996) have published texts to guide and assist teachers with promoting writing skills in the classroom. The common characteristics of good writing are ideas,

organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation (Education Northwest, 2012).

Zarry (1999) conducted a study with a group of sixth graders focused on the use of reading vocabulary activities and the impact on writing products. After the yearlong study, the experimental group outperformed the control group. The use of a thesaurus and activities such as Word Webs (synonym clusters), Vocab-books, learning a new word a day, and Context Capers (using new words in meaningful ways) not only increased vocabulary knowledge but also led to “owned” words within a student’s composition. This study indicated that students benefit from a form of direct vocabulary instruction, and struggling students in isolated portions of our nation require vocabulary growth in their knowledge base.

As rural students enter a 21st century world influenced by technology and globalization, it is important for effective teachers to provide strategies, skills, and experiences within classroom instruction. That instruction now includes the use of technology, as Bromley (2007) has shared the thought of how “technology is transforming writing. Writing practices in the classrooms of the future will need to reflect the roles computers and the Internet increasingly play in work-related writing” (p. 260). Whatever the medium, successful students need opportunities for writing, reflecting, sharing, and assessing. However, just as Arnold et al. (2005), Howley and Howley (2008), Howley, Wood, and Hough (2011) have repeatedly pointed out, rural students are at a disadvantage due to location, lack of funds, and access to technology savvy instruction.

Reading Programs. In addition to an educator's professional ability, knowledgeable content, classroom management, instructional strategies, and social competence with connections between home and school, the effective use of a reading program becomes an additional resource to the effective teacher. The effectiveness of a published reading program is dependent upon two levels of intent. The first level is the directive from campus or district leadership and their expectations that teachers follow the program. The second level is the teacher's professional competence and his or her beliefs in reading instruction.

In conjunction with the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, if a school district has qualified for and initiated Schoolwide Title I funding, a set of guidelines must be maintained. One component of the program is the use of research-based practices to develop and implement enriched instruction for all students (Texas Education Agency, 2008). Therefore, a state-approved basal is adopted and becomes a resource in reading and writing instruction. Educator member textbook adoption committees sift through the scores of state-approved publisher materials to determine which resources best suit or complement the teachers and students of their school district. Then the level of dependence then depends upon the degree to which each individual teacher applies these resources and the level of administrator expectation. Also, in light of the needs of rural students, textbook publishers focus on the larger population, which leaves rural populations underrepresented. However, of the publishers available, each of the districts investigated in the present study chose two different basal sources to base instruction. The following brief sections will describe each of these reading programs.

Open Court Reading Program. In 2008, Open Court Reading's name was changed to *Imagine It!* This program focuses on phonics and reading comprehension strategy use, both taught with very explicit scripted instruction. This program emerged from the belief that young children should be reading authentic literature as well as expository selections and distanced itself from the traditional basal readers. The authors of this program challenged themselves to develop "instructional strategies and tools critical to enable children to read literature" (Open Court Brochure, p. 2). *Open Court Phonics* provides color-coded Sound/Spelling Cards, explicit sound and spelling instruction, and scaffolded blending to teach decoding as well as encoding. *Open Court* encompasses early literacy through grade six with a focus on comprehension and vocabulary in the upper elementary grades.

During the development of *Imagine It!*, a two year period was used to create a more effective program with greater ease of teaching the material. The nine key areas listed were included in the program:

- Ease-of-use features for better instruction and classroom management
- Practice, extension, and intervention tools
- Increased vocabulary instruction and practice
- Focused and integrated fluency instruction
- A more robust writing strand
- Additional inquiry instruction
- Stronger English Learner support
- Enhanced assessment tools
- A full spectrum of integrated technology (p. 4)

The authors of the program have stated, “The foundational program of *Imagine It!* has consistently proven its effectiveness with diverse populations of students across the country for over four decades” (p. 8).

Scott Foresman’s Reading Street Reading Program. The Scott Foresman *Reading Street* (2001), published by Pearson, boasts of “an all-new comprehensive Reading and Language Arts series for the 21st Century” (2012, online). The basal is a collection of classic and “soon-to-be classic” literature and includes scientifically research-based instruction. Additional online opportunities are available for student engagement.

The *Reading Street* program includes a Response to Intervention component to assist with the monitoring of ongoing progress along with an explicit plan for managing small groups of students. As with most basal programs, blackline practice and unit test masters are available to assess students. The teacher’s edition provides unit and daily planning along with focused vocabulary for classroom instruction.

Accelerated Reader Program. Both districts used the software called *Accelerated Reader Program* (AR) by Renaissance Learning. Each used it as a supplement to the main reading program. Students were administered a computerized STAR test to document the students’ current reading level. Teachers then instructed students to read and test on code-labeled texts to match the reading level range. The computer driven program recorded and maintained test results on each of the texts students read and tested. Teachers ran weekly, quarterly, or six-week reports to monitor each student’s performance in the number of texts read, test average, average book level, and points earned.

In contrast to rural school districts, larger urban districts may have curriculum specialists available to sort through the various programs and provide support for their teachers. However, due to a restricted operating budget, many small rural districts depend on committees of teachers to assist in curriculum and program decisions (Stockard, 2011). Programs and curriculum on the market are designed to meet the needs of all children, but rural education has received little support or research. Stockard (2011) notes the importance to document the “unique issues in providing ongoing technical support and assistance” (p. 3). Her study examined the changes in student achievement in three rural districts with the implementation of an explicit structured curriculum with technical assistance. Her study yielded positive results and documented promising support for other small rural districts. The dedication of the teachers involved set a standard that began to answer Arnold et al. (2005) call to improve teachers’ “pedagogical skills in ways that have the greatest impact on student achievement” (p. 18). Whatever the situation, there is one common goal: implement good instruction because it, “is the most powerful means of preventing reading comprehension [and writing] problems” (Snow, 2002, p. xvii).

Assessment. Effective teachers are in a continuous state of assessing. Afflerbach (2007) posits, “Effective instruction is dependent on assessment that helps teachers and students move toward and attain daily and annual reading goals” (p. 277). There are anecdotal notes of classroom observations, one-on-one conferencing, or small, guided reading groups. There are various documentations of scores including daily quizzes, weekly or end of unit assessments, and state formatted benchmark exams that result in high-stakes, state mandated assessment. Student samples are collected, reviewed,

disaggregated, and analyzed (Mariotti & Homan, 2010). This type of data drives the formulation of the upcoming lessons as well as sets the arena for teacher reflection. Between the collection of data and state of reflection, an effective teacher begins to ask questions such as, “Which of my students require re-teaching? What other strategies can be used to process the content? What could be changed in the manner of my delivery?” Mariotti and Homan (2010) published a worktext with the assertion that “instructional decision making is critical to effective teaching practices – and ... teachers must be knowledgeable in the various formal and informal assessment techniques, ... for collecting data, and ways to accurately interpret that data in order to make sound instructional decisions” (p. ix).

An effective teacher interacts daily with his or her students and pays careful attention to what the students are doing as they read and write. This observation, whether it is by way of anecdotal notes or results from quizzes, provides valid information for making instructional decisions (Cooper & Kiger, 2006). Vygotsky’s (1978) definition of the Zone of Proximal Development revealed the levels of scaffolding. An effective teacher assesses and evaluates the amount of scaffolding a student will benefit from and is aware of students’ prior knowledge and competencies.

Using the various assessment tools to evaluate students, effective teachers look for the holes in the instruction to fill with additional instruction. Assessment and evaluation can be found in reading strategies such as KWL, Cloze Procedure, or anticipation guides that quickly signal to the teacher the prior knowledge of his/her students on a particular topic and if there is a need to quickly modify the current lesson to the appropriate instructional level (Tompkins, 2009). Although districts may dictate the

curriculum used within the classroom or expect the use of scripted instruction, it is the knowledge of the informed teacher that will allow him/her to make modifications to instruction that will promote the academic success of his/her students.

Cooper and Kiger (2006) identified eight principles of comprehensive literacy assessment from their studies as well as the studies of other researchers (Harp, 2000; Valencia, 1990a; Valencia, 1990b). The eight timeless principles are that assessments should be: (1) ongoing, (2) integral part of instruction, (3) be authentic, a reflection of real reading and writing, (4) a collaborative, reflective process, (5) multidimensional, (6) developmentally and culturally appropriate, (7) identify student strengths, and (8) based on what is known about how students learn to read and write (Cooper & Kiger, 2006). With these ongoing assessments, an effective teacher evaluates and identifies the diversity of struggling readers and makes determinations regarding instructional materials, level of scaffolding, and the levels of reading material (Mariotti & Homan, 2006).

Teacher Preparation. The ability to attract and maintain high quality, effective teachers has already been established as an issue for rural schools (Arnold, 2000, 2005; Barley & Beesley, 2007; D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; DeYoung, 1987; Eppley, 2009; Howley, 1998). Several studies have documented the lower pay as compared to the urban counterparts, community adjustment, housing, and the overall cultural differences that many qualified teachers face as points to consider before or seeking employment in a rural school or deciding to continue in that school. Theobald and Howley (1998) attribute this disconnect for highly qualified teachers to the lack of higher educational preparation in teacher programs. Theobald and Howley (1998) claim that teacher

preparation programs neither take into account uniqueness of rural schools nor do they promote a rural cultural sense. Instead, there is guidance involving economic concerns and a global economy. Nelson's (1983) study described the results of a survey of 56 universities from states with large rural populations. His study found that even though a large number of graduates did find employment in rural schools, the universities provided little in coursework to prepare these educators for this unique environment.

Conclusion

The review of literature reveals a need to further investigate rural educational settings. An investigation into the perspectives and practices of effective rural-specific teachers of reading and writing will contribute to the perceived lack of positive attributes in small rural school districts. A carefully designed study will investigate the daily practices and procedures of third- and fourth-grade reading/writing teachers in successful South Texas Title I rural school districts.

Rural schools have historical value to the nation's education system. Through the course of history and the growth of cities, rural school education became secondary to urban education. Research has documented the problems of rural education such as lack of funds, inadequate infrastructures, and inability to meet the needs of its students. Within the scope of these problems, it is imperative to investigate successful, high-needs, diverse rural districts. A study to reveal the perspectives and practices of successful rural elementary reading and writing teachers will provide insight into their learning communities through the effective reading/writing practices of classroom management, instructional approaches/styles, reading instruction, and assessment.

Chapter III

Methods

This chapter presents the methods employed in ethnographic descriptive fieldwork. The purpose of the study was to describe rural education culture as specifically linked to academic literacy in the elementary classroom. This type of qualitative inquiry allowed the “differences in practice among rural teachers ... [to] be shown by descriptions of what takes place in actual classroom situations” (Chase & Baker, 1952, p. 116).

As defined by dictionary.com (2011), the term ethnography, a noun, means, “a branch of anthropology dealing with the scientific description of individual cultures.” Spradley (1980) commented on the increased use of ethnography as a research method and stated ethnography’s gaining momentum via a “quiet revolution [that] has spread through the social sciences and many applied disciplines” (p. v). Miles and Huberman (1994) noted the “expansion of qualitative inquiry ... [having] been phenomenal” (p. 1) over a short period of 10 years. For a number of years, qualitative studies were confined to anthropology, social sciences and history; however, since the mid 1980s, qualitative inquiries have provided equally important measures as quantitative studies. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that “[T]he findings from qualitative studies have a quality of ‘undeniability.’ Words, especially organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing to a reader ... than pages of summarized numbers” (p. 1). Therefore, the descriptive fieldwork of ethnography provided the vehicle in which to reveal the culture of rural education as well as the culture of the community connected to the school.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state the purpose of a qualitative study is to “accumulate sufficient knowledge to lead to understanding” (p. 227). This understanding through rich descriptions of rural elementary academia proved to be rewarding through the in-depth explanations and analysis of qualitative ethnographic observations and interviews.

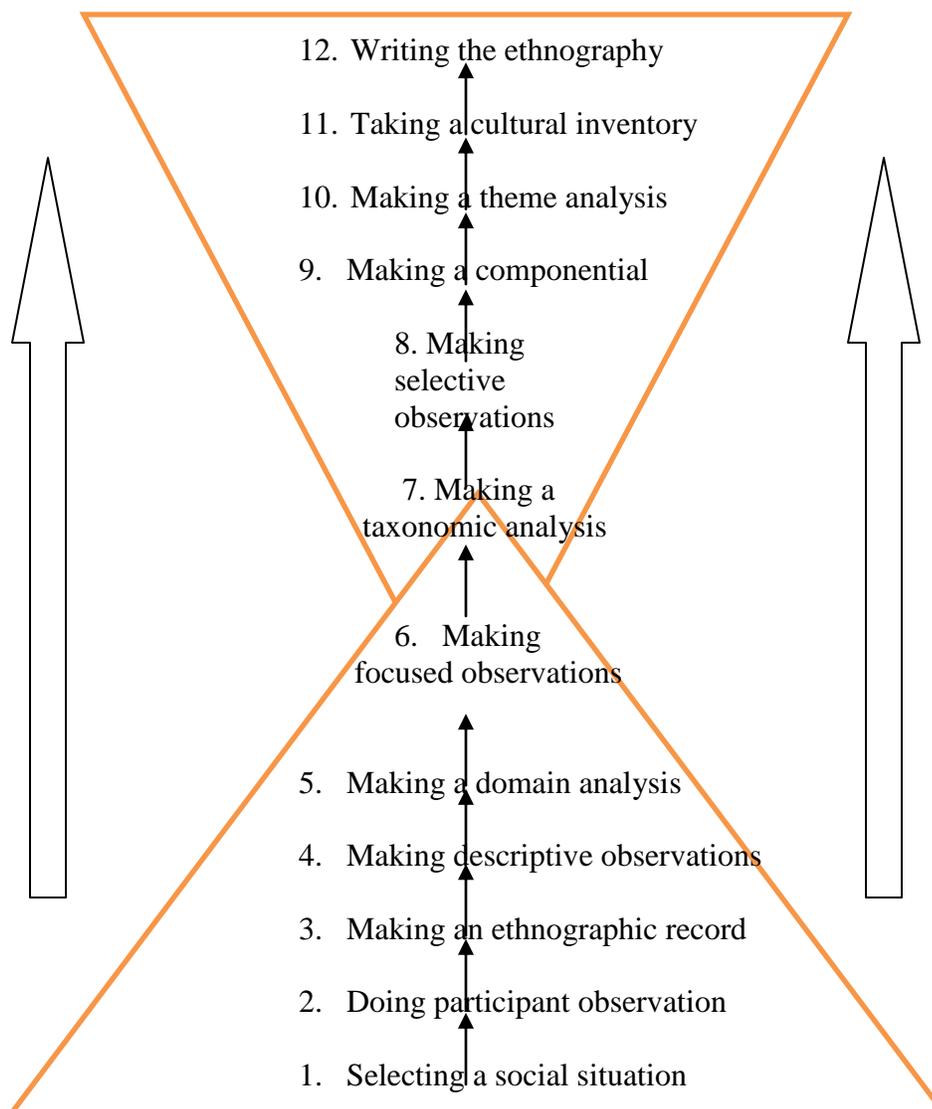
Strauss and Corbin (1990) advise by accurately describing the situation and rebuilding the data into a genuine acknowledgeable report of current educational processes for rural students and identifying themes or patterns that indicate reasons for academic success. This investigator employed the term, coined by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), ‘interpretative-descriptive’ research as the investigator stepped through the data analysis as a qualitative researcher. As the human instrument, one must also be aware of Patton’s (1990) and others’ process called *epoche* and become very aware of possible “prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions” (p. 36) as the nature of rural students was investigated while they are presenting a culture and language very similar to this researcher. This also presented a need for reflexivity as “the personal-self becomes inseparable from the researcher-self” (Creswell, 2003, p. 182).

Developmental Research Sequence (D.R.S.)

The researcher utilized Spradley’s (1980) model of Developmental Research Sequence (D.R.S.) as described in his seminal text, *Participant Observation*. The D.R.S. consists of twelve levels/steps that resemble a two-ended funnel. The initial steps, the broad or wide portion of the funnel, include “selecting a social situation,” observing, and recording. The narrow funnel elements, or focused elements, are domain, taxonomic, and componential analyses with more selective observations. As the study continues, the process or focus will widen or expand as a theme emerges and a “cultural inventory” is

holistically described as the ethnography is written (See Figure 1). Each of the 12 steps will be elaborated upon in more detail.

Figure 1. Steps in ethnographic research adapted from Spradley's (1980) *Participant Observation*



The D.R.S steps begin with a wide focus, surveying many possible social situations. When one is selected, the research included the *entire* social situation from Steps 3 through 12. However, there is a dual focus, one narrow, the other broad and holistic. The ethnographer continues to use the skills learned in Steps 4 and 5 while at the same time focusing observation on selected cultural domains. Toward the end of the project the focus is expands again to make a holistic description of the cultural scene (Spradley, 1980, p. 103).

Selection of social situation. The initial step is to select a social situation.

Spradley (1980) explains that “Every social situation can be identified by three primary

elements: *place, actors, and activities*” (p. 39). The place and actors are purposefully selected upon meeting the researcher’s criterion.

School criteria. The investigator established three criteria or markers for the selection of the social situation. Each district must: (a) be classified “rural” by TEA, (b) have earned an “Exemplary” academic performance rating for a minimum of two years, (c) be categorized as a high-needs district, and (d) have similar racial demographics. The following sections will describe the investigator’s processes for district and teacher selection.

District selection. The first criterion was that each district must have been classified as “rural” through the Texas Education Agency’s (TEA) Texas Public School Districts Categorized by Type, 2009-10, community identified as rural by U.S. Census, and located within the Coastal Bend or South Texas area. There were a total of 49 school districts in Region Two of the Education Service Center (ESC). Of those 49 school districts, 16 were identified as rural.

The investigator’s second social situation criterion was the district’s academic accountability rating of “Exemplary.” Through online access to the Texas Education Agency’s website, the investigator used information from the 2009 and 2010 Snapshot Report to classify each of the 16 rural districts and identified only those rated “Exemplary.” Of the 16 rural districts located in Region Two of the ESC, only two districts met this criterion. After identifying the district as “Exemplary,” the next step was to document the elementary campus’ performances for 2009 and 2010 as “Exemplary.” The investigator accomplished this by viewing TEA’s website link for each elementary campus’ Academic Excellence Indicator System report.

The third and fourth criteria were that each district be similar in the population demographics and socio-economic status. The districts must be a Title I school, categorized as high-needs district and/or based on 50% or higher free/reduced lunch percentages in a low-socio-economic community. The demographics of each community also must have a Hispanic population of 60% or more. The researcher used the Texas Education Agency website's Snapshot 2009 and 2010 links to obtain each district's demographic details. These links provided district specific descriptive information. Hayden and Corbin Independent School Districts met all three criteria components set by the investigator.

After districts and social situations were identified, the next phase was to secure district consent to participate in the study. Accessibility was initiated with phone calls to the superintendent of each district with follow-up e-mails to document the conversation and provide additional information on the study. The investigator reassured each participant about their rights to remain anonymous in this study by using pseudonyms that replaced original names of the districts, schools, and participants. In addition, all data and clinical resources were collected with permission from participants in full compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

Teacher selection. The investigation was an ethnographic study of four teachers in third- and fourth-grade classrooms in each of in each of the two districts. The researcher's place or location for participant observation was inside each of these classrooms, observing the instructional reading comprehension and writing methods of

teachers with their students during the scheduled reading and writing period for five consecutive weeks, four times per week.

The districts differed in the number of teachers per grade level. Corbin ISD had two teachers per level, was departmentalized, and had only one ELA teacher per grade level. Therefore, Corbin ISD participants had no selection process and were automatic participants upon district, campus, and participant agreement to participate in the study. The second district, Hayden ISD, had three self-contained classroom teachers per grade level. The principal selected the classroom teachers participating in the study based on her previous PDAS observations and informal walk-throughs.

Districts. Corbin ISD included a K-5 elementary campus that met one of this investigator's criteria by earning the highest performance accountability ranking of Exemplary in 2009 and 2010, scoring 96% and 94%, on the ELA's tests for both years. The district itself was Schoolwide Title I with 80.3% identified as economically disadvantaged on the 2011 Snapshot report, and thus met the "high-needs" criterion. The TEA's 2009-10 Performance Reporting documented third- and fourth-grade reading TAKS Standards of 92% for each grade level with 96% passing on fourth-grade writing. The statistics indicated a student population with a large majority of Hispanic students. Since the district had a small number of White students, the results were not provided by TEA in order to protect student identification. The economically disadvantaged subgroup met TAKS standards at 90%, 91%, and 96% on third- and fourth-grade reading and fourth-grade writing, respectively. Corbin Elementary earned 2011 Gold Performance Acknowledgements with commended performance for the sum of all grades tested (third-through fifth-grades) with 43% on reading and 19% on writing.

Hayden ISD included a K-5 elementary campus that has also earned the highest performance ranking of Exemplary in 2009 and 2010, scoring 97% on the ELA tests for both years. The district was Schoolwide Title I with 64.6% identified as economically disadvantaged on the 2011 Snapshot report, and thus met the “high-needs” criterion. The third- and fourth-grade classes met the 2009 standard with 91% and 95% passing reading, respectively, with 98% passing on the fourth-grade writing. The 2009 TAKS Standards among the economically disadvantaged subgroup achieved 89%, 91%, and 99% achievement scores for third- and fourth-grade reading and fourth-grade writing. The 2010 TAKS Standards, as reported by the Texas Education Agency’s Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) 2009-10 Campus Performance description, reported Hayden Elementary’s third- and fourth-grades scoring 96% and 94%, respectively, on reading and 98% on fourth-grade writing. The third-grade Hispanic students scored 1% higher than White students on third-grade reading, while the fourth-grade Hispanic students scored 3% higher on fourth-grade reading and 2% lower on fourth-grade writing. The economically disadvantaged subgroup scored 94% on third- and fourth-grade reading and 99% on writing. The elementary campus earned Gold Performance Acknowledgements with commended performance for the sum of all grades tested (third-through fifth-grades) with 46% on ELA and 34% on writing in 2011.

Teachers. Accessibility into each classroom began with similar contacts to each of the participant teachers. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions occurred a minimum of twice per participant. The purpose of these interviews was to reveal individual perspectives of teachers in rural education and to obtain in-depth thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge to academic success of their students. The initial formal

interview questions were the same as those used in Ortlieb's (2007) research (See Appendix A). All formal interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Follow-up interviews were more informal and conversational and not tape-recorded, but were noted in reflections, fieldnotes, and the researcher's journal. This data was used to support or clarify qualitative themes that arose from interviews and classroom observations specific to third- and fourth- grade reading/writing course instruction.

The interviews provided the researcher the initial insight of the teacher's perspective while classroom observations documented the teacher's actions and dialogue. These classroom observations were conducted in order to collect, describe, and document the events within the classroom. These classroom observations were naturalistic in order to observe how the teacher defined and explained the occurrences for student achievement via interviews compared to events within the classroom through the investigator's role of observer-as-participant.

Once the selection of the social situation was completed, the first phase of the D.R.S. was to identify the activities within this social situation. In early observations, classroom activities appeared to include sequential steps of behavior; however, the fieldnotes and journal entries that were documented through additional and repeated observations revealed more complex patterns. These patterns presented a collection of coded and analyzable data and revealed information that built the documented activities into a particular event.

Participant observation. The second step of the D.R.S. method was to decide upon the role of the researcher as a participant observer. According to Spradley (1980), the researcher may appear to all outsiders as just being ordinary where in fact there are

six major differences that identify a participant observer. A researcher as participant observer sets out with a dual purpose: not only to engage in the activities as an ordinary participant but to also observe and document the “activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation” (Spradley, 1980, p. 54). An ordinary participant usually goes through the motions of the activity without much thought of the surroundings and many of the other participants, for it is the activity that is of interest. While a participant observer may appear to be participating, the participant observer has a clear goal of mentally and/or physically documenting the other participants’ actions, behaviors, and activities. The participant observer makes a clear and dual-minded effort to take note of all aspects of the social situation through an explicit awareness of his/her surroundings. The researcher, as participant observer, must force his/herself to pay close attention to all the social interactions, behaviors, motions, and emotions that are normally blocked from mental documentation as an ordinary participant in a social situation. Along with this explicit and forced awareness of the social situation, a participant observer “must also approach social life with a wide-angle lens, taking in a much broader spectrum of information” (Spradley, 1980, p. 56).

Spradley (1980) explained that a participant observer will feel like he/she belongs within the social situation, yet will also be very aware of how he/she does not belong to the social situation. Since the researcher of this study is a certified elementary classroom teacher, feeling like an insider will come quite naturally through a familiarity with students, subjects, class schedules, instructional methods/strategies, and the typical occurrences during a school day. However, the awareness of being an outsider was

maintained through the explicit recall and documentation of the activities as well as unfamiliarity with new community environments.

Finally, as participant observer, the researcher becomes a research instrument as she reflects and documents the emotions and feelings of the participation. Spradley (1980) expressed the importance of the researcher being introspective, which is to be able to use his/her own feelings to assess the feelings of an experience following an observational activity. The researcher's ability to be both researcher and participant, gain explicit awareness of the participation, and view every angle of the activity will only be rewarded through documentation of these events. Thus, this researcher provided detailed accounts of the social situation, the researcher's objective views of the activities as well as the researcher's subjective feelings, emotions, and experiences in fieldnotes and personal journals.

As the research instrument, this researcher's close connection to rural culture necessitated that she maintain an awareness of the situation. Although the researcher possessed 17 years of professional teaching experience within a rural South Texas school district, the investigator's detailed documentation of events and observations helped to insure that events and actions were not overlooked. Spradley (1980) explained that when one is very close to the culture being observed, the tacit or cultural awareness outside one's knowledge may be overlooked. Since this awareness was brought to the researcher's attention, the familiarity with the rural culture was used to the researcher's advantage because less time was needed to become familiar with the concept of rural culture.

There are five types of participation for a participant observer. For this study, the researcher chose the role of “passive participant ... of bystander, spectator” (Spradley, 1980, p. 59). Even though the researcher is a certified classroom teacher with 19 years of classroom experience, maintaining the role as a passive participant was less disruptive for the classroom community, allowing for a more natural flow between the classroom teacher, the primary actor, and her students while she interacted with them. The other types of participation, such as active or complete participation, may have created a disruption of the normalcy within the classroom community.

Making an ethnographic record. The third step of Spradley’s D.R.S. model was the creation of an ethnographic record. The researcher created a collection of “fieldnotes, tape recordings, pictures, artifacts, and anything else that documents the social situation under study” (p. 63). Spradley (1980) quoted Frake (1964) as saying:

A description of a culture, an ethnography, is produced from an ethnographic record of the events of a society within a given period of time, the ‘events of a society’ including, of course, informants’ responses to the ethnography, his queries, tests, and apparatus. (p. 63)

In this study, the researcher’s ethnographic record began with “meet/greet” interview sessions and continued with formal interviews. These formal interviews occurred twice during the course of the study; one was conducted before the classroom observations began and the other was conducted after the completion of the classroom observations. The formal interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Spradley (1980) noted that the moment the researcher begins to note thoughts, reflections, and or document all that is heard or seen in his/her fieldnotes, a language is

used to encode this information. The researcher, as an ethnographer, must note that the language used to document the observations, reflections, and journal entries could hold long-range consequences. “When doing ethnography in your own society, however, it is easy to overlook language differences and thereby lose important clues to cultural meaning” (Spradley, 1980, p. 65). Therefore, the researcher must keep in mind the language used to document the situation, whether it is the researcher’s informal or professional language or the language of the informants. Since this researcher was reared in a rural school setting and taught in a rural school for 17 years, the language used in the classrooms and recorded in the fieldnotes was very similar. Because of this familiarity, the researcher took extra precaution not to overlook important clues that could impact the study. Spradley (1980) suggested three principles to consider while recording, reflecting, translating, and simplifying ethnographic data in order to prevent the distortion of cultural meanings. These three principles are: (1) the language identification principle, (2) the verbatim principle, and (3) the concrete principle (Spradley, 1980, pp. 66-68). This researcher concentrated on the concrete principle since it was possible that the researcher used generalization and summarization techniques during documentation. Therefore, it was important for this researcher to use specific language for these observations and subsequent documentations. The best way to begin the use of the concrete principle was to make a list of nouns and verbs while observing the cultural situation (a classroom observation) and expand the documentation soon after the observation (Spradley, 1980).

Finally, the ethnographer must formulate a system to organize the types of documentation in the ethnographic record. Spradley (1980) suggested several formats:

the condensed account, the expanded account, a fieldwork journal, and analysis and interpretation. In this study, the researcher used condensed note taking procedures while in the midst of observations and interviews. Afterwards, she returned to the “scene” mentally where she created an expanded account of the situation. Along with these documentations, the researcher maintained a personal journal. Spradley (1980) stated, “Like a diary, this journal will contain a record of experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that arise during fieldwork” (p. 71). With the use of dated journal entries, the researcher or ethnographer will “become a major research instrument” while analyzing the collected data of classroom observations and interviews (p. 72).

Making descriptive observations. According to Spradley (1980), there are two major kinds of descriptive observations: “grand tour observations and mini-tour observations” (p. 76). Just as one takes a “grand tour” of another’s home, this kind of descriptive observation collects the general aspects of the situation. Within this “tour,” Spradley’s (1980) “nine major dimensions of every social situation” provided a frame for documentation:

1. *Space*: the physical place or places
2. *Actor*: the people involved
3. *Activity*: a set of related acts people do
4. *Object*: the physical things that are present
5. *Act*: single actions that people do
6. *Event*: a set of related activities that people carry out
7. *Time*: the sequencing that takes place over time

8. *Goal*: the things people are trying to accomplish
9. *Feeling*: the emotions felt and expressed (p. 78)

In this study, once the researcher made grand tour observations, mini-tour observations were used to draw out more specific information. To accomplish this, Spradley's (1980) nine dimensions of social situations matrix, were adapted and used as a guide for checking the researcher's own thoroughness (see Appendix C). The researcher used this matrix to organize documentation and to mark off question types with the goal of not overlooking possible questions that required additional observation and/or description.

Making a domain analysis. Domain Analysis is the first of three types of ethnographic analyses in Spradley's D.R.S. It is a way to "systematically move from merely observing a *social situation* to discovering a *cultural scene*" (Spradley, 1980, p. 87). To begin the domain analysis in this study, the researcher identified the categories by using one of Spradley's (1980) nine universal semantic relationships: strict inclusion. The researcher analyzed data and conducted an in-depth search through fieldnotes and journals for "included terms," nouns or verbs, to reveal cultural categories and patterns that contained smaller categories. For instance, one worksheet recorded "included terms" such as: nurturer, caregiver, disciplinarian, instructor, counselor, friend, entertainer, organizer, grammarian, and coach. These "included terms" revealed the "cover term" through a semantic relationship of "a kind of" teacher. Therefore, domain analysis worksheets (see Appendix E) were used to help visualize the structure of each domain. The use of this type of organization and analysis format provided the researcher with a method that revealed additional areas for further research or development of additional

questions. Domain analysis recurred throughout the research as the researcher collected new data through participant observation.

Making focused observations. This sixth step of Spradley's D.R.S. model was the beginning of the narrowing of informational flow. In this step, the researcher takes the time to focus the observations, which can be either a surface or in-depth investigation. Since this study was an investigation into the positive attributes of rural ELA teachers, an in-depth investigation was conducted.

The first four steps were broad, surface collections. The fifth step began an analysis of the domains. Step Six initiated an in-depth investigation, an expansion of cultural domains based on the nine dimensions of social situations gleaned through the domain analysis (Step Five). The investigation began with a focus on the activities of third- and fourth-grade ELA teachers in the classroom. Therefore, the researcher returned to classroom observations to add to fieldwork activities with structural questions.

Making a taxonomic analysis. The taxonomic analysis step of the D.R.S. Method was an even deeper analysis of "cultural domains by finding out how they are organized" (Spradley, 1980, p. 112). In this study, the researcher began with classroom management, a domain containing the most information. The researcher then looked for similarities within the same semantic relationship within classroom management. When similarities were found, these were then grouped together. Then, additional structural questions arose that resulted in additional terms. The next phase to making a taxonomic analysis was to look for a "larger, more inclusive domain" (Spradley, 1980, p. 118). The second domain was instructional approach/style and other domains followed. This led to

a creation of a visual model for the tentative taxonomy; this visual model could take various forms (e.g., a box diagram, a set of lines and nodes, or an outline). This analysis led to new, more focused observations.

Making selected observations. Up to this point, the D.R.S. Method provided step-by-step procedures for conducting an ethnographic study. One of the earlier steps as a participant observer was to make descriptive observations, which were very broad observations of a social situation, in this case a classroom, to record as much as possible. Spradley (1980) used a visual metaphor of being like a funnel. The descriptive observation is the broadest, widest portion of the funnel, collecting and recording as much as possible. As the funnel narrows inward, observations became more focused, and the participant observer became more interested in a particular domain or a selected few domains. These domains only emerged as observations took place and began to form into categories or similarities. It was possible the informants, classroom teachers, made suggestions that influenced the participant observer to become more focused in a particular area. Although there was a continual ebb and flow between stages of observations, this final step of the observation intake, making selected observations, was the narrowest of the funnel. The participant observer's intent was to look for selected differences observed. These were analyzed and categorized for specificity. As the participant observer became accepted within the social situation, more observable opportunities transpired and ultimately explained what was occurring. This in turn, opened additional opportunities to acquire insightful information. As a researcher, these opportunities should not be passed As Spradley (1980) explains, "One of the challenging

features of doing ethnography is that one cannot tell where it will lead ahead of time. New discoveries open ... doors to cultural understanding” (Spradley, 1980, p. 122).

Ethnographic interviews seek the answers to specific questions that have evolved while uncovering the cultural meanings within a social situation. “Such interviews make use of descriptive questions (discussed in Step Four), structural questions, (discussed in Step Six), and contrast questions (discussed in Step Eight)” (Spradley, 1980, p. 123). These formulated interview questions actually treat the participant observer as an informant. Thus, the observer asks her/himself these questions and constructs meanings or answers from the field notes, journal entries, or from new observations. These same questions can then be re-asked to other informants in either formal or informal interviews.

During an observation, the participant observer may generate many questions. These questions can be jotted down to ask at a later period; however, if the moment presents itself, the participant observer may have the opportunity to informally ask an informant a question. The response to this informal interview may provide additional insight to the social situation being observed. In this case, a classroom situation, observing the methods and strategies a successful rural teacher used in her classroom led to questions like: “How did you come about using this particular strategy?” “As you have used a particular method or strategy, did you find yourself changing its process from year to year? Why or Why not?”

Since the researcher in this study did not want to interrupt classroom instruction for these types of informal questions, the researcher took opportune moments during class exchanges, conference times, or walks to out of the classroom events to discuss

these questions with the teacher. In any such event, capitalizing on this type of casual conversation provided the opportunity for the researcher to ask multiple questions. The answer might lead to more insight, as well as providing direct quotations to review and analyze.

The opposite of informal ethnographic interviews is formal ethnographic interviews, which require planning of a specific time, place, and carefully constructed questions in preparation before the event occurs. Spradley (1980) advised a researcher to begin such a formal interview with descriptive questions such as, “Can you describe what you do to prepare for a lesson from the time the topic is decided until you begin teaching the lesson to the class?” Spradley (1980) continued with the directive that from one descriptive question other descriptive questions could be asked as well as structural and contrast questions. The researcher needed to tape record formal interviews and take copious notes.

Ortlieb (2007) asserts, “Differentiation is the key component when composing questions for selective observations” (p. 62). At this point in data collection, interpretation, and analysis, categories begin to develop through differences. Within these differences or contrasts, a more focused question could be developed to reveal more differences, thus creating a greater diversity of questions. Spradley (1980) stated, “Selective observations require careful planning” (p. 129). The ethnography began with the broad collection of descriptive observatory (Step Four) situations with few very general questions; however, this stage of the D.R.S. Method required the careful planning of many specific contrast questions, which in turn generated even more questions as more notes were logged from each selective observation.

Contrast questions come in various forms, dyadic and triadic. A dyadic contrast question “takes two members of a domain and asks, “In what ways are these two things different?”” (Spradley, 1980, p. 125). These dyadic contrast questions always involve looking for the differences in terms that appear in the same domain; thus narrowing the focus in order to reveal a difference. Another form of contrast questions is the triadic. As the root “triad” or “tri” means three, the triadic contrast question uses three terms or categories at the same time. Such framing of a triadic contrast question would be, “Which two are most alike in some way, but different from the third?” (p. 126). Thus, similarities and differences are revealed at the same time.

In this study as the researcher, or participant observer, was formulating questions, taking copious notes, journaling, and observing the ebb and flow from descriptive observations to focused observations, the researcher sorted this information, or answers. This important step within the selective observational period assisted in revealing any differences between participants and/or their teaching styles. The researcher used the most efficient method to sort through these differences, writing the terms on small cards and sorting them into piles. If there was a card that held any difference at all when compared to the pile being created, the researcher placed that card in a new pile, thus card-sorting the contrast questions. This discovery of differences then would lead to dimensions of contrast, which became the basis for making selective observations and asking new questions.

Making a componential analysis. As the ethnographer followed Spradley’s D.R.S. up to this point, the investigator’s organization and more succinct interpretations of the discovered cultural patterns began. The researcher used Componential Analysis to

organize and represent the contrasts that were discovered during observation. It was a way to systematically “search for the attributes (components of meaning) associated with cultural categories” (Spradley, 1980, p. 131), “sorting them out and grouping some together as dimensions of contrast, and entering all this information onto a paradigm” (Spradley, 1980, p. 133).

This paradigm was a systematic and organized method to display the attributes of a cultural situation using cards to sort then record on a simple grid or chart that identified a domain and listed the attributes of that domain in the first left-hand column. For instance, for the partial domain, Classroom Management, the attributes such as student jobs, discipline routine or visual, student organization, rewards or forms of motivation were listed in the left-hand column of the chart. The next three or more columns consisted of the dimensions of contrast within that domain, which categorized and compared each of the attributes as either contrasts or similarities. Again, for the domain, Classroom Management, along the top of the grid, each participant’s name was documented and a simple notation of yes or no comparisons among the attributes completed each grid. Hence, the purpose of Componential Analysis was to clearly identify and expose the various features of a paradigm in an organized and systematic way. Componential Analysis was the last step of the narrowed funnel that provided a focused and in-depth study into a cultural situation, in this case, successful rural elementary teachers. In order to systematically create this analysis, Spradley’s (1980) process directed the ethnographer through a sequence of eight steps; however, these steps were not rigid and adaptations occurred depending upon the situation. If there was any missing information, then the researcher either documented more selective observations

to discover the missing information, or if time and/or interest were a factor, left them unanswered.

This succinct and systematic analysis of specifically discovered domains within the selected cultural situation of successful rural elementary teachers concluded the narrowed and focused analysis as visualized in the narrowest end of a funnel. The last three steps of the D.R.S. Method formed the re-widening of the double-ended funnel and provided more of a holistic view of the social situation.

Discovering cultural themes. As the ethnographer continually observed, recorded, investigated, asked and answered contrast questions, and identified and classified domains at the same time, it was also important to discover the cultural theme that connected domains. A cultural theme, as defined by Spradley (1980), is “any principal recurrent in a number of domains, tacit or explicit, and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning” (p. 141). A cultural theme is a revelation of patterns that had a high degree of generality and recurred in two or more domains. These reoccurrences were made explicit through a collection of expressions at a tacit level, where the ethnographer made inferences through the numerous domains that also connected the culture’s various subsystems. The process of looking for themes in this study was like taking a whole deck of cards that had been divided into fractional parts and rearranging the parts into clear relationships back to the whole.

In order for a cultural theme to emerge, this researcher found herself immersed and participating in the cultural scene. Finding oneself listening to informants, conducting participant observations for a block of time, and studying fieldnotes intensively revealed new relationships among domains, thus revealing cultural themes.

During this intensive immersion within a cultural scene, the researcher compared a single domain from one cultural scene with that of another cultural scene. For instance, a cross-cultural thematic search for “a kind of teacher” or “ways to manage a classroom” was compared. This was done while two different rural school elementary third- and fourth-grade teachers were observed and documented. This continual search for dimensions of contrast led to a search for similarities in instructional practices and classroom management. This resulted in a series of charts and diagrams showing the evolving dimensions.

Finally, Spradley (1980) suggested two “tentative guides” or strategies that proved useful; a search for universal themes and a power write as an overview of the cultural scene for an audience that has never heard about the study. A researcher utilizes a power write or quick writes by writing down as much as possible in a short amount of time to explain or describe a situation. Spradley’s (1980) suggested list of possible themes consisted of: social conflict, cultural contradictions, informal techniques of social control, managing impersonally social relationships, acquiring and maintaining status, and solving problems. It is possible that several universal themes could be discerned from one culture. For this study, the researcher focused on instructional style in reading/writing and classroom management as universal themes. Within these themes, the researcher paid attention to the similarities and/or differences the participants either revealed through interviews or classroom observations.

Spradley (1980) stated the goal of writing a summary overview “is to condense everything you know down to the bare essentials” (p. 154). Therefore, for this study, the researcher wrote brief summaries of each participant as she concentrated on the four

themes: classroom management, instructional approach/style, reading instruction, and assessment. Additional summaries, or descriptive writings, were written to focus on first the similarities then the differences between the participants' instructional approaches and classroom management. As the researcher acted as a participant observer and used this type of writing, a path evolved for additional "ethnographic research to fill gaps in the data and test new hypotheses about cultural themes" (Spradley, 1980, p. 154).

Therefore, the researcher did not necessarily have a particular "playbook" to discovering cultural themes. Instead, these tentative guides such as immersion into the culture and condensed descriptive power writes became the discovery markers for cultural themes.

Taking a cultural inventory. In preparation to writing this ethnography, this researcher's time in organizing field notes, interviews, copious lists of questions, domains, paradigm worksheets, and other notes proved fruitful. The process of taking a cultural inventory, and reviewing all of the notes, may have been laborious, but it assisted the researcher in seeing "the cultural scene as a whole ... [and] discover ways to organize [the] final paper" (p. 155). Therefore, the investigator began with finding a place to record the collection. To record and manipulate the themes for this study, the researcher used Post-It Notes on a wall covered with a sheet and divided into columns. Beginning with Step Five of the D.R.S., lists of cultural domains were gleaned from fieldnotes and more domains were identified and added to the list. Proceeding on to Step Six, the list of analyzed domains, the researcher inventoried and categorized domains as either being complete, partial, or incomplete.

Another component that was inventoried were the examples or anecdotes recorded in the fieldnotes. Giving these examples a name or a short descriptive phrase

and creating a table of contents provided a quick overview of what the fieldnotes contained. The creation of this inventory allowed the investigator an overall view of what was collected or what may have needed to be completed or required for additional research. Even “miscellaneous” data was inventory. Since the investigator took the time to create organized inventories and tables of contents, the process of writing the ethnography was followed an organized path to completion.

Writing an ethnography. The final and twelfth step of the D.R.S. Method was writing an ethnography. Although writing was the continual process throughout the data collection via observation fieldnotes, domain analysis, theme identifications, and creation of questions and lists, Spradley (1980) explained that an ethnographer’s best way to learn to write an ethnography is to actually write an ethnography. In this final phase of the D.R.S. Method, Spradley (1980) provided suggestions and stated the “nature of ethnographic writing as part of the translation process” (p. 161).

An ethnographer, as a translator of a cultural scene, has two major tasks to clearly accomplish for ethnographic writing. The first task was to make sense of the cultural patterns observed. Decoding and analyzing the cultural behavior, the artifacts, and the knowledge must be clear, in-depth, and fully engaged with the cultural scene in order to effectively correspond the final translation of the social situation. The ethnographer’s second task was to clearly communicate the cultural meanings to an audience that may or may not have prior knowledge of a particular cultural social situation. In all reality, the ethnographer must be bi-lingual in a cultural sense. The ethnographer must hold intimate knowledge of the audience’s culture and the cultural situation being translated. For this study, it was important that this translation did not lose its purpose: the goal to clearly

describe the perspectives and practices of successful rural school third- and fourth-grade ELA teachers. Numerous fieldnotes, journal entries, inventories, domains, analyses of domains, and other types of artifacts flowed from specific events toward generalizations. It was the goal of the researcher to generalize the perspectives and practices of successful rural school third- and fourth-grade ELA teachers. However, the ethnographer wrote the final ethnography mindful in a need to show the reader/audience the particulars and not get lost in the generalizations.

Spradley (1980) viewed the effective ethnographer as one who was able to master different levels of writing. “During the writing of any ethnographic description, the ethnographer must keep these various levels in mind and consciously use them to increase the communicative power of the translation” (p. 162). Spradley (1980) identified six levels of ethnographic writing as cultural translations move from general to particular statements. The beginning levels are Universal Statements followed by Cross-Cultural Descriptive Statements. In this study, the ethnographer (researcher) moved her writing through these first two levels. Beginning with a very broad statement about education and schools, the researcher narrowed her focus toward a difference between two cultures or forms of schools.

Writing Cross-Cultural Descriptive Statements will allow the reader to view the role of rural education as seen through the idea or concept of education in general. These statements will also allow the reader to understand how rural education plays an influential role in the nation’s aspirations of its youths’ education. The levels of writing continued to ascend with level three consisting of General Statements about a Society or Cultural Group and level four, General Statements, about a Specific Cultural Scene. The

difference between these two levels indicates the narrowing from general to more specific. Although the statements are generalized at level three for a particular group, or in this case rural schools, level four exposes the participant observer's documentation of a specific scene, albeit still a generalization. In the writing of this specific scene or vignette, quotations from a participant were used but still remained as general statements.

The last two levels of ethnographic writing are found to be more specific even though Spradley (1980) felt that "Levels One through Five all contrast sharply with Level Six, which takes the reader immediately to the actual level of behavior and objects, to the level of perceiving these things" (p. 165). Level five, Specific Statements about a Cultural Domain, transmits an outline or skeletal feature about a cultural event to the reader. While level six, Specific Incident Statements, shows the reader a specific event. At level six writing, the vignette, the reader is drawn into the scene and can take in or become a part of the scene as it unfolds, thus not being only informed but becoming intimate with the situation.

Therefore, the ethnographic writing consisted of at least six levels; however, not all levels are addressed in the same proportions. This mix of levels was up to the researcher with a focus on the goal to be achieved as well as the audience being addressed. For this particular dissertation writing, the middle levels were most appropriate to communicate the thick descriptions of successful rural school third- and fourth-grade ELA teachers.

Summary

This chapter presented an outline and explanation of how the data for this ethnographic study was gathered. Spradley's (1980) systematic Developmental Research

Sequence (D.R.S.) was presented. Each of the twelve steps in the D.R.S. was described and an explanation of how it was used in this particular study was presented.

Capturing the uses of literacy and the various discourses of a particular social group was best accomplished through the use of ethnographic approaches as Barton and Hamilton (1998) have stated that “detailed ethnographic accounts can identify the many ways in which reading and writing are used and valued outside of educational contexts – or ignored for more highly valued alternatives” (p. 21). However, Wolcott (1980) provided a word of caution when explaining the divisional lines between ethnographic techniques and its own evidence. He stated:

specific ethnographic techniques are freely available to any researcher who wants to approach a problem or setting descriptively. It is the essential anthropological concern for cultural context that distinguishes ethnographic method from fieldwork techniques and makes genuine ethnography distinct from other ‘on-site-observer’ approaches. And when cultural interpretation is the goal, the ethnographer must be thinking like an anthropologist, not just looking like one. (Wolcott, 1980, p. 59)

Thus, guided by Spradley’s (1980) systematic Developmental Research Sequence, as explained in his text, *Participant Observation*, this investigator conducted this particular ethnographic study to paint a detailed picture of four elementary, third- and fourth-grade reading/writing teachers as they successfully provided quality education in small, rural, low socio-economic South Texas public school systems.

Chapter IV

Results and Discussion

Introduction

Chapter four presents data collected through formal interviews and classroom observations. Chapters four and five were organized according to precedent set by other scholarly dissertations including those by Bergeron (2004), Ortlieb (2007), and Ainsworth (2008) who utilized Spradley's (1980) *Participant Observation* Developmental Research Sequence. Chapter four begins with a synthesis of interview responses from the principal and the two teachers by district. Each teacher interview section is followed by classroom observations highlighting both grand tour and mini tour instructional practices and concluding with a vignette from one entire day of observation.

Interview with Corbin ISD Principal – Ms. Ripley

Background/Education. An investigational interview was documented with Corbin Independent School District's Junior High/Elementary Principal, Ms. Ripley. She has been principal at Corbin ISD for five years. Before that, she spent 20 years in the classroom in the same district. Ms. Ripley came into Corbin ISD by way of Michigan. After her graduation from a Michigan university with her bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, she set her sights for the South.

I loved the snow when I was a child, but as I got older and I had to deal with the snow like driving in the snow, shoveling my car out from the snow, walking to class in the snow at the university, I was over the snow. So I decided I wanted to live somewhere where it was warm, and I wanted to live by the water.

Ms. Ripley made several stops along the way on both coasts of the United States coasts before settling in the South Texas community.

The Corbin school system was one of familiarity to Ms. Ripley as she was reared in a rural school district of similar size to Corbin ISD. She was a high school graduate in a class of 76 students and stated that she knew everyone from kinder all the way through high school, much like the Corbin community. Ms. Ripley stated, “You start school with them and you go all the way through with them, so we are pretty much like that here.”

Like in the Corbin community area, Ms. Ripley was familiar with the farming environment. Although her father was not directly involved, her grandfather, as well as her family history constituted a farming life. She stated that as industry moved into the area, the newer generation stopped farming and began industrial work. Even though her father never farmed, they lived on a farm. Even though Ms. Ripley was familiar with rural farm living when her path finally led her to South Texas, she claimed that she did go through a culture shock.

As Ms. Ripley continued to teach elementary at Corbin ISD, she obtained her masters in Early Childhood at Texas A&I University, which later became Texas A&M University – Kingsville. Later, she decided to go through the Partners for Educational Leadership (PEL) from the Region 2 Education Service Center (ESC2) for her principalship. There she participated in project-based activities for over a one and half-year period. As soon as she graduated from PEL in May that year, she became the principal of Corbin Junior High/Elementary School.

Ms. Ripley explained her reason for leaving the classroom and becoming the principal for Corbin Junior High/Elementary School. Although she thoroughly enjoyed

the classroom and teaching, she decided early on that she would teach until her “knees couldn’t take it anymore.” Ms. Ripley revealed that she was the kind of classroom teacher who sat on the floor with her students. She stated, “I couldn’t sit cross-legged on the floor any more without giving myself a lot of pain.” At this point in her professional career, she left the classroom, began instruction with the PEL (Partners for Educational Leadership) program and became the reading coach for the district with the *Reading First* grant.

After 20 years in elementary classrooms, Ms. Ripley found herself as the leader of both elementary and junior high teachers. In order to prepare herself for this new charge, Ms. Ripley attended every session possible at a national middle school conference and gathered copious amounts of reading materials. Even though she felt that elementary teachers and middle schools teachers were different, she claimed:

Really, teaching is good teaching, and if you know what good teaching is, it doesn’t matter, and anything I did as a pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, through third-grade teacher, I can adapt to make it work in a seventh grade class or an eighth grade class because it is good teaching. It is just adapting to the age level.

Ms. Ripley explained that the biggest difference between her elementary and junior high school teachers was the implementation of centers. The lower elementary teachers had been successful in implementing this concept; however, the junior high school teachers were slowly bringing the concept to reality into their classrooms. Technology assisted teachers to relinquish some of the classroom control in order to create more of a student-centered learning environment, but there needed to be more improvement in this area. Ms. Ripley claimed that her English Language Arts (ELA) teachers had found it to be

rather easy to create a student-centered learning environment, the science teachers were moving toward this goal through the use of labs, and the social studies teachers were making progress. However, she added that the math teachers found it hard to let go of the more direct forms of instruction. Ms. Ripley stated,

I understand, no matter what grade level, PreK all the way to forever, you need some direct teach, there has to be that direct teach piece there or else you are not the teacher. It's the amount of time and how you are going to chunk it out.

The use of classroom centers and creating student-centered learning environments was central to Ms. Ripley's educational philosophy. She was an advocate of self-learning as well as the notion that everyone in the learning community offered knowledge to teach his or her peers in addition to acquiring profound comprehension in reciprocal fashion. "We learn from each other and that you need to build a community within your classroom," expressed Ms. Ripley. She also stated that she is all for empowering the student to take control of his/her own learning. Her visions were for her teachers to set the parameters within the learning community, be explicit with expectations and directives, relinquish instructional control, and step back to facilitate. When this environment has been created, the "engagement level goes soaring through the roof," discipline problems faded to the background, and learning happens because the students become highly engaged.

Ms. Ripley continued her educational philosophy examination with her views on discipline. She saw herself as a strict classroom teacher and shared her classroom experiences with struggling teachers. Classroom observations of teachers experiencing repetitive behavioral referrals to the office often revealed the lack of consistency in

regard to discipline. The first conversation Ripley held with the teacher-in-need exposed the inconsistency, stating, “mean what you say and say what you mean and quit giving the students so many chances before infractions begin.” When the educator was fair and consistent, has set ground rules, and maintained documented follow-throughs, the teacher has created the tone for a productive learning environment with little to no discipline hindrances. This allowed the classroom community to share in the creation of a safe and secure learning environment. Thus Ms. Ripley’s firm belief in the “Golden Rule” was shared among her teachers and her students as she interacted among them all.

A strong educator with an “undying love” for the classroom calmly led the teachers in her charge as the district’s principal, and Ms. Ripley strove to improve her personal educational capabilities. She returned to school via on-line courses toward superintendency. She did not aim to become a superintendent, but aspired to become more informed about the governance of public schools in order to assist her district’s growth and seize the opportunities to empower her own education. The goal of Ms. Ripley’s education and career makes her not only a teacher with experience, but also a leader who has endeavored to increase success for her teachers and her district.

Instructional viewpoints. Ms. Ripley contributed the teachers’ use of Response to Intervention (RTI) as guiding instruction toward differing intellectual abilities. Students were identified by either the state test results of the previous year, through the administration of Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), through grade level reading assessments and fluency checks, and/or through teacher observations. Before the end of the first grading period (nine weeks) of the school year, teachers identified their students and placed them in instructional groups that ebbed and flowed within their own

classroom setting. The small group membership depended upon the skill needed and the expected products. The district implemented an after school tutorial program to assist struggling students by using smaller teacher/student ratio scenarios as well as provided time and assistance to complete homework. The teachers at Corbin ISD were flexible when it came to assisting their students. Teachers were willing to meet with students before school started, during their conference times, and even during their lunch period. Overall, she felt that the teachers of Corbin ISD had the interest of their students at heart. Ms. Ripley felt instruction for lower achieving students was met, and teachers have continued to improve their methods and strategies.

The next step was to improve the district's offerings for their gifted and talented students. It was noted that high achieving students were not being challenged enough, so an elective class at the end of the day was implemented, *Above and Beyond*. Students were not pulled from regular instruction; yet they were able to choose from a provided list to complete creative, intellectual projects. Teachers began to differentiate assignments among the students within their classes. Although assignments were different depending on the student, the content and weight of the assignments were the same for all students.

While in the process of providing advanced classes for the gifted students, the newly implemented Advancement Via Individual Determination program (AVID) was instrumental in the decision to place "middle of the road" (an academically average student) students in higher classes such as Algebra I. Since the district is small, this decision made it possible to create a class to meet the needs of some students and at the

same time provide the instructional support, high expectations, and close monitoring for others.

Parental support was an important ingredient to the success of the school. Corbin ISD has implemented a program, Parents Involved in Monthly Activities (PIMA), with the goal to get parents to come to the school and become involved in their child's education. Once a month, parents were invited to the school to participate in a special event, ranging from reading stories to the students to science nights. There were themes such as *Doughnuts for Dads*, *Muffins for Moms*, and *Tacos for Grandparents* to encourage the family, guardians, and the community to enter the school. Ms. Ripley stated that for many of the community members in this South Texas farming environment, school had not been a memorable experience, so trying to create a warm, inviting, and safe atmosphere for their students was extended to their families. However, parents were comfortable attending sporting events, so the school's leaders took that opportunity to make informal announcements about school events and parental reminders during various events.

In tandem with gaining parental involvement, student motivation was achieved through personal relationships. Ms. Ripley said that establishing a relationship with each of her students was fairly easy since she had most of them as students when she was a teacher. Nevertheless, Ripley built student/principal relationships by making herself visible on campus. The students often saw her in the classrooms, down the hallways, and outdoors on the playground. She initiated communication with her students, caring for their needs and finding out what it was she could do to make sure that they are successful. She inquired as to what needs students may have and even provided ideas because she

felt that many times students “don’t have a clue of what they need.” This caring approach and visible stance promoted an atmosphere conducive to student motivation. Students at Corbin Junior High/Elementary felt welcomed and safe the moment they walked through the school’s doors.

The most difficult aspect of teaching today has been to imbue the passion for learning from educators to the community. Ms. Ripley strove to communicate the importance to have education come first in the home and help parents to realize how important it is to know what their child is doing in the classroom to become involved. Ripley expressed a typical communication with parents:

I know I am asking your kid to only read for 20 minutes, but it is so important. I know I am asking you to get your kid to bed at a decent hour, but it is so important because in the morning they can’t function. Just getting parents to get on with that, it is like an uphill battle. Here, it is generational poverty, so it is very hard to break that cycle. We can only hope to break it with these kids. We work very hard to try to do that.

Through parent conferences, letters and phone calls home, and special community invitations, the Corbin Junior High/Elementary teachers and staff have been successful in building school pride and community connections. As Ripley articulated, pride in the school was founded on their educational accomplishments, which created a pride within the students. This school pride then radiated to families and the community. Corbin ISD has seen a new generation of success in its students of which the earlier generations did not experience or even consider possible.

In order to promote continual district success, ongoing professional development for the faculty is essential. Ripley restated her philosophy of education:

I believe everyone should continue to grow and everyone is on that same developmental path... it is true for children, it is true for all of us, no matter if you are an educator, a farmer, or a homemaker, we are all on that path of experience, learning, getting better, doing things better, and me too, I am on a path.

Therefore, Ripley has led her teachers as a facilitator and mentor to guide professional development through discourse communities as they share teaching strategies that work, thus creating academic success for both teachers and students. Ripley believed that when a school district was able to demonstrate to the community its success through the success of the students and create a community of pride, then the future generation “will have a clue on what to do with their kids ... otherwise it will be an endless cycle.”

Reading instruction. The reading program the district implemented was set by the *Reading First* guidelines, which mandated the use of a basal program that was scientifically based. The district adopted SRA-McGraw-Hill *Open Court*, but Ripley admitted that they did not want to use it any longer and wanted to adopt another program, but program replacement was not an option. It was not until the district brought in a team of consultants to provide professional development to implement *Open Court* correctly that they found themselves “loving the program.” Ripley stated, “I have really come to believe through this whole process, anything out there can probably work if you have all the pieces that you need and that means a lot of professional development on how to work it because really when you look at those books, a lot of smart people write them.” Even though the district had adopted the use of *Open Court*, now called *Imagine It*, for

many years, it was not until recently the professional development component brought the district into the full scripted use of this program. Earlier leadership guided the teachers to just using the parts of the program that each teacher saw fit. Ripley felt, through no fault of the leadership, that this created a lack of continuity in the program. She stated, “We have learned that you can’t do that because it doesn’t work.”

When Ripley was asked of her thoughts about the use of scripted programs and the removal of professionalism of her teachers, she was adamant about reading being too important of a skill to “be taught haphazard, it’s got to be done flawlessly.” Therefore, if the scripted program was going to provide district-wide results and continuity of reading instruction, then full use of the program in its entirety needed to be monitored.

Modification of the curriculum was not seen as necessary as long as it addressed the TEKS. Ms. Ripley explained what was really modified were the lessons. Teachers at Corbin ISD did not change the scope/sequence of their lessons in order to remain on track for the year; however, lessons changed with the group of children and the experiences the students brought to the classroom. Ms. Ripley observed year after year that students lacked vocabulary. Since Corbin is a small farming community and there is little to minimal exposure to outside cultures, the students of this district were deficient in experience and prior knowledge. “It’s hard to build [vocabulary] when you don’t go anywhere,” stated Ripley. Thus, in Ms. Ripley’s opinion, students’ minimal vocabulary experience influenced their lack of reading comprehension. However, the district worked hard to overcome the limitations of their students by physically providing field trips, hands on experiences, and technology access in every classroom. Every teacher was equipped with a Promethean Board for classroom and small group instruction along with

computers, iPads and iPods with Internet access in each classroom. The teachers have become creative in using these devices for vocabulary enrichment. Faculty and staff were more cognizant of their vocabulary choices in everyday speech in front of all students. Ripley felt that if her students heard her and her staff using the vocabulary words in their speech then the students' use of newer vocabulary became reciprocal in nature. Ms. Ripley and her staff made mindful efforts to use the new vocabulary of the week in casual speech while passing in the hallways.

Vocabulary, as one of the five research-based approaches recognized by the National Reading Panel (2000), is necessary to teach children to read; however, Ripley and her staff have come to believe that becoming a fluent reader is of utmost importance. "You have to have fluency because without fluency you will never get through anything. If you can't read fluently, reading takes too long and who wants to read if it is taking so long," expressed Ripley. The teachers at Corbin ISD hold weekly fluency checks and practice diligently with each student. Ripley articulated that the goal is not to create speed-readers, but fluent readers.

In conjunction to the reading approaches documented by the National Reading Panel (2000), Ripley emphasized the importance of relationships. She felt that building a relationship between student and book, student and their teacher, and student and parent is an important component to reading comprehension acquisition. Ms. Ripley stated:

I want children to like to read, and I want them to want to read. I want to see them reading while they are walking because it [the book] is so good they don't want to put it down. And I know it is not good and they get in trouble because they have their reading book out in class because they can't stand not knowing

what is going to happen next. I know then I have got a reader and when I have got a reader, I have got a learner.

The theme of “relationship” flowed throughout Ms. Ripley’s message. The educators at Corbin ISD strove to nurture that relationship between text and reader and for superior reading teachers to share that relationship through the desire to teach others the love of reading. For Ripley, superior reading teachers must be well-read and possess a love for reading. She commented that when interviewing new hires for the district, one of her basic questions inquires the interviewee’s reading enjoyment such as “What is your favorite book?”

Assessment. Corbin ISD is a year-round calendar district with nine week grading periods with the tenth week set aside for tutorials for those students in need. Teachers used blackline master assessments provided by the *Imagine It!* reading program at the end of each reading unit along with weekly practice masters with each reading story. Along with the weekly assessments of the story, fluency checks were performed on all students. In order to align with the state-testing instrument, the district held a mock state-testing week in late November to early December that included all tests for that particular grade level. For third-grade, math and reading mock state tests were administered. For fourth-grade, the same tests were administered in addition to a two-day writing component. The data from these mock tests was disaggregated and used to group students depending on their needs.

Interview with third-grade teacher -- Mrs. West

Background/Education. Among all the participants interviewed for this study, Mrs. West was the only educator who was reared in a larger urban type area. In addition

to being educated in an urban district, Mrs. West was also raised in a military family, which resulted in varied experiences attending nine different school districts between kindergarten and 12th grade. Of the many transfers to various districts, one such transfer found Mrs. West in a German Department of Defense School (DOD) where her third-grade teacher, a “very calm and casual educator,” influenced her later decision to become a teacher. Archeology was Mrs. West’s first interest until she realized that while on dig sites it might be days before being able to take a bath. While her husband was stationed in Washington, Mrs. West attended school, obtained her teaching K6 certification with a bachelor’s in interdisciplinary studies in childhood education, and began teaching. Education became her excavation site as she met and influenced new groups of students every year, uncovering their strengths and weaknesses. Soon, Mrs. West conferred a master’s in reading and literacy. Later she and her family transferred to South Texas where she took the Texas teacher certification exam. During the time of this interview, she was in her second year teaching third-grade at Corbin ISD. Mrs. West reflected:

This is the first time to be in the same classroom for more than one year. Even when I was in Washington and taught at the same district, they moved me from kinder at one school to teaching third-grade at another school.

The influence of “being the new kid in the classroom” and even a new teacher at a different district has impacted Mrs. West’s views for incoming students during the academic calendar year. She clearly remembers her feelings entering a new school district and leaving acquired friends and works to keep that that perspective in mind when receiving new students into her classroom. “Corbin has a large foster [and migrant] population, so there are new students on a regular basis.” Mrs. West continued to share,

“I try to make sure that my instruction, classroom atmosphere is such that the kids know that it is okay to come into my room.” Again reflecting on her third-grade DOD teacher in Germany, “I loved the class and the way he interacted with the class. He constantly had an influx of kids coming and going throughout the school year. He made students fit seamlessly, just part of the group.” In addition to Mrs. West’s perspective on new students, she also believes every year of experience she gains has provided her growth, because for Mrs. West, teaching is never the same. Although one may be teaching the same material, the students change and thus create a whole new community environment in which to learn.

Along with challenges and changes, Mrs. West has felt that her personal experiences and living in different places allowed her to share these experiences with students. For example, a story her class had read presented a platform to discuss her experiences in Germany, “When I moved from Texas to Germany, how different it was there. I was also able to share when my husband was in Japan for 14 months” and how she used Skype to communicate with him and adjust to the concept of time zones. She has given thought to becoming a literacy coach or to one day may continue her studies to become “a principal, but right now I love being in the classroom.”

Mrs. West’s many experiences in and outside the classroom influenced her views on education. From being the new student with every new transfer as an elementary and secondary student to teaching environments in two different states, Mrs. West has shared her experiences in the classroom not only in oral anecdotes, but also in the way she views her students. Her philosophy toward education was not only to provide caring and nurturing atmospheres of learning but also to allow the classroom community to become

close through sharing her personal experiences and building a safe atmosphere for students. Mrs. West maintained, as one of her goals, the creation of a high comfort level within the classroom so that with her encouragement and nurturing, students will “say it loud and say it proud. “I don’t want students to think that I only want to hear the right answers but we learn from the wrong ones.” Similar to the view throughout the district, the major component of Mrs. West’s educational philosophy is: “Para los niños, I really do feel that vibe here, from every teacher I talk to from prekindergarten through the fifth-grade, it really is all about the kids.”

Classroom management. One of the components for good classroom management is organization (Wong & Wong, 2009). A well-organized teacher models organizational skills for students, which provides for optimal learning time. Mrs. West stated, “Another important management aspect is to not have any lull periods. We are constantly moving, time on task, even though at a fast pace.”

With pressures of the state mandated assessment and its report to the community, little classroom time was wasted. There was a plan for every moment, and the students were well aware of their job. Mrs. West used the analogy: “I am like the tax collector, if you are wasting my time, and when it is your time, I will collect and that means you are at the pole [recess time], you are working because it’s going to get done.” Utilizing every moment of the school day was important not only to maintain learning, but also to discourage any disciplinary issues.

These organizational and behavioral expectations were set the first day of school. The companion math/science teacher worked closely with Mrs. West in setting procedures in place and thus establishing authority and discipline expectations.

Discipline was summed up with the acronym NED: **N**ever give up, **E**ncourage others, and **D**o your best. When it came to handling discipline situations, Mrs. West took care of her own discipline issues, not sending the student to the office. She felt that by the time the student arrived to the office, the offense was either forgotten about or the student had achieved his/her goal: to get out of the classroom. Her method was to “nip it in the bud right away, call the parents.” Students were expected to write out their own note to their parents for the misbehavior encountered. They were well aware of the consequence on the first day of school with the message that certain types of behavior will not be tolerated and time on task for all students will be maintained.

Communication in the classroom involved students and teachers talking to each other. Noise in the classroom was an expectation during certain parts of the day when students were working in cooperative groups. “There has to be noise, and I want there to be noise. I want them to be talking, I want them interacting.” This complementary “academia noise” was part of the learning process for Mrs. West’s students as she monitored the noise level to minimize disruption to neighboring groups or the surrounding classrooms. Quiet times were reserved for direct instruction, testing or silent reading, which created a balance of communication mediums for students. One effective method used to redirect classroom discussions and maintain the level of communication noise was through the use of NED tickets. When Mrs. West passed out tickets to students exhibiting the desired behavior, others quickly noted this to replicate the same behavior.

Motivating students to remain on task, exhibit the appropriate behavior, or become engaged in the learning process took various forms. From the distribution of NED tickets with a chance to win a prize from the weekly Friday drawings by the campus

principal to an extra 20 or 30 minutes of “free time,” these rewards motivated Mrs. West’s students. Free time for students could be extra time on the iPad or the computer with the freedom to choose from various activities or games or it could be recess on Fridays. Mrs. West observed, “I find it funny that many times the students choose games that were in centers like main idea or hangman.” Thus students were motivated to continue learning but in a more student-centered environment of self-selection.

Other forms of motivation have been through the *Accelerated Reader Program*. Students earned points for every computer-generated test scored within certain percentage point. These points were set in ten-point goal increments and students could spend points for prizes. After 50 points, they could be “coach” or “teacher” for the day, or have lunch with the principal. The third-grade teachers also purchased banana splits for students who accomplished their sight words and fluency phrases or multiplication charts for the math teacher. Intrinsic rewards or praises were used along with the extrinsic rewards to motivate students; however, having a tangible goal to reach was a powerful learning tool to motivate students at Corbin ISD.

Instructional approaches/styles. Meeting the needs of a diverse intellectual classroom began with getting to know the students’ prior knowledge, their strengths and weaknesses, and likes during the first two weeks of the school year. Before Mrs. West became acquainted with each student, she allowed students to have free choice to sit anywhere in the classroom because this was when she observed and noted student interactions and patterns. Unless there was a discipline problem that caused a distraction from learning, Mrs. West did not form her “learning groups” or “pods” until the second week of school. These heterogeneously grouped pods were determined by the various

attributes associated with each student. At different points throughout the school year, Mrs. West formed a new group so students had the opportunity to work with most, if not all, of the students. Cooperative groups have been successful for her students and have provided her support while she monitored each group. Centers were included during the school day to allow students to move from center to center and work either as pairs, in small groups, or as individuals on tasks for the week. This time provided instructional opportunities for Mrs. West to work with homogeneous groups with specific skills, RTI, as well as for her assistant to work with another small group. In addition to classroom observations, fluency checks, and formal/informal assessments, Mrs. West administered the *Texas Primary Reading Inventory* (TPRI) individually to her students in order to obtain additional information toward her instructional planning. Additional time to address the needs of students with accelerated skills was scheduled during tutorials after school.

Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of her students along with their prior knowledge, Mrs. West made it a goal to contact her students' parents to involve them with their child's education. Along with the various functions promoted by the district through the annual Dragon Fest and monthly themes inviting the family and community into the school, Mrs. West called the parents of her students and sent home weekly homework calendars to let parents know the events and expectations for the week. These weekly homework calendars were checked every morning, and NED tickets were awarded for parent signatures, and Mrs. West responded to any notes from parents. Mrs. West explained, "It's a quick way for us to communicate."

In addition to keeping parents informed on a weekly basis, parents were encouraged to attend the various functions sponsored by the district. Open House was the initial event at the beginning of the year that began face-to-face contact with parents and delivered the message of high expectations and the importance parental involvement in the academic success of their child. Many of her students' parents expected calls or notes home to inform them of inappropriate behavior; however, Mrs. West made it a point to send home positive notes and make calls home that praised the good work of her students. Mrs. West shared the positive impact on behavior a simple phone call home can make, especially a call that can be done immediately during the school day. Mrs. West added that it has been just as important to let the parent of a student know "what a pleasure they [their child is] are, or they have been trying hard, or if they have been struggling with this concept and finally got it and you should be proud, they didn't give up." Therefore, parent contact and open communication were important components to academic success in Mrs. West's classroom.

High stakes testing and accountability has been the most difficult aspect of teaching in Mrs. West's opinion. Even though the 2011-2012 year was non-reporting with the implementation of the first administration of State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), teachers at Corbin ISD exhibited the added stress level of this more rigorous test and the changes from the previous state mandated test, TAKS. Mrs. West expounded:

Just knowing the test itself is going to be more rigorous, I find myself adding enrichment to what I am already doing because I want to make sure that these

kids succeed. As a teacher, I would do it anyway, but just knowing that they have to be able to perform at a certain level adds the added stress.

Mrs. West's semi-departmentalized assignment allowed her to teach all of the third-graders at Corbin ISD, and she was accomplished in reporting 100% of the third-graders passing of 2011 TAKS with 61% earning commended performance on the reading portion. Even though last year's test results were a great accomplishment, knowing the importance of the results to the community and this year's unsure testing expectations, increased the level of stress and hindered creative teaching in the classroom.

Reading instruction. Entering the second year of use, the basal reading program published by McGraw-Hill, *SRA Imagine It!* was used to its fullest extent. Although this program is scripted, Mrs. West did not follow the script 100% of the time. She liked the idea that the script was there if needed and provided a projection the program's end result; however, Mrs. West took a different path. "We get there, we just go about it slightly different." By this, Mrs. West professionally individualized the teaching material to fit her own style as well as the learning styles of her students.

The district also made available the CSCOPE curriculum; however, only the Vertical Alignment Document (VAD) was monitored to address the reading readiness and support standards through the *Imagine It* program. The CSCOPE exemplar lessons were mainly used in the instruction of math, science, and social studies. Even though Mrs. West did not use CSCOPE's exemplar lessons, she attended roll out sessions provided by the Education Service Center, Region 2. During that time, she learned how to maneuver the site and among the modules as well as find the Vertical Alignment Documents (VADs) and Year at a Glance (YAG).

With the use of the basal reading program and informational documents, Mrs. West based her individualized teaching on the diverse needs of her students. Some students may require a slower pace of instruction or additional enrichment. Mrs. West made no changes to the curriculum; instead, changes to the method of delivery to meet the needs of the students occurred with every group. These instructional changes were made to address the two areas of reading her students struggled with the most: vocabulary and comprehension.

Another program used to assist with reading motivation was the *Accelerated Reader Program*. Students had free access to leveled texts in the school library. Students checked out two texts, one chapter book and one picture book within their predetermined Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) from the computerized STAR test. Mrs. West monitored the average grade performance and point accumulation each week on the AR tests for each student in her classroom.

Setting a purpose for reading was an instructional component of the *Imagine It!* basal reading program. Every story was classified by genre and a specific comprehension skill or strategy was showcased. Mrs. West implemented an additional method from another program outside the district, *Daily Thought Starters*, into her instruction that motivated the students into setting their purpose for reading. These thought starters “get the kids going and they start thinking outside the box because it gives them something to work off of as opposed to having to sit there and try to think of something on their own.” Experience with the use of these cards resulted in students coming up with other thoughts and making connections across the curriculum or from previous year’s studies and synthesizing the information. Therefore, beginning the school year with scripted guides

to set a purpose transformed into the authentic communication, prediction, and questioning of students.

The use of technology was evident for not only direct instruction but also for cooperative group or center activities. There were six computer stations, two iPods, four iPads, and use of the Promethean Board for small groups, pairs, or individual use of the software or available online activities. The technology was used to enhance the skills and strategies and content within the reading classroom.

Identifying the top five reading skills through observation, research, and reflection, Mrs. West discussed her thoughts on the reading skills most beneficial to students. In her opinion, fluency and comprehension were the top two skills. However, based on her mini assessments, Mrs. West stated that a student may appear to be a fluent reader but it did not mean reading comprehension was occurring. Mrs. West observed students who read smoothly, at a rapid rate, but were not able to answer comprehension questions. Yet she also knew reading too slowly inhibited comprehension. Therefore, Mrs. West concluded that in conjunction with fluency there must be connections made between the reader and the text to improve comprehension. “I really think that it is important for kids to make connections to what they already know, what they think they might know, what they have heard, what they have seen, anything.”

Making these connections to the text also included the importance of vocabulary, which grew as students took on additional reading. Motivating additional reading must include a level of fluency and conformability to eliminate comprehension frustration. Mrs. West reflected over her past teaching events and the amount of time spent on vocabulary development. Introducing a list of words was not the answer to solving the

weakness but finding these words within a text and using them within the students' own writing created ownership. Along with vocabulary acquisition, the student's ability to identify multiple meanings, figurative language, or use of idioms within the text and develop vocabulary through writing and speech aided reading comprehension. The ultimate goal was reading comprehension, and the vehicles to steer students to comprehension success was through fluency and acquiring continual vocabulary growth.

Determining instructional success was rated on the success of the students on standardized testing. Mrs. West related much of her teaching as being constantly associated to standardized testing and how it was "driving everything." She felt that if the standardized testing element and the pressure that it exerted were removed, a slower instructional pace would allow students more time to internalize the skill. Also because of the rigorous aspect of the state mandated test and increased expectation of TEKS mastery, the amount of time spent on each skill has decreased. Mrs. West felt that if more time was allowed to enrich the comprehension skill, her students would improve not only in their ability to understand the text but also have the time to make deeper connections to the text through cross curricular assignments and projects. However, by using the method of accountability and searching to find "the magic formula to fit it all in and do it in the depth and sequence for all the kids to get it and at the pace in order for all the kids to really" comprehend what was read, Mrs. West possessed the skills to accomplish the end goal: to have students reading at or above grade level.

Assessment. Students were monitored on a daily, weekly, and quarterly basis. Since the incorporation of RTI, documentation of student progress must be presented objectively, and Mrs. West utilized all forms of assessments to document the progress of

her students. Formal assessments consisted of the state mandated tests and the accompanying benchmark assessments, while informal assessments were TPRI and unit or weekly assessments. Due to the amount of time involved, authentic assessments were not used as much as desired, but Mrs. West documented anecdotal occurrences during classroom discussions and observations in order to adjust her plans to meet the needs of her students. Mrs. West commented,

As I am walking around, if I am seeing or hearing the same kinds of things or struggles, I really hone in on that because that tells me a lot more than just have the child sit in front of me and read these words. I get huge amounts of information from teacher observations.

While making these observations, Mrs. West stated that she was constantly reflecting and evaluating her own teaching performance.

The wheels are constantly going for me because I want to make sure that what I did, did it work, and if it didn't, why? Was it my delivery, was it the day, was it the story, was it not a good fit for the story we are reading?

Therefore, any and every form of assessment was necessary in order to reflect upon the teaching delivery so that changes and adjustments were made, something that Mrs. West constantly sought in order to improve the academic success of her students.

Mrs. West's Room

Grand tour. Mrs. West's room was located in a cluster of portable buildings for third- through fifth-grades and adjoined with the other third-grade teacher who taught math and science. First thing in the morning, the doors to these adjoining rooms were propped open so teachers and students moved freely between the two rooms. Once

instruction began, the doors were closed. Upon entering Mrs. West's room, the adjoining door to the other third-grade classroom was to the right and to the left was a bookcase with the backside to the doorway to create a foyer effect. There are charts posted on the backside of this bookcase that tracked students' progress with *Accelerated Reader* points and fluency word charts with the use of stickers. Sitting on top of the shelf was a small receptacle for the NED tickets. After earning and signing the backside of the NED ticket, students were provided a particular time during the class to deposit their tickets.

Sometimes students went to the location individually, but there were times when an assigned student walked about the classroom with this receptacle collecting tickets.

The next location in the classroom consisted of a kidney shaped table for small group instruction. At this table, the teacher worked with small groups or, during center time, her assistant worked with a group as predetermined by the teacher with a specific reading skill. There was a magnetic whiteboard located along this wall that posted the current date and reminders. Also posted was a tri-colored yardstick with a clothespin for each third-grade student. This was used to monitor discipline infractions. All students began the day with their clothespin on green. The next section was colored yellow for a warning, and the last one-third was colored red, which indicated a note or call home. Continuing along the back right hand wall, there was a filing cabinet used as a divider with two computers stationed along the remainder of the wall. Posted along the top of the wall were large phonics cards and the alphabet. There were times during certain lessons, especially spelling lessons, where the students directed their attention toward the use of these cards to assist with the spelling of a word.

The wall opposite the entry way was lined with cubicles, and each cubicle was labeled for each student to store binders, books, and school supplies. Also along this wall in the right hand corner, next to the cluster of computers, was a learning station. During center time, students had the opportunity to work independently on reading cards by reading the passage and answering the questions. Students recorded their answers on notebook paper and then did a self-check with the answer card located at that center. On the wall above this center was a bulletin board that posted the theme of the reading unit for that six weeks. Completing the wall toward the left were two pocket charts that provided center locations for the students each day and were positioned in front of another filing cabinet. During centers, students moved between the two adjoining classrooms to work with the teacher in their needed areas or skills.

The next wall was lined with four student-accessible computers for use during centers or *Accelerated Reader* testing. There was a bulletin board used as a Word Wall centered on the wall; however, during the five-week observational period no new words were added. Above this, closer to the ceiling, were more large phonics cards for students to use in order to access spelling patterns for sounds. All the phonics wall posters were products from Open Court Publications that were used from previous years. At the end of this wall was the teacher's desk and shelving of resource materials for her class. On the teacher's desk was a document camera and laptop computer for use during direct whole class or small group instruction. This area was enclosed in such a way that it formed a square area with the desk facing the class and the teacher's back to the wall. There were shelves positioned in front of the desk and a student's desk off to the side. On the shelf was storage for extra pencils, notebook paper, and other school supplies.

Mounted in the center of the fourth classroom wall was a Promethean Board with the projector mounted from the ceiling toward the center of the room. In front of the Promethean Board were stackable baskets where test boards were stored. Completing this wall were two bookcases containing various children's literature and classroom sets of novels, such as *Charlotte's Web*. There was a round table positioned in this nook to facilitate small group instruction such as guided reading centers.

The center of the classroom was complete with student desks. The flat-topped desks with a center compartment were arranged in four pods of four students in each pod. Students and teacher moved easily among the desks. As soon as the group of students entered the classroom, they immediately placed backpacks on the back of their chairs, pulled out their homework folders, headed to cubicles to retrieve their reading materials, returned to their assigned desk, and began work either in groups or individually. When class was dismissed for departmentalized switch, students were sure to clean up and push in chairs underneath their desks for the next group of students.

Mini tour.

Classroom management. Mrs. West established a daily routine to begin every class. Students entered the room after eating breakfast in the school's cafetorium, placed backpacks on the backs of their chairs, pulled out their homework folder for the teacher to view, and went to their assigned cubby to retrieve their writing binder and Reader's Notebook. On most days, students either read AR silently or took an AR test on one of the classroom computers. Mondays included an additional procedure, as students knew to prepare for a spelling pre-test by getting their notebook paper ready for the pre-test. Mrs. West constantly monitored her students, greeted them, and moved about the

classroom to check their homework folder for parent signatures. She also handed out NED tickets and smelly stickers for having items ready (i.e. reading binder, notebook) and signatures on desk. NED tickets were also used throughout the lessons to reward students for answering questions correctly and doing well on assessments. Each of these tickets were signed by the student and placed in a container kept by the door. Mrs. West established a procedure to not sign these tickets right away if instruction was under way. She stated to the students, “When you stop to sign, you turn off your learning.” By 8 a.m. students were seated and ready for ELA instruction. Mrs. West also checked the lunch counts and emailed confirmations to the office.

Mrs. West had a behavioral management system that was not only visual, but also a procedure that the students were familiar and comfortable with. She had a tri-colored yardstick hanging behind the kidney shaped guided instruction table with student named clothespins. At the beginning of each day, all the clothespins were placed in the “green zone” and were only moved if there were behavioral infractions throughout the day. During the data collection phase, there were only three instances where students were instructed to move their clips. One of these instances occurred when one of the students made fun of another student’s reading ability. Mrs. West was firm but not demeaning in this action and did not step away from the instruction at hand. All she had to do was instruct the student to move his clip, which he quietly did. It was later in the lesson when Mrs. West discussed in a calm, respectful manner with the student the need to refrain from speaking during instruction and how to move himself away from negative situations.

Time on task was an important message that was reiterated in Mrs. West's classroom. Mrs. West allowed student talk at appropriate times; however, when the talk was unfocused she was heard saying, "We have no time to talk." Mrs. West's time management was evident with being able to start and end lessons on time and did not allow distracted or misbehaving students to take away from instruction. Students were reminded that if they take her time, then she will take their time meaning they lose some recess time. In order to monitor time management, Mrs. West stayed in close proximity to students needing gentle reminders to remain on task. Mrs. West maintained effective use of her time in order to complete the needed instruction and also to stay on track for switching classes in this semi-departmentalized setting. Staying on time helped Mrs. West to be prepared for section B of the third-grade group. Daily, Mrs. West announced to section 'A' students, "Time to pack up and clean up. Prepare for restroom break and switch classes." After the class returned from the restroom break in the cafetorium, section 'A' re-entered the classroom to collect their backpacks and entered the adjoining room while section 'B' lined up outside the portable classroom on the ramp. Mrs. West opened the classroom door to greet each student, and the routine process of preparing for instruction began again. In addition to time management, students achieved the seamless movement between the different levels of lessons, from spelling, to vocabulary and word study, to grammar, and reading comprehension lessons.

Organization also allowed for time management. The Reader's Notebook for each student was tabbed and ready for use as well as the 3-ring three-inch binder containing practice and assessment worksheets. Students knew the procedure of where certain materials were stored for their use, such as test boards, red grading pens,

sharpened pencils, and fresh notebook paper. There were several times during the investigation when Mrs. West stated to the students, “We have a lot of work to get done today.” Students responded with positive voices, “As always.”

Instructional approaches. Mrs. West’s instructional approach was largely whole class instruction; however, the seating arrangement allowed for periodic small group discussion and peer assistance. Desks were arranged in what Mrs. West referred to as “pods.” These pods were in four groups of four students per group. When students were instructed to “turn and talk to a partner to ask and answer each other’s questions,” Mrs. West roamed the classroom listening to the paired discussion and occasionally offered support when needed. Moving from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered active learning in small groups was a charge from the administration that Mrs. West found comforting. She recalled Marzano’s research that the more students are allowed to talk and express their thoughts and opinions the more internalized the learning. Among the activities Mrs. West provided for oral discussion among students, whether as a whole class or within small groups, students enjoyed internalizing vocabulary words by playing charades. Student-teams acted out the words for the rest of the class to guess the proper vocabulary word. Sometimes the students indicated if they were performing an antonym or synonym to the word. This activity provided excitement and a deeper understanding of the words.

Along with student-centered activities, Mrs. West provided long wait-time for the student response. She allowed enough time for the student to think, and she had set the expectation to the rest of the class to also provide wait-time and be patient by raising their hands. After wait-time was provided and it appeared that the student was not able to

answer, instead of calling on another student, Mrs. West asked, “Would you like to phone a friend?” This allowed the student to get a partner to whisper the response to him/her so he/she could answer the question. This type of student interaction and interdependence contributed to the sense of community and shared learning within the classroom.

Mrs. West also incorporated the use of technology in her instruction. She stated that she would not know what to do if her Promethean Board malfunctioned. She used the Promethean Board daily to either display the worksheets while students followed along to correct/answer their own worksheets or the online resource to read the anthology’s weekly selection. During center time, a small group of students used the Promethean Board for a focused learning activity. Other computers in the classroom were also used during time in centers for programs with *Imagine It*, *Spelling City*, or *Study Island*. At each of the computer stations, students were allowed to work in pairs making it more of a competitive game. In addition, centers offered a shared time between both third-grade teachers. All the students were managed by one pocket chart in Mrs. West’s room. During this time, students checked their location and moved freely between rooms, depending on which center they were instructed to attend.

Rounding out Mrs. West’s instructional style was her ability to captivate her students with personal stories and events that had direct connections to the reading material. One such occasion was when the students came across the word “maze.” Mrs. West shared a moment from her childhood where she and her siblings were in a maze in Germany. She had all the students interested in this place where her parents sat in a restaurant and viewed the maze from above, watched their children, and how the siblings enjoyed trying to find their way out.

In addition to personal connections, Mrs. West assisted students with making connections across the curricula. When reading “Teammates,” the topic about segregation was connected to an earlier lesson in Social Studies on civil rights. Mrs. West led the discussion to assist the students to recall their earlier studies in history about “people against people because of the color of their skin.” Mrs. West also added connections to remembering information through visual means. During one investigative period on word study, Mrs. West reminded a couple of students who had stayed after school for tutorials the little “trick” she had them use in order to remember the difference in prefix and suffix. “Remember to look at the ABC chart to recall about the location for prefix and suffix.” One of the students promptly stated, “PQRS, the P stands for prefix and comes before the word. The R stands for the root word, and the S is for the suffix coming after the word.” The student was proud to be able to share this information with the class.

Reading Instruction. Grammar, word study, spelling, and reading comprehension skills composed the core of her reading instruction. The programmed reading anthology, McGraw-Hill *ImagineIt!* series, was the major resource for study skills, blackline practice worksheets, and assessments. Before the year began, Mrs. West prepared three-inch three-ringed binders for each student of blackline materials tabbed into six sections: Fluency Checks, Grammar, Skills, Cursive, and Tests. Other resources such as *Measuring Up* were also incorporated into lessons to enhance reading instruction and provide opportunities to model and practice testing strategies.

After the weekly spelling pre-tests on Monday, students were guided through word study. (If students scored 100 % on this pre-test, they were exempt from the

scheduled test on Thursday or Friday.) Mrs. West displayed the worksheet on the Promethean Board while students either viewed from the board or their own worksheet copy in their reading binder. The students were led to chorally read the word list, and Mrs. West challenged the students to find something the words in one line had in common. Responses from students were: “/ay/ giving the long a sound,” “all rhyme,” “all have one syllable,” or “they have vowel digraphs.” Mrs. West roamed the classroom passing out NED tickets and providing positive praises to students who had responded to this inquiry.

After spelling and word study lessons, students were seamlessly led through alternating reading and grammar practice. Students chorally and independently read a sentence displayed as well as identified the parts of speech, definitions and an example, of a particular vocabulary word. At times, Mrs. West called on groups of students to read aloud depending on the color of shirt they were wearing by saying, “I say it, you say it,” and the students repeated the vocabulary word and definition. Round Robin reading was also used at times to read the week’s anthology selection. The week’s selection was normally read aloud by the students on Tuesdays then the students listened to the selection to be read to them via an online resource program on Wednesdays. Students experienced silent reading mostly with the self-selected AR library text, but the vocabulary warm-up passage in the anthology was pre-read silently before echo reading the list of words found in the text. Occasionally, the students re-read the week’s selection silently before the story’s discussion circle.

Before reading the selection, students were guided to analyze the title, determine the genre, and read the focus question in order to make a personal connection to the

selection. In one selection, “The Beauty and the Beast,” students quickly made connections to the popular Disney movie, but were guided to focus on the theme of the story. Then they discussed if they had ever met someone for the first time and did not like them. A student responded, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Mrs. West was impressed with the use of figurative language and acknowledged this connection. She then moved to the specific skill for this selection, which was predicting.

Each “pod” of students had access to a small basket of supplies that was placed in the center of their cluster of desks. A *Daily Thought Starter* card was among one of the articles. The students used this card to aid them in making predictions about the selection. “I predict that the beast is going to hurt the man,” was the response of one student after viewing three to four pages of the selection. After reading a selection, this same *Daily Thought Starter* card was referred to again in order to summarize or ponder on the selection. As soon as Mrs. West gave the cue, “Alright, move your chairs to make a large rectangle,” the students became excited. “Yes! We get to book talk!” responded one student. “I like it when we do this,” commented another. Therefore, students were engaged in this activity and enjoyed having more control over the learning dynamics. Students completed the supplied sentences starters such as: “I can’t believe ...” “I wonder if they (or why)...” and “I didn’t know...” During this practice, students politely raised hands to be called upon by another student. Even Mrs. West raised her hand in order to have her turn at asking a question or redirecting previous discussion. The students were responsible for the overall direction of the book talk as well as the opportunities for open discussion. Many students had splendid questions; however, there were times a student’s question was not answered by the student called upon. Instead,

that student offered another question. Sometimes, another student was later redirected to a previous question in order to answer or ponder another question from it. Having this opportunity for inquiry allowed for critical thinking and promoted deeper comprehension of the selection.

During the reading of a selection, Mrs. West stopped the students occasionally to ask various questions depending on the primary skill and to clarify vocabulary use. There were times a mini-lesson took place either just before or during the reading. One such lesson focused on the purpose of the author and the connections the students could make to the reading as writers themselves. Mrs. West stressed the need for the students to “read with a writer’s eye, to be descriptive and create a picture and to think how the writer describes what happens.” Students were guided to stop every occasionally during a reading to discuss the story or make connections with their tablemate. A couple discussions involved determining the main idea of certain paragraphs or finding causes and effects. Each time the opportunity arose, Mrs. West had the class follow and copy her notes or wording from her composition book as displayed by the document camera. Then she decreased the amount of scaffolding and allowed table groups to determine the next paragraph’s main idea with supporting details. Finally, Mrs. West directed this guided practice into independent practice by having the students work alone as she monitored their work. At times, Mrs. West roamed the room from one table group to the next to see how students were progressing or she had the students meet her at her desk for her to evaluate their work.

In addition to these approaches to learning, reading strategies such as clusters, KWL, T-charts, cause/effect charts, and sequence diagrams were produced during this

investigation as well as answering the story's questions in complete sentences. Grammar and reading were combined in several activities such as using the week's selection in order to find nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. The students prepared a page in their Reader's Notebook with four columns and worked together to classify the words after reading one page. The products were modeled by the teacher and recorded by the student in their Reader's Notebook. Mrs. West maintained her own Reader's Notebook (a black/white composition notebook that had been tabbed) in order to display via the Elmo or document camera. As students worked together, Mrs. West provided positive praises. Struggling students, even though quieter in the conversation, found success with an expression of relief as they enjoyed working with their peers.

Finally, in order to prepare for the state mandated test, students used TAKS formatted booklets to not only practice reading skills but to also practice and show test taking strategies. Mrs. West included an example of initial test taking steps such as predictions of the selection using the title and picture cues. Mrs. West often reminded the students to look for bold printed or underlined words as possible vocabulary words; and check for a prefix or suffix to assist in the meaning. Then the students looked at the questions to determine the key words and if the answer could possibly be found in the passage or if the student had to infer or think about the answer by using clues and prior knowledge. Mrs. West's repetitive instruction signaled and stressed the importance to read the selection a minimum of two times. After reading the selection, students were guided to re-read again with the goal to summarize each paragraph in the margins. If anything less than 80% was scored, the student had to go back to make corrections. Mrs. West had the acronym "RAP" displayed on the back white board, which stood for Read,

Analyze, and Prove. She expected the students to follow these test taking strategies in order to achieve success.

Assessment. Students were assessed weekly over their spelling, vocabulary and comprehension skills. The spelling tests were administered orally while vocabulary and comprehension skills were blackline master assessments from the adopted basal program. The students were allowed to use their text for this informal test. Each week in connection with the reading test, students performed a fluency check. Mrs. West called one student at a time to the “teacher table” and read a provided passage as a cold read for only one minute. Mrs. West took running records and calculated the words per minute (WPM). During one observance, Mrs. West discussed with the student the progress made and documented the timing. Some reading rates ranged from 91 wpm to 174 wpm. Fluency checks on readings of a Dolch Word List were also timed at various points, and students earned stickers on a chart if they met their goal: to improve from the previous timing. Also, at the end of a reading unit, usually a six-week period, the students were administered a unit exam. In addition to weekly assessments, students also were graded on the daily worksheets.

Other forms of assessments included the STAR computer test through Reading Renaissance or *Accelerated Reader* and TPRI (Texas Primary Reading Inventory). The purpose of the STAR assessment was to place the student in a “good” reading range by finding the reading level for student reading comprehension success. Mrs. West also ran AR computer reports weekly to monitor the progress of each student and conference with students on their goal maintenance. The TPRI assessment was administered in the fifth week of school. Mrs. West administered the test to each student, all the third-

graders, one-on-one in the music room that had been set aside for this testing. All students were given the same word lists and the same two third-grade level stories to read and recall questions. They were allowed to refer back to the selection in order to answer the questions. Mrs. West used an iPad to document each student's performance, which was later synced by office personnel. The results from these assessments were used to group students and/or determine additional tutorial sessions. Mrs. West monitored and assessed her students on a daily basis as they progressed through the daily activities.

Vignette: September 14, 2011

A typical morning began with the teacher greeting the majority of her students at the door as they came in from breakfast at the cafetorium. Some students entered the room earlier to either complete assignments, AR readings, or take the computerized tests over their *Accelerated Reader* text. Students followed the routine procedures to prepare for class by getting out reading and writing binders along with the homework folder so Mrs. West can do a quick check and hand out NED tickets to prepared students and to those with a completed homework packet. Morning announcements made from the office consisted of the lunch menu, birthdays, the United States and Texas' pledges, a moment of silence, and any other announcements pertaining to that day or any upcoming events. The special event contained into today's announcement was about "Heavenly Hats," a fundraising project for cancer patients. Students are able to give their teacher a dollar for the fund and are then allowed to wear a decorated hat to school the next Friday. Today also happened to be Picture Day; therefore, teachers had been handed Zip Lock Baggies containing a slip of paper with each of their student's names. Later in the day, when it was the grade level's time for their photography session, the students were led to

the gym, stood in line, and handed this slip of paper to the photographer's assistant before his/her picture was taken.

Mrs. West began the morning by instructing the students to open their binders, something the students routinely did. Today, she stated, "If you didn't show your reading strategy, then you will sit at the pole today during recess." Following these instructions, the students' worked, the teacher quickly checked their assignment, and by a new set of instructions was given to have the anthology texts ready 7:55 a.m. "We have a lot of work to get done today," Mrs. West cautiously reminded students. The students commented in positive voices, "As always."

The teacher instructed students to turn to the second tabbed section in their reading notebook (a composition notebook), find the next clean page, and write the story title, "One Small Place in a Tree," at the top of the page. This was the beginning of the dictation of the spelling words and concluded with a dictated sentence. For the list of six words, Mrs. West called out the word, used the word in a sentence, and then repeated the word. After each word, a student with a raised hand was allowed to ask a question about the word. The question was a predictable framed question such as: "I know there is a long /i/ sound, but what spelling is it?" (The word was "sight.") Students used the posted phonics cards found on either the front or back classroom walls. Another student was called upon to provide the answer to the posed question. Mrs. West handed out NED tickets to students asking the questions and to those students answering the questions. Another question asked by a student after the word "sight" was, "I know it is the sausage card, but what spelling is it?" On this particular card posted on the back classroom wall was one with a picture of a sausage and below it were the letters "c" and "s." Another

student asked if these words were to be capitalized. Mrs. West provided the explanation that if these words were not proper nouns nor found at the beginning of a sentence then the word will not be capitalized. A similar question/answer session and discussion and continued for each of the six words. The seventh word, “frightful” was considered to be the challenge word. For this word, Mrs. West instructed the students to circle the consonant blend /fr/, but did not state what the consonant blend was. This was part of her evaluation as she navigated throughout the room checking students’ work to see if they had responded correctly, passing out NED tickets for each correct marking. The next instruction for this word was to then circle the suffix /ful/. Again, NED tickets were passed out for correctly written responses. Mrs. West continued discussion about consonant blends by calling on a student to describe or define. A student responded, “When you have two consonants put together to make their own sound, they just work together.” Discussion continued about the suffix. One of the students identified the suffix /ful/ and how the meaning of the word is “full of fright.” During this time of calling out the words, asking how a certain sound is spelled, and identifying consonant blends and suffixes, the tone in the room was one of positive energy. Students were relaxed in asking questions and felt proud to provide an answer.

Dictation continued as Mrs. West read a sentence for the students to scribe in their notebooks. She read the sentence several times: ‘Did you see the birds fly through the bright sky?’ Pausing after each read, Mrs. West then asked the students, “How do you start a sentence? How do you end a sentence?” After these reminder questions were posed, Mrs. West instructed students to sign their NED tickets and assigned a student to pass out red grading pens to each student to correct their dictation sentences. During this

time the assistant principal entered the room and sat at the kidney table, with an iPad and keyboard to conduct a Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS) evaluation.

Mrs. West continued with spelling dictation by instructing the students, “Now say the word, spell the word, and then say the word again. If the word is not spelled correctly on your paper, please correct it with your red grading pen.” Mrs. West called on individual students to spell one of the six words. Each of the students received a NED ticket for their job. When the students came to the word “frightful,” again Mrs. West reviewed a consonant blend, suffix, and the meaning of the word by calling on students to discuss these word parts and the definition. After discussing and correcting the six dictated words, one of the students collected the red pens while another student collected the NED tickets from each of the students. This transition also included preparation for the next phase in this ELA block with Mrs. West instructing students to “open your anthology to page 134.”

Mrs. West praised students for being prepared and ready to begin instruction with a calming, nurturing voice while at the same time directing a student to get his book and turn his body to eliminate distraction from a peer. To bring focus to the passage, Mrs. West instructed students to get the Discussion Starter card from the basket at their desks. Students had already read this selection earlier in the week; thus, today’s discussion was over their thoughts about the story. One of the students stated, “I never knew a dead tree can be a home.” While another student commented, “I felt bad when the tree fell down.” Several students provided pondering questions such as, “I never knew so many different animals could live in the same tree.” The students were engaged in these discussions

with hands raised and sitting on the edge of their seats while the teacher was mainly a facilitator who raised her hand and waited to be called upon when she wished to share a question or comment. It was during this time that the assistant principal left the room after spending about 10 minutes observing and documenting instruction and engagement.

After a short discussion over the story to focus the students, Mrs. West directed the students to the vocabulary words found in the anthology and reminded students to touch or track the word with their fingers while reading. After vocabulary study and oral predictions were made over the selection, Mrs. West began the computer-read version of the story while 100% of the students followed along in their texts. At one point, Mrs. West paused the reading of the story and instructed, “Open your Reader’s Notebook and turn to the Comprehension Skills section.” Mrs. West also had her own Reader’s Notebook (a composition notebook) ready to use as a model under the document camera. She drew in her notebook and directed the students orally to draw large a “T” chart on the page. The left column was labeled: Cause (why something happened) and the right column was labeled: Effect (what happened). The students were directed to assist the teacher in finding a cause and effect from the few pages that were read. After some discussion, Mrs. West and the students documented a cause and effect phrase or statement. The first phrase discussed was, “because the bear wanted to sharpen his claws, he scratches the tree.” Another cause and effect gleaned by the students was “because the timber bees wanted to lay eggs, they bore into to tree.” One of the students became excited to share another cause/effect statement with the class. He shared, “Because the fungi feeds the grubs, the timber beetles plant fungi in the tree.” About 15 minutes were used for this mini-lesson on cause/effect discussion, then the class returned

to the computer-read version of the story. After about seven minutes of listening to the reading, Mrs. West once again stopped the reading and instructed the class to find one more cause/effect statement from the story thus far and add to the chart in their Reader's Notebook. This time, instead of the whole class participating in the creation of one phrase, the students were instructed by Mrs. West to work with their partner to create a phrase. Each pair of students then shared their cause/effect phrase to the class. As this revelation occurred, Mrs. West provided positive phrases of praise such as, "That is wonderful" or "I really liked the way you and your partner worked together." Students who appeared to be struggling with this concept were much quieter, but did find success with their partner and an expression of relief spread across his/her face. Even though some students seemed apprehensive about searching for the cause/effect pair, just knowing there was a partner to assist made the learning more enjoyable. Nine minutes later, the computerized oral reading of the passage resumed. After four minutes, oral reading of the story ended and students were instructed, "Open your Reader's Notebook and find a cause and effect pair by yourself from pages 152 and 153 in your text. We will share these tomorrow. When you have written your cause and effect statement in your Reader's Notebook, open to the skills practice section and turn to page 109." At this time, Mrs. West continued to move about the classroom, checking students' work, assisting when and where she was needed. While Mrs. West walked about the classroom, she held a set of index cards in her hand and after five minutes of letting students locate and document their cause/effect phrase, she then moved to the final objective of the day's lesson.

Using a secretive sounding voice and holding the cards close, Mrs. West laid one index card at each table group and instructed the groups not to let anyone else, other than their group members, know what was on the index card. This was a new vocabulary review activity for this set of students, and with heads together and leaning over their desks, they were eager to learn of its purpose and how it worked. The students were working together as a group in order to act out the word in front of the class for the rest of the students to guess what the word was, a form of charades. The student “audience” was on the edges of their seats, waving their hands to be called upon to guess the correct vocabulary word being acted out, while even the student with the quietest demeanor smiled at their participation in the performance. This level of student engagement indicated a successful strategy in which the students begged for more time, “Aww, do we have to quit now?” However, it was time to clean up, pack up, and prepare for a restroom break before switching rooms. This session ended around 9:30 a.m.

Interview with fourth-grade teacher -- Mrs. Green

Background /Education. The fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Green, at Corbin Independent School District, was familiar with the community. She attended a small rural school just a few miles down the road that was composed of a very similar community in which everyone knew every teacher and everyone knew everyone. The school community she attended may not have known all students by name or personally, but they saw the same people everyday and were “tight knit.” Therefore, Mrs. Green was a natural fit into this district the moment she gained the opportunity to join the faculty eleven years ago. Mrs. Green began her teaching career mid-year in a larger district before receiving her Bachelor of Science degree in Early Childhood with a specialization

in reading. The following academic year yielded an opening at Corbin ISD of which she promptly applied and accepted a position as a pre-kindergarten teacher. From that initial position, Mrs. Green has taught third- through fifth-grades; however, in the last five years she has served as a fourth-grade semi-departmentalized teacher. Since conferring a Bachelors degree, Mrs. Green has since earned a Masters degree as well as a Master Reading teacher certification.

Teaching was not her initial career choice, but after spending some quality nights in her sister's middle grades math classroom, Mrs. Green became intrigued. Mrs. Green stated, "I saw her love for it, and thought, 'I can do that.' Once I thought about becoming a teacher, I thought about all my really good teachers and kind of hung on to all the good things that they did." With the positive influences from childhood teachers, her sister, and college coursework, Mrs. Green's educational philosophy has remained, "All students can learn." However, she was more specific about that general statement:

I believe that they can all learn with individualization, every student is different, they don't all learn the same way, I believe that students can learn if you can figure out how they learn. I believe they, even if they don't learn with what you taught them at that moment, with everything else that you do, at some point, it might be next year or even the following year, but developmentally they will. I have come to realize that some will need a whole lot of practice with it. I celebrate when it does happen; whether it is the day I teach it or the last day of school.

For Mrs. Green, all students can learn, but it is up to the teacher to provide the practice and the appropriate medium as well as the patience to achieve success.

Mrs. Green has always searched for new and better ways to instruct her students. Through the use of Google, Mrs. Green has been provided the access to read current educational research. The focused priority of her research has been on the change of the state mandated test, especially for the writing component of the test. Mrs. Green was in constant search to see what other districts were doing, what publishers had to offer, or anything that provided her with additional information in order to prepare her for testing format transformations so she could prepare her students. “Everything is changing so much, and I feel like I am lost in it.”

One of the authors she followed was Barry Lane. “I use a lot of his writing techniques, I get a weekly or biweekly newsletter.” Keeping abreast of current research activated Mrs. Green’s mind with improved ideas to attempt/test/evaluate in her classroom. In conjunction with writing inquiries, Mrs. Green kept abreast of current reading strategies; however, her first “go to” authors were Fontas and Pinnell. Once a student exhibited confusion or appeared to be struggling with a concept, Mrs. Green quickly thumbed through her resources in search of a better method to address the situation in order to accelerate her student and eliminate the element of surprise in the learning process.

Classroom management. Over the years as a classroom teacher, Mrs. Green recognized the importance of allowing the classroom environment to be one of the students’ ownership. Giving the students jobs for the week not only assisted her in maintaining an organized and well-run classroom, but also gave ownership and responsibility to the students instead of the students feeling like the classroom belonged to the teacher. In addition to regular classroom jobs such as line leader, computer

monitor, and paper pusher, there were assigned “team leaders.” Students were assigned to groups of four sometimes five, and one of the students became the “team leader.” Whenever a question arose within the group and members within that group were not able to answer, then the team leader posited the question to the teacher. Mrs. Green stated that this way, instead of having a classroom full of the same questions or many individuals coming to her, the team leader gathered this information, thus creating more classroom control.

Along with classroom ownership, students had behavioral expectations to maintain. There was a yardstick with clothespins, one for each student, and colored in thirds with three colors: green (great), yellow (warning), and red (disobeyed). This method of visual cues was used in conjunction with a program that came to the elementary school one year: The NED Show, which promoted character education through a multi-sensory approach to enhance positive attitudes, academic achievement, and behavior. NED stood for the three major rules Mrs. Green’s students followed in their classroom: **N**ever give up, **E**ncourage others, and **D**o your best. When a student disobeyed and moved their clothespin in the red range, the student stated in writing what was done wrong or inappropriate by completing a NED citation. This provided a reflective time for the student and revealed in writing his/her perspective on the infliction. Mrs. Green stated she rarely had a problem with her students getting to the red zone.

If I have four, that is a lot. I have high expectations. I don’t expect anything more out of you than what I expect from my own children. I want them to understand that I care for them and their success depends on their behavior.

Setting these expectations and procedures began the first day of school and were practiced for the first few weeks. However, having close contact between home and school was an additional positive influence on establishing authority or discipline in the classroom. Mrs. Green provided the use of her cell phone for a student having a bad day to talk to his/her parent right then and there. Mrs. Green felt that getting the student to tell their parent about the trouble was more beneficial than her speaking to the parent and much more effective than sending a note that may or may not make it home.

Other situations also depended on the student and his/her behavioral orientation. Mrs. Green stated that she gets to know her students well and quickly, especially those with emotional or behavioral issues. This was where she “picked her battles and ignored the little things.” As long as the behaviors did not hurt anyone, she and the other students just ignored the behavior; thus, sending a message that the attention seeking behavior was inappropriate. However, if homework was the issue causing a problem, there was an open door policy after school. The students were allowed to come in, do their homework and then leave it there. Mrs. Green and her students built a warm and welcoming learning community where they worked together to monitor behavior, complete assignments, and create academic success. The rapport she had with her students was not only one of teacher but also nurturer, caregiver, and friend.

Due to the procedures set and high expectations maintained in the classroom environment, “noise” in the classroom was an important component to learning. Mrs. Green stated, “If they are silent, they are not learning from each other.” She reported that many times she had to remind the students to talk to each other because by the time students have reached fourth-grade, they knew the standard classroom protocols. Her

ELL students also influenced Mrs. Green's opinion. She knew these students needed to hear the language and be given the opportunity to speak it; they needed to be active and engaged in the learning. Mrs. Green recalled one situation:

We were doing a science activity next door. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, it sounds so loud like a heard of cattle or monkeys.' But I looked up, and everyone was at his or her tables. It sounded crazy, but all were doing what they were supposed to be doing. They were just into the activity. And they were being successful with it.

Therefore, communication in the classroom was an important instructional component for classroom success and a tool for student motivation. The use of "NED tickets" communicated a competition to earn them. Students were provided opportunities to earn a NED ticket ranging from doing well on AR tests to classroom participation. Every Friday, the principal went to each grade level to draw from the "NED Bucket," and the lucky student received a prize. Students also earned stickers during fluency checks for every page of listed words they were able to read off in one minute or less and for meeting AR point goals. Other forms of extrinsic rewards were earning a Slushy for keeping the behavior clip on green all week. Mrs. Green explained that she was, "willing to buy if they are willing to behave and do what is expected. I want to show appreciation for the hard work they are doing." Even though extrinsic rewards were fulfilling for her students, Mrs. Green observed her students responding to positive praise and encouragement. A pat on the back or a "good job" brightened her students' faces. Hence, classroom management involved the entire learning community as responsible members to ensure learning and smoothly flowing transitions between and during

activities as well as open communication that encouraged individual rewards of academic success.

Instructional approaches. Students were placed in heterogeneous teams of four to five where there was opportunity for student-centered learning. However, small homogeneous groups were occasionally selected for teacher-led instruction as well as times of individual instruction when needed. The advanced or gifted students were also provided opportunities during the class day to expand research inquiries. Students had access to iPads for such activities as *Whirly Words* and *Textopolis* to provide challenging situations. Students also researched the theme of each reading unit and provided input into classroom discussions and/or presentations. Mrs. Green admitted that even though some activities were meant to target the higher learner, the other students reaped the benefits by either exposure or by also getting a chance to partake in the challenge.

Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of her students went beyond the classroom walls. Mrs. Green openly communicated with her students' parents in order to involve them in their child's education. Mrs. Green sent notes home as well as made phone calls to parents. These notes and/or calls did not necessarily come at a time to only report negative behavior; instead, parents welcomed positive notes of achievement. Some parents were easily accessed via email, which Mrs. Green preferred, as she could provide a quicker response.

Another method of keeping parents involved in classroom activities was the weekly homework sheet. This kept parents informed of the skills and expectations for the week. Unless a student habitually did not turn in homework, parent signatures were not required. Mrs. Green felt that many times it was pointless to monitor parent signatures

because for some students, getting the signature caused problems at home or parents just signed for all five days at one time.

Parents also had access to the online grade book in order to view their child's grades at anytime. Mrs. Green did note that some of her parents were unable to take advantage of technological means of communication so she made every effort to contact them by note or by phone to notify them of their child's progress, achievements, or any concerns. Finally, a district-wide method of getting parents into the school was accomplished by hosting open house and monthly events such as *Donuts for Dads* or *Muffins for Moms*. Therefore, parental involvement was highly encouraged by both teachers and the district. Communication inside and outside the classroom added to the instructional approaches to promote academic success.

Reading instruction. The CSCOPE curriculum guided teachers with math, science, and social studies lessons; however, for ELA, trying to use a basal program and following the Instructional Focus Document (IFD) from CSCOPE simultaneously became an "instructional nightmare," so the basal reading program guided instruction with the occasional inclusion of novel reads. These novel insertions were mainly used to enhance the social studies content area of which Mrs. Green also instructed. There was little use of the CSCOPE curriculum. Mrs. Green recalled attending one or two rollout sessions about four years ago:

At that time we had *Open Court* for grades PK-3 so fourth- and fifth-grade went straight CSCOPE. There were a lot of holes in it. It was one of the first years that it shot off, and we were kind of the guinea pigs that year. Then we decided to make it more consistent from Kinder all the way through fifth with *Open Court*.

The district has successfully followed the *Open Court* series and currently uses the newest program addition to *Open Court* called *Imagine It* published by SRA McGraw-Hill. Consultants were invited to assist in training all the ELA teachers in the district. However, Mrs. Green and the other ELA teachers (third- and fifth-grades) of the district did not let the basal dictate the only path. The teachers studied the reading readiness standards and supporting standards as outlined and documented by TEA's Lead4ward (an educational consultant group and online support system for STAAR preparations), and correlated these standards with *Imagine It*. For example, when it was discovered that one unit only addressed one or two of these standards, the decision was made to replace the particular unit with a novel study to support the standards and instruction.

Open Court included a writing component, but Mrs. Green did not follow the basal program or the CSCOPE curriculum. The writing component was a self-made curriculum and lesson plans that had worked and continued to be a living document of yearly improvement as state standards were increased and made more rigorous. Mrs. Green developed this curriculum as she met the needs of her students through continual research and implementation of well-established authors of the writing process. "One of the first things we do is focus, after brainstorming activities, revising techniques. I go in order until I get a feel for their writing, then I go strictly by the needs of the kids." Therefore, resources and programs have been available, but teachers at Corbin ISD maintain professional integrity in researching, planning, and implementing these programs and modifications in order to ensure success for their students.

Whole class direct instruction was the foundation of the instructional models used in the fourth-grade ELA classroom. After whole class instruction, student-centered

cooperative groups continued lesson engagement. Mrs. Green also led small homogeneous group instruction when necessary to re-teach a skill or instruct on a one to one level with a struggling student. Through the use of *Open Court's Imagine It* basal reading program, explicit instruction was provided to assist the teacher with her lesson delivery.

Mrs. Green's inclusion of Fontas and Pinnell's (2001) Reader's and Writer's Notebook developed as organizational tools to provide students with note-taking skills and a resource to refer to when analyzing words, reviewing reading strategies/skills, or rules. Mrs. Green's menagerie of teaching skills, along with her style and high expectations, have developed into a unique model that has become a living model, one that has continued to grow with each inquiry and subsequent searches for effective methods of teaching and learning.

Authentic teaching requires knowing the group of students well, and for this semi-departmentalized fourth-grade ELA/social studies teacher this was accomplished by knowing every fourth-grade student in the district. Just as varied intellectual abilities were acknowledged and planned for in the classroom, Mrs. Green must also prepare professional plans that allow her to instruct to her fullest potential. Monitoring fluency checks to determine a need for summarization, spelling patterns, or sight words for students learning the English language allowed Mrs. Green to adjust her lesson plans for more individualization. *Accelerated Reader* texts that the student had personally selected from the library and within his/her reading range were utilized to re-teach any skills that were not mastered on an assessment. During class discussions, Mrs. Green listened to the students' answers and how they were processing the evidence from the passage while in

small groups. “When I see those things, that is how I individualize like my tutoring and pull them in and work on those kinds of skills.”

A similar process was used during the writing portion of English Language Arts (ELA). Authentic texts were used to demonstrate or model various story leads, endings of stories, or word choice in the text such as dialogue and figurative language. Once the beginning processes and procedures had been established, small writing groups were formed to work on similar skills. There were teacher-to-student and peer conferences held to assist the author in revising his piece.

Team planning and building not only existed between the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade ELA teachers but also with the other fourth-grade math/science teachers. If there was a student or groups of students that were weak in math skills, opportunities were offered to practice these skills. Open communication between teachers occurred on a daily basis as the team worked closely together. Grade level teams met during conference times as well as at opportune moments during the school day, as in the exchange of students, to discuss student progress and needs. A vertical team of teachers met daily in the fourth-grade classroom. The teachers often took this time to discuss strategies or concerns of certain students.

Instead of changing the curriculum from year to year due to the need to address the reading standards, Mrs. Green made changes in the approach to the curriculum through the varied lessons and strategies. Through inquiry and research, Mrs. Green improved her instruction every year, whether it was organizational improvements, the Reader’s and Writer’s notebooks, or using new ways to teach a skill such as main idea. “I am always looking for something like that, looking for new ways to teach something,

maybe this will help somebody learn it a little bit better, relate it to something, make it easier.” Mrs. Green constantly researched and studied new or better ways to address a skill or method. Students have struggled the most with two skills, summarization and main idea. She knew that the issue was not that these skills were not being taught to students, because she taught summarization in first-grade; however, students had not grasped or internalized the concepts. This research continued to drive her to find a way for her students to achieve mastery of these skills.

Students were given free access to the school library to check out two texts, one chapter book and one nonfiction text of their choice, as long as it is within their reading level as determined by the STAR computerized test. Mrs. Green observed students preferring to only read AR texts because of individual competition for the points. Students were allowed to read outside their level as long as they maintained the point goals set for the quarter. Students who rushed to take a test and exhibited failing scores were instructed to summarize the book and review it with Mrs. Green before testing on it. When students came to review their book with Mrs. Green, she took the opportunity to re-teach and review any reading skills that had not yet been mastered while conferencing with each student. Mrs. Green admitted that it was difficult to expand the instructional time to as much as she liked because there were only so many hours in the day. However, within her classroom, there was an ebb and flow between the amount of time used for reading and writing. Some days more instructional class time was used on reading instruction than writing, and then on other days, the emphasis was on writing instruction. The best way of expanding instructional time was simply by being prepared. Mrs. Green stated:

I try to get the most bang for my buck by being prepared. If you are not prepared, then you are done. When you are prepared: 1. Not as many discipline problems and 2. More time to teach it. If not, it is a wash.

Technology was used to varying degrees within Mrs. Green's classroom. The Promethean Board was used for daily instruction by displaying the worksheets for whole class instruction and taking the morning status of the class with AR texts. The six student computers were equipped with programs such as *Study Island* and *ALEX*, an accelerated math program that was objective specific. There were different games and educational sites that had been saved on the computers such as *Kid Blog*. Not only were the computers available to the students but also three iPads and two iPods as well as having access to the teacher's laptop. Students got into small groups, usually in pairs, to use the software or online access. Another interactive tool teachers used were ACTIVE hubs. These were mainly used when working in *Study Island* as a whole class and viewed on the Promethean Board. The teacher reported high student engagement with the use of technology.

Mrs. Green stated that the top five reading skills most beneficial to students begin with comprehension and being able to master summarization, main idea, and inferencing. Vocabulary skills were a given. There was time allotted for word study and ownership of new words within either the passage or content area. She observed that many students just skipped the new word in hopes "that the word will never haunt them again." In her opinion, as student knowing the word and using it attacks multiple skills through the application of portions of the word that were already known by the student, which works to increase reading comprehension. The other skill that is exercised was the author's

purpose. Mrs. Green used author's purpose to tie writing skills with reading. Knowing why the author wrote a selection assisted in giving direction to why they (the students) as authors are writing. Finally, use of cause and effect rounded out the top reading skill beneficial in the fourth-grade classroom.

When Mrs. Green began teaching at a TAKS tested grade level, her first thoughts were she only needed to teach to the test by using TAKS passages to model test preparations and strategies along with the included reading and writing skills. Since then, "I have learned with good teaching, they can apply that knowledge when they are reading a TAKS passage. You don't have to TAKS passage them to death. Instead, they have to be very involved, looking in their stories, actively involved." Even though benchmarks were in the state mandated format, these benchmarks were not administered until the second quarter so as not to bore the students but to get them familiar with the setup. In addition, the test results of the previous year were used to begin tutoring sessions for small groups and one-on-one sessions to address the needs of students either in testing strategies or specific reading strategies.

Although the standardized format was important in Mrs. Green's classroom, it was not as important as motivating students toward a love of reading. In Mrs. Green's opinion, one of the most important qualities of a reading teacher was the ability to introduce good quality literature to the students and to model reading for the students. "Read alouds are very important" in conjunction with think alouds, to discuss and ask questions. "Then during the ELA block, I can say: 'Remember during our novel.'" The reverse was true while reading a novel geared to social studies, the ability to enlighten reading and writing strategies work to bring the school day and experience together.

Mrs. Green's opinion of a superior reading teacher was one who not only displayed the love of reading, but who also made sure all of his/her students understood the skills and never stopped researching new and better ways to apply twists to old methods. As Mrs. Green had shared, "My sixth grade reading teacher was an amazing ELA teacher. She really gave me my love for reading, and I want to do that and nurture them in that way."

Assessment. Student progress was constantly monitored whether it was via small group or whole class instruction. Weekly assessments over the story, grammar, and spelling skills were documented as well as weekly fluency checks. The reading basal program provided optimal practice and assessment pages. "They assess every single thing that is taught that week. If I taught it, it's going to be assessed. Then I can see the results."

Keeping record of these checks revealed possible struggles with reading comprehension. Sometimes quick oral checks were performed to indicate a change in tutoring needs. Mrs. Green said:

I am always watching to see if they are learning, checking with the small groups, asking questions, evaluating their writing and responses to questions. I also monitor the behavioral signs. Are their faces looking engaged, are there puzzled looks, are they huddled together, talking and assisting each other.

Mrs. Green's response about the use of worksheets was, "There were years where I didn't do them at all. For one thing, parents didn't like that there wasn't a tangible thing for something to do." Parents were accustomed to seeing graded worksheets come home for proof of practice. Even though Mrs. Green stressed to her parents her method of

instruction and how she used writing as an evaluative tool that was not enough to satisfy them. In response, she incorporated the use of worksheets mainly to appease the parents of her students and also to introduce new skills to the class as a whole. She found it easier to have a visual, tangible tool for the students to use during whole class discussions and reference as notes. Mrs. Green commented:

I try not to rely on it too heavily, but your brain needs to see constantly. I don't think that it is the only thing I need to be doing, center groups, sorting games. I don't think worksheets are the do all and tell all because it is not creative but does serve the purpose for the moment as long as that is not the only thing you do.

Therefore, assessment took many forms and constantly took place throughout the school day. Not only did the results indicate the needs for the students, it also provided reflection for Mrs. Green in order to improve or make changes in her teaching. Mrs. Green felt, "If they are not getting it, it is not their job to get it the first time, it is my job to teach it till they get it." Mrs. Green also reflects over the course of the year while pondering over the state mandated scores. "When my scores go down, I think, 'What did I do? What did I spend too little time?'"

Mrs. Green's Room

Grand tour. Just across the decked platform from the third-grade classrooms was the connecting fourth-grade classrooms' portable building. One found Mrs. Green standing outside her open door, greeting her students first thing in the morning. The first sight upon entry was the arrangement of students' desks. In the beginning of the five-week observation, the desks were arranged in groups of four with a potted ivy plant placed in the center for each group. Each plant held a "Team Leader" pin to be used as a

classroom management tool. Later in the observational period, Mrs. Green had rearranged the seating to be like a U shape with a cluster of four desks in the center of the U. Students still worked within their assigned groups.

Along the wall to the right of the door stood a shelving system of cubicles for each of the students. Within these cubicles, each student had a blue tub that held their reading and writing notebooks and other school supplies along with a three-ringed binder containing practice and assessment pages for the reading program. Just past the cubicle system, there was a sticker chart for the students to monitor *Accelerated Reader* and fluency check progress, and beyond that was a door to the adjoining restroom area that separated the two sections of this portable building. At different times during the day, there were students other than fourth-graders who entered through Mrs. Green's door to just quietly and quickly head to the restroom. These were either third- or fifth-grade students who needed an additional break other than the whole class break when they traveled to the cafetorium to use the restrooms.

Just past the door was a storage cabinet that had various posters and signs of positive reinforcement displayed. Mounted to the left edge of this cabinet was the same behavioral monitoring system of the tri-colored yardstick with clothespins for each student. Around the backside of this storage cabinet was a writing center area with one desk, a canister of pencils, process writing posters mounted on the wall, and a pocket chart that kept a visual cue of each student's stage in the writing process. It was not until the end of the five-week observation period where this management system was being utilized, as Mrs. Green had begun the year with modeling and preparing students for the writing process. Rounding out this corner was a classroom library. There was one

shelving system against the back wall, next to it a rocking chair and another shelving system, like a magazine rack, on the other side of the rocking chair. Beyond the small organizational shelving was a line of five student-accessible computers. Every morning, the computer monitor was charged to turn on all the computers and have them ready for either *Accelerated Reader* testing or other activities that were accessible via online or internal software. Off to the left, above the computers, was a bulletin board that displayed the reading unit theme. This was a student prepared bulletin board that was developed through a hands-on activity in the classroom. This line of computers ended with a printer that connected for use by both fourth-grade teachers.

The third wall had a white board mounted that was mainly used for student jobs in the upper left hand side and space for teacher/student use during guided reading or documenting the order of students waiting for student-teacher conferences. Below the white board was a set of low shelves that held binders and resource materials. The top shelf had three baskets that assisted in organizational methods for students to turn in assignments according to the departmentalized group. In front of this shelving and white board was a kidney shaped table. When in use, the teacher sat on one side of the concaved shape while three to five students sat as a group facing the teacher. Once a week, Mrs. Green pulled one student at a time for fluency checks to this table. That way during the weekly test over the story and skills, Mrs. Green had perfect view to the class while also timing and maintaining running records of each individual student during the weekly fluency check.

The third wall was completed with the teacher's workstation. A filing cabinet to the left of the kidney table and a teacher's desk facing the students created a boundary.

The shelving systems behind the teacher's desk cornered along the two adjoining walls that held teacher resources. On the teacher's desk was an Elmo and laptop computer as well as a PC. The laptop was mainly used to display worksheets or online resources on the Promethean Board. The PC was mainly open to campus email and communicating, to the office attendance and lunch counts. Also mounted on the wall was a large technology unit box that connected the district's computer systems.

The fourth and front wall to the classroom contained the Promethean Board with a projector mounted from the ceiling toward the center of the classroom. Below the Promethean Board was a low set of shelves that contained a pencil sharpener, map color pencils, extra pencils, various manipulatives, and classroom sets of books. Off to the left of this low shelving system was another bookcase that contained an organized method of class handouts and manipulatives. The last item, positioned next to the door was a microwave on a small desk and on top of the bookcase were photos of Mrs. Green's children along with an ivy plant. Mrs. Green's classroom was warm and inviting, which made it a comfortable place to be a part of.

Mini tour.

Classroom Management. It was obvious certain classroom management procedures had been set in place since the beginning of the school year (five weeks prior to this investigation). Mrs. Green began each morning by greeting her students at the door. The first group of students entered through the outside door into the portable building as Mrs. Green held the door open on the decking and she welcomed each student with a smile, a pat on the back, or a friendly comment. When classes switched, Mrs. Green again greeted her students entering through the interior door between the two

fourth-grade classrooms. The students first went to the assigned cubicle and retrieved their “bucket.” This bucket or tub contained the ELA materials such as the text, a Reader’s and Writer’s Notebook, tools for writing and coloring, an AR reading log folder, and an AR library book. The students headed to their assigned desk to prepare for the day’s lesson, retrieve any homework materials from their backpack and their writers’ notebook from the bucket to begin the daily edit. Of course, there were occasional reminders to the students, as Mrs. Green gingerly asked her students, “Guys, did you forget that when you walk in you need to take out your buckets?” As soon as the students had completed copying and editing the passage from the screen, they settled in to read their AR text, take the computer test over the AR text, or go to the library. However, in about the fourth week of the investigational period, Mrs. Green changed the procedure by allowing trips to the library only during AR time later in the day rather than first thing in the morning. This change occurred due to students taking too long to return to the classroom and causing either a delay in or the missing of introductory instruction.

While students were moving through the designed procedures, Mrs. Green constantly monitored the class, working at the computer to either document the AR status of the class, attendance, lunch counts, and responding to parent notes (either hand written or via email) when necessary. There were a couple of instances where a quick phone call to the parent via her personal cell phone was made in order to provide a quicker response.

The AR status of the class was documented for all to see on the Promethean Board. Mrs. Green asked each student what his/her current status was with his/her library chapter text. She then typed the title and page number on the screen. A color-coding system was used to note how long a student was either in the same text or when a new

text was begun. In one instance, a student appeared to be making up the number of pages she had read the night before; however, Mrs. Green caught on quickly and strongly encouraged the student to be honest with her reading reports. Students taking the computerized AR tests reported to Mrs. Green the results and obtained her signature in their reading log. There were many days when Mrs. Green conducted one-on-one conferencing with students over the results over the AR test, and if the student scored 90% or higher, she gave them ten NED tickets. The student later placed the tickets in a bucket for an end of the week drawing. All of this monitoring and conferencing took place within the first ten minutes of the morning along with campus announcements and pledges. By 8 a.m., planned instruction was well under way.

Throughout the instructional day, students maintained various assigned jobs such as paper pusher, leader, plant caregiver, computer monitor, pencil sharpener, messenger and more. Mrs. Green stated in her interview that letting the students maintain responsibility through these jobs not only assisted her in keeping the room in order, but also put the role of responsibility on the student to where there seemed to be more of a feeling of pride for their classroom. The students showed enjoyment in having their turn wearing the job lanyard and certain students assisted in making sure each job was fulfilled. Not only were job workers responsible for the room, but students were also expected to maintain their area by keeping his/her desk in order along with their chair in line. At one point when the students were called to meet on the carpet at the front of the room, Mrs. Green noticed chairs left awry and stated, "If you did not push in your chair, go do it, please. What if the Queen of England came in, we wouldn't want it to be a mess in here."

Finally, classroom management was not only enhanced by the issuance of NED tickets for students who did well on AR tests and responded well in class through either their behavior or their response participation, but also through the use of a color-code system on a yardstick to provide a visual reminder of his/her behavioral status of the day. During this investigation, only once was a student sent to move his clip from green to yellow. However, there was an additional system for discipline management. If a student had either failed to meet a homework assignment or had reached the “red zone” on the yardstick, a NED citation was written. The student was expected to complete this form himself and allow the teacher to make additional comments before taking this note home for parent signature. This form was to be signed by the student’s parent and returned to the teacher the next day. There was one occasion where a student had to complete a NED citation for not having his library book with him one morning. Once the citation was filled out, Mrs. Green phoned the student’s parents.

Overall, classroom management was well established and students knew the expectations. Mrs. Green was organized, full of energy, pleasant, caring, and nurturing to her students. The students were aware of her expectations and strove to meet them. She implemented “fun” ways of getting the students’ attention, such as modeling a clapping pattern for the students mimic and respond to. This brought the class together from small group work and cued them to focus on her. Occasionally, Mrs. Green modeled a new cheer to praise a student in the class for doing well. There were no surprises or inconsistencies from day to day unless the fluctuation to the schedule was due to a fire drill, a trip to the nurse for eye exams, or picture day. Even when these events occurred, the class traveled as a whole and adhered to the standard procedure of moving from one

place to another; thus, indicating that Mrs. Green had procedures set in place and students knew the expectations.

Instructional Approaches. The majority of instruction was performed as a whole- class, with students listening to Mrs. Green’s delivery or listening to the weekly basal selection read aloud by a computer while they followed along with the visually displayed text on the projection screen. However, there were points throughout the observation where students worked either with elbow partners or in small teams of four. Students mainly remained in their assigned seating; yet, there were times students were called to gather on the carpet as a whole group or small groups gathered with the teacher at the kidney shaped table. In either form or style of instruction, Mrs. Green was always visible to her students and was constantly monitoring student progress and behavior.

Mrs. Green used whole class instruction to not only focus students on one particular skill or objective, but also to allow students to become peer leaders. Every morning the students worked individually to copy, revise, and edit a short daily oral language focus activity from the screen into their writer’s notebook. After a set eight minutes to perform this task, along with other morning activities, students were given the opportunity to “share the pen” by marking revisions and edits on the displayed passage on the Promethean Board. A student was selected to make corrections on the Promethean Board and talk through his/her reasons. After completing one sentence, the student at the board selected the next student to revise/edit the next sentence by “passing the pen.” During the visual corrections and oral discussions, the remaining students checked their work and/or made corrections to their work.

During this whole group activity, Mrs. Green always asked the student to “whisper read” the selected sentence they were attempting to correct. She often said, “There is a magical connection between lips and brain.” She also encouraged them to verbally step through identifying the subject and predicate of the sentence and discuss how the sentence begins and ends. On a daily basis, there were opportunities for mini-lessons of which Mrs. Green capitalized for the moment. Mini-lessons brought to the attention of the students were on such topics as irregular verbs, commas in a series, correction of run-on sentences, combining sentences, and quotation marks. The students routinely edited for spelling and punctuation, and when students caught an edit that Mrs. Green had missed, she praised them and handed out NED tickets.

Following the morning sponge activity, instruction flowed smoothly into either a short grammar lesson, vocabulary for the selected basal story, or process writing. All of these points were addressed to some extent, but not always in a specific order and the amount of time spent varied. Whichever order the lessons were presented for the day, there was an interconnection that occurred for students between the reciprocal nature of reading and writing. One such example was when the students were listening to a read aloud; Mrs. Green stopped the reading to instruct students to write a particular sentence in their writers’ notebook. First, she had them create a new division, “Sentences and Words we Can’t Forget.” Mrs. Green began a positive and dynamic three-minute discussion of how one can model his/her own writing after an established author. She encouraged students to take that extra moment when reading their AR texts to pay attention to the words and “neat sounding sentences.” She even took the extra step to model the proper citation method when taking a sentence from a source. Mrs. Green

managed this smooth flow of instruction in an organized professional manner constantly making curricular and real world connections.

She was also cognizant of setting behavioral expectations before allowing students to move into small or paired groups. During one particular session, teams of students were “performing” the vocabulary words, and Mrs. Green reminded her students of the proper behavior by saying, “Raise your hand, no shouting, talking, or visiting during the performance.”

Whether instruction occurred as a whole class, in pairs, or in small groups, Mrs. Green expected students to talk to each other as a means to solidify their own knowledge and learn from their peers. She encouraged visual responses or illustrations for vocabulary study and displayed these on the themed bulletin board. She also felt that allowing the students some movement in the room was important. Giving students the opportunity to move from one location to another for another round of discussion not only provided students with varied perspectives, but also gave them the necessary freedom to curb their energy in healthy and productive ways.

Reading Instruction. Every week, Mrs. Green focused her students and set a purpose for the week’s reading selection. Whenever possible, cross-curricular connections were made. For example, one particular week’s selection dealt with forms of energy, so students discussed the different modes of travel and movement and made text-to-text connections with the science content.

Periodically, student activities were directed into small groups or pairs. Students were engaged while working in small teams to either act out or play Charades or create a graphic organizer with given vocabulary words. During these activities or strategies,

students were huddled and had their heads together to assist in secrecy from the other students so no one could hear their “practice.” Even though a few students were shy to perform, with the assistance of their small group, students participated and performed to the remaining classmates. To mark the success of performing their set of words, group members high-fived each other and even Mrs. Green.

For the writing process, Mrs. Green began with the first step, brainstorming, and stayed on that skill for several weeks. She had begun the school year with short quick writes that consisted of lists of ideas such as “Things you did this past summer” or “Things you like to do.” Not only was Mrs. Green getting the students to write or list in a carefree manner, but she was also getting to know her students at the same time. Later during the investigational period, Mrs. Green modeled her thought processes to choose one focused topic to write about as she used a flow chart or diagram to brainstorm more details for that particular topic. She also used authentic texts from her library to demonstrate various leads written by favorite authors such as *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor.

Students also peer-edited written works either in partners or even by a whole class activity called “clocking”. Here the students looked at the last sentence of their peer’s paper, first read it backwards, then forward to edit for only spelling, capitalization, and punctuation using specified map colors for edits. Mrs. Green warned, “This is not a quick process and by the end of this process, the writer will have a magnificent masterpiece!” After a given amount of time, the students initialed the sentence they edited and passed the paper to the right then read the next bottom sentence that had not

been edited. This type of activity was extended over several days due to its lengthy nature.

Other forms of small group instruction consisted of three or four students meeting with the teacher at the kidney shaped table for either one-on-one conferencing over a piece of their written work or guided reading instruction. She had students read their written work while she wrote down “tips” or areas of concern on a sticky note. Following the read, Mrs. Green quickly pointed out her thoughts and handed the note to the student to return to their seat to revise. When a student was reading a longer piece of work or chapter book, she orally questioned or discussed with the student about the text and asked him to summarize. She made it a point to check with her struggling students and those who were not performing well on the AR tests. These discussion checks were a way to determine if a student was ready to test.

Other instructional approaches Mrs. Green used were blackline masters from the McGraw-Hill *Imagine It* basal program as well as the technology resources. Students were given weekly homework packets on Mondays, and certain assignments or practice worksheets were completed throughout the week. At various points during reading instruction, the Promethean Board was used to display these worksheets so the correct answers could be modeled or word study displays could be orally discussed. At the end of the week, Mrs. Green administered a weekly blackline master exam or assessment to the students.

Mrs. Green also procured the use of the online access feature to the weekly basal, which allowed students to listen to the reading being read aloud. During these readings, Mrs. Green stopped the reading periodically to discuss either the week’s vocabulary or to

check for comprehension skills. Many times connections to writing were pulled from the story to assist in explaining what authors do. Finally, Mrs. Green used the document camera to display her own version of either the Reader's or Writer's Notebooks. Mrs. Green had organized these notebooks at the beginning of school by tabbing them with various divisions such as vocabulary/spelling, comprehension, editing/revising, and grammar. On any given day, students were directed to turn to a particular section in order to take notes and told, "I write, you write, we all write together" as Mrs. Green displayed her work on the screen.

Assessment. Formal forms of assessment were observed during this investigation. The previous year's TAKS scores had been disaggregated and the needs of the class were projected through the curriculum's scope and sequence. Mrs. Green checked class work orally and allowed students to make their own corrections. Mrs. Green administered spelling pre-tests on a Monday, which allowed students to correct their own work and make their own plan for the week based on their study. Students took weekly formal tests as part of their McGraw-Hill *Imagine It* Program and were allowed to use their text to answer the questions, which were mostly multiple-choice with some fill in the blank. While students tested, Mrs. Green called one student at a time to the kidney table for individual fluency checks. The passage was part of the testing packet and the students read for one minute while Mrs. Green took a running record and recorded their time. During one such check, students' speeds varied from 182 words per minute (wpm) to 61 wpm. If a student had miscues, Mrs. Green went back over them with the student after the timing was complete and even discussed the meaning of some words if the student did not understand. If it appeared the student was racing for the time, Mrs. Green pointed

out the “running through the periods.” Mrs. Green kept a weekly record of the timing and informed the students immediately of their progress. One particular student struggling with fluency gave rise of concern. Mrs. Green discussed her plans on using the third-grade TPRI instrument to reassess and make modifications for this student. However, Mrs. Green’s personal assessment was that this particular student needed “a lot of oral reading to and with.”

In addition to informal assessments, Mrs. Green held one-on-one conferences with her students on their writing products. In the beginning, certain sections were pointed out and discussed, such as the lead, conclusion, or maintenance of focus throughout the piece. Therefore, Mrs. Green was concerned with the progress of her students and knew her students well.

Vignette: August 30, 2011

Mrs. Green was the sole ELA and social studies teacher for the fourth-grade level at Corbin ISD; therefore, the investigator was able to observe either the majority of the first group or the end of that section, the transition of groups, and the continuation of the same objectives with the second group, or Group B, as known to Mrs. Green. On this particular observation, Group A was concluding their class period. Students were opening their anthology texts to turn to the week’s selection and were called upon by the teacher to read sections from the anthology. The first section to be read and discussed was on defining the genre, myth, which then led to a teacher led discussion of some movies such as *Hercules*, and *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. Mrs. Green pointed out the risks taken in a myth, asking the class if one “always recognizes the risk?” She then told personal stories of when she was young. One of her stories was of a

time when she “thought the clothesline would be a great object to hang from. I was totally wrong and found myself on the ground,” explained Mrs. Green. The students were enthralled with the personally shared stories and began to make predictions to the upcoming reading selection.

Mrs. Green had prepared the on-line site for the selection to be read to the class via the computer and use of the Promethean Board, where the actual student pages were displayed. Just moments into the read, Mrs. Green stopped and asked, “What does ‘retold’ mean?” One of the students responded, “That means this story was already written by someone, but is now being rewritten by another, this author.” Mrs. Green acknowledged the response and asked the students to make predictions from the pictures on the first page of the selection. After some discussion with the students, the reading continued until paused to discuss the context clues surrounding the vocabulary word “delectable.” As the teacher moved about the room, one student stated, “I believe the word delectable means something expensive as in expensive clothes or maybe even the type of food.” Again, after some discussion and use of surrounding imagery to determine the definition of delectable, Mrs. Green resumed the computer/on-line reading of the selection while the students all followed along. Once again, the reading was stopped, and students were directed to write a sentence from the selection into their writers’ notebook. Mrs. Green directed the students to turn to the section in the notebook titled: “Sentences and Words we Can’t Forget” as she explained to the class to associate authors’ styles of writing when developing their own writing. The sentence from the text that was pulled and written in the writers’ notebook was: “He liked to study their brilliant colors, the clever overlapping of their feathers the way they soared on the sea wind” (Daedalus &

Icarus, p. 151). Among the discussion of noting powerful sentences, Mrs. Green made a strong point of the importance to always cite sources when making notes of other authors' styles. She encouraged her students to take heed to the material or texts being read and to associate them with their own writing.

Time had come to an end for group A's ELA experience for the day and students were assigned to complete the selection's reading for homework. The students prepared to switch classes by gathering materials, placing tubs back in assigned cubbies and lining up. Within five minutes, group B entered the classroom, quickly retrieved their buckets or tubs from their assigned cubbies, settled in with AR reading, computer testing, or traveled to the library. During this time, Mrs. Green gathered the AR status of the class and displayed it on the classroom screen. The status showed the title of the text being read by each student and what page currently on in their library/chapter text. Also, if a student made either a 90% or a 100% on the computer AR test, Mrs. Green gave the student ten NED tickets. At one point during this whole class status check, Mrs. Green visited with one of the students over the text: *Artemis Fowl*. Since this text was a higher-level text and contained 12 chapters, Mrs. Green advised the student to summarize each chapter and to speak with her before testing over this particular novel.

Within 15 minutes, students were directed to get their writers' notebook to begin editing "Hannah's Halloween Scare." In this passage, grammatical errors were to be located and corrected using an orange map color/pencil. Students followed the established procedures by copying the passage from the screen into their notebooks as presented; then made the edit marks to indicate correct punctuation marks, corrected spellings, capitalizations, or proper word usages. Seven students moved from their desks

to the floor in front of the screen in order to copy this passage, and the class was given eight minutes on the timer to complete this sponge activity. While the students were working on this passage, Mrs. Green moved about the room viewing her students' work. She pointed out the need to correct paragraph indentation and explained numerous times, "Use your fingers, either the segment of your index finger from first joint to second joint or placement of two fingers for about an inch indentation." Mrs. Green insisted that her students be clear on paragraph formation in order to relate to their own writing samples.

As soon as the timer went off, Mrs. Green called the first student to come up to the board and used the Promethean pen to help edit the first sentence. While the student was at the board preparing to make one of the corrections, Mrs. Green questioned the group, "Does the sentence begin with a capital letter? End with a punctuation mark?" Students responded and the student at the board was asked to "whisper read" the sentence. Mrs. Green continued to prompt the students by asking various questions over the first sentence in the passage, "Who or what did something in this sentence?" The students responded, "Hannah." Mrs. Green asked, "What did Hannah do?" The students responded, "She scared her brother." Finally the student at the board edited the spelling mistake, "litle" to little. The students were to identify the subject and predicate not only orally but also by circling the subject and underlining the predicate.

Editing of this passage continued for each sentence. Mrs. Green took the opportunity to insert mini-lessons on writing tips such as the use of transition words, "first, then," and used the moment to apply it to their own writing and to not overuse the word. One of the sentences contained a predicate expander called a dependent clause. Other words of caution were to make sure each sentence contained a subject and a

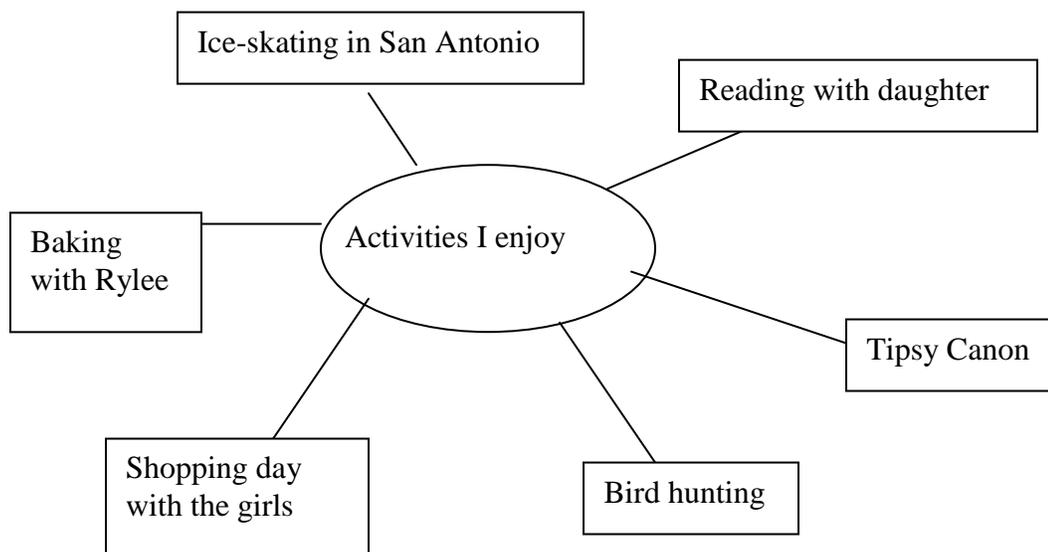
predicate to ensure a complete sentence or thought. Finally, Mrs. Green provided a quick mini-lesson over the use of quotations by pointing out its proper use within the passage as “marks that surround what is actually being said.” Mrs. Green continued to state, “Plus the comma is used to separate the portion being narrated from that of a direct quote of what was being stated.” After about 20 minutes, editing and revising of this passage was completed, and the students were instructed to open their writers’ notebook to the “Pre-writing and Idea Section” and turn to the next blank page.

Mrs. Green began this portion of her ELA instruction with the purpose of a given writing prompt and compared it to UIL Ready Writing, as several of the students experienced this style of writing in third-grade. Up to this point, the students had been focused on grammatical processes of writing and had not begun the writing process. She also noted to the class that, as fourth-graders, they will take a mandated state exam (STAAR). Mrs. Green explained to her students how they will be given two prompts, an expository and narrative prompt, over a two-day testing period in the spring. Following this discussion, Mrs. Green directed the students to date the page in their writers’ notebook and write the following prompt: “Write about a time you took part in an activity you enjoyed.”

The students listened to the beginning process of writing being one of brainstorming or just thinking. Mrs. Green had provided a computer-generated flow chart of her thinking of times where she had personally taken part in an activity she had enjoyed (see Figure 2). After she discussed her thoughts and ideas with the class, Mrs. Green directed the students to begin their pre-writing cluster with one activity. She moved about the room to make sure each student was noting an activity. She also

reminded the whole class to refrain from talking so as not to disturb others while they are writing and thinking.

Figure 2. Mrs. Green's brainstorming map for a daily class activity.



Mrs. Green began with a general prompt, "Activities I enjoy." Creating this cluster graph provided an organized visual to list at least six different activities enjoyed. Later each of these boxed ideas had more detailed thoughts connected to them.

As Mrs. Green moved about the room, she reminded students to be more focused on an activity and not going to a place. After about five minutes, Mrs. Green asked each of the students to share one activity they had written. After all the students shared their one activity, Mrs. Green directed them to "write one more thought or activity you have enjoyed on the cluster." There was a couple of "Yes!" exclamations made within the room as students were excited to be able to write down various thoughts or activities. Again, after the students were given time to orally share their thoughts or activities, Mrs. Green stressed the difference between an activity and a place. She also stated, "Playing video games or movies is not an activity you actively do."

The writing lesson was followed by the third phase of Mrs. Green's ELA plans for the day, reading. The students were instructed to get out their *Imagine It* texts along

with their Reader's Notebook. Mrs. Green opened the reading lesson with word study and had the students read line one from the projected screen. She asked, "What do each of these words have in common?" After a few minor hints referencing a homework page, the students recognized the "est" suffix as being a superlative. The word study continued with line two and focused on the word "bibliography." Mrs. Green directed the students to chunk the word and note the short /i/ sound in "bib" and to note the word "graph" found in the word. She asked, "What does this Greek root word "graph" mean?" Several students raised their hands and offered answers such as: "to write, to draw, to sign." Mrs. Green added that graph also means to record as in math's line graphs, pictographs, and bar graphs to name a few.

The students were instructed to write the line of words in their Reader's Notebook and underline the word "graph" found in each word. The words found in this particular list were graphics, autograph, biographer, and bibliography. Students also noted other word part meanings, such as "auto" meaning self, "bio" meaning life, and the suffix er meaning the who of the action.

Completing the word study lead the teacher into a quick review of vocabulary study for the week's selection. The teacher led oral discussion and asked various students to demonstrate the word if possible. Mrs. Green asked her class, "Give me another word for crowed." Students quickly responded, "Bragging, showing off, boasting." The class was asked to identify the way "things could be nudged." One of the students got up to demonstrate how he nudged his partner with a gentle shove on the shoulder. Another request was to name three synonyms for "shrill," but first a student defined for the class that a synonym is another word that means the same. Quickly three

students provided “squeak, scream, and squeal” as synonyms for “shrill.” Mrs. Green also stated to the class, “When I hear the word brilliant, you think...” Another student provided her thoughts of “bright, smart, genius.” Finally, the last review was posed with the discussion of events that might cause astonishment. Several students offered ideas such as winning five million dollars, discoveries about stars, or the feeling when a bear jumps out. After about six minutes of vocabulary review, the teacher began to provide background knowledge over the week’s anthology selection being a mythology and about taking risks. She set the story up by providing background information to her students about who Daedalus was and the maze he created at the king’s request. Mrs. Green added that Daedalus was held captive in a tower to keep him from revealing the solution to the maze’s path. She guided the students to provide predictions by looking at the illustrations on the first page. This brought the daily ELA instruction to a completed cycle as both groups moved through the reading and writing content and skills.

Interview with Hayden ISD Principal -- Mrs. Pearson

Background/Education. Reared in a community very similar, yet larger, to the district she now leads, Mrs. Pearson conferred a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education from the University of Texas-Austin. After her graduation, she moved to Corpus Christi, then to Refugio followed by Beeville, as a classroom teacher. She also held a secondary certification in math and Spanish and later earned a Master of Counseling degree followed by mid-management certification. While a counselor at a nearby high school, she took on a number of administrative duties and was encouraged by her principal to seek her mid-management certification in becoming a principal. So at that point, she started the path toward principalship “a little at a time.” Pearson actually

had completed certification some time before actually becoming a principal as she found her heart in counseling. Since becoming an administrator, she has been an assistant principal for three years and the principal at Hayden ISD for the last six years.

Mrs. Pearson expressed her educational philosophy as being somewhat generic, but she firmly believed in the fact that all children can learn. She reflected,

Some of them don't learn to the same level, and not as fast as others, but they have the potential to learn. In fact, I was in the life skills unit just now watching the teacher in there, and those kids were learning, at their level, but they were learning.

Pearson took pleasure in seeing and knowing that learning was taking place when instruction was happening in a way that addressed the students' needs and passed knowledge through their strengths. Pearson's interests in curriculum and counseling strengthen this philosophy. Her thirst for reading the most current research in curriculum was, in her opinion, where the biggest impact could be felt for student achievement.

Instructional viewpoints. Mrs. Pearson monitored her students closely. She had her pulse on all the forms of assessments that occurred on her campus. Her teachers disaggregated benchmark assessments and turned in the required reports for her to view and then later discuss. She spent many evening and weekend hours reviewing these results. When she and her teachers met in grade level meetings, their goal was to identify the strengths and weaknesses. "We meet on our kids every three and six weeks and we have RTI meetings. By the time they [students] get to fourth-grade, there are no surprises." Mrs. Pearson expressed positive outcomes of this close monitoring, noting that many of their students required small group instruction. Thus, documenting student

progress, knowing the student's strengths and weaknesses, and maintaining communication with each child's parent or guardian was a major component toward student success.

Teachers have open lines of communication to their parents, and there were many documented parent contacts either via phone, face-to-face, or notes sent home either delivered by the child or by mail. If a student was exhibiting an average below 75% in any subject at either the three- or six-week reporting period, teachers were expected to make contact with the parents and schedule conferences. The teachers worked diligently communicating with the parents of their students; however, the principal intervened if there was trouble in getting parents to the school or made home visits with the teacher and/or counselor. Pearson shared a recent event:

We had one child that had been in trouble and nothing we did was working, so I finally called. The teacher had been having conferences with his [current guardian]. I met with the parent and finally got the kid to open up. That is when my counseling comes in. He tells me that he want to go back to live with his mom. I told them [the aunt and mom] that all of this back and forth is affecting him. You need to get your act together at home so he can work here at school.

The close connections between home and school attributed toward student motivation according the principal. Various forms of recognition were implemented to provide positive recognition to the students at Hayden Elementary. Weekly announcements over the school's intercom broadcasted top point earners in the *Accelerated Reader Program* every Monday. On Tuesdays, one student from each classroom was selected by his/her teacher as the "Math-lete" of the week and recognized

for doing something exceptionally well. At the end of each six-week grading period, each teacher mailed affirmative postcards to two or three students. These students may not necessarily be the top-notch students; instead, those are those who have either shown improvement or some other indication of academic or behavioral success. Each six weeks, straight A, A/B, and perfect attendance students were rewarded with pencils and ribbons, and the all A students were additionally rewarded with a breakfast with parents and teachers. Mrs. Pearson did not consider the extrinsic rewards as being excessive. Instead, she strongly believed that by having these extrinsic rewards in place created a path toward intrinsic motivation. Mrs. Pearson expressed:

Some of our kids have not felt success, so we are waiting for them to want to do it [succeed] when they don't even know what it feels like. You have to get them there before they actually want to get the points, to get the taste of success before there are no more rewards.

The principal continued to state that many of their students do not have anyone at home that will motivate them so motivating students to academic success has been left up to the faculty and staff.

Methods to motivate students as well as strive for academic success have been a continual goal achieved through professional development. The HISD staff participated in district-wide professional developments during the summer and at the beginning of the school's calendar year. Additional preparations occurred during the school year as teachers requested trainings on such topics as CSCOPE rollouts or testing protocols such as STAAR and TPRI.

The principal, in the form of book clubs, initiated a more community-based professional development. The principal researched a text that addressed improvement needs of the campus, such as *Teach like a Champion*, and assigned each grade-level a particular chapter, which was then presented and discussed at a weekly faculty meeting. Mrs. Pearson acknowledged the importance of continual education for her teachers, but during the academic year, teachers “can become overstressed if asked to perform too many tasks.” It was felt that this process worked really well for her staff as Pearson pleasingly stated, “It worked out really good. In fact, when I go into the classes now, I can hear some of the things that they [the teachers] have picked up from the book. That was good.”

Reading Instruction. The guiding program implemented by Hayden Elementary for the last five years has been CSCOPE, which was a curriculum created by a consortium of Education Region Centers across the State of Texas. Mrs. Pearson explained that the Year at a Glance (YAG), Vertical Alignment Documents (VAD) and the Instructional Focus Documents (IFD) guided the teachers as well as provided exemplar lessons to the standard and rigor expected through the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skill (TEKS) mandated by the state. The components of CSCOPE originated from the TEKS. Therefore, it was thought that if teachers utilized CSCOPE as a systemic approach to teaching and learning, they prepared students for the state mandated assessment. This curriculum pulled forth a combination of direct instruction with explicit instruction using the 5E model of exemplar lessons (Bybee, Taylor, Gardner, Van Scotter, Powell, Westbrook, & Landes, 2006).

In conjunction with the CSCOPE curriculum, many of the teachers interjected other programs such as *Project Read* for additional phonics. This was mainly in the lower grades and not as widely used currently as it had been before the implementation of CSCOPE. *Zoo-phonics* was used as an introduction to letters and sounds. The state adopted reading basal, Scott Foresman *Reading Street*, was implemented in various lessons. Pearson stated that the teachers preferred CSCOPE because it was challenging and provided the level of rigor that has been aligned to the state's academic expectations.

Individualizing instruction to meet students' needs was HISD's major goal. Pearson felt that her teachers did a good job of knowing their students' strengths and weaknesses. They monitored their students through various forms of assessments such as weekly quizzes, three-week and six-week benchmark exams, and anecdotal notes of classroom observations. This information was then disaggregated in order to determine appropriate tutorial groups, guided reading groups and/or flexible small group instruction with the teacher. Students also had access to a computer lab in order to interact with software designed to strengthen the weaker skills that were identified by assessments.

Mrs. Pearson noted that the curriculum as provided by CSCOPE is a "live document." The teachers continually modified the curriculum as the year progressed and did not use CSCOPE for every word or unit. "We have teachers that do a good job teaching so I don't expect them to throw out everything they have done that has worked and just only use CSCOPE," expressed Mrs. Pearson. She advised her teachers to always look at the specificity in order to maintain the level of rigor of expected teaching. However, in reality, Pearson felt that CSCOPE was good for first and second year teachers as she shared:

When I first started out teaching, I would have loved to have had something like that. And as you get your experience, you put in your own stuff and you take out, and our teachers do. They make copies, and they make their own notes on there. Next year they know that they didn't use that and that they had used this. It has to be like that.

When making adjustments to lessons, documenting student progress, and reporting or monitoring assessment results, noting student weaknesses and addressing these weaknesses through either student strengths or adjusted lessons was an important function for academic success. Mrs. Pearson noted that students continued to struggle with comprehension skills regardless of how diligent teachers are or intense the documentation. "I think we do a very good job with phonics because our kids can read everything, but it's the comprehension and higher level skills" that continued to cause students to struggle with their reading. Mrs. Pearson explained her evaluation of the problem as being limited vocabulary. The lack of exposure to a larger base of vocabulary limited the student's understanding of a given passage. The weak prior knowledge resulted in a struggle for the students at Hayden Elementary so the teachers did as much as possible to build upon the knowledge base, according to Mrs. Pearson. "We do story maps and graphic organizers, provide pictures" and utilize video feeds.

Instructional time was expanded as far as it can go within the limits of a school day. Teachers utilized every moment of the day, and Pearson felt there was little down time. Expanded days were provided in the form of after school tutorials, and RTI interventions were built within the school day for all teachers to be monitoring and providing small group instruction. "I don't really see any down time for teachers. Even

when they bring them [students] to the restroom, they've got flash cards or their AR books.”

Teachers were able to enhance the school day with the integration of technology within the classroom, which added instructional time. Mrs. Pearson preferred to see more technology accessed than what was currently available to her teachers. Currently, there were two computers in each room, but one computer was left available for students to test on *Accelerated Reader* texts; however, students did have daily access to the computer lab for a 30-minute period. The principal felt there was access to some good programs such as *Reading Eggs*, *Study Island*, *Word Maker* and *Earobics*. Many of the programs were geared for the lower grades, but *Study Island* was satisfactory for the upper grades as it was designed to help students master the content specified in the TEKS.

These software/online programs were chosen to address the top five reading skills that are most beneficial to students. Mrs. Pearson felt pleased that her teachers were addressing these skills as she stated that phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency are of utmost importance for academic success. Even though she felt that fluency influences comprehension, “each of these skills builds one on the other.”

High performance on the state mandated test was a goal set by the campus, but the principal did not feel that her teachers geared their instruction for the standardized testing. “I think we gear to teaching the TEKS, and I think if we follow our CSCOPE and the level of rigor that we have there, then we are addressing both.” She expressed the importance of exposing the students to the format so that there “won't be any surprises.”

Being able to prepare and guide students through a grade level of learning and the expected assessments was part of doing their job as teachers.

Preparing students came in the form of engaging students so they are interested in learning all forms of information. Mrs. Pearson felt a superior teacher must get the student's attention and constantly monitor to make sure the student understands the content. Part of getting the student's attention is the teacher's ability to convey their passion and love for the subject. Pearson felt that the enthusiasm in a teacher's voice, along with constantly monitoring and checking for understanding ensured that all students were actively engaged in the lesson. A superior teacher was one who took the time to notice and plan for a particular student or a small group of students. This teacher will pull struggling students to the side to meet their needs and include the shy or quiet students by not allowing the overachievers to take over. A superior teacher monitors the results of his/her students' academic success and reflects on and critiques his/her own teaching.

Assessment. Students at Hayden Elementary were given various forms of assessments. There were benchmarks given every three weeks as well as end of unit assessments and weekly assessments. This district also implemented the District Awards for Teacher Excellence (DATE) grant that required beginning of the year (BOY) and end of the year (EOY) assessments. The lower grades included the TPRI assessments that were performed in the beginning, middle, and end of year. Along with the disaggregation of these formal assessments, the principal did periodic walk-throughs in addition to the required evaluations for the Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS). Pearson had prepared a checklist that she used which was aligned to the PDAS form as

she specifically looked to see if students were engaged in the lesson and what types of activities were being done. She also documented if the majority of the students were responding, if they were successful with the lesson, if critical thinking was occurring, and if there were connections to the student's outside world.

The principal also studied the disaggregated data provided by the teachers on each one of the students and then met with grade level groups every six weeks to discuss students, strategies, the assessments, and plans. The types of assessments the campus used were TAKS release tests, CSCOPE unit assessments, and WebCat assessments. The principal affirmed the purpose of these assessments was to ensure the level of rigor and encourage the teachers to analyze the assessment and modify to fit the instructional content. Instead of relying solely on teacher created assessments, the provided bank of assessments as made available by CSCOPE and WebCat, provided the teachers with the tools to monitor their students.

Leadership evaluation was matched to that of the school's results on the state mandated test (TAKS). Mrs. Pearson noted that her boss, the superintendent, evaluated her every three months, but for her it was looking at the reading levels. She stated,

For me, it is kind of like for you when your students don't do well, for me, if my teachers are not doing well, it reflects back on me. If our reading levels aren't going up, then it reflects on my leadership and curriculum and what we need to get going.

Pearson explained that although her primary responsibility was to provide the resources and training for her teachers, ensuring that they have the proper tools to promote academic success in their classrooms, the success of the students provided her feedback

as to the strength or weakness of her leadership. “You can’t just disown it and put it on somebody else. You are all in it together. We either win together or we lose together.”

Mrs. Pearson was a team player and a leader who was always in search of the most current research that would assist in the continual success of her students, her teachers, and her campus.

Interview with third-grade teacher -- Mrs. Easton

Background/Education. Mrs. Easton grew up just south of the district in an adjoining district with similar demographics and was, therefore, familiar with the students and the surrounding community. She lived in a small rural community and rode a bus to the larger district. Mrs. Easton also identified with her English Language Learners (ELL) as both of her parents only spoke Spanish at home. Although she did not remember if she was identified as ELL during her own schooling, she felt that she had experienced similar issues as her students. Mrs. Easton commented that her parents were not involved in school, but it was not out of neglect. However, as the seventh sibling out of eight, she had siblings to help her along the way. The situation then mirrors so many of today’s parent perspectives, an uncomfortable association to the school environment.

Mrs. Easton’s success as a student influenced her to seek a post-secondary degree. “By the third-grade, I had figured it out. I was always in the high class, [albeit] the lower end of the high class.” Becoming a teacher had been a goal or dream as far back as she could remember:

I was probably in second-grade when I decided to become a teacher. I have always wanted to be a teacher. I have never had a bad teacher. I always had pretty good teachers that influenced me. Even when I was

little, at home I always had my little desk, my papers. I would get my mom to buy little staplers; I would make my own grade books with spiral notebooks, and wrote my own little notes. I always had been in love with the chalkboard, and being in love with my teacher.

Mrs. Easton continued to reflect over her school experiences. Even though she did not remember being served as an ELL student, she believed she should have:

I understood things, I just couldn't explain things. That is why I have a special place in my heart for my ELL kids and for kids who don't have parents that speak English. You should see the looks on my parents' faces when they find out that I can speak Spanish.

Mrs. Easton had the opportunity to tutor students new to the district speaking little English. The main focus of the after-school tutoring sessions was on instructional vocabulary. "I tried to teach them in the way I learned. No one taught me, I just compensated. I used context clues to figure out what certain words meant."

After 18 years of teaching, Mrs. Easton's Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood education and ESL certified endorsement has fulfilled her childhood dream of being a teacher. Also, Mrs. Easton's educational philosophy was heavily influenced by her position as a parent. She felt that since she became a parent before her teaching career began, that influenced how she guided her kindergarten through third-grade students. Therefore, building a rapport with her students and providing the nurturing and care so many of her students seek has provided the cornerstone to the educational success of her students. Also, setting high expectations for her students and providing them with positive reinforcement has been her foundation for student success.

Ongoing education was a personal expectation for Mrs. Easton. She enjoyed reading and learning from many different authors about everything from classroom management to current research on learning styles. The most recent read was one directed or assigned by the campus principal. However, Mrs. Easton preferred to follow a particular author, Debbie Diller, to stay current on literacy centers and small group instruction.

Classroom Management. Providing a safe learning environment began with the students taking ownership of their environment. Students were provided the opportunity and the skills to open the school year by creating the type of learning environment that would work for their classroom community. Along with working with her students to establish positive behavior protocols conducive for learning, Mrs. Easton employed effective teaching advice from such renowned specialists as Harry Wong. She used Wong's "Give Me Five" technique to redirect class attention and greeted each student as they arrived into the classroom each morning in order to set a tone and manage a smooth operational classroom from the first day of school. Mrs. Easton established authority the first day of school by informing the students that she is there to teach them and help them move on to the next grade level. She sets this invitation to learning with a warm smile that does not fade. Mrs. Easton stated, "I know they have said that for the first two or three weeks don't ever smile, but that is not me. I want them [the students] to feel safe."

Discipline problems do arise from time to time, but in the 11 years Mrs. Easton has taught at Hayden ISD, she could only recall three incidents when office referral actions were warranted. These referrals were for major offenses, such as stealing or fighting. Mrs. Easton felt that addressing behavioral situations was best done

immediately and calmly. She preferred to discuss concerns with the student in the hallway in order to identify what the behavior indicated to her about the student. Being able to talk to her students in identifying an issue was set since the first day of school, as she had an open door communication policy. As part of establishing a safe environment, Mrs. Easton believed the best way to help her students to understand a concept or be able to handle a situation was to be accessible to them.

This communication not only included the students feeling comfortable in speaking with her but also extended through both whole class and small group participation. Mrs. Easton believed that in order for a lesson to engage a class, it was imperative to allow communication among students. She also used the level of “noise” in the classroom to gauge if learning was taking place. “When it’s noisy like that and somebody is being quiet among the noise, then I know they are not understanding or doing what they are supposed to be doing.” Mrs. Easton had set re-directive procedures in place to ensure whole class attention by a simple verbal countdown in three to five seconds.

Along with the communication within the classroom to ensure learning and solve behavioral activities, Mrs. Easton extended her open door policy to her parents. Face-to-face conferencing or impromptu visiting was always welcomed; however, Mrs. Easton took additional steps to ensure that her parents were aware of what their child was doing in the classroom. She prepared a Monday Memo that went home every Monday with graded work from the previous week. There was a daily sheet in the homework folder that documented student conduct, AR progress, and any other notes directed to the parents. The parents also documented notes to Mrs. Easton on this form. This type of

communication assisted with student motivation. When the students knew their parents were involved, they took learning more seriously and behaved better. However, when asked what has been the best motivating procedure, Mrs. Easton shook her head and did not know why students preferred to spend their lunch with her was so popular. Mrs. Easton passed out tickets for every “E” students were able to maintain (a report card grading system). After a student saves up at least ten tickets, then he/she was allowed to purchase from the “treasure box.” This year, the most popular purchase was “Lunch with the Teacher.” Mrs. Easton may not be able to explain why her students wish to spend their tickets the way they do, but the extra caring and nurturing she provided her students in a relaxed environment of open communication contributed to her success.

Instructional Approaches. Addressing the needs of students with varying intellectual abilities has been a challenge for Mrs. Easton, yet a challenge she has energetically accepted. Mrs. Easton admitted to constantly looking for new ways to provide new, better, or adaptable teaching methods in order to reach all of her students. Rather than reminding students who commonly had the answers to questions to withhold their answers, she instead directed these students to develop the questions to be asked. She also used many visual cues within the classroom, such as the Venn Diagram and the weekly creation of Window Panes that were created and used by the whole class.

Notifying parents and being accessible to them were not issues for Mrs. Easton, as she freely provided her cell phone number to all the parents of her students. For the struggling students, Mrs. Easton maintained parental contact at least two times a week. Notification calls to parents to inform them about the upcoming week were usually made on Mondays, with follow-up calls on Thursdays. By the end of the first grading period,

Mrs. Easton maintained a constant communication with most of her parents. Some parents do communicate via email; however, for the most part, her parents were more comfortable with text messaging. By maintaining close contact with her parents, Mrs. Easton warmly welcomed her students' parents into all educational aspects of their child's development. For Spanish speaking households, Mrs. Easton preferred to call the parents to speak to them in Spanish than to send a note written in Spanish. Also, the district provided an on-line access or portal for parents to check their child's grades. Mrs. Easton felt that the parents of the higher-level students were more likely to take advantage of this feature than parents of students who were struggling. It was possible that these parents may not have access to the technology at home or the child does not encourage the parent to check the site.

The most difficult aspect to teaching in Mrs. Easton's opinion was to maintain a high level of engagement for the students. She explained that she had to keep her students entertained constantly and attributed this to the students' exposure to technology. In combination with high engagement levels, Mrs. Easton acknowledged the balance required for the varying personalities that created her classroom community. Whatever facet to teaching that may appear difficult, Mrs. Easton accepted the challenge to overcome and maintain her goal of a successful academic year.

Reading Instruction. Reading instruction was guided by the CSCOPE curriculum, the provided exemplar lessons, and pieces from the Scott Foresman's *Reading Street* basal to address the CSCOPE lesson indicators for the week. Mrs. Easton followed the CSCOPE curriculum because as she stated, "... the fact we are not sure of what this STAAR test is going to be and how it is going to be tested." Even though some

of the lessons were “not the way I like to teach,” Mrs. Easton worked diligently to first interpret the lessons and then apply her style. The CSCOPE curriculum and exemplar lessons were available to HISD teachers for the last five years, in which they followed the Vertical Alignment Documents (VAD) and Instructional Focus Documents (IFD). Similar to the other teachers in the district, Mrs. Easton attended various roll out sessions provided by Region 2 Education Service Center (ESC).

Mrs. Easton researched and studied continuously in order to provide everything she could for her students. This curriculum was a continual “living” document. Every year, there were changes or modifications to some degree either by the writers of CSCOPE or by the interpreting grade-level teachers. During this particular year, the level of rigor had been increased due to the impending changes to the state mandated tests. Therefore, Mrs. Easton felt obligated to maintain as much originality as possible in the lessons so as not to lose the degree of expected rigor.

The instructional model used the most was organized and predictable direct instruction; however, Mrs. Easton incorporated student-centered learning. The direct instruction for her began the lesson with whole class participation and was then sectioned into small groups, such as cooperative learning groups, for students to take ownership of their own learning. One of the teaching models implemented many years ago by the principal at that time was the reading cycle. Mrs. Easton liked the organization, the predictability, and ease of its administration. Students, parents, and teachers knew by the day of the week what was expected. As a kindergarten teacher for many years, Mrs. Easton was trained in whole-language experience as well as guided reading or balanced

literacy. She now felt she used the best of all her training repertoire in order to reach all students in her charge.

In addition to Mrs. Easton's professional training, she admitted that in order to individualize her teaching, she brought personal experiences into the classroom. These personal experiences were mainly those from her childhood. Mrs. Easton felt that if one can express childhood thoughts and feelings then one could become closer to the thoughts and feelings of the students. Mrs. Easton was a child at heart, and her warm smile, gentle laugh, and caring nature only added to the individualized teaching occurring in her classroom.

The reading skill that most students in Mrs. Easton's class struggled with was comprehension. Contributing to lower comprehension skills was the lack of fluency. Mrs. Easton explained that although the students could decode words well, by the time the student had reached the end of the sentence, he/she had already forgotten what was read. She added that if the passage was read to the student, then the comprehension was there. Another component that indicated frustration with reading comprehension was students struggling with summarizations and limited growth in vocabulary. Each of these skills was a priority for Mrs. Easton as she continued to implement instruction extending from the reading block time and into students' free reading time and content instruction.

The students were expected to check out two AR texts from the library each week and meet their weekly goal as documented on the computerized testing of each text. The students were given a free choice within a leveled range and encouraged to have one fiction chapter book and one nonfiction text. Mrs. Easton also had a library within the classroom. She had these sectioned by theme and allowed students to enjoy these texts as

well. If a student wished to check out an additional book from the library but was not allowed to surpass the two-text maximum, then Mrs. Easton would check out the text for the student. She stated that it was important to her to try her best in getting the students reading material they showed interest in. She wanted to be able to capture any moment or topic that interested the student in order to promote a love for literacy, not roadblocks. To captivate a prolonged desire to read, Mrs. Easton did author studies with her students. Displaying an author's collection and researching about that author encouraged students to read. In addition, when she noted a particular author her students found interesting, such as Peggy Parish or Mary Pope Osborne, she purposely set to purchase and stock her classroom with more texts by those authors.

Setting a purpose for reading was implemented across the day's instruction from reading time to content area information. Not only did Mrs. Easton set a purpose for a reader to read, but also for a writer to write making the reading/writing connection. She felt these were not isolated areas of instruction but emulated all through the school day and beyond the classroom walls. Therefore, instructional time was expanded as far as one could expand it. Literacy instruction began from the moment the students walked in the room, continued when they left, and followed them home as they completed reading assignments.

Technology allowed additional expansion to instruction. Not only did Mrs. Easton use a document camera and/or projector for daily instruction and access to *United Streaming* video clips, she also used the two student accessible computers for further instruction such as reading blogs and additional research on various science or social

studies topics. She also used listening stations during center time while she was targeting her lower 10%.

The expanded instruction of this teacher was aimed to accomplish a goal: to have all her students reading at or above their grade level. When ranking the top five reading skills most beneficial to students, Mrs. Easton posits use of context clues and summarization skills in the promotion of comprehension. Mrs. Easton attributed these skills not only toward reading success, but also to writing success. Additionally, Mrs. Easton stated, “It is very important to understand what they are reading and pick out key words, the prior knowledge, have it relate to something they know, make connections, to retain what they are learning.” Mrs. Easton admitted that when teaching as a kindergarten teacher, the foundations of literacy were focused on phonemic awareness and phonics that would be followed by fluency and comprehension.

Comprehension has many aspects such as being able to break down the story, identify the setting, and finding answers to your questions. Finding answers to one’s questions quickly led Mrs. Easton to the discussion of the state mandated test and preparing students with test taking skills. Mrs. Easton reflected upon the years she taught kindergarten and compared them to the last three years as a third-grade teacher. Through this personal reflection, she became aware of how critical the early literacy years were for her students in relation to academic and testing success. Therefore, her goal was to implement powerful literacy instruction that not only enabled students to demonstrate mastery at the end of the year on the state mandated test, but also promoted a love for reading and writing that will remain with them throughout their future. Mrs. Easton did not simplify her instruction but provided the needed scaffolding and slowly removed the

assistance until the student was on his/her own, feeling success, and not “intimidated by anything that gets thrown at them.”

Mrs. Easton pictured a superior reading teacher as one able to address all the levels of readers in the classroom. A person that is cognizant of her students’ needs assists to accelerate those not on level and get them there, and at the same time challenge those at level to continue their literacy growth through inquisition. The superior reading teacher, in Mrs. Easton’s opinion, was one who “is going to do whatever it takes to get them there.” She felt this teacher is one who does not stay within the norm, does not just teach for the day, but is one who seeks out and finds new, better, researched methods and/or strategies that will motivate and accelerate learning within her classroom.

Although Mrs. Easton did not feel that she had become this superior reading teacher yet, she did believe that her background contributed to serving both underprivileged and ELL students. In addition to this, Mrs. Easton had a mentor as well as a vision to encourage her future growth in assisting all of her students.

Assessment. There were many forms of assessments that Mrs. Easton used to monitor her students. The more formal assessments were in the form of benchmarks of either unit tests or TAKS release tests that were disaggregated, reported, and submitted to the principal. These were administered every three to six weeks. On a weekly basis, story quizzes, spelling tests, and language mechanics were addressed. Besides a formal report card sent home at the end of every six weeks grading period, Mrs. Easton contacted parents, within the third week of that grading period, with a progress report. She also held face-to-face conferences with parents of these students whose grade average was below 75% in any subject. In addition to these more formal types of assessments, Mrs.

Easton also documented daily anecdotes of her students' progress in a spiral notebook. She noted which students were struggling, how they were struggling, and then she quickly regrouped students to meet their needs by providing additional intervention strategies as guided through Response to Intervention procedures. She also did frequent fluency checks to ensure her students were maintaining the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) fluency standards. Keeping organized records on each student allowed this instructor to monitor her students and reflect on and/or evaluate how the instruction was progressing for her students.

The initial evaluative tool Mrs. Easton used to assure learning was taking place was to continually be among the students. She was always walking among them, moving about the classroom and monitoring students closely to provide additional scaffolding when needed. Mrs. Easton was in tune with the needs of her students, taking the time to look for students with an empty page or a blank look on their face. Mrs. Easton checked for understanding in various forms. The initial and major method was to have the student recall or repeat what his/her question was and discuss what issue was possibly causing a misunderstanding. Then she had the students express knowledge by writing either in words or by visual cues.

Student performance on various assessments, assignments, and/or projects did not only evaluate if learning was occurring in the classroom, but also provided feedback for Mrs. Easton to evaluate her own teaching performance. Even though the principal's walk-through feedback was one form of evaluation on her teaching, one that "at times hurt but was accepted as helpful professional improvement," it was the performance of her students that gave Mrs. Easton the most meaningful form of evaluation on her

teaching. “To me, if they [students] are successful, then I am. To me that is more important than any form of evaluation.” Therefore, weekly quizzes, unit or benchmark assessments, and the ultimate state mandated tests were the evaluative tools Mrs. Easton used. The more periodic assessments indicated how her teaching either needed to improve or continue while the end goal was academic success at the end of the year.

Mrs. Easton’s Room

Grand tour. Mrs. Easton’s room was located in the original, older portion of the elementary building built in 1953, down the hall from the principal’s office. Outside her door and along the hallway wall were colorful postings of students’ work with an “Under Construction” theme. This particular year, the construction theme was two-fold; for one, the district was in the process of building a new elementary building at a new site, and the second purpose was to celebrate the change in the state mandated test from TAKS to STAAR. The construction theme continued within the classroom walls with various pre-made posters of hard hats, dozers, caution signs mounted around the room and on the narrow, long bulletin boards mounted above the white boards found at both the front and back of the room. On the inside of the classroom door, Mrs. Easton posted up the students’ “paws” as they earned them for being chosen as “Math-lete” of the week, where one student was recognized by the office and received their purple “paw” from the office.

The first items to draw attention in the classroom were the student desks with wire baskets attached underneath. The desks were positioned to maintain focus on the far left sidewall; thus creating the front of the room. Half of the desks were positioned in two small groups of four or six desks, and these were divided from the remaining desks by the

document camera and projector combination cart that was in the center of the room. The nine remaining desks to the right were in two traditional rows.

Next to the entry door, there was a small storage closet, then the back wall had many shelving and organizational systems. The first shelving unit was a set of cubicles for the students to store their textbooks, notebooks, binders, and a few school supplies because the wire basket area provided by the desk/chair combination did not allow for enough storage. Next, there was a large plastic tub or trashcan receptacle that was used for students to place lunch boxes or backpacks in. Beyond this was a kidney shaped table for small group/teacher led instruction. Behind this table and along the whiteboard was a small shelving system for teacher resources. Posted on the whiteboard were several positive educational posters and basketball and volleyball posters of Mrs. Easton's daughters.

Along the next wall began another bookcase. Above the bookcase were more sports posters and on top of the bookcase was a small reading lamp. This lamp added warmth to the classroom as being inviting and safe. To the side of the bookcase and in front of the window was a small table that held two student-accessible computers. These computers were mainly used for students to take their AR tests. The majority of the wall was filled by a large bulletin board nestled between two windows that were painted to restrict view to the outside courtyard. Displayed on this bulletin board was a menagerie of information, including newly acquired vocabulary, AR sticker charts, and math progress. Much of the vocabulary was displayed on chart paper and created by the teacher during classroom discussions in a Window Pane strategy format.

Completing this sidewall was the teacher area. The teacher desk was used to create a boundary for a small squared area with a bookcase along the wall to shelve more teacher resources. On the desk was a teacher computer used to take attendance, email, and access various sites. However, access was prohibited to many of the sites that could be used in classroom instruction. The teacher's desk also held several organized piles of papers to either grade, were graded, or resource materials in preparation for upcoming lessons.

The front classroom wall contained a magnetic white board with the current date and day's objectives posted on the right side. The teacher used the board to draw various visualizations of skills such as story mapping and math strategies. Also posted on the white board's left side on chart paper were the teacher scribed classroom rules and consequences that had been prepared by the class the first week of school along with a few other instructional posters. In front of the white board was a colorful, educational rug that was used to either bring the class to the floor for mini-lessons or read alouds. Positioned at the left edge of this rug was an easel for chart paper used by the teacher to create the Window Panes for vocabulary study and other word clusters for word study.

The final wall began with a sink and countertop that extended about two-thirds along the way. Below was storage space and placed on the countertop were more shelving compartments for the storage of class sets of novels and other literature pieces. There was a rack of themed Bags of Books that Mrs. Easton had acquired for her classroom while teaching kindergarten and first grade for a number of years, but found that her third-graders liked to view these same texts. These texts also served to be instructionally appropriate to use as mini-lessons for her struggling students. The final

one-third of the wall was like a half sized open-door closet. Here, there were hooks for students to hang jackets, backpacks, or lunch boxes. Above this area on the large, high shelf were stackable plastic drawer containers that held various manipulatives, stickers, pencils, erasers, and positive award incentives. Sometimes chart paper with a reading strategy such as how to summarize a passage or story was mounted to the edge of the shelf, hanging down like a curtain over this open area.

Overall, Mrs. Easton's classroom was a warm, inviting, and colorful room full of resources and additional literature texts for her students. Just as Mrs. Easton's smile provided a safe atmosphere for her students, her room was splashed with touches of her welcoming personality, her nurturing demeanor, and her glowing pride in her family and her students.

Mini tour.

Classroom management. Mrs. Easton had a definite routine and her schedule consistency was prevalent with the exception of remembering to document attendance via the 10:00 a.m. computer transmission. Once the day began, Mrs. Easton was completely focused on instruction and made every moment count for her students. The morning always began with Mrs. Easton greeting her students at the door as they filed by the breakfast container to pick up a food item and drink and then returned to their desks to eat and begin working on the morning sponge activity. Several times during this investigation, a parent came into the classroom for a quick visit/conference with Mrs. Easton to discuss various concerns about their child, ranging from a type of homework assignment to a health issue or upcoming doctor's appointment. Mrs. Easton's warm and nurturing personality greeted each and every visitor into the classroom, and her parents

appeared to be comfortable in sharing information with her and felt it important for her to know.

Mrs. Easton appeared to not mind a bit of chaos at times within the classroom as students began their morning by eating or giving away their breakfast and settling in for the daily sponge activity. She did remind them on several occasions that they only had a certain amount of time and needed “to get busy.” Mrs. Easton did have the occasional disruptive student who was looking for attention. One instance was a student enjoying his performance of armpit noises. She did not demean the student in any way. For a bit, she ignored the student, then moved next to him, and without saying a word, the situation subsided and instruction never paused. More than anything, it was Mrs. Easton’s gentle smile and gaze that sent the message to behave. It was later during the course of the morning when Mrs. Easton privately spoke to the student to correct or modify the situation.

Mrs. Easton’s caring and gentle nature was even more evident during an episodic period where one of her students was distraught every morning. This behavior appeared to originate as a parental detachment issue. Mrs. Easton, along with the counselor and principal, spent time with the parent and student during conference times or early morning arrival to school to attempt to remedy the situation. However, after several days of coaxing, the parent did withdraw the student from the district, only wishing to return a few weeks later. While this was going on, Mrs. Easton maintained her instruction in the classroom. When the principal required her required presence, Mrs. Easton briefly left instruction to a paraprofessional to complete the lesson. Even though Mrs. Easton spent some time with the student to try and figure out what was the nature of this setback and

tried to pour her heart out to understand, she did not neglect the other students' instructional time. As instruction continued, Mrs. Easton monitored the troubled student by walking by and encouraging her to continue with the lesson yet conveyed the message to the child that she understood her feelings.

Mrs. Easton used a combination of cues to maintain attention from her students. She began a countdown from five or raised her hand to signal students to quickly come to a close with the small group activity and return to their individual seats. When the whole class discussions seemed to be getting a bit loud, Mrs. Easton paused and became silent, which signaled to the students to respond with silence and listen to her message. She also used affirmative oral praises as well as stickers and other motivational tools to encourage students.

Teaching the students to be organized was another form of management. Mrs. Easton had set up the school year with students creating various folders, binders or spirals for specific subjects so when a particular objective or subject was under instruction, then that folder, spiral or binder was used to take notes. Students were also assigned cubicles in the classroom to store texts and folders. Some items were kept in their individual wire baskets at their desks; however, due to the small size of these baskets, there was a need for additional storage. In order to maintain a clearer floor space, Mrs. Easton had set aside a large trashcan as a lunchbox and/or jacket container. This way as the students entered the room these items were placed in the container instead of falling off the back of the students' chair and onto the floor.

Finally, there were definite areas in the room maintained for particular use. There was the rug at the front of the room that provided an area for whole class discussion or

read alouds, there were storage bins for pencils, erasers, scissors, glue, and rulers. She even maintained small wire baskets for sharpened and unsharpened pencils. All these aspects provided easy movement and transition within a compact classroom.

Instructional approaches. Whole class instruction predominated as the preferred instructional delivery; however, the students' settings moved from traditional in-desk to a more intimate "on the rug" location. One-half of the desks were arranged in traditional rows while the other half were in small clusters. Mrs. Easton began every morning with a Daily Oral Language (DOL) / Daily Oral Geography (DOG) sponge activity for students to complete independently by copying the prompts from the Elmo projected screen and making the proper written responses in a designated spiral notebook while also preparing for the day, serving students breakfast in the room, and listening to morning announcements. After this allotted time, about fifteen minutes, Mrs. Easton led whole class discussions to solicit student responses to correct and/or answer the prompts that, at times, presented opportunities for mini-lessons on various topics ranging from grammar and punctuation to mapping skills. She properly modeled the grammatical edits and wrote the proper responses for students to view and correct their own work.

ELA instruction appeared to move seamlessly from grammar, spelling/word study, reading, and writing skills. Mrs. Easton worked diligently to make connections not only among the ELA studies but also across other core curricula. She was also very cognizant for her second language learners to ensure suitable visualization during word study for instance using the windowpane strategy commonly used for ELL students. Mrs. Easton organized every bit of her instructional time, which even included keeping the students on a task during classroom restroom breaks. She instructed the students to

take their AR text with them and as the students waited in the hallway or their turn, they sat and read. Mrs. Easton also visited with individual students on various topics that ranged from weekend events, homework assignments, or behavioral concerns.

Mrs. Easton had her students' education at heart throughout her instruction. She observed student behavior and facial expressions for immediate feedback and made instructional adjustments accordingly. During this investigational period, a particular lesson over summarization had not been "captured" by the students. Mrs. Easton did not let the matter rest and had returned to school the next day with an idea she had pondered over during the night. Mrs. Easton continued to strive for total understanding within her classroom. Another example of her attempts to simplify and/or create learning moments was with simple spelling tricks such as for the word "should." Mrs. Easton shared, "You may remember the proper spelling by thinking: **Shhhhh o you loud dog.**"

Although much of the instruction was by oral delivery, Mrs. Easton not only shared personal learning moments with her students, but she had established the comfort level within the classroom to the extent that this learning community was willing to share their personal stories. Students were proud to share their quickwrites or tell about an event. Mrs. Easton felt that creating this comfort zone within the classroom also promoted the social climate for students to work together during student-centered activities. Therefore, Mrs. Easton's nurturing and caring instructional style promoted a safety net that encouraged students to take risks throughout their approach to learning.

Reading instruction. Mrs. Easton's reading instruction consisted of connected combinations of spelling/word study, the selection's vocabulary, and the reciprocal nature of reading and writing. After the daily grammar and geography sponge activities were

completed, word study and spelling patterns began the daily reading instruction. Students studied the week's spelling words from the basal on Mondays and then tested on Fridays. These spelling lists were selected according to the scope and sequence of the lessons as determined by the CSCOPE curriculum. The other days of the week, word study lessons focused on root words with affixes such as: -ed, -y, -ful, and -er. Students were led through word study activities by either oral discussion while the teacher scribed each to display on the document camera or the anchor chart (a teacher created chart displaying word study) while the students were gathered together on the carpet. One spelling lesson dealt with recognizing spelling patterns such as: -ought, -aught, -ield, -ound. Mrs. Easton had these patterns prepared on sentence strips with initial sounds or blends prepared on separate index cards. For this lesson, she solicited student response as if the combinations created a real word or not. After some discussion and discovery, Mrs. Easton modeled on the white board a type of word wall. She created columns for these spelling patterns and had students look for words in their texts or contribute words they already knew.

Other examples of word study objectives were alphabetical order and additional affixes. Mrs. Easton listed all the students' first names in the classroom in random order. The students then had to rewrite these names in alphabetical order. After introducing affix meanings, Mrs. Easton used a collection of words such as "time, polite, note, and please" to attach each of the suffixes to challenge students if that addition created a true word. For instance for "polite," the students were confronted with the list: "polited, politely, or politing." The students quickly identified "politely" as being the only true

word. Mrs. Easton also drew attention to the spelling pattern and keeping the ending –e when adding the suffix –ly but to drop the –e when adding the suffixes –ed and –ing.

Mrs. Easton believed in visual modes to introduce the selection’s vocabulary. She created an anchor chart with the students’ assistance. Mrs. Easton designed these as windowpanes, and after the students provided oral input and deep discussion, Mrs. Easton drew or created a picture and scribed their created definition, and these anchor charts were displayed in the room along the bottom of a bulletin board. One week’s particular focus was on poetry. Mrs. Easton admitted to having difficulty continuing her windowpane visuals for the selected vocabulary words so she led the students in developing the definition then wrote the definition on her chart and had the students chorally read the definition with the word after each discussion.

Mrs. Easton intertwined the reading and writing as guided by the CSCOPE curriculum when students were to think as a writer while they were reading. For the lessons to identify and compare autobiographies and biographies, Mrs. Easton used authentic children’s texts to read aloud and explore the features of the texts. A pair of texts Mrs. Easton presented to the class was *Ruby Bridges Goes to School: My True Story* and *Myley Cyrus, Hannah Montana* by Jennifer Magid. After a discussion on points of view used by authors to tell a story, Mrs. Easton read a few pages from each of these texts. She had instructed the students to write down as many of the pronouns being used on their marker boards as she read. Discussion among the students ensued, and they were able to point out the authors’ point of views. One of the students noted, “When you hear or see the words her, she, or he, then that is probably written in third person and is a biography.” Another student chimed in saying, “Yeah, and when you hear the word I,

then that is in first person and is an autobiography meaning that the author wrote about himself.” Students were engaged and excited in this activity as they often were when making reading and writing connections. From this lesson, a spin-off lesson occurred later within the investigation. Mrs. Easton had the students create interview questions for a character in the week’s assigned basal story, “How the Desert Tortoise got its Shell.” Mrs. Easton had the students writing and not only recalling the events of the story to answer the questions, but also had students thinking critically to ponder questions and seek answers. Mrs. Easton also used this opportunity to discuss and model the story plot to the selection and drew the model/visual on the white board. She also shared a personal connection of what this story plot model reminded her of, saying, “I call this a ‘witch’s hat’ even though it really isn’t, but that is what this graphic reminds me of.” After the students completed the graphic, with Mrs. Easton’s scripting, a connection was made to writing. She discussed how this tool could be used in reverse in the creation to organize your own story or written work.

Still with the focused objective to identify differences between autobiographies and biographies, Mrs. Easton used technology to demonstrate. First, she introduced the word “blog.” After some discussion and making connections between a blog and the quick writes the students did on a daily basis, Mrs. Easton had students form small groups in order to gather around the three computers in the classroom to view a collection of sites with blogs. Then these groups discussed what they viewed after reading a few blogs on the computer. Mrs. Easton was guiding them to make a connection between blogging, autobiography, and biography. Using their desks as a medium, Mrs. Easton directed the students to use their dry erase markers to create a Venn Diagram comparison

between an autobiography and a blog. At this point, students were expected to work independently and Mrs. Easton monitored their progress as she walked around the room and made affirmative praises such as: “I like that, good job.”

Another reading and writing connection was made after the students were led through the elements of a play. First, Mrs. Easton discussed the elements of a drama and provided examples like movies and plays. She pointed out that these people were all acting or pretending to be someone else, the character. Mrs. Easton had the students talking about their favorite characters and actors in various movies, and then she pointed out how the talking is the dialogue and is set off by quotations. Mrs. Easton set the purpose for one particular play, “Pushing Up from the Sky.” Students were to find out what the author wrote to reveal a character’s traits. Twelve students were assigned parts and given a few moments to read their sections silently. Then the oral reading of the drama began. Mrs. Easton began by reading about the characters and the various scenes and props that were used. One of the students made a connection between this information and the music teacher’s Christmas program that used props for the performances. Another student made connections to the scene changes and said, “Hey, that is like the scene changes in the movie, *The Lion King!*” Just before the students were to begin their performance of this drama, Mrs. Easton placed a worksheet on the document camera that was to be completed together after the reading. The students were instructed to focus on the dialogue that will tell them about the character. The students enjoyed their performance. Several of the students even made connections to a story used during guided reading, *The Hunters and the Elk*.

The following day's lesson, Mrs. Easton continued the week's objective of identifying elements of a drama, the plot, and characters in a play. However, after reading the story, *The Legend of Spookley the Square Pumpkin*, Mrs. Easton had the students in small groups to transform this narrative into a play. Three groups of students were given large sections of butcher paper and under Mrs. Easton's guidance were instructed to only focus on a certain portion or scene of the text. Each group had a different scene to transform. Mrs. Easton also wanted this activity to model the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Mrs. Easton wrote or scribed with her students the narrator's opening portion, and the students provided the dialogue for each of the characters in their scene. Mrs. Easton used teachable moments after the students performed their scenes to discuss the content and how the students worked together to make the scene work. The students appeared to really enjoy the opportunity to write a play from a text. One of the students did state, "Writing a play is hard, but working together made it fun." Another student added, "Yeah, working together can be fun, but sometimes we don't use some of our own ideas because we don't want to be too bossy." This comment hit on what the teacher was trying to convey while the students were working together, "If you have an idea, don't be afraid to say it to your group."

Students were observed having the opportunity to read silently at various points during this investigation. It was the procedure to read in one's AR text once finished with an assignment or while waiting in the hallway for a restroom break. It was observed many mornings upon arrival to the classroom, students sat along the hallway walls reading their texts instead of being outside at the onset of the school day. Other forms of reading within the classroom were varied. At times, the high school Peer Assistance and

Leadership (PAL) or Mrs. Easton read to the students. Sometimes the students orally read the week's selection in a round robin style.

Reading and writing skills and or elements were firmly intertwined through out Mrs. Easton's instruction. Students were provided in depth word study via spelling patterns, word meaning, and structure. Mrs. Easton seamlessly tied these skills from grammar lessons into the reading all the way through the writing. Connections were made from one lesson to the next and from one day to the next. Mrs. Easton even made cross-curricular connections and brought in real world associations into the classroom.

Assessment. Mrs. Easton used formal and informal assessments to monitor the progress of her students. For one of the formal assessments, Beginning of the Year (BOY) measurement for the District Award for Teacher Excellence (DATE) grant, the teachers at the third-grade level chose to use a TAKS formatted passage published in *Measuring Up*® by Peoples Education. Students were given the allotted time during the scheduled reading block in order to demonstrate their skills on the assessment. Students were strongly encouraged to document test-taking strategies while the teacher moved about the room to monitor the students. One of the students had an IEP (Individual Education Plan) stipulating oral exam so an assistant was in the room to administer this exam at the kidney shaped table located at the back of the room. Other sources for formal assessments were the CSCOPE unit exams and supplementary resources published by KAMICO®.

The day following an assessment, Mrs. Easton reviewed the test with the students, discussed the answers, and modeled the proper strategies to be used. She used the document camera to display her work as she expected the students to follow along and

participate in the discussion. Among the test taking strategies expected, Mrs. Easton modeled strategies by underlining the title, making a prediction, and highlighting key facts or supporting details in each paragraph to identify the main idea. She also underlined possible vocabulary words and looked for their meanings stated either directly or indirectly by using context clues. She modeled identifying three key words in each question, and searched for proof within the passage. Most of the students were attentive to Mrs. Easton's desire to prove the importance of using these strategies; however, there was one student observed reading his AR text instead and another student playing with his water bottle as he attempted to distract his peers.

Students were assessed informally on a daily basis. Mrs. Easton used worksheets from the CSCOPE curriculum that assisted in the instruction of the daily objective. At times these worksheets were completed as whole class for a scaffolded guided practice followed by a similar worksheet for students to either work in pairs or complete individually. However, there were times Mrs. Easton modified the worksheet since some items included in the worksheet had not been explicitly covered during classroom instruction, and she did not want to discourage the students. Mrs. Easton also did periodical fluency checks, but more often with her struggling students while documenting running records. Finally, self-checking activities such as "cut-coded" sentence strips for a sequencing skill provided additional and immediate feedback for student accuracy.

Vignette: October 4, 2011

Typical mornings began with students arriving either by bus, car, or walking to the school. The students routinely placed their backpacks inside the elementary hallway along their classroom wall and either eagerly headed to the playground or patiently sat

along the interior wall and visited with a classmate. The 7:50 a.m. bell notified the students to line up outside their classroom door as their teacher, Mrs. Easton, greeted them at the door and offered them their daily breakfast. Students had the routine rehearsed to pick up their breakfast items and return to their desk to consume and prepare for the day. The first daily assignment was prepared and projected on the white screen via a document camera. The students automatically retrieved their Daily Oral Language/Daily Oral Geography (DOL/DOG) spiral and began copying the assignment from the screen to promptly edit/revise the work. The students were given ample time to eat their breakfast and complete this assignment while daily announcements from the office were listened to and Mrs. Easton visited with individual students. Mrs. Easton also recorded information for after school tutorials, asking students if they were staying or assisted them by contacting their parents for reminders. She also calmly reminded students to work on the daily sponge activity by saying, “If your paper is blank, there is a problem. You should be finished with this activity or at least well on your way.”

About fifteen minutes after the first bell, Mrs. Easton began to call on students to orally discuss the edits and recorded these marks and corrections for the students to see. The students were reminded to be sure they note these corrections and if they had not already done so, to make the corrections during this time. Figure 3 was a sample of the DOL/DOG that students and teacher edited/discussed and answered. This daily sponge activity led to several mini-lessons, ranging from punctuation, word usage, and proper spelling. One specific discussion was about the use of an apostrophe, of which in this case, the apostrophe was not to be used. Several of the students felt that since the name, Williams, ended with an “s” there should have been an apostrophe, but Mrs. Easton

provided questions such as, “What is Ms. Williams owning in this sentence? (“Nothing, you can’t own ‘drew’, because that is a verb”) What is she doing?” (“She drew a picture of a wolf.”) That prompted the students to think and come to the conclusion that the name just ended in an “s.” Another short discussion about how to properly document a magazine title was discussed. Each time, Mrs. Easton only prompted her students enough to allow them to discuss and come to the proper conclusions. The second portion of the sponge allowed practice with an atlas and mathematical application.

Figure 3. A sample of the Daily Oral Language/Daily Oral Geography used by Mrs. Easton.

DOL:

1. yesterday ms Williams drew a picture of a wolf for us
2. Too women is going to buy national geographic, a magazine, for our school library

DOG:

3. Including Minnesota and Louisiana, there are twenty-four states west of the Mississippi River. How many states are east of the Mississippi?
4. What state is to the west of Colorado and to the east of Nevada?

This daily sponge activity was projected onto the classroom screen. Students copied the DOL sentences and DOG questions into their Writer’s Notebook. They revised and edited the sentences and answered the DOG questions. These corrections/answers were then orally discussed in a whole class setting.

A smooth transition to word study began with instructions for the students to join the teacher at “the rug.” There was a teacher prepared Anchor Chart with the words: “late, like, polite, time, and please” ready for the students to focus upon. Mrs. Easton began discussion about “the magic e,” allowing students to add to the discussion. (“It doesn’t make a sound but allows the vowel just before the consonant-e to speak.”) Quickly, Mrs. Easton directed the students’ attention to the list of suffixes written on the chart: -ed, -ly, -ing. She also reminded the students of the different sounds produced by the suffix –ed.

Students demonstrated the sounds: “ed, t, d.” Working through the list of words, the students were asked if a particular suffix from the list was added to the base word, was it correct, did it still make a word? When the combination was agreed upon by the students to be a correct word, Mrs. Easton wrote the new word on the chart next to its base word. After going through the list of five words, Mrs. Easton drew the students’ attention to the spelling pattern that occurred when the suffix –ly was added. The students quickly noticed that the “e” remained present when the –ly was added but was dropped when the suffixes –ed and –ing were added to the word.

After this 12-minute lesson, the students quickly and quietly returned to their desks to the teacher’s count to three. Students prepared to work on a CSCOPE worksheet as a whole class. Mrs. Easton had later explained the reasoning of whole group discussion. The particular assignment did not stay focused on the particular word study skill at hand. Some of the assignment was a spiraling of previously studied words; however, some portions had not been addressed to the class at all. Therefore, she felt the need to assist the students to focus on only the words the students had discussed in class.

Upon the completion of the word study, another transition to the week’s story ensued. Discussion of the story through a picture walk began followed by Round-Robin reading, and even a high school (PAL) who came in daily at 10:30 read to the class. Today’s story was about the invention of the basketball game by Naismith. During this reading, Mrs. Easton stopped periodically to discuss. She guided students to pay particular attention to the actual patent date of the basketball as being invented or officially documented in 1929. The students quickly noted that the game invented by Naismith was much earlier, in 1891. After the reading of the story, Mrs. Easton began

the focused objective of identifying the parts of a story as the beginning, middle, and end. First, she allowed the students to orally recall the portions of the story such as: Dr. Naismith dropped out of school, became a lumberjack, and after five years, returned to high school then on to college. He became a minister and became involved with the YMCA where he met his wife. Later in life, he became a doctor and had five children. After this discussion and recall of sequential facts from the story, Mrs. Easton handed out three index cards to each of her students. She instructed them to be sure their name was on each of the cards and on the reverse side to label one card 'beginning', the second card as 'middle,' and the third card as 'end.' Finally, students were to work on their own to "write the events of James Naismith – his beginning, middle, and end as presented in the story, "The Man Who Invented Basketball." While the students were working on this task, Mrs. Easton asked the group to also think about the author of this particular selection and what were the feelings toward Dr. Naismith. One student stated, "The author must have been impressed with Dr. Naismith since he took the time to find out so much about him." As the students responded orally, Mrs. Easton asked them to provide clues of what guided them to that decision and concluded with a brief discussion on the attributes of a biography.

The instruction for this particular day ended; however, the continued flow and study on the focused objective for the week persisted through the next day's lesson: biographies versus autobiographies and points of view. Students even had the opportunity to connect the reading experience with a writing experience by beginning a biographical sketch of one of their classmates by first preparing interview questions.

Interview with fourth-grade teacher -- Mrs. Blanco

Background/Education. Mrs. Blanco was familiar with the local community as she was born and reared not far. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and entered the workforce as a licensed social worker that satisfied her for 12 years. She knew early on that the longevity as a caseworker was not a life-long aspiration, and with the birth of her first son, she began thinking of becoming a teacher. However, at that time, it was not practical to quit a fulltime job and go back to school. The real event that stimulated the “teaching bug” was when Mrs. Blanco was working part-time and began to look for additional income. She had a friend who was the director of the local adult education department provide that opportunity. Although Mrs. Blanco was not a certified teacher, she started teaching General Education Development (GED) English classes one night a week that led to additional nights teaching reading, science, and social studies. Mrs. Blanco reminisced, “I would leave [class] on such a high. I loved it, I enjoyed the feedback.” As online education access allowed for more global opportunities for career changes as a non-traditional student, Mrs. Blanco later conferred her Masters in Education in Curriculum and Instruction and Assessment and just recently entered into a master’s program in counseling. Since becoming a classroom teacher for the last six years, she allowed her social worker license to lapse. Mrs. Blanco’s entry into the education profession not only allowed her to recognize her passion and a fulfilling career for herself, but it allowed her to discern the life-long learner within. This self-realization became the foundation of her educational philosophy: education is important and not negotiable.

Mrs. Blanco continued to display the importance of education with her own development in education not only in her current studies in counseling, but in any other medium that provided information. She used sources such as CNN, Yahoo, Caller Times, MSN, from “local to international stuff; anything to deal with education. I try to stay away from the whiny state of education where teachers are being blamed, but if it is research based, then I like to read it.”

Classroom Management. Good classroom management is the foundation for academic success. Mrs. Blanco began the school year with establishing procedures the first week of school and used Harry Wong’s tips in getting her year started. Her repertoire of management skills was also eclectic as she was well read and applied methods that fit her style and allowed her day to flow smoothly. She felt that every year there was growth. This year she added knowledge gained from the principal’s assigned summer reading: *Teach like a Champion*, using the acronym SLANT (Sit up, Listen to speaker, Ask and Answer, Nod your head, Track Speaker). Previous instruments used were NED (Never give up, Encourage others, Do your best) and the Rights, Rules, and Privileges through the Hatton W. Sumners Foundation. Students developed their own social contract, and these rules along with the consequences of breaking them were posted in the room.

The students were responsible for their own learning community not only in managing behavior, but also in the care of the environment. Each student had his/her own job for the week. Mrs. Blanco commented, “I haven’t been in another classroom to have observed, but I think we run like a pretty well oiled machine.” This was also evident in the numbers of discipline referrals, which were minimal. This particular year

was abnormal in that Mrs. Blanco started out the year with a student in ISS (In School Suspension) for illegally breaking into the school during the summer months. For the most part, Mrs. Blanco handled discipline with her students by talking to them. She generally asked them to step outside, and they conversed. Mrs. Blanco claimed, “I think a lot of times the social worker kicks in. I talk, I always try to deal with it [the discipline problem] first before just sending them [students] to the office.” Mrs. Blanco stated that if and when she had to “write up” a student it was under direct instruction from the principal to document instances, and these instances were usually scenarios where a student was not performing for other instructors outside her classroom.

A constant flow of communication inside a classroom was an important medium whether it was between teacher and students or between students. Mrs. Blanco allowed a range of discussion levels from whole class to small group; however, during her direct teaching time, she set a high level of respect for the speaker. “It is my personality, I like structure, I like quiet, and I like straight rows. I know that is old school. I know that there is a time to raise your hand and wait your turn,” admitted Mrs. Blanco. The stating of: “Give me five” or quietly standing in front of the class were the normal cues for the students to become aware that the noise level had reached out of bounds. Mrs. Blanco also used random cards, an index card for each student’s name, to train students to quit blurting out answers. Even though communication was an important component, managing the communicative flow set the tone for a peaceful and successful learning environment.

Just as positive communication within the learning environment was a component toward success, so was the ability to motivate students into learning and doing the best

they could. Most positive reinforcements came in the form of tangible items provided to the students. Such tangible measures provided were popcorn parties for the class that collected the most, nacho party for another event, Popsicles for events such as 100% wearing purple on Spirit Fridays, or pencils and ribbons for perfect attendance and honor roll. By the fourth-grade, Mrs. Blanco felt that the students were exposed to many outward or substantial mediums to reward success and made it her mission to begin the lessons on an intrinsic reward system. Any time the class was posed with a challenge, such as raising money for fire victims, the first response from the students was, “What do we get?” Mrs. Blanco used the occurrence as a teachable moment.

I don't like to buy my kids off. I use it as a teachable moment, to complement them, to let them know I sincerely appreciate them. I give them a little lecture every time about getting something. That it isn't about them, but about feeling good about yourself for helping someone in need. I have to step back to teach them socially the reward of doing well and the reward of trying and putting forth the effort.

Instructional Approaches. A heterogeneously composed classroom required a professional skill in addressing the differing intellectual abilities. Mrs. Blanco's foundation to addressing the needs of each of her students was by really knowing her students. This knowledge included not only the review of disaggregated assessment results, but also the knowledge of each student's interests, family, and personality. Mrs. Blanco did not split her instruction into three or four different leveled or differentiated lessons to address the same content; instead, with the guidance of the CSCOPE exemplar

lesson outline, hands on activities were manipulated to set a distinction addressing the needs of each learner. However, Mrs. Blanco admitted,

I think I try to address it to where they don't necessarily know I am addressing the struggling students, and they don't really know that I am directing. If anybody needs additional help, there is the teacher table. I am available to everybody all the time.

In addition to knowing her students, Mrs. Blanco was extremely accessible to her students' parents. Every Monday, Mrs. Blanco sent out "Monday Memos" and personal notes to the parents on the progress/behavior of their child in her charge. Mrs. Blanco freely offered her personal cell number as a contact to her parents, allowing the parents easy access to her whether it be a need to talk about test results or an inquiry for a spelling list of which Mrs. Blanco quickly provided either over the phone or sent the list via email.

The classroom community purposely and easily extended to the families. Early on in the school year, parents became comfortable in maintaining contact between school and home. "Parents reach out to me in how to handle home issues with their child. I also reach out to them when I notice behavioral changes in the classroom," stated Mrs. Blanco. Examples of family issues were when a dad may be gone weeks at a time to work on business or a family member has been incarcerated. Mrs. Blanco's open access policy allowed parents to feel at ease. She stated, "The more I let my parents communicate with me, call it 'Kissing up to them' it makes my job a lot easier for when I need to talk to them." Therefore, including parents in their child's education was another important component to academic success. Parents' concerns were acknowledged and

the school to home connection was valued. Information from classroom behavior to unfinished assignments or finding out how the child will be returning home from after school tutorials were all avenues or reasons to maintain open contacts.

Sometimes more than a phone call or a note sent home via the student was not enough. Mrs. Blanco often made home visits. Sometimes these visits were warranted because there was a gap in the common methods to maintain parent contact, or it was because the parent did not have a way to travel to the school for a face-to-face conference. Mrs. Blanco shared a recent event that included trying to make parent contact. The student had not been completing assignments. For example, the parent signed up for a conference at the school, but did not arrive at the designated time. When the time came for the actual home visit, Mrs. Blanco, the school principal, and the student traveled home for the conference.

Having the student leave the campus and come along for a home visit was something not normally done, but Mrs. Blanco requested this action. She wanted to have the student there to be aware of the discussions as she stated,

I feel very uncomfortable about having ARDs and RTIs without the child there, because we are talking about them. Again, this is the social worker coming out in me, client/consumer; we are talking about their life. I don't want to be making decisions for them without including them."

Mrs. Blanco explained that in these types of discussions, the parent was able to hear both sides, the child knew what was being said and hopefully realized that the parent and teacher were not attacking the child but instead were working together as a team to help

the student. Therefore, the open door policy of communication and parental involvement was instrumental in providing motivation for the students to succeed in school.

In Mrs. Blanco's opinion, the additional paperwork and documentation required to make sure that students' needs were being met and keeping the flow of communication open between parents and administrators was the most difficult aspect of teaching today. For the amount of hours Mrs. Blanco spent teaching, an equal amount of hours were spent completing paperwork. Some of that time was on grading, but a good bit involved reports. There were the test disaggregations, creation of assessments, and lesson plans. Mrs. Blanco was aware and had access to various sources, whether blackline masters or technology to assist, but she took instruction and assessment of her class to a personal level in order to maintain the high level of expectation. She preferred to sit at the computer to create a short assessment of a lesson than just use a quick copy from a workbook. "I feel if there are things on that sheet that I didn't teach, it won't do me any good." Therefore, being able to document how her students were capturing the knowledge at the moment was an important process in Mrs. Blanco's teaching. A process that does occupy her time, but she felt it to be well worth the exchange for student success.

Reading Instruction. The driving force for reading instruction was the use of CSCOPE, a curriculum used by the district since 2004, which provided exemplar lessons. Mrs. Blanco attended several roll out sessions offered by the Region Two Education Service Center over the course of the last three years. She has studied the VAD, IFDs, and the lessons provided to carefully and painstakingly prepare the weekly lessons for the fourth-grade level at Hayden ISD as she was the grade level's ELA planner. Although

her assignment was a self-contained classroom, the three fourth-grade teachers shared in the portions of lesson planning. Mrs. Blanco admitted that there were some of the lessons she did not like.

It is impossible to do all the things they say we can do in one lesson. I can't do word study in five minutes. They don't put any time in for mechanics. If it wasn't for the sponges that I do every single day, there is no way my students will learn ... [a particular] skill or get the mechanics.

In addition to CSCOPE, Mrs. Blanco incorporated the *Renaissance Learning* program and bits of the state adopted basal: Scott Foresman's *Reading Street*. She also stated that she liked to implement the Marie Carbo's *Reading Styles* program (students read short passages, listened to paced audio tape, then answered passage specific questions); however, currently she was not able to use it the way it was really intended. In the past, she had incorporated the program as one of her centers and used it to its full extent during summer school sessions, yet she planned on reentering the program's full function. The *Reading Styles* program was a research-based language arts program that allowed students to listen to pre-recorded stories and answer provided questions. In addition to these programs, Mrs. Blanco used consumable products from such companies as *Kamico*® *Instructional* products and *Buckle Down Publishing* to assist in test preparation and format while providing additional reading practice.

Instructional models employed by Mrs. Blanco varied. As she incorporated portions of the CSCOPE curriculum, the exemplar lessons provided models of direct instruction as well as student-centered hands on activities. During direct instruction of the targeted skills, explicit instruction was provided through selected strategies to provide

practice in acquiring the skill, which led to reading comprehension. Using various models of instructions allowed Mrs. Blanco to selectively individualize her teaching to meet the various learning levels of her students. She took anecdotal notes and provided small group and individual instruction to ensure student success. Along with this individual attention, modifications to the daily lessons allowed Mrs. Blanco the most effective ways to teach outside of the provided curriculum. CSCOPE was modified to some extent every year with improvements and it addressed the state's readiness and supporting standards in a timely manner.

Students continued to struggle with reading comprehension in general, according to Mrs. Blanco. Higher order thinking skills such as inferences, predictions, main ideas/summarizations, and cause/effects were those that Mrs. Blanco focused upon and made sure to continue the spiraling re-teach required to ensure mastery of these skills. Therefore, Mrs. Blanco was cognizant of her students' needs and capitalized upon the "free" literature her students selected as additional teachable moment opportunities. In order for her students to have a wide selection, Mrs. Blanco provided additional reading material by purchasing texts that may interest her students from various bookstores such as Half Price Books. She liked to stock up on books for her classroom and as long as her students met their AR weekly reading goal, selecting an additional read was welcomed and encouraged. The types of material provided were a wide range of fiction and nonfiction texts. The students had access to *Texas Studies Weekly*, a 100% standards-based newspaper for social studies that provided nonfiction reading. Mrs. Blanco scheduled weekly class trips to the library for additional instruction and occasional read-alouds by the librarian.

Along with using her students' free literature selections to continue instruction, Mrs. Blanco also opened discussions as to why the students were reading what they were and to what reason the author had written a particular piece. Whole class, small group, or one-on-one conferencing were all vehicles of instructional styles used in order to set a high priority for reading all through the school day, above and beyond the content. All this was done in order to strike the love of reading, planting a want or desire to read, instead of mandatory reading.

Being able to provide various reading materials and a wide offering of genres, Mrs. Blanco used every instructional moment of the school day plus time spent during her conference period, lunch, and after school. Mrs. Blanco's commitment and passion for education was a trait she cultivated toward her students on a daily basis by extending and expanding instructional time throughout the school day and across all content areas.

This instructional expansion continued through the use of technology. Mrs. Blanco used the district's subscription to *United Streaming* to provide short video clips and visual cues to enhance content instruction. She also utilized CSCOPE developed and personally developed PowerPoint and Youtube instructional aids to augment skills and content. Much of the technology Mrs. Blanco used was geared to classroom instruction and not so much for student manipulation. Mrs. Blanco's classroom was equipped with a document camera and screen projector to aid in instruction; however, there were "two old style computers in the classroom, not enough for students to use other than for AR testing."

The top five reading skills Mrs. Blanco felt were most beneficial to students were those skills students could carry with them through continued education. Higher order

thinking skills such as inferencing and determining the author's purpose for the text were critical to making connections. However, Mrs. Blanco expressed a difficulty in making text-to-self connections due to little concept in the ability to connect with the South Texas environment. Therefore, increased vocabulary skills to enhance life experiences and familial connections were beneficial to improve student success as her students learned life's lessons whether it was found in fiction or nonfiction texts. Finally, Mrs. Blanco felt that making the reading and writing connection was an important aspect. Making the connection to grammar and what was written by published authors and making those applications to the student's own writing was an important skill. Mrs. Blanco stated, "Reading then apply it to your writing, when learning something in writing, then apply it to your reading." Therefore, reading and writing are reciprocal in nature and this application in conjunction with reading strategies connect the higher order thinking skills as the student synthesizes literacy growth.

Success on the state's standardized test was a pressure that weighed on each teacher at Hayden Elementary. The district was a data and test-driven school that continually monitored progress of their students and set high expectations with the goal to maintain Exemplary status. Thus recognizing the end goal, Mrs. Blanco felt the qualities of a superior reading teacher was one who possessed the love for what he/she did and pulled the kids in with this enjoyment. Mrs. Blanco commented, "I think you have to have genuine, sincere love for what you are doing, because the kids can read right through you." A superior reading teacher teaches by example, shows emotion, feeling, and passion for what they are doing and has an overall natural propensity to teach

reading. These aforementioned qualities are then harnessed with the willingness to stay abreast of current research, “bringing in something new to make things work.”

Assessment. The students were assessed on a weekly and daily basis through observations and anecdotal notes. Since the increased rigor and expectations in the new state mandated test, a challenge to manipulate and assess higher order thinking skills was a directive from the campus principal. Mrs. Blanco used six week’s benchmarks as provided by CSCOPE as well as her own teacher prepared mini assessments. In order to assure that learning was taking place in the classroom, Mrs. Blanco used a daily evaluation management system that guided full participation of all students during whole class discussion. She provided scaffolded instruction, documented misunderstood skills, content, and strategies, and encouraged self-assessment after small group activities or discussion. Mrs. Blanco admitted that there were assignments which she did not officially record grades because she felt that her notes and observations offered a more conclusive documentation. Therefore, it was a combination of teacher created assessments, workbook pages, formal benchmark assessments and informal observations, and anecdotal notes that guided her instruction toward the next lessons. Mrs. Blanco then used these assessments to self-evaluate. She felt as long as the students were giving her 110% of their best, she was proud.

Mrs. Blanco’s Room

Grand tour. Every morning began with Mrs. Blanco being totally prepared for the day, not only with various plans, activities, or manipulatives but also by having breakfast served at each one of the student’s desks. She then positioned herself at the open door greeting each one of her students with a firm handshake and warm smile. As

students entered into the room, most became accustomed to the procedure of moving their number tab from one Velcro strip at the entry bulletin board to another Velcro strip that indicated whether they were eating in the cafeteria or brought their lunch. This also provided a quick method to note any absences as soon as Mrs. Blanco stepped back into the classroom, following the last student being greeted. Also, students quickly and smoothly prepared for their day, getting homework assignments and writing binders out. While eating breakfast, they began making editing corrections from the screen projected sponge activity.

The students' combination chair desks with wired bookrack under the seat were arranged in traditional rows with two rows on either side of the document camera and projector cart combination located in the center of the room, facing away from the door. In this design, Mrs. Blanco was able to walk along an aisle to check and conference with each individual student on either side of her as she documented homework assignments such as spelling contract or AR progress and the amount of time read the previous night.

Along the classroom's back wall beyond the entry bulletin board posted with students' jobs, attendance, lunch and breakfast menus and the "under construction" theme, there was a kidney shaped table surrounded by resources and materials in preparation for small student groups. Also stacked along the wall were incoming textbook sample materials from various publishers to be viewed and studied as Mrs. Blanco was grade level leader and also on the textbook committee. In this same location was where Mrs. Blanco called the class together for read alouds. Here, the students sat on the floor as Mrs. Blanco sat in a chair in front of the gathered group. There was a magnetic white board mounted along this back wall that was used to post reminders to

the students about missing work or if they were to remain in the classroom for additional tutorials.

Beyond the kidney shaped table and completing the back wall was a small teacher's desk/area with shelving to store teacher resources, a microwave, a small refrigerator, and the teacher's computer workstation. The side classroom wall was an exterior wall that faced the Junior High Campus and had a cubicle system to either store manipulatives or the students' textbooks. Along the top of this cubicle case were sets of trade books and extra school supplies for the students as well as storage boxes for glue, rulers, and scissors and an ivy plant to give a warm caring effect to the classroom. To complete this wall was a large bulletin board with a table positioned underneath. Posted to the bulletin board were teacher created charts that had been formed during word study and grammar/mechanics mini-lessons. Mounted from the ceiling in this corner was a TV with DVD player.

Along the front classroom wall was another magnetic white board with two small bulletin boards on either side. The right side bulletin board continued to display more word study, vocabulary, or grammar rules while the bulletin board on the left displayed the calendar for the month. On the upper left side of the white board, Mrs. Blanco kept the homework assignments posted and below these were the daily objectives. Every morning Mrs. Blanco began her instruction by stating to the class the expectations in each subject for the day as she read from her posting. Above the white board, centered and mounted to the wall was a white screen and world/state pull down maps. To the right were teacher prepared positive behavior expectations posters as in "SLANT" and "Give Me 5," and to the left were the teacher and student created classroom rules/consequences

chart and daily schedule. The fourth classroom wall began another shelving system in part as a bookcase for classroom literature texts as well as handouts and class preparation materials for upcoming lessons. Completing the line along this wall was a table for two student accessible computers. These computers were mainly used for students to take AR tests and some time could be spent on research.

Completing the wall was a closet, storing teacher and classroom supplies. The closet door was used to post writing samples. Between the closet door and the classroom entry door was a large rolling cart used to store classroom supplies such as paper, soap bottles, and Kleenex tissue boxes. Finally, there was a small desk positioned to the right side of the door that was easily accessible to students as they entered the room where small boxes of sharpened and unsharpened pencils as well as a bottle of hand soap were available to the students. Hanging on the wall behind this table was a large pocket chart used to place student's work if he/she were absent for the day. Students knew upon returning to class after being absent to check their pocket for any handouts/assignments. Completing the room were various "Under Construction" themed posters/icons as the elementary campus awaited the construction of their new building.

Mini tour.

Classroom management. Mrs. Blanco had definite procedures established so that students knew what was to be expected and scheduled. Every morning began with breakfast served at each of the students' desks and a Daily Oral Language (DOL) sponge activity displayed on the screen. Mrs. Blanco greeted students with a handshake at the door where upon entering the classroom, the student "punched their time clock" as being present, prepared for the day by unpacking backpack and getting homework out, ate

breakfast and completed the DOL sponge activity. While students began their morning, Mrs. Blanco, with clipboard in hand, checked with individual students about missing assignments or homework. Finally, every morning Mrs. Blanco read the various subjects' objectives for the day to her students.

In order to keep the classroom operating effectively, Mrs. Blanco created various jobs for the students to maintain a week at a time. Students were found collecting breakfast trash, recording what the day's menu was on the white board, marking attendance on the breakfast roster, watering plants, updating the calendar, and passing out papers. Another procedure Mrs. Blanco used to encourage participation by all students in an activity was by using random cards. These were index cards with the student's name, one card for each student. Mrs. Blanco used these to call on students to either answer a question or perform a task.

Managing time and keeping to a schedule was a positive attribute to Mrs. Blanco's classroom management. Even though she had some flexibility to the school day due to being a self-contained classroom, Mrs. Blanco found it important to keep to the schedule as closely as possible and demonstrate to the students the need to use their time wisely. Mrs. Blanco had the daily schedule posted on chart paper and mounted to the wall and used a timer for various events. Daily restroom breaks were timed as one-half of the class (the evens) took a break while the other half of the class (the odds) remained in the room to AR read or complete an assignment. Labeling the class as odds or evens referred to the numerical alphabetical order of the students. The student knew the number assigned and wrote this number on his work in addition to his name. This same number was used on the "time clock" when students entered the classroom every

morning to move their placers under “brought lunch” or “cafeteria lunch.” This method of organization contributed to time management as papers and students were quickly organized into alphabetical order whenever needed. Time was also an important factor when sending students to the library. A student was handed a stopwatch to monitor the amount of time he had been out of the classroom. A timer was also set regularly while students were working in small groups so that when the set time was up and the buzzer heard, students promptly moved back to their original positions. Therefore, maintaining a schedule and adhering to it was an important factor. However, during this investigational period, there were a few times schedules had to be flexible when another event such as picture taking encroached on the classroom time. As a collective observation during this investigation, movement and transition from objective to objective was smooth with little wasted time. Students moved quickly to get involved with a targeted assignment or lesson and worked on the task at hand.

Organization was another form of classroom management that included assisting students to keep up with reading and writing notes and products, assignments when absent, and staying current on missing work. The students via teacher modeling had set up reading and writing three-ring binders with identified sections. Therefore, as particular instruction occurred, the students turned to the appropriate section to take notes or to include an assignment or worksheet into the binder. Absent students knew to check their “pocket” on the wall for any papers and/or assignments that were handed out the day(s) they were not in class. Mrs. Blanco even had a method for her organized filing system of worksheets and assignments in order to be efficient while teaching throughout the day. Finally, Mrs. Blanco maintained an organized list of students on the back white

board who were not able to go to recess for the day. This visual not only assisted the teacher who needed to stay in, but also let both the student and the teacher know what product or assignment was missing.

Instructional Approaches. A traditional classroom described Mrs. Blanco's instructional approach. Individual desks were placed in straight rows, facing the designated front of the room for all the students to view either the screen or white board. Most of the instruction was presented in whole class format with teacher directed discussions. Students knew the cue "SLANT" upon hearing it, and there was a teacher made poster above the bulletin board explaining this acronym: **S**it up, **L**isten, **A**sk and answer, **N**od your head, and **T**rack speaker. Whenever Mrs. Blanco noticed a student slouching or laying his head down she stated to the class, "SLANT, we have a long day today." Mrs. Blanco encouraged student discussion but not when she was providing direct instruction to the class. She expected them to be attentive and quiet, but she was well aware of her students' ability to maintain concentration and participation during a lesson. On one occasion, Mrs. Blanco noticed several students having difficulty focusing and appearing to be sleepy and tired, so she directed, "Let's stand up and stretch. We need to be alert for this important information."

Students did have varied opportunities to work in groups of four on some activities, such as completing a chart on story elements, and in pairs when trying to discover the spelling rule of when to change the "y" to an "i" before adding "es." Students also worked as partners to interview each other in order to produce a biographical product of one another. During the investigational period, Mrs. Blanco called the students to sit on the floor, in the "reading corner" in front of her while she

read aloud a text. Therefore, Mrs. Blanco preferred whole class instruction, but did provide opportunities for small group instruction and during centers time held a guided reading group at the kidney table under her guidance.

Technology contributed to the mode of instructional delivery. Mrs. Blanco displayed the daily grammar sponge activity via the document camera as well as displayed various worksheets for students to either follow along or correct their own worksheets. Mrs. Blanco painstakingly searched the Internet in preparation for lessons in order to either use the material as a focus or as part of the instruction. Mrs. Blanco had prepared one particular lesson over media techniques in biographies; however, she had a little difficulty in getting certain clips to work, but because she was prepared and had several resources she was able to meet the lesson objective. The students were involved and responded well to the clips and worked as a whole class to identify the uses of sound, movement, and visuals within the clips. Several students offered their connections either as self-to-text or text-to-text. One student stated, "I have read about the Star of David in a book over the summer." Finally, Mrs. Blanco created PowerPoint files to be used for additional instructional support.

The use of technology as a mode of instructional delivery was an increasing medium in the classroom; however, the use of chart paper to display the teacher's note taking or the students' work still prevailed in Mrs. Blanco's classroom. Mrs. Blanco used chart paper to write as she spoke about certain objectives. Some of the wall charts viewed during this investigational period were grammatical rules, interview questions to ask, irregular plural nouns, various word study samples, double consonants (compound, prefix, suffix), adverbs and adjectives and prepositions and prepositional phrases. These

anchor charts provided samples, classifications, definitions, and guidance for the students to view on a daily basis. Students also wrote the same information to keep in their reading/writing binder. Therefore, the combination of oral discussion, visual cues, and physical written impression provided various forms of instruction to address each student's learning style.

Reading Instruction. CSCOPE curriculum or its exemplar lessons were the guiding instruments to reading instruction. Mrs. Blanco studied the scope and sequence as well as the suggested lessons and took meticulous effort to address the TEKS through the guidance of CSCOPE and several outside sources. In addition to the CSCOPE curriculum, supplementary resources were used that included KAMICO® assessment preparation materials, TAKS Master®, Daily Language Response activities, and the process writing cycle. The perspective to reading instruction was to view teaching reading through a writer's eye; therefore, Mrs. Blanco planned instruction to flow seamlessly and also made daily connections from the selections read by the students to what was being written by the students.

Every day began with a sponge activity, such as revise/edit a passage, followed by answering the TAKS formatted questions the following day, or work on a combination of sentence revisions, analogies, rhyming words, or determining past or present tense of a sentence. Many times a mini-lesson occurred when there was a concept not understood by the students such as dialogue and its proper punctuation, which then became a discussion point for students while revising their biographical product. Every day the students were given time to work on this activity independently, followed by whole class discussion and correction of their work. Students' participation to answer were

randomized by the use of name cards while Mrs. Blanco modeled the correct documentation for students to view via the document camera.

The daily sponge activity was followed with a smooth transition into word study. Mrs. Blanco prepared an anchor chart to discuss the day's focal study, which ranged from affixes and root words, dictionary skills, homophones, and parts of speech. Mrs. Blanco's instruction was mainly whole class discussion; however, occasionally small groups of students worked together. One activity involved pairs of students to work together to sort the spelling pattern of singular and plural nouns ending in "-y." First, Mrs. Blanco introduced the lesson whole class and asked students to find singular nouns ending in "-y" from a particular handout that each student had. She then strategically placed these words in certain areas on the chart. After working as a whole class, the students were to cut/paste a collection of words to match the singular word with its plural and also determine the spelling pattern. All through this activity, Mrs. Blanco monitored the room and encouraged the students to work together and come up with the rule and what was different between the two lists of words. One student guessed, "The top one is only one syllable." Mrs. Blanco responded, "I see how you are thinking that, but what about 'cowboys'? It is more than one syllable but you still will just add -s to the word." After a brief discussion, students worked feverishly to try and figure out the rule. Mrs. Blanco purposely had left it up for the students to discover on their own. After about ten minutes with the students working in matching and sorting the words and looking for the pattern and rule, Mrs. Blanco announced to the class, "I will give ten Blanc Doughs and a cheesy prize for anyone who can figure it out." This was just one example of how Mrs. Blanco worked with her students. She did not just deliver the information like trying to

pour water into a glass. Instead, she set up the situation and assisted the students to figure it out as much as possible. She provided instruction in positive and encouraging steps, always activating the students' curiosity and challenging them to rise through learning.

Along with the TAKS formatted passages and the language skills taught, Mrs. Blanco connected authentic children's texts into her reading lessons that enhanced the writing portion of her ELA lessons. During this investigation when the focus was on teaching the students how to develop biographical products, Mrs. Blanco used paired texts to show the author's craft and compared fiction and nonfiction texts. For one pair of texts, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography* and *Little House in the Big Woods*, Mrs. Blanco began with the nonfiction biography by explicitly showing the students the features of the particular text. Mrs. Blanco brought in personal thoughts and feelings about reading biographical texts as she shared with the students, "Sometimes after reading a biography and getting to know more about the person, your perspective may change as mine had after reading about this particular musician." After the first three pages were read, Mrs. Blanco posited several questions to the class such as: "What kind of information did we gather already from this text?" and "Why would an author pursue writing a biography?" She also showed the students various pictures and queried the time frame from childhood through adulthood as well as the setting. The following day, the fictional companion was introduced, a chapter read, the teacher posited questions, and a comparison of the two texts ensued. After a short discussion, the students returned to their desks from the reading circle to begin a whole class discussion to compare the two texts while completing a handout, "Comparing/Contrasting Literary Works." Mrs.

Blanco used her random cards to promote student participation to reveal comparative information such as characters, setting, problem, events, and solutions. One of the students exclaimed, “The fiction text is written very similar to the nonfiction text except the nonfiction is true and the fiction was more entertaining!”

Finally, a myriad of reading strategies such as jigsaw, clusters, cloze passages, and Reader’s Theater were employed during instruction. Mrs. Blanco worked hard to provide her students with the tools needed to deepen their comprehension skills before, during, and after reading. Therefore, Mrs. Blanco’s reading instruction was holistic or thematic as all literary parts melded together as cohesive and comprehensive student-centered learning units.

Assessment. Meticulous classroom records consisted of formal, informal and authentic assessments. Every Monday, Mrs. Blanco had prepared short notes to parents to inform them of their child’s progress, any missing assignments, and AR point accumulation in conjunction with a parent letter that reminded them of various upcoming events and the week’s objectives. Three-week progress reports were prepared for all students and mandatory parent-teacher conferences, preferably face-to-face, were to be documented for any student with averages below 75%. Mrs. Blanco kept a clipboard with her during her morning rounds to check for homework assignments and document AR reading. She was organized with the record keeping and progress of her students in order to be prepared for parent and/or principal conferences on a particular issue as well as to assist in lesson preparations to re-teach or provide a differentiated plan.

Upon the onset of the investigational period, instruction entered its sixth week and under direction of the principal, benchmark exams were being administered. These

formal exams were prepared from the CSCOPE curriculum, and students were given more than the reading block time to complete. Benchmark exams were also administered for writing, both revising/editing and composition, and math on separate days. During an exam, students were expected to show the test taking strategies. It was noted that when one of the students was ready to turn in the exam, Mrs. Blanco looked at the work and said, "I don't see strategies." Hence, the student returned to her desk to resume with the exam. Before the testing period began, Mrs. Blanco set the purpose of the exams as these assessments were being used to determine after school tutorials and student's needs in upcoming lessons. She did quick reviews such as reminding the students about framing an essay for the written composition portion of the exam. Other formal assessments administered to the students were TAKS formatted passages and end of unit exams created via the CSCOPE curriculum.

Mrs. Blanco also informally assessed her students during modified guided reading at center time in addition to monitoring small groups during student-centered reading or writing activities. Various blackline masters from the CSCOPE curriculum, KAMICO®, and TAKS Master® were used daily for either guided or independent practice activities. Finally, authentic assessments consisted of teacher-created objective focused exams or quizzes and rubrics for the purposes to evaluate written products and oral presentations. Mrs. Blanco set the purpose of the rubric to her students not only as an evaluative tool but also as a guide for the student as he begins the product. She attached a completed rubric to a student's written product and conference the results. Therefore, Mrs. Blanco used assessments, whether objectively or subjectively evaluated, as critical tools to monitor and know her students.

Vignette: October 20, 2011

By the signal of the first morning bell, Mrs. Blanco was positioned and ready at the door. As students entered from the playground, she greeted students with a firm handshake, and had breakfast served at each student's desk. The document camera projected the day's sponge activity and cued students to the work at hand. As the students entered the room, they moved their "number" from the Velcro strip of the right side to the left to "Punch In" their attendance into the class just as construction workers clock into work. Students followed normal morning routine of getting their homework assignments ready and composition books out to copy and edit the morning language sponge activity. While students ate breakfast, prepared for the day, and worked on daily sponge activity, Mrs. Blanco visited with individual students regarding assignments, monitored the room, and stopped by each student's desk to check for homework as she documented anecdotal notes.

Discussion and modeled correction of the daily sponge activity began about 15 minutes after the second bell that signaled the beginning of the school day rang. Mrs. Blanco called on individual students through the use of "random cards" to orally provide the corrections. After some discussion and possible mini-lessons, Mrs. Blanco then modeled the correct answers in her own handwriting as projected by the Elmo.

Following the morning sponge activity, students moved into a word study activity that for this particular day led into an extensive study on adjectives and adverbs. Mrs. Blanco had chart paper ready to record a list of adjectives at the top left portion of this chart paper and a list of adverbs toward the bottom left. As discussion ensued in the class, Mrs. Blanco posited to the class to study these two lists of words and create a

definition. After this student discussion and discovery, she scribed the definitions for adjectives and adverbs on the right side of the same chart paper. Mrs. Blanco stressed the importance of using clear descriptive words in the students' own writing projects. She also stressed how the STAAR test was limited to only 26 lines; therefore, the importance of using clear, concise and selective wording was necessary in order to produce an acceptable product. The students also recorded this information on notebook paper to be filed in their reading/writing binder behind the "reading information" tab.

After about 20 minutes of word study, the students transitioned into the week's focused reading objective, the identification of dramatic plays. Mrs. Blanco showed the students the children's text, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka as a comparison to the readers' theater play they would be using and pointed out that both pieces were written by the same author. Mrs. Blanco assigned parts to nine students and had each part highlighted for the students on their own copy. These nine students moved to the front of the room to perform the approximate seven-minute reading. The next assignment was for the students to identify the elements of this reading. The students had worked as a whole class the day before on a different piece of drama, but today Mrs. Blanco used her random cards to place the students in groups of four to Jigsaw the elements worksheet. The students moved to various places in the room to begin their group work and each group had only one part of the worksheet's task to complete together. Mrs. Blanco monitored the groups as she moved from group to group to make sure each group remained on task to complete only the part that was assigned to them. She also reminded the students "to be sure to find textual evidence." The students worked well together to discuss their assigned story element. (characters, setting,

problem, plot) After about fifteen minutes, students were called to return to their seats and prepare for their morning break.

Upon returning from break, discussion resumed over the elements of the dramatic play at hand. Students provided the information from their group discussions. Then Mrs. Blanco instructed the students to think about the theme of this story, “the broad lesson that affects your life.” She meticulously instructed the students to not just pick out a detail from the story like the problems of baking a cake or about the type of materials one should build his/her house, but to think about the lesson to be learned from this story. Some of the students supplied responses such as: “Never say anything bad or mean about someone because when something mean was said about his grandmother, that is when the wolf got mad.” Another student stated, “Don’t let your anger control you.” When the next student felt the theme was about being lazy since the wolf was in search of sugar, Mrs. Blanco reminded the class about not focusing on a detail in the story as the lesson, but to use the detail as textual evidence. After about 15 minutes of discussion, students were instructed to place this worksheet in their reading/writing binder in front of the previous day’s notes and prepare to resume work on their narrative found on their yellow tablets. Mrs. Blanco then began conferring with one student at a time on their written piece. Again, she reminded the students the importance of only having 26 lines to work with as in the amount of space to present a complete piece. After silently reading one student’s work, Mrs. Blanco asked the student, “What is your surprise? You didn’t address your prompt at all.” She provided guidance in order to focus the piece and bring the piece to addressing the prompt. Students had only about 15 minutes to get into their writing, as it was then time to transition into the day’s math lesson.

Conclusion

This study revealed four highly qualified and successful teachers and two principals in two rural South Texas elementary schools. The researcher formally interviewed each teacher, observed classroom practices and routines, and made further inquiries through informal conversations. Through a five-week collection of fieldnotes, journal entries, and artifacts, the researcher recorded thick descriptions of each participant as revealed in Grand and Mini tours. Aside from the effectiveness of these successful educators, their deep connections to the rural community and its families permeated a personal commitment and expectation of self and the students. The following chapter will present a comparison of the six participants.

Chapter V.

Findings, Limitations, and Implications for Future Research

Introduction

Chapter five presents the findings from the participant interviews and synthesis of classroom observations from chapter four in order to reveal patterns between the participating teachers in two rural school settings. A comparison in the form of a Venn Diagram was crafted to depict the similarities and differences found between the participants. Spradley's (1980) Semantic Relationship Chart (see Appendix E) was used to identify the "cover terms" and "included terms" documented through interviews, formal and informal, and classroom observations and classified into a "kind of" relationship. Interview and observational analysis were organized by the overarching themes of classroom management, instructional approaches/styles, reading instruction, and assessment. This chapter concludes with a summary and discussions of implications for future research and the study's limitations.

Findings - cultural themes

This qualitative case study focused on the participant observation of third- and fourth-grade reading/writing teachers in two South Texas Exemplary Title I rural school districts. The questions that guided this study provided a focus and direction to in-depth discovery: (1) What are rural reading teachers' perceptions of effective literacy instruction? (2) Which instructional practices do third- and fourth-grade reading teachers utilize in two Exemplary rural South Texas school districts? (3) What are the similarities and/or differences between rural reading teachers' perspectives and practices? The commonality of these districts was not only that they were rural as designated by

definition, but were also Schoolwide Title I and consisted of similar student population demographics. Additional similarities between the two districts were found after reviewing data collected through interviews and classroom observations.

Data collection and analyses were organized by the categorized interview questions and consisted of the following: Classroom Management, Instructional Approach/Style, Reading Instruction, and Assessment. The investigator began the domain analysis; the fifth step in Spradley's (1980) *Participant Observation*, while collecting observable data to create a semantic relationship chart (see Appendix E). The domain analysis narrowed the double-ended funnel by using "cover terms" among the determined themes of Classroom Management, Instructional Approach/Style, Reading Instruction, and Assessment. After additional focused observations, review of fieldnotes, artifacts, and the investigator's diary, the identified domains were further analyzed for sub-relationships through taxonomic analysis.

Themes yielded through interviews, formal and informal, and observations indicated many similarities between the two rural districts. This investigation found an association between leadership, the perspectives of individual teachers, and connections to classroom performances through the emergence of subcategories, which will be discussed in the following sections. A brief context to current research will preface each section.

Principals

Context. Strong, research-conscientious principals implemented collaborative leadership within both districts in order to address the unique issues of each rural setting. Previous studies (Blase & Blase, 1999) identified common characteristics shared among

effective leaders; these included characteristics such as promoting teacher choice and group self-improvement. Erwin, Winn, Gentry, and Cauble (2010) found a relationship between higher student achievements, campuses receiving the state's highest accountability (Exemplary) school rating, and specific leadership skills. These leadership skills were identified and evaluated as knowledge and skill domains by the National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA). Warren and Peel (2005) found that a common component of successful schools was successful leadership. Leaders in successful schools analyzed data and synthesized this information for the all stakeholders (teachers, parents, and community) in order to understand and improve needed areas. These successful leaders collaborated and worked together on a shared vision while establishing trust among the individuals involved.

Interviews. Both rural school districts were led by “team players.” The principals searched for current data-driven research to either improve their own leadership skills or to disseminate to their faculty. Ms. Ripley worked toward educational self-improvement through continued professional development via online courses toward superintendency certification, yet she had no desire to one day seek that position. Mrs. Pearson stated that current educational research was her favorite thing to read. Her goal was to share relevant information with her faculty as well as provide professional development through her book club study with the teachers. These study groups varied sometimes being grade level specific, other times campus participation. Both principals held weekly faculty meetings, bi-term grade level meetings to review benchmark results, and vertical team discussions to share in the vision of the common goal: high student performance on the state mandated tests and growth of struggling

students. Both leaders made accommodations for the faculty to attend workshops to achieve this common goal. Mrs. Pearson noted that her success and ultimately her superintendent's successful evaluation was a direct link to the success of her teachers as determined by the state's mandated test. A similar district-wide mission statement also guided this common goal: Develop the knowledge, skills, and work ethic that support all students into successful and productive members of society.

Finally, the principals' leadership was visible to the staff and the students. Every morning each principal announced the daily menu, various reminders, birthday greetings, and set the stage for a small group of students to lead the pledges. Mondays were reserved for special announcements, such as *Accelerated Reader* Point Club accomplishments. In addition, Hayden ISD had Tuesday announcements of each classroom's "Math-lete" of the week. Both districts made birthdays special for each child not only with the school-wide announcement, but also with a small token to praise their special day. Each principal knew their students by name and greeted them as they entered the building.

During this investigational period, the principal at Corbin ISD was observed on four separate occasions entering classrooms to personally deliver a message to the teacher or performing an evaluative walk-through. There was one observation where Ms. Ripley joined the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers during their lunch period to just sit and visit for a brief time.

At Corbin ISD, the principal was not the only leader making her presence known to faculty and students. The superintendent and the assistant principal were out every morning greeting teachers and students, even though their main purpose was to make sure

all teachers were in position at the start of every day. They conducted walk-throughs to evaluate teacher and student performance using the Professional Development Appraisal System (PDAS) instrument. The principal at Hayden ISD was not observed entering participant classrooms during this investigational period; however, she was available to assist with troubled students and conducted teacher evaluations on her campus using the same PDAS instrument. One of the Hayden ISD's teacher participants commented on the evaluation process as intimidating, but accepted the critique as helpful, professional improvement.

The principals' backgrounds or previous experiences were the major differences between the two districts. Corbin ISD's leadership had 20 years experience as an elementary classroom teacher with the district. Hayden ISD's leadership started as a secondary math/Spanish instructor, a Masters of Science degree in Counseling and principalship service in several districts before her current position in the district.

Teachers

Context. Effective leaders are only as good as the effective teachers they choose to staff their schools. Stronge (2007) writes, "Teachers have a powerful, long-lasting influence on their students. They directly affect how students learn, what they learn, how much they learn, and the ways they interact with one another and the world around them" (p. ix). Stronge's (2007) analysis of interview and survey responses supported other studies (Berry, 2004; Cruickshank, Jenkins & Metcalf, 2003; Noddings, 2002; Wayne & Youngs, 2003), which found that effective teachers are not necessarily determined by the coursework, degrees, or certifications attained. Rather it is what Rice's (2003) study identified teacher quality attributes such as caring, nurturing, patient, diligence, and

understanding. Teacher quality attributes were important factors; however there were additional components to effective teachers (Berry, 2004). Effective teachers must also know “how to organize and teach their lessons in ways that assure diverse students can learn those subjects. ...Highly qualified teachers don’t just teach well-designed, standards-based lessons: They know how and why their students learn...” (Berry, 2004, p. 2).

Thompson, Greer, and Greer (2004) and Walker (2010) conducted similar studies that gathered reflective responses from their own undergraduate students to render recurring themes or 12 characteristics of an effective teacher. These characteristics envelop one central theme, caring, as Noddings (1984) writes, “A caring teacher is someone who has demonstrated that she [he] can establish, more or less regularly, relations of care in a wide variety of situations...[and] will want the best for that person” (p. 100-101). Walker’s (2010) longitudinal study concluded “12 identifiable and professional characteristics of an Effective Teacher: (1) Prepared, (2) Positive, (3) High Expectations, (4) Creative, (5) Fair, (6) Personal Touch, (7) Develops a Sense of Belonging, (8) Admits Mistakes, (9) Sense of Humor, (10) Gives Respect to Students, (11) Forgiving, and (12) Compassionate” (pp. 3-4).

Interviews. Each of the four participants chose different paths on their way to becoming an educator. Both of the teachers at Corbin ISD were not inspired to become educators until plans in a different degree seeking area were thwarted. Mrs. West originally was interested in becoming an archeologist, and Mrs. Green pursued a nursing career. After beginning undergraduate studies, each realized these professions were not meant for them and reflected upon an alternative career path. They each had someone in

their lives that influenced them. Mrs. West had fond memories of an elementary teacher while attending Department of Defense elementary school abroad and Mrs. Green's sister shared classroom experiences.

Mrs. Easton was the only participant who had always dreamed of becoming a teacher. She had set that goal and strove to achieve it no matter the difficulties or roadblocks encountered along the way. Mrs. Blanco entered the teaching field as a second career with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and 12 years experience as a licensed social worker. She knew her original field of work was not something she intended to retire from; so instead, she began looking for a career change as her family grew. Like Mrs. West and Mrs. Green, Mrs. Blanco was influenced and encouraged by an educator who initiated her teaching career in GED classes at night.

Finally, three of the four teachers were reared in comparative backgrounds. Mrs. West was the only participant who had many school experiences, both in the United States and abroad, as a child due to her father's military reassignments and with her husband's military service. These collective personal experiences became her inspiration to provide a warm and welcoming classroom. She was the only participant who held an additional teaching certification from another state. Mrs. Green grew up in a rural community that was similar and close to Corbin ISD where she worked with her sister and husband. She was the only Master Reading teacher among the four participants. Both Mrs. Easton and Mrs. Blanco grew up close to Hayden, in a slightly larger township with a population ranging between 5,000 for Mrs. Easton and 14,000 for Mrs. Blanco.

Classroom Management. Organization, Community, Discipline, and Student Motivation were the themes found in classroom management. Each of these themes will

be discussed in the following section. The similarities and differences between districts will also be revealed.

Classroom Organization. The teachers in both districts had classrooms that were extremely organized. Students had been taught organizational procedures and, by the sixth week of school, knew how to move and function smoothly within the classroom. Organization was not limited to areas in the room. In addition to classroom organization, the teachers taught students personal organization. Students were taught to keep their own reading/writing notes in clearly tabbed binders.

Both fourth-grade teachers maintained a pocket chart on the wall. Each student was assigned a pocket where they would find any handouts and/or important information after an absence. The third-grade teachers left materials at that student's desk (Hayden ISD) or in his/her cubby (Corbin ISD) if and when he/she was absent.

The weekly schedule or homework sheet was another organizational tool used by the teachers. The Corbin teachers had homework packets with the homework sheet as a cover page to indicate which assignment was to be completed. Mrs. West made morning rounds checking for parent signatures when Mrs. Green only checked for a parent signature if there was a pre-arranged plan between her and the parents for more controlled communication. The teachers at Hayden sent out Monday Memos to all the students that informed parents of upcoming events and learning objectives for the week. Every morning, Mrs. Blanco and Mrs. West walked around the room to check for parent signatures and student homework while writing anecdotal notes on a teacher created chart.

One of the differences in classroom management was in the arrangement of student desks. Corbin ISD's teachers preferred to create clusters or pods of four or five students. This arrangement was conducive to small group activities. Although the fourth-grade teacher began the school year with clustered flat-topped student desks, mid-way through the investigation, Mrs. Green rearranged the desks into a large horseshoe or "U" shape with a cluster of five desks in the center of the shoe. This arrangement still allowed for small group interaction. Hayden ISD teachers tended to arrange the classroom in a more traditional style. Mrs. Easton's room arrangement was half-and-half. One one-half of the room had the chair-desk combination with wire basket placed in traditional rows while the desks on the left side of the room were arranged in small clusters of either four or six face-to-face desks. Mrs. Blanco's desk arrangements were in straight rows facing the whiteboard where most of the instruction occurred. Mrs. Blanco stated in her interview she preferred structure and assumed it was because that was the way she remembered her elementary days.

Each teacher's personal workstation included a desk, computer, and shelving. Corbin ISD teachers also had a laptop and document camera at their desk. Mrs. Easton and Mrs. Blanco had "organized piles" on their desks; however, they knew where everything was. Mrs. Blanco's desk was the only one positioned toward the back of the room while the other three had desks positioned in the front right corner of the room. Yet none of the teachers taught from their desks. Their instruction was delivered among the students or through the use of technology.

All four teachers had various centers clearly marked within their rooms. Some of the centers required students to return to their desks in order to complete the activity.

Each teacher conducted small, guided reading group instruction at a kidney shaped desk, which became one of the center groups during scheduled times. Corbin ISD teachers had a paraprofessional assist during centers while Hayden ISD teachers had their paraprofessional enter during the reading instructional block on certain days of the week and a high school Peer Assistance and Leadership (PAL) assisted every day at 10 a.m. Under the direction of the teacher, this high school student worked with small groups in various activities or read to the students.

Community. Creating and establishing a learning community was important to these rural teachers. The learning community was not confined to the classroom walls and was not limited to their students. The learning community extended to the families and surrounding community that assisted in rearing these students. The extension of the learning community added to the students' personal sense of belonging. On more than one occasion and by more than one teacher a comment was heard such as one made by Mrs. Easton, "I treat you just as I would my own kids because I care for you." Therefore, the participants from both rural districts created a sense of community based on making the students feel like they are part of a family, are cared for, and are safe.

There was an open door policy extended to parents and community members. Each district held an Open House night within the first six weeks of school to encourage families to visit the classrooms. Both districts also honored grandparents with special invitations to visit their grandchild on the morning of Grandparents' Day. Corbin ISD established additional events such as "Doughnut for Dads," "Muffins for Moms" and "Tacos for Grandparents" to encourage family and community members to participate at

the campus. Community members were encouraged to enter classrooms and read to the students.

Each district hosted fall festivals, both as Parent Teacher Club (PTC) fundraisers and traditional community events. The school districts' goal was to bring community members and families together and onto campus grounds. The caring, nurturing and safe environment found in the classrooms extended into the community. Both principals felt it was important to include various events outside the school day and the classroom to encourage parents and the community to feel comfortable and needed.

Nurturing a caring learning community within the classroom walls was an important component in a safe learning environment. The teachers used the first few weeks of the school year getting to know their students' strengths and weaknesses and initiate bonding activities. One of the advantages of a rural community was that many of the students have known each other since kindergarten and had been in the same classroom for several years. The teachers wanted to ensure that all students were comfortable working in small groups sharing their work and ideas. Another element added to promote this component of comfort and community within the classroom was the inclusion of family photos. Each participant displayed either framed pictures or sports posters of family members on their desks. Thus, the participants from both districts displayed personal memorabilia, which contributed to the feeling of community, sharing, and family.

Each district implemented Character Traits, daily character building activities by the Flippen Group (2010), into the curriculum. Corbin ISD's assistant principal traveled from grade level to grade level to teach one of the character components. Hayden ISD

teachers added the same content into their instructional day while the principal reminded students during morning announcements of this daily the character trait with a positive short message. Mrs. Easton stated positive results among her students especially during shared quick writes. Her students could not wait to share their ideas, weekend experiences, or dreams. She stated during an informal discussion, “Building a comfortable social community in my room allows the students to be more at ease. I want them to feel respect and show respect to share among themselves and especially with me.”

Whenever a new student moved to the community, the teachers made it a point to welcome the new student into the classroom and have mentor students assist in the transition. When Mrs. West received a new student, she introduced the student to her class but made sure not to embarrass them. As she stated in her interview, Mrs. West kept her “new school” experiences as an elementary student fresh in her mind. During this investigational period, there were two students received into the Corbin district. Mrs. West conferred with the new student and asked her to complete an index card with bits of information such as name, address, and birthday. Soon after, Mrs. West made ready a desk and materials for the new student and introduced her to the class.

Mrs. Green also received a new student who just moved into the district during this investigation. At first, the student sat quietly at the kidney table while Mrs. Green continued with her instruction. After students were working independently, Mrs. Green took that time to get to know the new student and show him around the classroom. The student was shown where the “tubs” were and which one was his. She asked for school

supplies to see what he may need and provided him with a Reader's and Writer's Notebook.

The Hayden ISD teachers did not receive any new students during this investigational period; however, each had one student leave the district. Beside the normal routines of making sure all school texts were accounted for, Mrs. Blanco and Mrs. Easton made it a point to give the student a hug and tell them how much they were going to miss his/her presence in the classroom.

Student Jobs. A learning community within the classroom walls was nurtured and trained to both effectively supervise a classroom create a bond, trust, and safety among the students. Mrs. Green and Mrs. Blanco contributed to the classroom community by giving responsibility to the students to take ownership of their classroom through various student jobs. Physically providing roles and job descriptions promoted the mental growth of the community (Diffily & Sassman, 2004). The students assisted in the management of the classroom thus freeing up teacher time and energy for other classroom affairs. However, the most beneficial aspect of these responsibilities was that students felt important and looked forward to assisting the teacher and their peers. "Yeah, next week I will be the paper pusher," exclaimed one student in Mrs. Blanco's class upon viewing the new job positions for the week. "Oh, here is your job tag. I didn't want you to forget it," exclaimed one student to another in Mrs. Green's classroom. In the districts' grade four classrooms, jobs were clearly evident either through the job tag lanyards students wore or a designated bulletin board that displayed the tasks. The third-grade classrooms may not have posted specific job titles, but students continued to be helpful in both classrooms. For Mrs. Easton's class, students

took turns assisting in tasks such as the distribution and cleanup of breakfast, passing out of papers, and sharpening of pencils. Mrs. West's students assisted in walking about the class with the **N**ever give up, **E**ncourage others, and **D**o your best (NED) ticket bucket for the collection of tickets, providing overall cleanup of the room, and passing out red grading pens and notebook paper. Mrs. Green explained it was important for the students to have the additional responsibility through jobs, "This is a way of sending the message that this is their classroom and not mine."

Discipline. All four participants in this study had similar methods in handling student behavior within their classroom management. Each of the teachers used tickets to motivate students to the desired behavior. Corbin teachers were consistent with the use of NED tickets. The principal visited each grade level on Fridays to conduct a drawing from the NED tickets and students were rewarded. In addition to earning tickets, the students at Corbin were able to visually monitor their behavior using the clothespin placement on a tri-colored yardstick. Students who reached the "red zone" wrote their own infraction on a NED form, hand-delivered to their parents for signature, and returned the following day.

Use of personal cell phones was another effective discipline tool used by all four teachers. During the investigational period, the researcher observed Mrs. Blanco allowing her students to use her personal cell phone to call home reminding parents of after school tutorials. Mrs. Green called one of her student's parents to respond to a note the student hand-delivered that morning. All four participants were comfortable in letting parents know their personal phone contact information, Mrs. West laughed as she stated, "Sometimes I would have a parent's number on speed dial." Mrs. Blanco and

Mrs. Easton stated that parents were comfortable sending text messages. Cell phones were an effective means to maintain contact especially when a behavioral event occurred and the teachers reached out for parental support. Mrs. West revisited a past occurrence when one of her students refused to follow her directives. She said, "All I did was get my cell phone and called dad. Dad spoke with his child, and the behavior did improve to some extent." Because of her group of ELL students, Mrs. Easton made it a point to call parents to clarify information in Spanish. She stated, "I am not comfortable in writing Spanish and find oral communication to be more effective and quicker." In each of the interviews, the teachers all used the cell phone for quick and effective communication with parents.

Overall, the four teachers in this investigation preferred to handle discipline within their room instead of sending students to the office. Mrs. West commented that many times students who misbehaved were really looking for a way out of the room and earned that right when being sent to the office. However, there were no major discipline occurrences observed other than one third-grade student not wanting to leave her mother. This teacher utilized the counselor and principal's skills to determine the nature of the seemingly unprompted issue. The teachers operated an efficient classroom management plan to meet the ultimate goal of maximum time on task. Every moment of the day was scheduled and maintaining a schedule was an integral part of establishing a routine for the students and completing planned instruction. Corbin teachers maintained a more rigid schedule since they shared their students with their content counterpart. Although Hayden's teachers had some flexibility in daily schedules, each rarely veered from the documented schedule in order to maintain continuity and complete planned objectives.

Student Motivation. Teachers in both districts demonstrated caring and nurturing characteristics by their personal willingness to financially contribute toward positive praises with awards such as stickers, pencils, erasers, and/or food treats from fast food places. During her interview, Mrs. Green commented, “I am willing to buy if they are willing to behave and do what is expected. I want to show appreciation for the hard work they are doing.”

The Corbin teachers passed out NED tickets to students for doing well on computerized AR tests over the self-selected texts. If a student made a 90% or better then he/she received ten NED tickets. Each of the teachers had the students maintain an AR folder to record the title, score, and points earned from each novel read. Mrs. West made it a point to hand out NED tickets to students who had their homework sheets out with parent signatures and ready for the morning. Students quickly wrote their name on the back of the ticket, placed the ticket into the NED basket, and awaited future drawings.

Extrinsic rewards were very common and even promoted by the principals of both schools. Mrs. Pearson shared her opinion of extrinsic rewards during her interview, “Some of these children have not ever felt success. How will one know what success is unless it is experienced? So we need to build that successful feeling through simple rewards.”

Corbin teachers passed out tickets to those participating appropriately with group activities, for correct responses to various questions, or for exhibiting the desired behavior. The Hayden teachers had minimal variances with the extrinsic rewards. Mrs. Blanco used “Blanc Dough” bucks to reward students and held weekly drawings from her prize box, but their principal did not host grade-level drawings. Mrs. Blanco rewarded

her students in very similar fashion as the Corbin teachers but not as frequently nor as freely. She awarded one ticket at a time whereas Mrs. West and Mrs. Green offered upwards to ten tickets per student. Mrs. Easton, on the other hand, was not observed passing out tickets; however, there was a prize box students visited.

Additional motivational rewards were also supplemented through Hayden's active PTC. Students whose class met the 100% goal of wearing purple on Spirit Fridays were rewarded with a type of treat, like an ice pop, the following Friday. PTC also rewarded classes or grade levels for achieving the highest participation in various activities such as Pennies for Fire Victims, Canned Food Drive, and Box Tops for Education.

Even though extrinsic rewards were a positive force for student motivation, Mrs. Blanco was frustrated with all the opportunities for rewards and the expectations from her students but understood her principal's philosophy. Instead, Mrs. Blanco took the opportunity for mini-lessons with her students, "Getting something is nice but doing something just because it makes you feel good inside is the ultimate feeling." She shared the benefits, lessons, and the responsibilities of doing a good deed for the sake of community service, the intrinsic reward, and not for the "what can I get for doing this" attitude, as expressed by some of her students.

Hayden students were also rewarded for academic success. At the end of every six-weeks grading period, teachers prepared grade reports to the office of "All A's", "A/B's" and perfect attendance. The school's PTC funded rewards with ribbons, pencils, and stickers along with the report card. The campus hosted a breakfast once per six

weeks for “All A” students and their parents. It was not observed during this investigational period if Corbin ISD performed similar rewarding systems.

Corbin ISD provided different means to reward students for participating in various activities. One particular event encouraged students to bring in box tops from participating grocery items for education coupons. Since the students wore a specified uniform to attend school, the reward for the grade level bringing in the most box tops by the end of the term was that students were allowed to dress out of uniform for one month. Students also participated in activities to bring community service into the classroom. One such activity was Heavenly Hats. This fundraiser collected money for cancer patients. The students donated a dollar in order to wear a crazy or decorated hat to school on a designated Friday.

Another extrinsic reward system used by both districts was through the *Accelerated Reader* (AR) program. As students progressed through designated point clubs, students were awarded point club status with a button, and they accumulated points to “spend.” At the end of each grading period, students attending Corbin ISD spent their points at an in school AR store. Hayden allowed students to either spend their points in the AR store or accumulate them for the end of the year. In the past, students who earned over 100 points were given the opportunity to travel as a group and spend “real” money at a Wal-Mart in a nearby town.

Student motivation provided positive encouragement to students who had previously had little experience with success. Both districts’ goals stressed small academic achievements and encouraged students to feel proud of their accomplishments. Family and community involvement added to the strand of student motivation.

According to the principal at Corbin ISD, Parents Involved in Monthly Activities (PIMA) and leadership presence in the classrooms contributed to student motivation as well as a positive relationship with the students.

Therefore, the teachers strived to maximize each instructional moment of the school day. Teacher preparation was only one component to ensure continual instruction and educational provision for each of the students. The teachers' knowledge and demonstration of classroom management encompassed several components. Classroom management included teacher organization and the desk arrangements to suit each teacher's style of delivery. The goals of both the teachers and the districts included community involvement as a component of classroom management. The old saying, "It takes a village to raise a child" came to light as various events were scheduled to make the community aware of the happenings of the campus and its students. This sense of community manifested into an intimate learning community within each of the classroom walls, as students were encouraged to feel safe and comfortable to take risks. Finally, discipline procedures and student motivation completed the teachers' methods in classroom management.

Instructional Style. The following section focused on the participants' instructional style as of Framework of Instruction, Teacher as Facilitator, Technology, and Professional Development.

Framework of Instruction. Preparedness, one of the 12 characteristics of an effective teacher (Borich, 2000; Stronge, 2007; Thompson, Greer, & Greer, 2004; Walker, 2010), was evident within all four participants; however, there was a difference in what the two districts expected from a prepared faculty. The framework of instruction

was comprised of several subcategories: Curriculum, instructional organization, operational calendar, and class composition.

Curriculum. Although both districts subscribed to the CSCOPE curriculum, Corbin ISD's curriculum was structured through the state approved basal program, Open Court's *Imagine It*. Vertical teams of teachers in Corbin ISD ensured all aspects of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) were addressed through the use of CSCOPE's Instructional Focus Document (IFD). They prepared Open Court's unit lessons to address the limitations or supplemented instruction where needed to eliminate any deficiencies.

The Lead4ward Group provided both districts with training to prepare for the changes in the state mandated test. All participants discussed activities during faculty meetings on their respective campuses as they worked in teams and analyzed the TEKS verification to document the number of readiness and supporting standards. The teachers at Hayden ISD spoke of the color-coding activity for each six-weeks grading period of the state standards in order to provide the most effective instructional time.

Hayden ISD teachers used the CSCOPE curriculum through careful analysis and modification of the provided exemplar lessons. Both Mrs. Easton and Mrs. Blanco reported long hours spent outside the school day locating authentic literature and making instructional modifications to fit their delivery style and learning styles of their students. There were points during this investigation where Mrs. Easton did not feel prepared or confident in the lesson delivery. Although the students were unaware of this insecurity, Mrs. Easton made her concerns known through informal conversations with the researcher. Even though Mrs. Easton may have felt unprepared, she did not let

instruction fall apart. There was one particular lesson over summarization where Mrs. Easton attempted to deliver the lesson according to CSCOPE's exemplar lesson, but she was perceptive to her students' confusion as exhibited through their facial expressions. She made immediate adjustments to her delivery in order to complete the lesson and returned the next day with confidence and additional modeling to re-teach the lesson. She demonstrated that preparation could only be achieved through a collaborative effort between grade level peers during after-school hours.

In addition to the CSCOPE curriculum, teachers at Hayden ISD continued to use state adopted textbooks and supplementary resources. The teachers referred to the reading basal, Scott Foresman's *Reading Street*, whenever a particular selection addressed specific objectives as stated in the curriculum. Otherwise, the team followed the exemplar lessons provided by CSCOPE, searched online for additional resources, and used either their personal classroom library or the school library for authentic texts to model instruction.

Instructional Organization. During the first few weeks of school, teachers at both districts taught their students how to use their organized binders or notebooks. Teachers at Corbin ISD directed their students with set-up procedures to organize their own black and white composition notebooks. This notebook was tabbed into sections for word study, spelling, grammatical rules and notes, and reading comprehension skills such as sequencing, main idea, inferences, and cause/effect. There was a slight difference between the two grade levels at Corbin ISD. Mrs. West, third-grade, only referred to this notebook as the "Reader's Notebook" whereas Mrs. Green directed her students to create two separate notebooks: a "Reader's Notebook" and a "Writer's Notebook." Mrs. Green

made the analogy that these structured notebooks would become useful organized tools for the student's use just as a carpenter's tool belt assists the carpenter's organization of his tools. Students used the black and white composition notebook under the teacher's direct instruction to take particular notes as reading or writing lessons occurred. Mrs. Green also included the Daily Oral Language activities' section along with another section for "Words and Phrases We Can't Forget." Students were expected to use and make reference to these notebooks throughout the school year for either their reading skills or writing ideas. Each of the teachers maintained "their notebook" to explicitly demonstrate and model instruction to their students via document camera.

The teachers at Corbin ISD also prepared a three-ringed binder for each student containing handouts and worksheets to be consumed by each student during the course of the school year. The teachers planned for the new school year before the previous year ended and tabbed the binders into six sections: Sight Words/Fluency Phrases, Fluency Checks, Grammar, Skills, Cursive, and Tests. Mrs. West solicited the previous year's class to assist in preparing the binders, which initiated a community bond between grade levels. In a sense, the preparation was like the passing of the baton in a relay race. The majority of the material came from the adopted basal's blackline masters for skills and testing resources; however, outside resources were included in the collection. The grammar practice sheets were not from *Imagine It* but from a state approved, district adopted language arts text. Finally, graded worksheets and unit tests were kept in this binder until the end of the nine-week grading period when students then took the materials home along with their report cards.

Teachers at Hayden ISD directed instructional organization with their students in a very similar fashion also using a three-ringed binder to organize notes and categorize English Language Arts (ELA) skills and objectives. Mrs. Blanco established procedures with her students so that they could maintain their binders. The procedures included using sections such as Word Study notes and charts, Grammatical Rules, and Reading Comprehension Skills' notes to manage the binders. Thus, she stressed the need to be organized in order to physically and mentally locate information. The only difference between districts in regard to organized binders for instructional purposes was Corbin ISD's use of a three-inch three-ring binder complete with blackline master copies for the year, while the teachers at Hayden ISD set procedures for the students to tab and add to the binders as topics/objectives transpired via instruction either by inserting the blackline master or taking notes on standard wide-ruled notebook paper. Instead of filing scored papers in the binders, teachers had students file the graded papers in their "Monday Folder" to be taken home every Monday for parents to peruse. The unit tests and benchmark exams were sent home in this Monday Folder to be returned the following day with a parent signature, and the teacher maintained a student file throughout the year.

Operational Calendar. It is important to provide brief descriptions of each district's operational school calendar. Corbin ISD operated under a year-round calendar that began July 26, 2011 with nine-week grading periods whereas Hayden ISD utilized the traditional school calendar that began August 22, 2011 with six-week grading periods. Corbin ISD's calendar provided for tutorials during their intercessions on the tenth week of each grading term. Both districts provided after school tutorial sessions as well as summer school for students in need. However, this particular scheduling difference

proved beneficial for this particular study. The researcher was able to observe at approximately the same time period in each district, about five weeks after the start of the school year.

Class Composition. Class composition constituted another marked difference between these two rural exemplary districts. Corbin ISD's third- and fourth-grade classes were departmentalized. One teacher instructed all the math and science for the grade level while the participant for this investigation instructed only the ELA and social studies instruction for the entire grade level. Group A third-grade students entered the classroom around 7:40 in the morning after having breakfast in the cafeteria and prepared to switch classes with the math teacher at 9:30 after a restroom break. A very similar schedule was maintained for fourth-grade. The only difference was the mid-morning switch occurred at 10:05. Therefore, Corbin ISD's teachers had direct contact with all students within the grade level.

Hayden ISD's leadership implemented self-contained instruction. There were three teachers per grade level, and each teacher taught all subjects with the exception of music, physical education (PE), and computer lab. Music was provided every other day with the off day for character study, library time, or silent reading. PE and computer lab times were scheduled back-to-back to provide a 45-minute conference time for teachers. Half of the grade level students traveled to PE for 20 minutes then switched with computer lab instruction for the remainder of the time. Although students were reassigned for in-school tutorials and grouped by ability among the three grade-level teachers, Mrs. Blanco admitted the brevity and lack of community allowed uncertainty of which teacher the students were to listen to for their reading and writing instruction. In

addition, Mrs. Blanco expressed difficulty in managing these short periods of instruction, as she preferred maintaining instruction with her own students. Therefore, the self-contained community provided a closer bonding.

Teacher as Facilitator. A major component of instructional style was found within each teacher and the expectations from self and school leadership. Participants in this study stated a personal need to teach and share their passion for reading and writing through expected objectives. Corbin ISD's principal, Ms. Ripley, made it clear when interviewing prospective employees for the district, "One set of the questions I ask is, what is your favorite book and what titles are you reading now?" She said it was important to look for future district teachers who had a passion for reading in order for them to bring in the personal connection and exhibit that passion throughout the interview. Ms. Ripley chose to provide her students with teachers who were avid readers that loved reading. Hayden ISD's principal's, Mrs. Pearson, indicator for passion was "enthusiasm in their voice and for the subject they are teaching." She stated the importance of facial expressions or body language and how "students will enjoy a subject only as much as their teacher does." A teacher's attitude was important when facilitating students' learning power. This supports research by Borich (2004), Noddings (2001), Thompkins, Greer, and Greer (2004), and Stronge (2007) on effective teaching.

Teacher as facilitator was subcategorized as the facilitation of either whole class settings or small group instruction. Each style of delivery had its own purpose in order to address the needs of the students. Ms. Ripley stated it best. In order to facilitate one's learning, "empower the children," and inspire a drive for one's own learning, the participants initiated and focused a strand of study as a whole class setting then

rearranged the class into small groups to allow an opportunity to practice the newly acquired knowledge.

Whole Class. All four participants held whole class instruction at varying points. There was an ebb and flow from whole class to small group or “elbow partner” to carry on a discussion of the topic at hand. The Corbin ISD teachers maintained a more equitable balance between whole class to small group than the teachers at Hayden ISD, where direct teacher instruction contributed to 80% of the instructional time.

Whole class instruction was seen as time periods where the teacher was doing all the talking and asking all the questions. The teacher maintained a lecture style of instruction while students sat quietly at their desks, performed the task or copied work from the projected materials on the document camera. Mrs. Green was the only teacher to regularly turn whole class instruction into interactive events where students demonstrated editing and revising skills by correcting the morning passage. A student was called upon to mark the corrections and orally discuss the thought process and answer any questions from his peers. Then the student “passed the pen” by calling on another student to revise or edit the next sentence in the passage.

Both Mrs. West and Mrs. Green utilized the “turn to your partner or team” for a brief discussion on the skill or topic under whole class direction. Mrs. West used book club format as student-centered whole class discussion once a week. The students positioned their chairs as a perimeter of a large rectangle where all students were facing each other. Mrs. West relinquished her authoritative figure to join the students and followed the same rules to enter the class discussion. Other whole class discussions focused upon the completion of a blackline master worksheet. Mrs. West and Mrs. Green

led the discussion and modeled one or two samples with a set of directions before students were instructed to work independently. During these directions, students provided answers and teachers directed mini-lessons or clarifications. Therefore, whole class instruction at Corbin ISD was fluid between lecture and activity, which allowed for student-centered learning to occur.

The teachers at Hayden ISD solicited student participation during whole class instruction by calling students to orally answer questions or correct daily language passages. Mrs. Blanco used random cards, index cards with a student's name, to shuffle and select a student to answer or continue reading from a passage. Blackline masters were not the focus for whole class instruction; instead, Mrs. Blanco and Mrs. Easton created large visuals on chart paper that remained displayed around the room. Students orally assisted in the creation of these charts while being asked questions or prompted into searches. Mrs. Easton called her class to the carpet positioned at the front of the room, creating a close discussion group, while she and the class worked together to create "anchor charts." Whenever class charts were not used, teachers modeled the information on the document camera while students were instructed to copy the same information in their Reader's Notebooks. Both Mrs. Blanco and Mrs. Easton, at Hayden ISD, spent most of their reading and writing instructional time talking to their students to guide the instruction and impart the objectives and/or skills during word study, vocabulary, grammar and charts and graphs such as Venn Diagrams, sequence charts, and cause/effect charts.

Four occurrences were recorded where Mrs. Blanco announced "SLANT" to her students. This was her cuing system for students to **Sit up, Listen to the speaker,**

Answer/Ask questions, Nod your head, and Track speaker. Mrs. Blanco inserted the acronym in the middle of her oral instruction when she saw students slumping or looking sleepy to get their focus and attention. Mrs. Easton found students, on occasion, not listening to instruction while they read their AR text silently or were doodling in their notebook. Mrs. Easton did not use a cuing system and continued with discussion unless there was a behavioral problem. Her normal corrective method was to move close to the student and provide “the look” as she continued instruction.

Corbin ISD teachers also provided whole class instruction for word study, grammar lessons, and initial reading/writing skills. Mrs. West and Mrs. Green focused much of the direct instruction from basal worksheet packets as part of a homework check. All four teachers initiated and maintained direct instruction with the use of the document camera displaying worksheets for students to complete as discussion progressed. This is consistent with McKenna et al. (2007) position that technology must be more than teacher explaining or modeling.

Small groups. Both districts scheduled centers for specific times of the day. Centers consisted of guided reading or a teacher led group, reading comprehension skill cards, handwriting, listening, science or social studies, and computer (research, skill software) stations. The grade level teachers at Corbin ISD shared the same center time, which allowed students to flow from one classroom to the next where they participated in the station of the day and/or met in small group with the teachers. Corbin ISD’s teachers engaged more frequently in small group instruction than did the Hayden ISD teachers. Corbin ISD’s teachers preferred to maintain clusters of four or five students for

instruction while the Hayden ISD teachers preferred a more traditional whole class approach.

Teachers at both districts directed small groups in a direct and simple manner. This was accomplished through instructing the students to “turn to your partner and discuss.” Mrs. Green encouraged her students to turn and talk to each other in response to either locating an answer or collectively asking a question. She instructed students in a series of small groups to move to different parts of the room so that they could discuss the topic with someone new. Mrs. West and Mrs. Green encouraged “academic noise,” and monitored their students’ participation. They both felt positive about the engagement and learning taking place in their classrooms. In all of the classrooms, students worked in small groups of four or five for vocabulary study; in these small groups, the students had use context clues to create an original definition before checking a dictionary. Later in the week, small groups used an assigned word and acted out Charades for the class.

Mrs. Blanco randomly placed students in four groups of four and positioned them in different corners of the room to complete the assigned activity. One observed reading strategy was the jigsaw method. Mrs. Easton also provided small group opportunities for her students. One activity was the rewriting of one of the weekly reading selections into a play. Each group was given a scene to rewrite and later performed the play to their class. Other forms of small group activities at Hayden ISD included handwriting, read-aloud by high school PAL, teacher guided, and silent reading (self-selected AR texts).

Technology. All four teachers had access to technology consisting of a teacher station (computer), a document camera/projector, and computers available to students. Audio books or passages were accessible for both campuses. However, Corbin ISD

offered more in the way of technology. There were six computers to every classroom along with iPads, iPods, a Promethean Board, and ACTIVE hubs or voters. The ACTIVE hubs were not utilized during this investigation. The teachers explained that the ACTIVE hubs were mainly used for state mandated test taking preparations. Mrs. Green stated, “This makes reviewing various passages more entertaining for the students and allows them to be interactive with the passage instead of just circling answers on paper.”

Students accessed the computers before school began and during center time to take AR tests or play downloaded games such as *Spelling City* or *Study Island*. Students at Hayden ISD accessed similar games or programs but only for 20 minutes a day during computer lab time. Corbin ISD’s teachers used the Promethean Board as an instructional delivery tool; however, during center time, a small group of students interacted with an activity on the Promethean Board, which was displayed through the teacher’s computer station.

Hayden ISD’s teachers had limited access for their students to use computers in the classroom; however, during one particular lesson, Mrs. Easton instructed three groups of students to huddle around the available computers to read a few blogs. She had made this connection to the focused studies on biographies and later had a follow-up activity to compare biographies/autobiographies to the online blogs. To facilitate this instruction, Mrs. Easton enlisted the assistance of the high school PAL. Later in the same lesson, the instructional medium moved from technological access to student drawn Venn Diagrams.

Mrs. Blanco searched online sites to enhance reading or writing instruction, which she shared with her grade level team. She located video and/or audio clips, short passages for Reader’s Theater, and various poems to add to the modeling or guided

practice activities. Mrs. Blanco created PowerPoint presentations that focused on the imagery used by authors. She also created slides on a particular author of study. The teachers at Hayden ISD accessed *United Streaming*, an online collection of video clips, for all content areas. This is consistent with Gordon (2011) and Howley, Wood, and Hough's (2011) views that technology is an invaluable tool in rural situations.

Professional Development. The teachers in both districts were self-motivated, as well as encouraged by the campus principals, to engage in professional development. Various workshop listings offered by Region 2 Education Service Center were made available to the teachers to self-select areas of interest. In addition, the fourth-grade teachers conducted online research at home for instructional support in the changing areas of reading and writing testing. During this investigational period, Mrs. Green entered class with fresh ideas she gleaned from a night's search. She shared these ideas with her colleagues.

Both campus principals encouraged the self-learning of each faculty member. Ms. Ripley stated, "I like to encourage additional studies, but I have a young group. They have a young family, and I don't want to burden the little family time they have." Mrs. Pearson was aware of the lack of time during the school year and the amount of stress her staff experienced. This past summer she initiated a community book club with her staff by assigning a particular chapter to each grade level to read and prepare a short presentation to the faculty, enabling the faculty to utilize the jigsaw reading strategy to read the entire text without physically reading every page.

In order to make full use of the curriculum, Corbin ISD's administration brought in an Open Court consultant who walked their teachers through the scripted lessons and

provided additional program services over a period. Although the principal stressed the importance of this training for its contribution to the continuity of instruction between grade levels, each of the teachers expressed the belief that their ability to pick and choose was important because this allowed for professional decisions concerning the specific needs of that year's group of students.

Hayden ISD's teachers spent the last five years attending rollout workshops to interpret the exemplar lessons and directives of CSCOPE curriculum. The principal encouraged attendance of at least one teacher from each grade level in order to disseminate the information to their colleagues at their campus. However, at this point, teachers expressed little interest in driving the 120-mile round trip every six weeks to talk through the curriculum. Instead, teachers were more concerned with the new changes in the state mandated tests. The teachers preferred learning what changes were expected in order to tweak either their teaching style or begin the search for additional resources. Preparations for the state mandated test were of paramount concern in both districts. The teachers searched for current materials and directives that would assist them in helping their students succeed on the state mandated test.

Reading/Writing Instruction

The reciprocal nature of reading and writing was evident among all classrooms. The following section will describe the instructional styles in reading and in writing based on the principals' perspectives and the researcher's teacher observations.

Principals' perspectives. Both districts strove to provide the needed materials and/or training for their faculty in order to meet the ultimate goal of supporting academically successful students. Reading instructional materials were the noted and

observed differences between the two districts under investigation. Ms. Ripley, principal at Corbin ISD, expected her teachers to follow Open Court's *Imagine It* program in order to maintain the program's "consistency and continuity of the grade levels." She stated in her interview, "Reading is too important of a skill to teach haphazard. Reading is important, and it is hard to teach children how to read. It's got to be done flawlessly."

Mrs. Pearson, principal at Hayden, supported the use of the CSCOPE curriculum, the scope and sequence provided through the IFD and YAG documents and exemplar lessons. However, she depended on the decision-making skills of her veteran teachers to plan and make adjustments in lessons to fit the needs of their students. She stated:

I listen to my teachers. ELA is probably the biggest challenge for the teachers to use only CSCOPE. I always tell them to look at that specificity because that tells you the level of rigor you are suppose to be able to teach it to. Then look at what they are offering you and what you have, and can you combine?

Mrs. Pearson continued to state that there is not a single document with the ability to provide all the needs of diverse learners. "This is a live document, making revisions, pulling from outside sources," commented Mrs. Pearson. Although, she supported scripted use of this curriculum because it could be beneficial for first and second year teachers "because they have nothing to bank on. Veteran teachers have that leeway to use things that work for them. I have heard them say, 'Ah, I never thought about it that way.'"

Teachers' perspectives. This section will be subcategorized into themes that were revealed during reading instruction: Word Study, Connections, Scaffold, Fluency, Authentic Texts, Read Alouds, and Strategies.

Word Study. Although each school's curriculum used scripted lessons, all four participants varied in their adherence to those lessons. No matter the directive, one strong commonality among all participants' instruction was the focus on word study. All taught similar skills, such as affixes and root word origins, to their students and directed students to document these tools in their Reader's Notebook. The only difference was the presentation or medium of instruction; Corbin ISD's teachers used blackline masters and displayed lines of words on the document camera. Hayden ISD's teachers used chart paper and teacher-created designs to display words in the classroom. Mrs. Easton cautiously and intuitively remained in tune with her ELL students by creating a visual stimulation toward vocabulary development through the windowpane strategy. Mrs. Easton shared a personal connection with these students because she was an ELL student, even though she did not remember being labeled. As she stated in an interview, "I know this is how I learn, and so, I know I have students like me."

Word study also included vocabulary lists. The Corbin ISD teachers used prepared lists from the basal each week for every reading selection. Mrs. Easton also selected additional vocabulary words from the basal. Since Mrs. Blanco did not conduct her reading instruction from a basal, she did not have weekly vocabulary lists. Instead, students encountered new vocabulary from alternative TAKS reading passages or their AR texts.

Connections. In previous years, an Open Court consultant assisted Corbin ISD's teachers in the program's use; however, Mrs. West and Mrs. Green deviated from the scripted lessons by including personal experiences and anecdotal stories in their lessons. In both the interviews and classroom observations, these participants interjected

supplemental activities into a lesson. These included reading comprehension strategies (jigsaw, book talk, visual imagery, and cloze procedure) to enhance the basal. Both teachers analyzed the needs of their students through the observation of student performances, test results, prior knowledge, and normal interactions among peers. The participants used this collected data to enhance and individualize the lessons to focus on student strengths.

The social community created within the classroom was capitalized upon during reading instruction. Mrs. Green periodically gathered her class in a small area on the floor at the front of the room to discuss the reading selection for the week. She led vocabulary and visual imagery discussions to make personal connections between the reading and the author's purpose. These teacher-initiated discussions were followed by one or two minute partner discussions, after which the class returned to a teacher-led debriefing.

Mrs. Green's reading instruction also included connections to the author as she led additional discussions to writing style and initiated personal connections from text to her own writing products. She included the use of a Writer's Notebook and used the weekly selections as examples of how the author "showed" his thoughts, feelings, and events.

Mrs. West led similar teacher-initiated discussions; however, her students remained seated at their desks. She led students through vocabulary study, using words from the text. Students first read the passage silently then turned to a partner in their group to pair-share followed by Round-Robin reading of the selection. After the reading of a weekly selection and before the students took the test, students engaged in a book

discussion using a “starter card.” The students gathered in a large rectangle shape, with the students facing each other. From there, students raised their hands to either ask a question or make a statement about the selection. Students’ discussions ranged from recall to in-depth, “I wonder” statements.

Both of the Corbin ISD teachers required their students to read the weekly reading selection a minimum of three times. The students read the passage orally in a whole class setting. The oral reading was either Round-Robin reading style or “popcorn” reading. The following day, the program’s online site was used to generate a computer-led read aloud. Mrs. Green displayed the actual student text pages via the online site while the selection was read. In contrast, Mrs. West only had the audio for her students. While the students were listening to the reading, teachers monitored and followed along. Periodically, the teacher paused the reading to raise a question or provide a personal connection to the text. Students were allowed to interact and make connections to the text. These connections were either to self or from another text. The majority of times, student connections were to an AR text being read; however, there was one particular selection where the students made connections to science content, a topic currently being studied.

Scaffold. Additional connections and discussions to vocabulary or reading comprehension skills were also initiated. Teachers took the opportunity to provide scaffolding via a direct instructional model such as the identification of cause/effect statements found in the passage. After each pause of the computerized read aloud, a reduced level of scaffolding was directed from whole class to small group, from paired partners to independence. Students recorded each of these levels in their Reader’s

Notebook. Finally, the students were expected to complete the third reading of the selection as a homework assignment.

Students in both grade levels at Corbin ISD engaged in student developed kinesthetic activities to promote vocabulary ownership. Periodically, students gathered in small groups to plan and rehearse a given set of vocabulary words. After two to three minutes, the group performed their set of words to their peers. The goal was to perform well enough to deliver the visual message with little to no oral communication. Students were observed huddled together to maintain privacy to not let their peers hear them. Upon the word being successfully identified, the small group expressed “high-five” motions in grins of triumph.

Another commonality shared by the districts was the use of the *Accelerated Reader* program. This reading program, designed to supplement a reading program, targeted a student’s independent reading level. Students were expected to silently read self-selected texts either in class or as homework. Corbin ISD’s teachers provided a 20-minute daily period for silent reading and/or computerized testing over texts. All the teachers were similar in their method of tracking students’ progress with weekly and end of term reports. Only Mrs. Green used technology to visually document status of the class every morning. This is consistent with Allington and Cunningham (2002) and Stange and Ponder’s (1999) admission that scaffolding is an important component of effective instruction.

Fluency. Finally, Corbin ISD teachers demonstrated the goal for fluency improvement among their students. Every week during weekly assessments, both teachers tested and recorded fluency rates with each student. When a student struggled,

the teachers discussed the miscues and reading pattern observed after the passage was read. Students were aware of their reading rates and charts were kept to monitor progress.

Mrs. Easton expressed the need to check for fluency and referred to a binder containing her guided reading groups and method she planned to use to monitor fluency; however, she found scheduling and additional documentation difficult. Mrs. Blanco and Mrs. Easton were concerned with fluency but did not officially document the rates. Instead they made anecdotal notes of particular students whenever they read aloud, whether it was during reading instruction or other content areas, to later pull to small group and work in areas of need.

Authentic Text. Mrs. Green and Mrs. West followed basal selections and unit collections for reading instruction. However, they veered from the scripted lessons in order to address the needs of their students. They used standard reading comprehension strategies, such as sequence, inference, and cause/effect, along with creative personal activities to engage the students into learning the skills. However, a central thrust of this instruction seemed to be primarily to help the students acquire an increased knowledge bank of vocabulary.

The Hayden ISD's teachers approached reading instruction differently from Corbin ISD's basal technique. Each of the teachers used authentic children's texts either found in their personal classroom library or from the campus library to focus the CSCOPE directed objective. Mrs. Easton tended to use the adopted reading basal selections with more frequency than Mrs. Blanco. These authentic selections were only used if the reading skill was appropriately addressed as guided by the curriculum.

Reading instruction was closely tied to the perspectives of the authors. During this investigation, reading skills focused on story elements, character traits, and author's purpose, which in turn was applied to the writing process.

Each of the teachers at Hayden ISD also supplemented CSCOPE exemplar lessons with additional resources. Mrs. Easton used her 18 total teaching years as well as her personal second language experiences. Mrs. Blanco used her Internet search abilities to locate additional resources, strategies, and texts to enhance lessons. All four teachers' instruction included elements using authentic texts and integrating technology in their lessons. Various authorities, Allington and Cunningham (2002) and McKenna et al. (2007) have stated that these are elements of effective instruction.

Read Aloud. During this investigational period, Mrs. Blanco did not engage her students into Round-Robin reading. Instead, she often read aloud to her students as a whole class. Her reading materials were authentic texts from the school library. For one particular period of instruction, the lesson objectives were to compare and contrast autobiographies and biographies. Mrs. Blanco chose two pairs of texts to illustrate these lessons over a two-week period. Mrs. Blanco spent a portion of class' scheduled reading time to introduce one text and set its purpose, which was followed by reading and discussing portions of the text. This discussion then led to the next day's comparison with an alternate text. Each lesson connected vocabulary study and authors' skills in creating visual images and clarity. These same texts were later connected to writing instruction as students were investigating and working on a biographical product of one of their peers.

Mrs. Easton presented similar activities when comparing autobiographies and biographies; however, the text selections were much shorter and did not require several days to read the complete text to her students. Mrs. Easton facilitated small group discussions in which the students acted as if they were going to interview one of the characters from a previously read selection. Mrs. Easton also guided her students to identify point of view and make text-to-writing connections via autobiographies.

Guided by the CSCOPE curriculum, both teachers at Hayden ISD conducted similar lessons during classroom observations. One such lesson was on the study of story elements. Even though the approach was different, each teacher achieved her goal. Mrs. Easton used a pair of texts to make connections to very similar storylines as she guided students through the story elements. Later the same connections were used as small groups of students transformed a story into a play.

Mrs. Blanco's approach analyzed the elements of a story as well as the elements of a biography. Using a fable, Mrs. Blanco orally read the short selection to the students then paired the students with their own copies. They re-read the selection and discussed the plot line. Following the small group discussion, the teacher focused attention back to a whole class discussion. During this whole class discussion, Mrs. Blanco documented student conversations in her Reader's Notebook. This same story was then re-read by students as a play during Readers' Theater. Randomly selected groups of students stood at the front of the class and performed the reading. During one observational period, three groups of students were provided the opportunity to perform in front of their peers.

Strategies. Although the reading instruction in the two districts involved two different programs, an overriding similarity was the active student engagement of visual,

auditory, kinesthetic learning styles (VAK). Students were to “say what I say, do what I do” as directed by their teacher and then given an opportunity to demonstrate. Whether the activity was charades or reader’s theater, students were engaged and worked with peers to formulate a performance. Students were given opportunities to visually make connections to oral discussions either through teacher or student drawn icons.

Finally, a similarity between the two rural districts was the documentation and implementation of Response to Intervention tiered strategies. This intervention documentation began with whole class observations and accumulated test scores to where teachers documented the strategies and length of time per intervention and planned for differentiated lessons during centers time as well as after school tutorials.

Writing. The following sections will discuss the writing instruction of the four participants. The following themes will be discussed: Reciprocal Nature, Grammar, Free Write, Process Writing, and State Testing.

Reciprocal Nature. The reciprocity between reading and writing was clearly evident with all four participants (Allington & Cunningham,2002; Rice, 2003; Zarry, 1999). However, Mrs. West’s reading instruction was more reading specific and applied writing in the form of answering questions with complete sentences. Mrs. Green, Mrs. Blanco and Mrs. Easton established a seamlessly flowing schedule between reading and writing activities where students did not question or appear baffled by the sequence. Every morning the three participants began with daily oral language passages allowing students time to complete the assignment independently before initiating class discussion. Mrs. Blanco was the only one to inject TAKS/STAAR formatted passages two days a week as the selection for the Daily Oral Language. Mrs. Green stated she planned the use

of formatted passages later in the school year as testing time nears. She did not want to overuse the format.

Grammar. There was little use of a state adopted text for grammar instruction. Instead, Daily Oral Language and TAKS/STAAR passages were used to teach the required skills. Students were also guided to apply revision and editing tools to their own authentic written products as well as the writing of their peers. For all participants, whenever the students were instructed to use their language arts texts, a student was called upon to read the short informational passage. Then students followed the teachers' directives in taking notes in their Writer's Notebook. Mrs. West did not refer to a grammar text nor have her students maintain a Writer's Notebook but did have a section of blackline master worksheets prepared for her students to work through. She also made connections back to the reading selection as students either looked for dialogue, word use, or conducted discussions about why some authors chose to write grammatically incorrect.

During an observational period, Mrs. Easton used the class set of language texts to have students observe how an author organized a text with beginning, middle, and end sections. In small groups of three or four, students were given color-coded index cards to identify parts from a previously read selection. Then they were given the task of writing a summary of a previously read selection using these directives. Therefore, the third-grade teachers kept the writing as a closer relationship to reading by teaching reading skills through writing.

Quick Write. The one addition made by Mrs. Easton was the inclusion of daily quick writes. The students were provided time, usually a few minutes before either

leaving for music or lunch, to write for three to five minutes on anything they wish. This writing was kept in a spiral notebook and Mrs. Easton did not indicate whether she used specific topics or prompts. Students wrote about varying topics: what they did the previous weekend, Halloween, the story they just read, a birthday party, or even about their feelings for their teacher. At the end of the writing period, students volunteered to share their writing by reading it orally to the class. Students were eager to share and expressed sighs of disappointment when time expired and they did not get a chance to share. During one informal conversation, Mrs. Easton stated that she planned on using the child's own writing to teach about grammatical skills. Her goal at the current time was to just get them into writing and enjoying it. Also, after students had more experience in writing their thoughts, they would have more to share with Mrs. Easton.

Process Writing. Both fourth-grade teachers made a conscientious effort to establish procedures for the writing process. Mrs. Blanco and Mrs. Green commented during their interviews that the writing instruction they provided to their students was not found in only one source. Each has taken years of experience and knowledge gained from workshops and in-service trainings to develop a writing program that matched their teaching style and their students' learning styles. Mrs. Green brought out a text written by Barry Lane and Gretchen Bernabei (2001), *Why We Must Run with Scissors: Voice Lessons in Persuasive Writing*. She stated, "This is my bible, along with continuous Internet searches, to constantly make improvements to the way I teach writing. Every year, I have a different group of students with different areas of need."

Mrs. Green and Mrs. Blanco also shared similar modeling techniques of using established children's authors to focus mini-lessons on such topics as leads, dialogue, or

conclusions. Both teachers used the works of various authors as examples of the writing craft. The teachers also shared samples of their own writing. Mrs. Blanco followed her curriculum's guide to have students write biographies. Mrs. Green used process writing, which began with brainstorming about fun things the students had done. Even though the writing task was different in each classroom, the initial process was the same. Mrs. Green brainstormed ideas while Mrs. Blanco's students brainstormed types of questions to ask a student to be interviewed. Finally, students were given instructions and expectations on peer conferencing skills and how to assist with revision and editing. Mrs. Blanco and Mrs. Green also set aside for one-on-one conferencing with their students.

State Test. Fourth-grade teachers were burdened with the additional stress of the state mandated writing test. They explicitly provided modeled instruction to help students develop writing skills in preparation for this test. Mrs. Easton knew the instructional needs of fourth-grade teachers due to vertical team meetings, and she provided initial writing skills to her students. She even used state released writing samples from previous TAKS tests to inform students about the scoring system and the expectations for each kind of writing. Mrs. West was aware of the needs to implement more writing into her daily instruction; however, this particular group of students required, in her observational evaluations, more reading comprehension directives.

Assessment. In addition to establishing classroom communities, each participant held high expectations for their students and themselves. The success of their students directly reflected back on their teaching or their ability to reach each of their students. Authorities such as Allington and Cunningham (2002), Gambrell et al. (2007), and Spandel (1996) have stated the importance of assessment use to not only document

student progress but to also self-evaluate their instructional delivery. This was demonstrated in their anecdotal notes and on various evaluative instruments. All of the study's participants were able to establish students' sense of belonging, a safe learning environment, and an expectation of high student performance. Mrs. Blanco worked with each individual student based upon his/her own level. She knew the capabilities of her students and expected them to put forth serious effort in their work. She and the other participants kept lines of communication open between home and school through phone calls, Monday Memos, progress reports, and/or individualized notes that discussed the performance and potential of each student.

All participants used Response to Intervention (RTI) progress monitoring to evaluate and document a struggling student's activity. A computerized STAR report was administered to the students at the beginning, middle, and end of year. Initially this assessment assisted in the identification of student reading levels for the *Accelerated Reader* program. Later the teachers used the results to monitor progress and provide one-on-one conferencing documentation.

Both district leaders expected the disaggregation of benchmark tests in the state mandated testing format. Ms. Ripley noted that their district's mock testing is done in late November to early December when they actually shut down instruction for the week and administer the test just as it will be administered in the spring. Mrs. Pearson's faculty also superseded instruction with benchmark tests, but they did not schedule a campus-wide event. Instead, teachers were expected to administer the test and submit the disaggregated results to the office. The results were used to determine after school tutorial attendance and lesson modifications to accelerate success for struggling students

and to inform small group teacher-directed instruction. This small group instruction took place during center time. Both Mrs. Easton and Mrs. Blanco scheduled post-test instructional time to review the test and held whole class discussions with students about their performance.

Other forms of assessment were conducted through weekly spelling tests and teacher-prepared rubrics to evaluate writing products. Corbin ISD teachers used the basal's blackline test masters to assess student comprehension and progress on a weekly basis. Hayden ISD teachers modified CSCOPE worksheets, used outside resources, or created authentic assessments to insure that the expected testing rigor was maintained.

Corbin ISD teachers used additional assessments to evaluate their students, such as the TPRI and timed fluency checks with running records. Mrs. West administered the TPRI to all third-grade students. The results became part of the documented monitoring of students and were used to group students based on their needs. The results were also used to place students in after school tutoring. Mrs. Green and Mrs. West administered weekly fluency checks and kept records of each student's progress.

Finally, all participants described in their interviews their process of self-reflection after they graded a set of assessments or examined their personal observations during a lesson. The researcher observed the results of this reflective process. One day during a lesson, Mrs. Easton noticed confusion in the facial expressions of her students; she also had a lack of oral response from students. The following day, she used a different activity to address the topic of the lesson. It was important to participants, professionally and personally, to use student success as a measure of their ability to teach effectively. They each set high expectations for their students and equally high standards

for their own performance. Their ultimate assessment was the achievement of the common goal: academic success for all students. While the more immediate evaluation was the results of the state tests at the end of the current school year, the definitive evaluation was long term: the student's ability to become a productive member of society.

Summary

Due to a lack of research depicting the positive aspects within rural schools (Arnold, Newmann, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005), the researcher's purpose for this study was to add to the body of research the practices and perspectives of third- and fourth-grade reading/writing teachers in two exemplary rural South Texas Title I school districts. The study revealed the practices, procedures, and/or programs used in these districts to accomplish the highest academic "grade," Exemplary, on the state mandated test. Interviews and classroom observations were conducted to gain insight to views and perspectives of teachers as well as to explore and document classroom activities.

NCLB (2001) required that school districts employ highly qualified teachers, and each district met that mandate. Two of the participants held Bachelors degrees. Two were ESL-endorsed, one was a certified Master Reading teacher, and two had Masters degrees in Curriculum and Instruction while one was pursuing an additional master's in counseling. All four participants had participated in numerous workshops and in-service attendance hours. However, being highly qualified does not necessarily mean a teacher is effective or able to produce successful learners and build a successful, exemplary school, campus, or district (Rothman & Barth, 2009).

There has been large bodies of research linking student achievement to effective teachers and even more research attributing success to “instructional and management processes” (Stronge, 2007, p. 22). However, additional studies indicate effective results are related to the teacher’s affective or social skills (Thompson, Greer & Greer, 2004; Walker, 2010). With a view to the characteristics of an effective teacher, this study focused on the teacher’s perspective of effective literacy instruction and on the instructional practices the teacher utilized in the classroom. These two components were analyzed and compared between teachers across two rural elementary campuses in two rural South Texas Title I districts.

According to Walker’s (2010) longitudinal study, a common theme emerged from students’ essays and discussions of their personal reflections on the personal qualities good teachers. What was important to the study’s participants was their relationship with the teacher. The four participants in this study exhibited many of these characteristics. They were prepared, reflective of practices and student performance, caring and compassionate, respectful, forgiving, fair, and positive. They also held high expectations for themselves and their students, had a personal touch, established a sense of community, added humor to their teaching, and admitted to mistakes (Stronge, 2007; Thompson, Greer, & Greer, 2004; Walker, 2010).

Participants prepared each lesson with a careful study of provided curriculum that was directed by basal program or exemplar lessons. Faculty worked together in search of additional resources to assist the needs of their students by attending workshops, faculty meetings, and utilizing Internet searches. This included an exploration for state mandated test samples or guidelines. Corbin ISD’s vertical team of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade

teachers regularly planned for upcoming units while Hayden ISD teachers met as grade-level teams. This preparation included the procedures to implement lessons or texts and strategies such as using graphic organizers, jigsaw, or cloze procedures to enhance the strengths of the students.

The beginning of the school year included “All About Me” activities for students to express themselves in writing, drawing, or coloring topics that interested them or revealed something about themselves. The teachers completed this same activity not only to model the expectations but also to share their personal attributes with their students. Although several of the participants were employed for a number of years within the same district, and parents and siblings already knew the teacher well, this activity provided teachers with additional insight into each student. In addition to personal knowledge of the students, formal and informal assessments were used to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses. The previous year’s state mandated tests and benchmark exams were disaggregated. Unit and weekly test results were monitored. Corbin ISD’s third-grade teacher administered and included TPRI results, which contributed to making decisions for small group and/or after school tutorial attendance.

Teachers demonstrated their personality in the way they organized their classroom. The rooms were inviting and allowed for easy access to groups or individual students. Students were provided personal space in small cubbies, and procedures were in place to assist student organization. Students at Hayden ISD had additional space at their desks because they remained with the same teacher for the duration of the school day, whereas Corbin ISD’s students switched classrooms for math and science instruction with another teacher. Each of the rooms displayed student-created work, motivational

and instructional posters, class schedules, and a few plants. Mrs. Easton decorated with soft-lit lamps in reading areas, and all participants displayed family pictures either on the walls or on their desks.

Each day, the four participants stood at the door and greeted their students entering the classroom by extending a warm handshake or a pat on the back. During lessons, participants shared personal connections to the text and to writing projects. This personal touch supported the safe and warm learning environment.

In addition to effective characteristics, each of the teachers integrated personal instructional styles into their reading and writing instruction. There were different story resources, but basic reading skills or objectives were similar between the two districts. The participants guided instruction by beginning with a focus, which was followed by teacher modeling in whole class settings. Teachers shared personal stories to make additional connections to text and self, thus creating a higher level of student engagement. Corbin ISD teachers incorporated more paired and small group activities throughout instruction yet were steadfast in the use of blackline masters. Students completed these worksheets together as the teacher modeled the lesson then worked with a small group. Students then worked independently. The range from high to low scaffolded levels was evident during all instructional lessons.

Word study and vocabulary were important components of reading and writing instruction. All the participants, including the principals interviewed, viewed a student's vocabulary repertoire and ability to make word meanings as closely linked to reading comprehension. According to the participants, the students' increase of vocabulary contributed to their writing skills. They believed that exposure to increased vocabulary

came through additional reading. Both districts used the *Accelerated Reader* program to provide additional reading materials and to assess student-reading levels and place students in a zone of proximal development for book selection. Mrs. Green managed a visual status of the class through use of the Promethean Board to document daily silent reading progress of each student. All participants set procedures with their students in the use of a personal reading log and monitored progress by initialing each completed entry. The other three participants relied on nightly parent signatures documenting the number of pages students read for homework.

For three of the participants, reading and writing were interwoven throughout the instructional period. Grammatical skills, sentence revisions, and word choice were discussed daily through a daily oral language activity. Teachers continued the identification of these skills during a selected reading passage and in their students' personal writing pieces.

Oral discussion of the selected reading passage was common. Corbin ISD teachers expected students to have a minimum of three reads per selection, and students were tested weekly over the selection's vocabulary, reading skills, and passage comprehension. Students were administered the program's blackline masters for selection and unit tests. Hayden ISD teachers used the basal selections sparingly as selections mostly came from authentic children's literature texts, which only one copy was used as a teacher read aloud to a whole class setting. State formatted test passages were used to assess student comprehension, reading skills, and vocabulary skills.

Highly qualified and effective teachers were found in two rural South Texas Title I school districts. This qualitative study added to the research of how effective teachers

created successful communities of learners and built a successful campus and strong district. These rural schools employed highly qualified and effective teachers and refuted the assumption that rural schools cannot attract effective teachers.

Limitations

The population and setting of this study is a limitation. There were six participants, two principals and four teachers, and two district locations. Including more rural districts and expanding community settings depicting a broader picture of South Texas may reveal different practices among rural reading and writing teachers. Expanding the length of the investigation period from the four days a week for five weeks to a longer period, possibly an entire school year, would provide a deeper and richer description of reading/writing teachers' practices. Additionally, due to the brevity of the investigation, a second in-depth formal interview was not fully fulfilled.

Student assignment and the use of two different reading programs could have altered the collection of data. Self-contained classrooms compared to a semi-departmentalized structure may have distorted the learning community findings, as students at one locale did not remain in the same classroom for the same period of time. In addition, calendar assignments may have had a difference. One district operated under a traditional calendar while the other district was year-round. However, because of this calendar arrangement, the investigation could be seen as occurring at the same time of the school year within each district.

Finally, the researcher's personal knowledge of one district over the other could be seen as a limitation or bias. The researcher experienced two years as a self-contained classroom teacher (second- and fifth-grades) in a small private school and had taught in

one rural district for 17 years with two years as a third-grade self-contained classroom teacher and 15 years as a fourth-grade self-contained classroom teacher. The researcher did know and had worked with the participants in the past; however, she had left employment from that district for a two-year period prior to the investigation. However, the investigator's experiences in both grade levels provide credibility to this study as she had knowledge of the grade specific expectations.

Implications for Future Research

As previous researchers, such as Arnold et al. (2005), Howley and Howley (2004) and Howley et al. (2005) have concluded, rural schools need to be examined. Much of the research on rural schools has documented academic deficits for their community and for the country. Due to the small size of rural schools, their remoteness, and the lack of attractive funding, many researchers have chosen not to conduct studies in a rural setting. Research regarding educator perspectives and reading/writing procedures of high achieving rural Title I schools will provide literature for struggling educators and emphasize the importance of rural schools.

The participants in this study were effective rural elementary teachers who did not adhere to scripted lessons; rather, they relied on their professional knowledge in order to make curriculum decisions that best met the needs of their students. Students' prior knowledge and experience was the foundation of teachers' lessons that enhanced vocabulary acquisition through small group, kinesthetic, and visual experiences. These teachers scaffolded instruction through the reciprocal nature of reading and writing with the end goal of developing an independent learner.

Additional research opportunities could investigate the reasons some teachers tend to remain in a rural setting. Why do many rural teachers native to an area decide to return to the same area or teach in similar community? Are there any differences between “home grown” rural teachers and those new to the area, “transplant teachers?” The same type of research could be applied to the school leaders.

Research to compare teachers at exemplary rural districts to districts with academically acceptable or lower state ratings could shed light on ways to rectify the achievement gap between rural districts. The research could document the differences or similarities between teachers at successful high-needs and low-needs rural schools.

Finally, additional research to investigate teachers’ perspectives of reading across all core subjects could bring continuity between subjects taught. What reading strategies and instructional methods are performed across content areas such as math, social studies, and the arts? It is possible that in a self-contained one might not see a difference between strategies used in reading as in math, but would one see a difference among departmentalized teachers?

Conclusion

The investigator interviewed and observed rural third- and fourth-grade teachers during ELA instruction using Spradley’s (1980) seminal work, *Participant Observation*. The initial formal interview questions used were from Ortlieb’s (2007) study classified according to four themes: Classroom Management, Instructional Approach/Style, Reading Instruction, and Assessment. The twelve steps of Spradley’s (1980) Developmental Research Sequence were followed to initiate observation of the social situation; create an ethnographic record; make domain, taxonomic, and componential

analyses; and compose the ethnography. The writing style used for this study followed a precedent set by other scholarly dissertations including Bergeron (2004), Ortlieb (2007), and Ainsworth (2008) to provide thick descriptions.

Collectively, the teachers in this study used their professional skills to select reading and writing strategies based on their students' strengths and weaknesses as identified through anecdotal notes and/or informal/formal assessments. These teacher facilitators provided scaffolded instruction from whole group direct instruction through small group, peer/partner discussion, and individual activities. This led to the development of a social community, which was an important component within their overall classroom management schemes. These teachers valued student ownership and responsibility within their classroom as important. They used this aspect of ownership as a building block for a secure and safe environment that allowed students to express their acquisition of skills and knowledge through group activities and individual contributions. This sense of community continued outside the classroom walls to include the parents and extended families. Open communication to parents through emails, phone conversations, and community invitations to campus events such as festivals and monthly themed community activities stressed the importance of school pride.

The participants' ability to incorporate personal style and connections in their teaching was regularly noted. Even though "following the script" was available and advised, each participant interpreted lessons and demonstrated professional skill according to the needs of her students. This personal connection to texts and students provided direct models as students made personal connections to text, themselves, and their environment. The teachers were also cognizant of their own teaching style in order

to complement their students' learning style. Participants noted preferences for lecturing yet found it important and successful to provide visual and kinesthetic modalities such as Readers' Theater, Charades, and Windowpanes. Finally, these highly qualified teachers disaggregated data to guide additional lessons, self-evaluated their lesson deliveries, and used post-test reviews as mini-lesson opportunities. Therefore, when these characteristics envelop a collective body, it is not surprising why these rural districts have earned Exemplary academic performance. These two high-performing and high-needs rural elementary campuses had highly qualified and effective ELA teachers.

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Appendix A

CLASSROOM TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background/Education

1. What type of community were you reared?
2. What degree(s) do you hold?
3. When did you decide to become a teacher? How many years of experience?
4. What is your educational philosophy?
5. What was the last educational article you read?

Classroom Management

6. What techniques or models do you utilize to ensure good classroom management?
7. How do you establish authority/discipline?
8. What do you do when a discipline problem arises?
9. How do you feel about noise in the classroom? How do you handle it?
10. How important is communication in the classroom?
11. What principles do you use to motivate students?

Instructional Approaches/Styles

12. How do you teach a classroom of children with differing intellectual abilities?
13. How do you and how often do you contact parents?
14. How do you include parents in their child's education?
15. What is the most difficult aspect of teaching today?

Reading Instruction

16. What type of reading program do you use? How long has this system been in place?
17. Were you formally trained to use this program? How?
18. What instructional models do you feel are necessary?
19. How do you individualize your teaching?
20. How do you modify your curriculum from year to year?
21. What do you find students struggle with most in reading?
22. How do you provide your students with a free choice in selecting literature?
23. Is it important to supply a purpose when reading?
24. How do you expand instructional time?
25. What types of reading literature are available to your students in the classroom?
26. How do you integrate technology into the reading curriculum?
27. What are the top five reading skills that are most beneficial to students?
28. Describe how much of your teaching relates to standardized testing?
29. What important qualities make a "superior" reading teacher?

Assessment

30. How do you monitor students' progress?
31. What do you look for to evaluate that learning is taking place in your classroom?
32. What type of assessment(s) do you use? Is it primarily informal, formal, or authentic?
33. How do you evaluate your own teaching performance?

Appendix B

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background/Education

1. What type of community were you reared?
2. What degree(s) do you hold?
3. When did you decide to become a principal? How many years of experience?
4. What is your educational philosophy?
5. What was the last educational article you read?

Instructional Viewpoints

6. How do you recommend to your teachers to instruct to differing intellectual abilities?
7. How do you include parents in their child's education?
8. How do you motivate students to learn?
9. What is the most difficult aspect of teaching today?
10. In what ways do you provide for professional development?

Reading Instruction

11. What type of reading program do you use? How long has this system been in place?
12. What instructional models do you feel are necessary?
13. How can teachers individualize their teaching to meet students' needs?
14. How do you modify your curriculums from year to year?
15. What do you find students struggle with most in reading?
16. How do you expand instructional time?
17. How do you integrate technology into the reading curriculum?
18. What are the top five reading skills that are most beneficial to students?
19. Describe how much instruction relates to standardized testing?
20. What important qualities make a "superior" reading teacher?

Assessment

21. How do you monitor students' progress?
22. What do you look for to evaluate that learning is taking place in classrooms?
23. What type of assessment(s) do your teachers use?
24. How do you evaluate your own leadership performance?

Appendix C

OBSERVATIONAL TABLE OF THE NINE COMPONENTS OF EVERY SOCIAL SITUATION

Date: _____

School: A or B (circle one)

Time: _____

Investigator:

Space (the physical place or places)	
Actor (the people involved)	
Activity (a set of related acts people do)	
Object (the physical things that are present)	
Act (single actions that people do)	
Event (a set of related activities that people carry out)	
Time (the sequencing that takes place over time)	
Goal (the things people are trying to accomplish)	
Feeling (the emotions felt and expressed)	

Additional Notes: _____

Appendix D

METHOD RATING SCALE

Grade level: _____ Date: _____

Rating Scale: 1 – 5

1 never exhibits

4 mostly exhibits

2 rarely exhibits

5 always exhibits

3 occasionally exhibits

*Classroom Management:***1. implements consistent classroom management skills.**

1 2 3 4 5

*Instructional Approaches:***2. models reading approaches to students.**

1 2 3 4 5

3. scaffolds learners to increase their skill ability and reading level.

1 2 3 4 5

4. uses verbal communication to enhance the learning environment.

1 2 3 4 5

5. allows students opportunities for higher order thinking.

1 2 3 4 5

*Reading Instruction:***6. utilizes small group instruction during the reading block.**

1 2 3 4 5

7. designates time for students to independently read.

1 2 3 4 5

*Assessment:***8. bases instruction on data gathered through prior and ongoing reading assessments.**

1 2 3 4 5

9. individualizes instruction according to needs of students.

1 2 3 4 5

Comments: _____

Appendix E
SEMANTIC RELATIONSHIP CHART

1. Semantic Relationship: _____
2. Form: _____
3. Example: _____

Included Terms

Semantic
Relationship

Cover Term



Structural Questions: _____

Included Terms

Semantic
Relationship

Cover Term



Structural Questions: _____

Appendix F

CONSENT FORM

Perspectives and Practices of Successful Teachers in Diverse Rural South Texas High-Performing High-Needs Elementary Schools

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research project studying rural literacies. The purpose of the study is to identify the factors that promote “Exemplary” academic achievement in rural schools. You were selected to be a possible participant because our rural district has been identified by the Texas Education Agency as being Exemplary for the last two academic years.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in formal and informal interviews. The formal interviews will be audio recorded to be transcribed later and take place in the beginning and end of the study. All audio recordings will be transcribed and you will be given the opportunity to read and approve the transcriptions for clarity and/or provide additional information. You will also be observed during reading/writing classroom instruction. During these teacher observations, the researcher, Robin Pate, in the form of field notes and journal entries, will document your methods, approaches, and style of instructional delivery. There will be a methods rating scale used for one form of the documentation; however, this instrument will not be used to determine a professional evaluation. The focus is only the methods and activities implemented in the course of classroom instruction. This study will take a period of five weeks, four days per week.

All recordings will be kept confidential and you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of the recorded sessions in order to make any corrections, clarifications, and/or deletions. These recordings will be kept for a period of five years and securely locked in a file cabinet located in the researcher’s office.

What are the risks involved in this study?

The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study; however, your participation will directly influence the field of rural education, as the results will be disseminated in scholarly publications.

Do I have to participate?

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi being affected.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?

This study is confidential and interview responses, classroom observations, and demographic information will be collected, printed, numbered and stored securely (as hard copies) in a locked filing cabinet located in Robin Pate's office at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and accessible only to the researcher and dissertation committee chair, Dr. Evan Ortlieb. All names used in publication will be pseudonyms to provide anonymity.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. All audio recordings will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet located in the researcher's office at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, and only Robin Pate and Evan Ortlieb will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for five years and then erased/destroyed.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?

This research study has been reviewed by the Research Compliance Office and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact Erin Sherman, Research Compliance Officer, at (361)825-2497 or erin.serman@tamucc.edu

Signature

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study. You also certify that you are 18 years of age or older by signing this form.

_____ I agree to be audio recorded.

_____ I do not want to be audio recorded.

Signature of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____

Printed Name: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ **Date:** _____

Printed Name: _____