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STUDENT-CENTERED LITERACY INSTRUCTION:

AN EXAMINATION OF AN ELEMENTARY TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

An Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

Dr. Victoria Robinson, Committee Chair

Dr. Michael J. Licari
Dean of the Graduate College

Carolyn Marie Wiezorek

University of Northern Iowa

December 2012

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, I examined and interpreted the literacy instruction of a fourth grade instructor who identified herself as a student-centered teacher. I sought to understand and interpret the beliefs and attitudes of my participant, Julie. Through seven unstructured interviews and five observations, I collected, and simultaneously interpreted, data. Julie freely shared her beliefs, successes, challenges, and frustrations regarding her literacy instruction.

Because of the contextual nature of the study I sought emerging themes through analysis and reflection. Four themes surfaced: attitude and philosophy, environment, instructional practices, and impact on students. Julie possessed an attitude that all students could learn and believed in creating a community of acceptance. She worked to build a positive, productive environment for all students, free of labels. Julie's instructional practices focused on motivating students to take responsibility for learning. She used formative assessment to create flexible, fluid groups, avoiding fixed ability groups. All of Julie's students experienced academic growth as measured by district mandated assessments. In addition to academic growth, Julie's students engaged in the learning process, rediscovering lost curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. Students that saw themselves as less worthy than their peers found their voices and recognized their strengths as a result of Julie's teaching practices and encouragement.

The study offers implications for educators. Among them is the important role formative assessment plays in learning. In addition, relinquishing control of learning to students offers motivation and engagement on their part.

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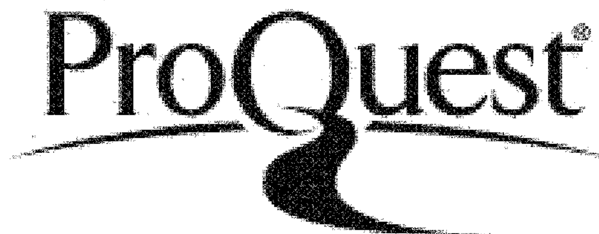

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many traditional schools today fail to provide students with the tools they need to be independent learners (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Friedman, 2005; Murphy, 2010; Noguera, 2010). Rather than energize and excite students, participation in the educational system seems to dampen curiosity and squelch creativity, individualism, and love of learning. Alternatives to this dismal picture of education do exist and are successful (McCombs, 2003; Salinas & Garr, 2009) but remain under constant threat of prescribed programs, one-size-fits-all curriculum, and legislative mandates. How then, do classroom teachers negotiate these challenges? This dissertation examined how an experienced, self-proclaimed student-centered teacher described her teaching experiences, shared her beliefs about education, and struggled to fit into the school and district communities.

What I Wanted to Know

The purpose of this study was to examine and interpret the literacy instruction of an elementary teacher who identified herself as a student-centered educator. Specifically, I sought to answer the following question:

1. What does it mean to the participant to be a student-centered teacher?
2. How are her beliefs and understandings enacted within her literacy instruction?
3. What philosophical beliefs guided her instructional decisions?
4. How did she justify instructional choices?
5. Was she cognizant of such justifications?

I sought to understand the participant's successes, challenges, frustrations, thoughts, and actions. I wondered what she saw as her strengths as a teacher and what areas she felt needed improvement. I wanted to observe her and converse with her to better understand her conceptions of student-centeredness and how those conceptions transferred to her classroom.

Using a qualitative study, I explored the instruction, attitudes, and experiences of a student-centered teacher. I collected and analyzed data through interviews and observations. As I interpreted the data, I used pseudonyms for my participant, the school, the city, all students, and other teachers in order to maintain confidentiality.

Why I Wanted to Know This

Because I subscribe to the belief that students learn best in a constructivist setting, I chose to undertake and share a contextualized analysis of a teacher that identifies herself as student-centered. A list of steps or procedures, rather than an interpretation of one teacher's experience, would not have aligned with my philosophical beliefs. Intentionally, I avoided trying to develop formulas or methods. As Gallagher (2004) offered suggestions of how one might move toward teaching practices consistent with the constructivist framework, she warned, "Constructivist teaching cannot be proceduralized, otherwise it becomes just another form of technique-driven teaching that crowds out both teachers' and students' intellectual engagement" (Teaching Practices from a Disability Studies Perspective section, para. 17).

Prior to narrowing my research topic, I realized that student-centeredness couldn't be neatly defined in one sentence, multiple sentences, or even several paragraphs. Rather,

I found it to be an ongoing convergence of attitudes, ideals, and practices that often weave themselves into content, instruction, and assessment. One's thoughts and attitudes regarding multiple concepts, including motivation, inclusion, community, building independence, authentic learning activities, assessment, and self-esteem, contribute to the formation of student-centered teaching. These interdependent intangibles unevenly unite to form student-centered teaching.

In theory, Aaronsohn's (1996) definition of student-centered teaching accurately defines the act, but fails to acknowledge the complexity or richness embedded in enacted, contextual student-centered teaching and learning.

> Any teaching in which the focus is not on the teacher as performer, rescuer or repository of wisdom, not on the content as given material that must be covered, but on students' interaction with accessible, meaningful content, with one another, and with the teacher as facilitator of that interdependence. Process is an essential part of the content in this form of instruction. (p. 177)

I sought to better understand student-centered teaching and learning in context. I wanted to observe and interpret the nuances that affect the learning environment and see how my participant individualized instruction for her students.

I chose to focus on my participant's literacy instruction because I have seen many teachers struggle to teach reading successfully to students of varying abilities. I think this might be due to the fact that the scope and sequence of literacy skills is ambiguous and non-linear. I have observed many teachers in my 27 years as an educator and very few literacy instructors used flexible grouping rather than ability grouping or whole group instruction. Content, rather than students, served as the focal point for almost all of these teachers. My desire to learn how one might teach reading in a way that better meets the

needs of each student fueled my passion for investigating the teaching practices, attitudes, and beliefs of my participant.

My Experience as an Educator and a Researcher

I began my teaching career more than 27 years ago in a small Catholic elementary school in southwestern Wisconsin. After one-and-a-half years of teaching all subjects, including art, music, and physical education, I stepped into a shared principal position. Our administrator had been released for embezzling money and the replacement backed out at the last minute. Administration challenged and interested me, but I wasn't ready to give up working directly with students. The next year I moved to another Catholic school in Iowa. Again, I taught first grade, this time for 6 years, and strived to provide challenging opportunities to all of my students. I knew that open-ended assignments and projects would allow students at varying ability levels to improve skills and grasp concepts. I was also cognizant of the self-esteem and self-efficacy of my students, wanting them to be confident in their ability to learn the myriad of subjects. My teacher education program addressed neither of these areas so I sought advice from colleagues and experimented in my classroom.

The birth of my first child, and two additional children, prompted an 8 year hiatus from the elementary classroom. A half-time position as a Gifted and Talented facilitator eased me back into the education arena and kept me at the elementary level for 11 more years. Since I had no background in gifted education, I enrolled in one course, which snowballed into an endorsement and then a master's degree. The new information I learned caused many sleepless nights as I reflected on my earlier practices that were not

differentiated and failed to meet student needs. I vowed to do everything in my power to ensure that the individual needs of the students I worked with would be met. My position as Gifted and Talented facilitator at an elementary school enabled me to work with classroom teachers on more differentiated, as well as inclusionary practices for eleven years. Two years after the completion of a master's degree, I began working toward a doctoral degree in leadership. I remember thinking that an administrative position would allow me to positively affect the education of more students. As I finished coursework and prepared my dissertation proposal, another career opportunity arose. I stumbled upon an education faculty position at a local university, applied, and was awarded the job. This new path multiplied my ability to impact students by working with teacher education candidates.

My cumulative experiences and continuous construction of knowledge constantly shaped and reshaped my philosophy of education. It is important to share this philosophy for two reasons. First, because it is the lens through which I view teaching and learning. This philosophy drove my research question and selection of my participant. Second, it aligns with my role as a qualitative researcher immersing myself in a study with my participant, mutually investigating and understanding her experiences.

I believe that people construct knowledge through their own understanding, experiences, and existing knowledge. Each student brings to the classroom unique experiences and varying levels of understanding on any given topic. The teacher needs to acknowledge these differences and create a learning environment that allows students to fully participate and build on existing knowledge. The environment should offer students

authentic learning activities that provide socialization, choice, and self-assessment. Learning is deepened when students have opportunities to co-create products and discuss concepts. Choice encourages students to further interests and develops intrinsic motivation. Self-assessment shifts responsibility of learning from the teacher to the student and builds independence. Within this environment students engage in purposeful and personal learning.

A classroom environment should build a democratic community and develop citizenship. Students should be taught to make decisions and solve problems collaboratively by evaluating potential rewards and consequences for themselves and others. They should be encouraged to act, not because an authority figure has dictated an action, but because they understand the reasoning behind the action. Students should understand that they are members of the classroom community and retain rights and responsibilities to that community.

Within this classroom environment the role of the teacher is not to dispense information for students to accept. It is to create authentic activities and guide students as they immerse themselves in content. The teacher relies on her content mastery to scaffold understanding and redirect misconceptions. She teaches students strategies and models metacognition in an effort to shift responsibility of learning to her students. The teacher is a member of the classroom community that leads and directs students, but refrains from exerting control over students.

I believe that all students deserve an enriching, holistic curriculum experienced in an accepting, inclusive classroom. It is ultimately the responsibility of the classroom

teacher, with support of administration, to create an ideal learning environment in which students construct knowledge.

As detailed in Chapter 2, constructivism and constructivist pedagogy served as the philosophical and conceptual framework for this study. Student-centered teaching is a component of constructivist pedagogy (Cambourne, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005, 2012). Constructivist pedagogy is predicated on the belief that all knowledge is socially constructed and that people make sense of the world through their interactions and experiences (Vygotsky, 1896-1934/1998). Constructivism opposes the idea that there are objective truths to be discovered and knowledge that exists outside of persons waiting to be discovered or transmitted. Rather, a constructivist belief is that learning takes place in context and cannot be separated from values or experiences (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1970). Constructivist pedagogy has the potential to develop students' independent learning by allowing them to act upon their natural curiosity and interests.

Overview of the Dissertation

Early interviews and observations confirmed for me that student-centered teaching does not consist solely of certain qualities a teacher possesses or a list of procedures to be implemented. Contextualized factors of teaching and learning vary from one classroom and one school year to the next, deeming replication impossible, but there are factors of student-centered teaching that are manifested individually using common constructs. The premise that student-centered instruction responds to student needs dictates that when different children are present in the classroom different approaches and responses will be necessary.

Many themes emerged in this study and revealed an interconnectedness that made organizing them a challenge. Eventually, I sorted my interpreted findings into four broad categories: Attitude and Philosophy, Environment, Instructional Practices and Impact on Students. I further divided the instructional practices category into four subcategories: The First Weeks, Instructional Planning, Grouping Practices, and Building Independence. I also divided the Impact on Students category into two sections: Growth and Achievement, and School Beyond Room 4S.

Chapter 2 provides a review of literature on student-centered teaching and learning. Chapter 3 details methodology for the study and Chapter 4 presents my research study findings. Chapter 5 consists of conclusions, lessons learned, and implications for teacher education.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review section presents student-centered literacy research in the following areas: definition and description, learner-centered frameworks, historical antecedents, classroom implications, and literacy.

Definition and Description

McCombs and Whisler (1997) offered the following definition of learner-centered education.

> The perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners). This dual focus then informs and drives educational decision making. (p.9)

To better understand a student-centered classroom and the role of the teacher, Jones (2007) described a place where the needs of students take center stage.

> The teacher (and the textbook) help to guide the students, manage their activities, and direct their learning. Being a teacher means helping people to learn – and, in a student-centered class, the teacher is a member of the class as a participant in the learning process. (p.2)

Students do not decide what they want to learn, but are encouraged to consistently participate in the learning process. The teacher's role shifts to that of facilitator.

In 1990, as a response to educational and political cries for reform, the American Psychological Association's (APA) Presidential Task Force for Psychology in Education was formed. The task force analyzed and synthesized research conditions that supported learning and achievement (McCombs, 2003). They produced a document entitled "The

Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: A Framework for School Reform and Redesign" (APA Task Force on Psychology in Education, 1993). A revised and reissued document followed (APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs, 1997). The contents of the document summarized what research determined about how students learn and how motivation, development, and individual differences influence learning (McCombs, 2003). An expansion of the Learner-Centered Principles is offered in the Learner-Centered Frameworks section.

The phrase "learner-centered" is often equated with terms such as "child-centered" or "student-centered." Lambert and McCombs (1998) explained that learner-centered goes beyond other similar terms, applying to all people from birth to death.

> When one looks across the domains covered in the principles – the metacognitive and cognitive, affective, personal and social, developmental, and other individual differences factors - it is clear that there is an emphasis on both the learner and learning. The central understanding that emerges from an integrated and holistic look at the principles, however, is that for educational systems to serve the needs of every learner, it is essential that every instructional decision focus on the individual learner – with an understanding of the learning process. (p. 9)

The broader learner-centered term also encompasses all stakeholders in the educational process, including teachers, administrators and parents. The whole person is addressed with the use of the term learner-centered.

Learner-Centered Frameworks

A few frameworks exist to further define and understand learner-centered teaching and learning. As mentioned above, The Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (LCPs; APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs, 1997) are 14 principles clustered into four domains; Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors,

Motivational and Affective Factors, Developmental and Social Factors, and Individual Differences Factors. Table 1 shows how these research-validated principles are organized and defined.

A second framework of student-centeredness, Best Practice Principles, presented by Zemelman et al. (2005) detailed a more/less list of teaching recommendations from separate national curriculum reports. The authors described thirteen principles, grouped into three clusters, based on the more/less list. The first of these clusters was Student-Centered which included Experiential, Holistic, Authentic, and Challenging principles. The second cluster, Cognitive, included Developmental, Constructivist, Expressive, and Reflective. The final principles fell into the Social umbrella and included Collaborative and Democratic. See Table 2 for more detailed information.

The third framework addressing learner-centered teaching and learning was written for the higher education community. Weimer (2002) identified the need for a focus on learning rather than the previously exclusive spotlight on teaching. She organized her framework into five key changes to practice that take place when teaching is learner-centered. First, the balance of power shifts from an authoritarian structure to a more democratic one. Second, the function of content means that quality rather than quantity is emphasized. Constructivism more deeply involves students with content and requires active learning. Third, the role of the teacher is no longer exclusive content expert or authoritarian classroom manager, but promoter of learning. Fourth, responsibility of learning ideally will fall to students, but teachers help students to build

Table 1

The APA Learner-Centered Psychological Principles

COGNITIVE AND METACOGNITIVE FACTORS
Principle 1: Nature of the Learning Process The learning of complex subject matter is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience.
Principle 2: Goals of the Learning Process The successful learner, over time and with support and instructional guidance, can create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge.
Principle 3: Construction of Knowledge The successful learner can link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways.
Principle 4: Strategic Thinking The successful learner can create and use a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies to achieve complex learning goals.
Principle 5: Thinking about Thinking Higher-order strategies for selecting and monitoring mental operations facilitate creative and critical thinking.
Principle 6: Context of Learning Learning is influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology, and instructional practices.

MOTIVATIONAL AND AFFECTIVE FACTORS
Principle 7: Motivational and Emotional Influences on Learning What and how much is learned is influenced by the learner's motivation. Motivation to learn, in turn, is influenced by the individual's emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking.
Principle 8: Intrinsic Motivation to Learn The learner's creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal choice and control.
Principle 9: Effects of Motivation on Effort Acquisition of complex knowledge and skills requires extended learner effort and guided practice. Without learners' motivation to learn, the willingness to exert this effort is unlikely without coercion.

(table continues)

DEVELOPMENTAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS
Principle 10: Developmental Influence on Learning As individuals develop, they encounter different opportunities and experience different constraints for learning. Learning is most effective when differential development within and across physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains is taken into account.
Principle 11: Social Influences on Learning Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES FACTORS
Principle 12: Individual Differences in Learning Learners have different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning that are a function of prior experience and heredity.
Principle 13: Learning and Diversity Learning is most effective when differences in learners' linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds are taken into account.
Principle 14: 'Standards and Assessment Setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing the learner and learning progress-including diagnostic, process, and outcome assessment-are integral parts of the learning process.

Note. Adapted from APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs, 1997.

the skills needed to attain the goal of being independent, autonomous learners. Fifth, evaluation purpose and processes require self-assessment on the part of students. Teachers must seriously consider what and how they assess.

The three frameworks presented contained overlap in philosophy and content. All three frameworks promoted a constructivist approach, shifted the role of the teacher from content dispenser to that of guide or coach, and endorsed complex, deep, and active learning by students. Each of the frameworks advocated a more democratic and less authoritarian approach to teaching. Differences included variations in organization and content.

Table 2

Principles of Best Practice Learning

STUDENT-CENTERED
The best starting point for schooling is young people's real interests; all across the curriculum, investigating students' own questions should always take precedence over studying arbitrarily and distantly selected "content."
Experiential: Active, hands-on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning. Students should be immersed in the most direct possible experience of the content of every subject.
Holistic: Children learn best when they encounter whole ideas, events, and materials in purposeful contexts, not by studying subparts isolated from actual use.
Authentic: Real, rich, complex ideas and materials are at the heart of the curriculum. Lessons or textbooks that water down, control, or oversimplify content ultimately disempower students.
Challenging: Students learn best when faced with genuine challenges, choices, and responsibility in their own learning.

COGNITIVE
The most powerful learning comes when children develop true understanding of concepts through higher-order thinking associated with various fields of inquiry and through self-monitoring of their thinking.
Developmental: Children grow through a series of definable but not rigid stages, and schooling should fit its activities to the developmental level of students.
Constructivist: Children do not just receive content; in a very real sense, they recreate and reinvent every cognitive system they encounter, including language, literacy, and mathematics.
Expressive: To fully engage ideas, construct meaning, and remember information, students must regularly employ the whole range of communicative media-speech, writing, drawing, poetry, dance, drama, music, movement and visual arts.
Reflective: Balancing the immersion in experience must be opportunities for learners to reflect, debrief, and abstract from their experiences what they have felt and thought and learned.

(table continues)

SOCIAL Learning is always socially constructed and often interactive; teachers need to create classroom interactions that "scaffold" learning.
Collaborative: Cooperative learning activities tap the social power or learning better than competitive and individualistic approaches.
Democratic: The classroom is a model community; students learn what they live as citizens of the school.

Note. Adapted from Zemelman et al. (2005, p. 10-11).

The Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (LCPs; APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs, 1997) and The Best Practice Principles (Zemelman et al., 2005) were lists of principles organized with headings and subheadings. Weimer (2002) organized information under five topics, one for each suggested change to practice. In regard to content, the first two mentioned frameworks addressed child development and Weimer (2002) did not. Although each of these frameworks contained differences, the commonalities and variations served to inform this study.

Throughout the study, the terms "student-centered" and "learner-centered" were used interchangeably because my participant and I agreed that the principles and key ideas outlined in the three frameworks described our interpretation of student and learner-centeredness. No blatant discrepancies between the described terms of student-centered and learner-centered existed and so they were considered synonymous for the purpose of this study.

Historical Antecedents

In addition to understanding the various terms, definitions, and descriptions, it is important to understand student-centered teaching and learning from a historical

perspective. Student-centered teaching and learning are embedded in constructivist principles. Early contributors to student-centered learning included Rousseau (1762/2011) with his natural, child-centered, and experienced-based educational philosophy recommended in his book *Emile,* originally published in 1762, and Johann Pestalozzi (1859) who opened a school with a learner-centered curriculum.

Another early contributor, Colonel Francis Parker was among the first Americans to embrace the learner-centered model of education (Parker, 1900). Early in his administrative career, Parker unsuccessfully tried to encourage teachers to change from rote memorization methods to more learner-centered ones. He traveled to Germany to learn from the Europeans about their learner-centered schools and returned to the United States where he found success in different leadership positions in Quincy and Boston, Massachusetts, Chicago, Illinois, and New Hampshire.

In an address delivered in Quincy, Massachusetts at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Quincy Movement, Parker (1900) detailed changes made by the school system under his leadership. Authentic learning activities replaced rote memorization. Spelling and grammar instruction was embedded in the writing of stories and letters. Students began enjoying school and fared well on state-wide tests despite the removal of punishments and rewards. Parker stated, "In fact, the reason why students manage to escape knowledge is that knowledge and skill are made sole aims and bribery the means of learning" (p.451). In a paper describing changes Parker implemented in the Quincy schools, Adams (1879) told of the experiment to increase the effectiveness of schools without increasing expenses, "The essence of the new system was that there was no

system about it; - it was marked throughout by intense individuality" (p.37). In schools that Parker led, the instructional focus had shifted from group memorization of lessons to active, authentic and individualized learning.

The Progressive Education Association, formed in 1919, promoted learner-centered education. An evaluation of the learner-centered approach to education called the "Eight Year Study," was conducted from 1932 until 1940, finding the approach equal or superior to traditional education in every way. Advantages of a learner-centered approach over the traditional teacher-centered education included the students' attaining higher grades, more academic honors, superior intellectual curiosity, creativity, leadership, and drive, as well as more awareness of world events and more developed objectivity (Hensen, 2003).

In addition to previous theorists mentioned, there are other important contributors to a move from traditional teaching, where teachers direct the learning process and students assume a receptive role, to a student-centered approach. Piaget explored the process by which humans construct their knowledge of the world. In describing new methods of education in contrast to traditional methods, Piaget (1970) noted, "The new methods are those that take account of the child's own peculiar nature and make their appeal to the laws of the individual's psychological constitution and those of the development. *Passivity as against activity"* (p.137).

John Dewey emphasized the learner's interaction with the physical environment. Dewey (1938) advanced the idea of outward freedom because "without its existence it is practically impossible for a teacher to gain knowledge of the individuals with whom he is

concerned. Enforced quiet and acquiescence prevent pupils from disclosing their real natures. They enforce artificial uniformity" (p. 62). Dewey believed that learning experiences should motivate the child and each problem should lead to new, related questions about the topic. He also provided specific, detailed information regarding the role of the teacher. More challenging than the role of the teacher in traditional schools, the progressive teacher "must be aware of the potentialities for leading students into new fields which belong to experiences already had, and must use this knowledge as his criterion for selection and arrangement of the conditions that influence their present experience" (p.76). The progressive teacher needed to prepare students beyond the final exams and into their futures.

Vygotsky (1896-1934/1998) introduced the role of social interaction in learning. He spoke of a child's zone of proximal development which refers to the range between what a child can do independently and what he can do with the support of a more skilled person. In the learner-centered classroom the teacher scaffolds learning for students based on their interests, learning style and developmental readiness. These areas differ for each child so the teacher must know the content well and assess what each student needs next in order to progress. A learner-centered teacher uses a student's zone of proximal development to plan for instruction.

Student-centered learning has evolved, ebbed and flowed throughout the years. While harmonious with, and descended from past progressive eras, it holds promise for enduring. Zemelman et al. (2005) stated, "This time around, the philosophical orientation is better balanced with pedagogical pragmatism and insight about cognition" (p. 26).

Rallis (1995) referred to the scientific management principles of Fredrick Taylor, which promoted the school-as-factory metaphor where students are products that meet the demands of society, as a barrier to reform. The public cries out for change yet continuously falls back to the previous traditional construct of schooling. Rallis suggested that the purposes and practices at play in a learner-centered school provide potential for change because they are "founded on a countering set of values that recognizes the uniqueness and potential of each individual as a contributing member of a democratic society" (p. 225).

Other societal factors such as standardized accountability testing and high stakes testing for college admission reinforce traditional views of teaching and learning. Windschitl (2002) noted the disconnect that exists between what is tested and reinforced in many schools and what is needed for the working world.

> Paradoxically, the business community, into which many college graduates will matriculate, is now placing a premium on employees who can think creatively, adapt flexibly to new work demands, identify as well as solve problems, and create complex products in collaboration with others□all supposed benefits of constructivist learning environments. (p. 135)

More recently, others (Friedman, 2005; Wagner, 2008) urged educational reform that would arm American students with skills necessary for global competition in the 21st Century. While the authors do not mention constructivist pedagogy or student-centered education, the survival skills they tout align with the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs, 1997), the Principles of Best Practice Learning (Zemelman et al., 2005), and Weimer's (2002) Five Key Changes to Practice, as well as constructivist learning theory.

Classroom Implications

One consideration in learner-centered research is the need to educate the whole child (McCombs, 2000, 2001; McCombs & Quiat, 2002; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Pierce & Kalkman, 2003; Zemelman et al., 2005). Honoring a student's culture, interests, and individuality contribute to meaningful learning experiences.

A lesson gleaned from research on student-centered classrooms is that all people learn (McCombs, 2001; McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Rallis (1995) summarized this assumption, "the school does not ask *if* a student can learn, but rather under what conditions a student *will* learn individually enhancing and socially beneficial concepts and skills" (p. 225). If one believes this premise the paradigm shift required to embrace student-centered teaching and learning is reduced.

The focus moves from what teachers teach to what students learn (Glasser, 1986/1988; McCombs 2001; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Tomlinson, 2001; Weimer, 2002; Zemelman et al., 2005). As the spotlight moves from teacher to student the role of the teacher does not diminish, rather it transforms into that of a coach. According to Loucks-Horsley (1995), in addition to having content knowledge, teachers need to know when students are developmentally ready for content. They provide scaffolding for students as they work toward self-regulation (Pierce & Kalkman, 2003).

Teachers also emphasize democracy and empowerment instead of bureaucracy and control (Astuto & Clark, 1995). Educators implementing a student-centered educational model provide challenging experiences that prepare students to move beyond being consumers of knowledge to users and producers of knowledge (McCombs, 2001).

Closely tied to the idea that all students learn is the premise that no single measure of intelligence is sufficient. Campbell, Campbell, and Dickinson (1996/1999) described "the common tradition of intelligence theory which adheres to two fundamental assumptions: that cognition is unitary and that individuals can be adequately described as having a single quantifiable intelligence" (p.xv). Alternate views of intelligence are more compatible with student-centered teaching and learning. Gardner (1983/1993) presented his Theory of Multiple Intelligences that includes eight intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Sternberg (1997) encouraged schools to value and assess analytical, creative, and practical aspects of intelligence. In return achievers that are more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse would be identified and nurtured. The practice of teaching to students' strengths, as one does in student-centered education, can help them overcome weaknesses and maintain a positive attitude toward school (Levine, 2002; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2006).

Intrinsic motivation to learn is satisfied in student-centered classrooms (Bigelow & Vokoun, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Glasser, 1986/1988; Katz & Assor, 2006; Kohn, 1999; Landen & Willems, 2001; Lepper, 1988; McCombs & Whisler, 1989; Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1996; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006; Vokoun & Begelow, 2008). Glasser (1986/1988) related intrinsic motivation to the satisfaction of needs in his choice theory. Others (Katz & Assor, 2006; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006) built on the idea of satisfaction of needs, defining the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) also found that "attainment of an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic goal promotes deeper processing of the learning material, greater conceptual understanding of it, and both short-term and long-term persistence at relevant learning tasks" (p. 28). For teachers this means structuring instruction and supporting students so they feel challenged, yet competent. Teachers must help students to connect learning to personal needs, interests, and goals. They also need to allow choice and control matched to the age of the student and the task required. McCombs and Whisler (1989) echoed the above advice and added that teachers need to challenge students to be actively involved in their own learning. Although teachers are cognizant of these recommendations, they do not always practice them (Sweet et al., 1996).

As Vokoun and Bigelow (2008) pointed out, not all students thrive with the responsibility of making choices. Teachers need to be prepared to carefully phrase written directions for assignments so as to give control to students that choose to go above and beyond while ensuring that all students master basic objectives. Being able to predict motivation and achievement might prove helpful to teachers. McCombs (2001) listed three domains that are best at predicting motivation and achievement for K-3 students. They are establishing positive relations and classroom climate, adapting to individual differences, and facilitating students' learning and thinking skills. For middle and high school students, honoring student voice and providing individual choice and challenge were added. Many of the factors that describe student-centered classrooms also increase intrinsic motivation.

Literacy Research

The body of research on reading and literacy is vast and multifaceted. I have chosen to focus on literacy research germane to this study. A government authorized, landmark report by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) analyzed research literature on reading and implications for reading instruction. Another publication entitled "Put Reading First" (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001) followed and was written by teachers for teachers. The writers analyzed and discussed five areas of reading instruction: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Few would dispute the importance of these five components, but other aspects of reading instruction also merit attention.

Allington (2005) shared five pillars of effective reading instructional design he argued were ignored in the above-mentioned publications. Those pillars included: classroom organization; matching pupils and texts; access to interesting texts, choice, and collaboration; writing and reading; and expert tutoring.

Taylor (2008) considered pedagogy equally important as content in teacher reflection of reading instruction.

> Teachers must focus and reflect equally on the content and the pedagogy of their reading instruction, and they must continuously make good instructional choices to meet individual students' needs based on these reflections in conjunction with ongoing pupil assessment data. (p.1)

Bansberg (2003) stressed the importance of teachers' knowledge of student needs in literacy instruction. These needs are dynamic and often unpredictable. He also emphasized the need for teachers to reflect on and analyze student data and then use information gleaned to improve instruction. Cambourne (2002) linked instructional

principles that emerge from constructivist theory with the teaching and learning of reading. These principles addressed more how to teach than what to teach.

Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (1999) studied higher poverty schools and found school and teacher factors to be important in the most effective schools. Teacher factors included time spent in small group reading instruction, time spent in independent reading, high student engagement, high expectations for students, and the prioritization of reading in the classroom. Stronger teachers asked higher-level questions of students, coached students in word recognition, and managed the classroom with routines, quick transitions, and a rapid pace. In phonics instruction the most accomplished teachers distinguished themselves by helping students apply phonetic knowledge to reading books and writing.

Other literature (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2008; Constantino, 2005; McQuillan & Au, 2001) raised issues regarding access to books. Constantino (2005) found a significant difference between high and low socioeconomic status (SES) for access to books in home, classroom, and school, but not in public libraries. Wealthy families possessed more books than those from poorer families.

The importance for student participation in authentic reading and writing activities rather than worksheet or drill and practice activities has been a focus for some educators and researchers (Allington, 2001; Atwell, 1998; Boushey & Moser, 2009; Gallagher, 2009; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Miller, 2002; Miller, 2009). Gallagher (2009) proposed a new word, readicide, and defined it as "the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools" (p.2).

His book detailed many common reading practices that deter students from reading rather than create lifelong readers.

Strongly connected to lack of engagement is the motivation to read. A series of articles published in a special issue of *Educational Psychologist* outlined and built upon each other in addressing motivation for reading. Wigfield (1997) highlighted what influences motivation to read. Baker, Scher, and Mackler (1997) put motivation for reading into the context of home and family. Alexander (1997) examined the role self-knowledge plays in motivation to read, finding that when new information is presented in interesting and manageable contexts, students remember more of what they read.

In the classroom context, Guthrie and Alao (1997) recommend tying literary texts to conceptual themes such as: providing students with opportunities for choice, control and self-expression; teaching cognitive strategies; and helping students find personal meaning in the text. Examining motivation to read from a more social perspective, Thomas and Oldfather (1997) contended that for students to want to learn they must own the process of constructing meaning and be able to share in an environment where student voices are honored and their sense-making is respected. McCombs (1997) synthesized information from the above-mentioned articles and underscored the need for a framework that addressed the issues raised, endorsing the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (APA Task Force on Psychology in Education, 1993).

Authors (Allington, 2006; Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007; Tompkins, 1997/2010; Zemelman et al., 2005, 2012) have compiled lists of best practices in literacy instruction. The reading workshop model described in books by Routman (1994), Calkins

(2001), and Atwell (1998, 2007) demonstrated for teachers a more student-centered format for reading instruction. Others (Boushey & Moser 2006, 2009; Miller, 2002, 2009) modeled the workshop practices, presenting details, examples, and anecdotal stories.

Boushey and Moser (2006) provided teachers a model for setting up a student-centered literacy environment called The Daily Five. They explained and described five tasks that students do while the teacher works with individuals or small groups. The five tasks are: Read to Self, Read to Someone, Work on Writing, Listen to Reading, and Spelling/Word Study. In describing their progression toward a more student-centered approach Boushey and Moser (2006) reported,

> We began with a teacher-driven model that relied on busywork and artificial reading and writing activities (worksheets and so on). We slowly progressed through centers to where we are now, with the Daily Five. The Daily Five is a student-driven management structure designed to fully engage students in reading and writing. (p.12)

Boushey and Moser (2009) in their second book, advanced understanding of student-centered literacy instruction by explaining and modeling how teachers can work with individuals and small, flexible groups to meet the needs of the students in their classroom. These authors have helped to bridge the gap between educational research and classroom practice by including vivid descriptions, examples, and anecdotes. As individuals and organizations promote literacy research, I am hopeful that more bridges will be constructed, eventually eliminating the gap between research and practice.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine and interpret the literacy instruction of an elementary teacher who identified herself as a student-centered educator. Specifically, I sought to answer the following question: What does it mean to the participant to be a student-centered teacher, and how are her beliefs and understandings enacted within her literacy instruction?

The following general questions guided me as I observed and interpreted the concept of student-centered literacy instruction. I questioned what students did in the classroom, as well as what the teacher did. What were the challenges and benefits of student-centered literacy instruction voiced by my participant? How and why did she become student-centered? And, how did my participant interpret the responses of students, parents, coworkers, and administrators to her student-centered literacy instruction?

This chapter details the study's research methodology. It is divided into the following sections: qualitative methodology, participant information, the setting, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Qualitative Methodology

"Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). An additional explanation provided by Glesne (1992/2006) further defined qualitative research and

perfectly aligned with the purpose for my research. "Qualitative research methods are used to understand some social phenomena, from the perspectives of those involved, to contextualize issues in their particular socio-cultural-political milieu, and sometimes to transform or change social conditions" (p. 4). My quest to understand the meaning my participant had constructed and how she made sense of her teaching and experiences led me to qualitative research.

In designing the study, I considered the differences between the prescriptive approach used in quantitative research and an interpretive approach used in qualitative research. Eisner (1983) clarified the contributions of each.

> What I think scientific inquiry *can* provide in education are rules of thumb, not rules. Rules of thumb are schematics that make interpretation and judgment more acute. Scientific inquiry can provide frames of reference that can sophisticate our perceptions, not mechanisms that will control the behavior of students, teachers, or administrators. In short, if a distinction can be made between the *prescriptive* and the *interpretive*, between rules and schematics, between algorithms and heuristics, in the human situation I opt for interpretation, schematics, and heuristics, rather than prescriptions, rules and algorithms. (p. 9)

Since each person is unique and human relationships dynamic, it would be impossible to predict and control behavior or prescribe a set of rules for a given situation as attempted by quantitative research. On the other hand, interpretation, a hallmark of qualitative research, offers the opportunity to internalize and personalize information. Each person connects differently with presented material and thus interprets and reacts uniquely. Variables in any school setting are many, complex and interwoven, and difficult to measure. Lincoln and Cannella (2004) critiqued experimental studies, recognizing that they could produce some knowledge, but were "ill suited to examining the complex and dynamic contexts of public education in its many forms, sites, and

variations, especially considering the farrago of subtle social difference produced by gender, race, ethnicity, linguistic status, or class" (p. 7). Qualitative research was deemed best suited to this study since it was conducted in a school setting.

Poplin (1987) exposed two criticisms of the scientific method. First, she addressed reductionism that removes supposedly isolated variables from their context, rendering the research incomplete. Secondly, she pointed out an artificial boundary between the researcher and the "subject" created in experimental research. Both of these criticisms reinforced my choice to conduct qualitative research. Research out of context or reduced to the point that variables can be isolated, produces useless results. Even if one could predict and control, an identical situation could never be replicated in an educational setting. In the educational setting of this study, as the researcher, I realized that my presence in the classroom affected that environment. The questions I asked and the way I responded to my participant's answers guaranteed my integral part in the research.

At times, qualitative researchers have tried to conform to an experimental design. Such research with methodological checklists or prescribed formulas, prove insufficient in multifaceted studies. Ferguson and Ferguson (2000) as interpretivist researchers, lamented depth, breadth, and challenge missing from their field as researchers adapted to follow established publishing guidelines that try to mold qualitative research into a more quantitative format. In reality, qualitative research methods adapt to the findings of the study rather than a preset method.

The intent of this interpretive research was to examine the literacy instruction of a particular teacher at a particular time and place in history and interpret her beliefs and experiences in an effort to deepen my own understanding and inform the practice of literacy instruction. If research is to inform practice, stronger connections between the two are essential. Teaching consists of a myriad of interdependent lessons, attitudes, and experiences. Such interdependence demands a holistic approach. Windschitl (2002) expressed a concern that resonated with me and contributed to my choice of research methodology.

> Currently, the knowledge base about constructivist teaching is largely codified in lists of prescriptive instructional principles, which are clearly stated but do not instill in teachers the necessary mental images of constructivism and practiced in authentic classroom situations. And only marginally more useful are brief, decontextualized examples of how these principles can be applied to classroom practice. (p.162)

Bransford (2000) documented the research-to-practice gap in the broader educational arena. Poised to bridge this gap, qualitative inquiry helps educators construct meaning from information previously out of reach. Elmore, Peterson, and McCarthey (1996), referring to teachers reported that

> ...in all instances, their practices were unlikely to change without some exposure to what teaching actually looks like when it's being done differently and exposure to someone who could help them understand the difference between what they were doing and what they aspire to do. (p.241)

In addition to deepening my own knowledge regarding student-centered teaching, I wanted my research to inform practice and possibly empower teachers to transition from more traditional teacher-centered classrooms to more student-centered classrooms. I hoped that by offering exposure to a contextualized, holistic, and authentic student-

centered classroom I might help bridge a gap between research and practice. With these goals in mind, I deliberately chose qualitative inquiry as the vehicle for my research.

My Participant

The teacher participant in my research, pseudonym Julie, had taught for 13 years in Selwood, Iowa and formerly taught at the same school where I taught. I chose Julie as my participant because I knew she consistently created and maintained a student-centered classroom from year to year. Past collaborative teaching projects, observations of her classroom, and multiple conversations regarding student-centeredness assured me that she would be an ideal participant. My research was dependent upon the chosen classroom teacher being truly student-centered and Julie exemplified that description in her teaching.

Julie's teaching career followed several years of working as a dental hygienist. Increasingly dissatisfied with work in the dental office, and frequently finding herself volunteering for jobs that involved work with children, Julie heeded the advice of her father, a long-time educator, and returned to school. She first taught in special education, serving students with intellectual disabilities before moving to a fourth grade general education classroom. From the first day, her views of students clashed with the labels and the hierarchies created in schools.

> So I started my teaching career in a Life Skills room where kids are written off and I watched them learn. I'm like, they have so much to offer the world. It's who they are, not changing them or making them fit in a keyhole. And so, in watching that struggle, in trying to get them in the classroom, I think is where it started. Then when I transitioned into a general ed. classroom and found that it was even more profound in the regular room as far as… Everybody had their place and everybody had their label and you either had a lot to offer or you had a little to offer. And, that's not how I see kids. (3/31/11)

I met Julie when I took a position as Gifted and Talented facilitator at the elementary school where she taught. She stood approximately five feet, four inches tall and had a medium build. The blonde shoulder length hair that framed Julie's face often curled and extended in various directions refusing to be restrained by hair clips. Her slightly pink face was free of blemishes and wrinkles, except for those at the corners of her eyes and mouth when she smiled. Julie dressed casually in pants and various button down blouses that by the end of a given day displayed multiple coffee stains. She was quick to smile and slow to anger, making her a pleasant coworker.

Julie seemed to prefer spending time with her students or preparing for lessons in her classroom rather than socializing with other faculty members. She avoided the teacher's lounge and most gatherings outside of the school day. However, Julie participated fully in staff meetings and collaborated with colleagues on committees. For the most part, Julie focused on the job of teaching her students and did not allow distractions. She was kind to everyone, but didn't go out of her way to be social.

My position provided insight to the teaching practices of most classroom teachers in the building. Julie's style of teaching engaged my intellectual curiosity because it vastly differed from most. She didn't have set reading groups; she allowed student choice of books; and she let students develop and carry out service projects of their own choosing. I observed children in her classroom transform from reluctant readers, and apathetic students, to engaged, passionate learners.

After working in the same school with Julie for nine years, she moved to another school in the same district and we communicated occasionally. My interest in

constructivism grew and prompted me to teach a course on student-centered literacy in which Julie was enrolled. Her participation in this class highlighted her student-centered practices and constructivist mindset. Concurrently, I worked to narrow my dissertation topic and yearned to learn more about student-centered teaching and learning in a contextualized setting. Other teachers I had worked with or taught in graduate-level courses displayed evidence of student-centered teaching, but not to the degree that Julie had. I realized that observing and interviewing Julie would help me better understand student-centered teaching and learning.

I offer the following scenario of Julie's classroom to provide rationale for identification and selection of Julie as the participant for my research. This vignette was based on an observation I conducted prior to my study and for an unrelated purpose.

During literacy block, students in Julie's class read from books they had selected and determined to be of appropriate reading level, based on a five-finger technique learned early in the school year. Students held up one finger each time they didn't know a word in the text. If at the end of the page they had five or more errors, the book was deemed too difficult and they would find an easier one. Multiple children were scattered on the floor throughout the room, in comfortable chairs, or at desks. Three pairs of students curled up elbow-to-elbow, knee-to-knee whisper reading. Four students sat hunched over desks, pushing pencils across paper with the urgency of a tax-preparer mid-April.

Julie and a freckle-faced girl held a conference, heads angled toward each other. The girl articulated her goal of cross checking to make sure the pictures and words made

sense. After reading a few paragraphs from a book about snowboarding, the girl stopped and said, "When I read that grooming may take place at any time, I looked at the picture and saw the machine that grooms the snow. I knew what I read made sense."

Julie said, "This is the third time you successfully demonstrated your goal. Would you like to move on and choose another goal?"

"No, I would like to practice this one just a bit longer. Could we meet on Friday? I think I will be ready by then," the girl responded.

The example above demonstrates the role of the teacher as a guide, the student taking responsibility for learning, and differentiation of content, process, and environment. All of these components contribute to a student-centered approach. This and other observations, as well as many conversations Julie and I held, affirmed my decision to request her participation in my study.

As a qualitative researcher, I knew that my relationship with Julie would play a role. The study would "not be a form of inquiry *on* human action as much as it is inquiry *with* human actors" (Schwandt, 1996, p. 63). Observations, interviews, and analysis of data would be viewed through my lens and I would be a player. Predictably so, the relationship between Julie and me embedded itself in the research and the context of the study proved unique. As Ferguson and Ferguson (2000) detailed, the researcher and the studied, Julie and I, co-constructed the study, each bringing our expertise to the table.

The Setting

Altman Elementary School, the K-5 elementary building where Julie taught, enrolled just over 500 students in a district with between 10,000 and 11,000 students. The

district included thirteen elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools. According to Altman's Annual Report of Progress 2009 – 2010, the number of students proficient on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills exceeded the district score in reading, math and science. Julie's grade-level team at Altman Elementary School consisted of four fourth-grade teachers. Twenty-two students were assigned to Julie's classroom and a paraprofessional assisted in the classroom every morning, specifically to support two students with behavior disabilities.

Data Collection

The data collection methods for this study consisted of seven semi-structured interviews, ranging in length from 45 minutes to 90 minutes and five observations of participant interactions with students, two of which were videotaped. Observation times ranged from one to three hours. Student assessment artifacts were also collected. Data were collected between February 2011 and October 2011. All observations focused on the participant's literacy instruction and took place in the spring semester of 2011. The majority of interviews took place during that same time frame, but included a follow up interview in October of 2011. The student assessment data represented the participant's 2010 – 2011 class.

Interviews

At the onset of this study I intentionally chose to employ semi-structured interviews with preset questions serving as starting points for conversations, rather than unstructured interviews. I wanted to remain somewhat unstructured for the reason Fontana and Frey (1994) described as the ability to attempt to understand complex

behavior without imposing preconceptions. I wanted to remain open to possibilities and interactions and avoid pre-established responses so as to allow the conversations to take me where they would. Within the first interview, asking preset questions seemed rigid and unnatural so I abandoned most of them almost immediately. Perhaps because I had already had a relationship with Julie, the interviews took a conversational tone from the start. I was compelled to speak frankly, rather than try to maintain a facade of traditional interviewer, asking questions and deflecting or avoiding answering them.

According to Fontana and Frey (1994), "Unstructured interviewing provides a greater breadth than the other types, given its qualitative nature" (p. 365). Although I had prepared questions for each interview, the open nature of the conversations that passed between Julie and me provided rich, deep, and meaningful data and reflected our relationship. Julie didn't always wait for me to ask questions and often excitedly spilled information about a student's success or a new teaching strategy. She would ask me questions and garner my opinion on an issue that plagued her. My flexibility in the interview structure and format enabled deep and interesting conversations that most likely would not have occurred had I been more rigid.

Glesne (1992/2006) wrote, "She suggests that we interact with openness, honesty, and respect; not with the mask that rapport can provide or with the walls of professional distancing" (p.119). Glesne was referring to a correspondence of researcher Marleen Pugach about research relationships. The relationship Julie and I developed throughout the process of this study was built on openness, honesty, and

respect. My philosophical beliefs annulled any need for professional distancing and our rapport-turned-friendship contributed positively to co-construction of this study.

Observations

In addition to semi-structured interviews, I observed Julie firsthand in her classroom. Observation "is the technique of choice when behavior can be observed firsthand or when people cannot or will not discuss the research topic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 111). Although Julie did not hesitate to discuss the research topic or avoid questions I asked, observations of her in the classroom prompted me to jot questions I might ask her in upcoming interviews. Over time, these observations helped me develop contextual understanding as I interpreted interactions between Julie and her students. I felt the benefit that Adler and Adler (1994) referred to in their description of qualitative observation.

> Qualitative observation is fundamentally naturalistic in essence; it occurs in the natural context of occurrence, among the actors who would naturally be participating in the interaction, and follows the natural stream of everyday life. As such, it enjoys the advantage of drawing the observer into the phenomenological complexity of the world, where connections, correlations, and causes can be witnessed as and how they unfold. Qualitative observers are not bound, thus, by predetermined categories of measurement or response, but are free to search for concepts or categories that appear meaningful to subjects. (p. 378)

I had no set expectations when I entered Julie's classroom to observe her interacting with her students. I wrote furiously in an effort to capture everything my senses could take in. Two of the five observations were video recorded. Because I could view the recordings multiple times, those sessions provided me with richer data.

This medium offered the opportunity to analyze voice, pace, tone, facial expressions and body language.

Artifacts

Student assessment artifacts provided to me by Julie included data from the Basic Reading Inventory and an assessment referred to as the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) provided by Northwest Evaluation Association. Both tests were administered in the fall and then again in the spring. I hadn't originally planned to include such data, but it served as an important benchmark for Julie. How her students performed on these assessments was important to her and played a role in her instructional decisions. All student names were removed prior to my receiving the data.

Data Analysis

In an effort to support or challenge interview data and enhance description, I recorded and transcribed all conversations as (Glesne, 1992/2006) suggested. I sought patterns, emerging themes, and stories. As Ferguson and Ferguson (2000) pointed out, I was aware that the process would "not depend on breaking data apart, but finding an overarching story in a more wholistic [*sic*] approach" (p. 182). The processes of transcription and interpretation ebbed, flowed, and became inseparable. As I considered the data, formulated ideas, and made connections I remained cognizant of Wolcott's (2001) description of interpretation.

> Interpretation, by contrast, is not derived from rigorous, agreed-upon, carefully specified procedures, but from our efforts at sensemaking, a human activity that includes intuition, past experience, emotion-personal attributes of human researchers that can be argued endlessly but neither proved nor disproved to the satisfaction of all. Interpretation invites the examination, the "pondering," of data in terms of what people make of it. (p. 33)

Making sense of the vast amount of data before me consumed time and emotional energy. I was energized by Julie's student-centered approach to teaching and yet, to some degree, burdened with the responsibility to represent my findings in a way that might benefit other teachers.

> Confronted with a mountain of impressions, documents, and field notes, the qualitative researcher faces the difficult and challenging task of making sense of what has been learned. I call making sense of what has been learned the art of interpretation. This may also be described as moving from the field to the text to the reader. (Denzin, 1994, p. 500)

In the process of moving from the field to the text to the reader I read and reread interview transcripts, viewed video recordings, jotted notes, and highlighted text. I analyzed student assessment data and carefully considered the best way to present it. I created a table with possible themes represented on the x-axis and interviews and observations on the y-axis. I recorded into the table page numbers of ideas or statements that fit each theme and simultaneously highlighted and noted the particular theme on a copy of the transcripts so I could retrieve it quickly. As more themes emerged I created graphic organizers to show relationships.

Once I settled on a systematic way to present the data, I worked diligently to put pieces in place until a better form of presentation revealed itself, plunging me back to another starting point. The ambiguity I felt throughout this process challenged and frustrated me. After multiple starts, I eventually established solid themes and focused on weaving the story and my interpretation, maintaining a healthy skepticism about the focus (Wolcott, 2001). I used the table I had created to include quotes, anecdotes, and

observations, checking each off once they had been included in the research. I continued to write, rewrite, and clarify until complete.

After writing several drafts of my interpreted findings, I asked Julie to read the latest version and asked her to offer an opinion. She chuckled when commenting that neither of us did a very good job of completing sentences. As for the content, she affirmed the accuracy and lamented that some of her comments about coworkers appeared so critical in print. She also took the opportunity to provide me with updates on students as she read about them in the text.

Ethical Considerations

Glesne, (1992/2006) listed five basic principles that guide the decisions of institutional review boards (IRBs) when they review applicants' proposals. She cautioned researchers to be aware of these and other issues before, during, and after conducting research. The five principles are:

1. Research subjects must have sufficient information to make informed decisions about participating in a study.
2. Research subjects must be able to withdraw, without penalty, from a study at any point.
3. All unnecessary risks to a research subject must be eliminated.
4. Benefits to the subject or society, preferably both, must outweigh all potential risks.
5. Experiments should be conducted only by qualified investigators (p.130).

All of the above concerns have potential to affect qualitative research and I carefully considered each one prior to beginning my study and remained cognizant of them throughout the entire process.

Knowing Julie prior to undertaking the research study enabled me to consider possible solutions to potential pitfalls prior to conducting the study. I clearly communicated the purpose and process of the study to accurately inform Julie of what her participation involved. I offered Julie the benefit of sharing ideas and holding conversations with another educator and because Julie and I shared similar philosophical beliefs, I was able to offer her support at times when she doubted herself or her decisions.

I obtained permission from Julie's building administrator to observe and videotape her in her classroom. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study effective January 19, 2011.

In writing the research, I strove to honestly and respectfully represent my interpretations so as not to harm or risk Julie or any other person. I took this responsibility seriously and carefully considered what to include and exclude from narratives.

Decisions regarding Julie's anonymity rest with her. Pseudonyms were used for names of the town, school, participant, students, and other adults mentioned in the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to share the results of my study. Through my interpretation of observations and interviews, I confirmed for myself that contextual analysis features ambiguity, uncertainty, and multiple possibilities. This realization challenged my organizational abilities and demanded that I construct and reconstruct the information in a myriad of different ways and numerous times.

Ultimately, I organized my interpreted findings into four broad categories: Attitude and Philosophy, Environment, Instructional Practices and Impact on Students. I further divided the Instructional Practices into four categories: The First Weeks, Instructional Planning, Grouping Practices, and Building Independence. I also divided the Impact on Students into two sections: Growth and Achievement, and School Beyond Room 4S.

The first three categories address my research question: What does it mean to the participant to be a student-centered teacher and how are her beliefs and understandings enacted within her literacy instruction? Julie's attitude and philosophy, the environment she provided for students, and her instructional practices define and demonstrate student-centeredness. The fourth category, Impact on Students, details the affect Julie's student-centered instruction had on her students.

It would be impossible to overemphasize the interconnectedness of each chosen category. Equally impossible, is the inclusion of every significant detail. Thus, I have toiled to analyze, organize, and report my interpretation of a student-centered teacher in

the context of her classroom in a way that brings meaning and the possibility of change to the reader.

Attitude and Philosophy

Julie possessed an attitude that all students could learn and built a caring and accepting learning community for her students. Students came to her with varying needs, strengths, and deficits. Each one quickly found a place in her classroom and in her heart. No student was valued more or less than another. Each was uniquely crafted and treated in a way that enabled recognition and appreciation for such distinction. Julie's unconditional acceptance of students may be credited to a background in special education and a philosophy built upon the idea that all people can learn. The following excerpt of Julie's interview and my observations illustrate these conclusions.

> My dad is in education and I came up with the philosophy statement that I believe every child can learn. Oh, I think I wrote I believe almost every child can learn. I was even thinking of kids that were severe and profound, is where my *almost* [emphasis added] came in. My dad was like, "Really, you don't believe every child can learn?" There was this discussion that I had before I even walked into a classroom to teach in the job. And I think you're right. I do believe every child can learn. (3/31/11)

As a general education teacher, Julie modeled inclusivity. Her 2010–2011 fourth grade class boasted a diverse group of students, including students with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), RAD (Reactive Attachment Disorder), and a student on the autism spectrum. These labels that defined students in other classrooms simply provided information to better serve students in Julie's room, 4S. Problems, weaknesses, and annoying habits made up minute portions of the individuals in Julie's classroom allowing strengths, successes and interests to form

the majority of each child. Helping students to see the value of inclusion behooved Julie in meeting the needs of students in school and in life.

> I think there is a place for everybody. Is it always easy? No. But, is it worth it? Yes. The rewards you get from every voice mattering in a classroom are amazing. If you can get your top kids to understand that life is about learning from wherever they can, from whoever they can and to be able to see that everybody has something to offer, they go farther, you know. And if you get your low kids to understand that they have a voice, then they go further. I'm not just talking education. They go further in life once they know their voice matters. So, yeah! I'm a huge proponent of inclusion. (3/31/11)

Along with the beliefs that all children can learn and an inclusive classroom provides the best environment for that learning, Julie believed that students must believe in themselves and in their ability to carry out tasks and complete assignments. Teachers possess power to influence a student's self-esteem and self-efficacy. Julie expressed her opinion in a conversation regarding ability grouping that two of her teaching partners employed.

> I'm sorry. They (the kids) know. They know, they know. We do them harm in trying to help them because we give them that label. I vowed not to do that a long time ago and I've given up some good teaching in trying not to do that to kids. But, I think, bottom line, you can't get a kid anywhere until they believe they can. When you keep putting kids in the low group they don't think they can. When you keep putting kids in the high group they don't think they have anything to learn. You can't put those labels on kids. The student-centered classroom gets away from those because every kid is a learner and every kid is given the opportunity to share their learning and to be a part of any discussion and valued for what they are. Once again, I don't believe in intelligence levels. I believe in learning styles and to learn in different ways and different lengths of time, but they are all learners. Are you really smarter because you learn faster? Is that really how we define intelligence? (3/31/11)

When asked if she could supply an example of a student who might not have been appreciated in a previous class, Julie responded.

> One is a little red-haired girl. According to the government, she is not where we want her to be and she was not quite the math student she wanted to be and so she started setting goals for herself, started seeing success for herself and just that meeting one-on-one. Part of it is, knowing that the teacher cares and that I'm in it with you. She has just sky rocketed, sky rocketed. She just started seeing herself as a student and somebody worth something. People started going to her when we were doing division in math. It was so cool for people to go and get her help. She was also strong in Greek and Latin (word study). Because she is a hard worker, she was really strong in Greek and Latin. So when it was time to review our Greek and Latin, people wanted to work with her because they know she would get them. So she was one who didn't have a voice before this year. (5/5/11)

In regard to student-centered instruction, I have witnessed Julie focus on students and their needs, creating engaging and authentic opportunities. A few years back, I shopped at a store her fourth grade students organized and manned in an effort to raise money to buy a Wii gaming system for nursing home patients at a local institution.

Students had pushed desks together forming tables to display their merchandise. Plates covered in plastic wrap held chocolate iced cupcakes. Baggies containing chocolate-dipped cereal dusted with powdered sugar, 25 cents scrawled in permanent marker sat stacked against each other next to similar bags containing chocolate chip cookies, brownies, and rice crispy treats.

The students had enlisted family members to help bake, wrap, and label the items for the day of the sale. They had incorporated measurement and fractions in their baking, money and estimation in their projections, and creative thinking and artistic expression in advertising. Comparison shopping and budgeting consumed hours of preparation for another area of the store consisting of brightly designed pencils, animal shaped erasers, multicolored bracelets, and jeweled rings all purchased from Oriental Trading Company with money donated from one of the student's mothers.

When I stepped up to purchase some cookies and a few pencils, a notoriously shy girl, Susan, looked me in the eye and said, "Is that all you want Mrs. Wiezorek? Our baked goods are flying off the shelf." I insisted that what I had was plenty and handed her a one dollar bill which she quickly placed in a shoebox and returned my change. I remembered feeling surprised by Susan's confidence and competence and by the cohesiveness of the class. The students worked as a team to brainstorm the idea, divide the various jobs, and determine the profits. No job was more or less important than another and the students assigned each other tasks that utilized their individual strengths.

The students exceeded their goal of $250 for the gaming system and purchased several games to accompany the gift. The administrator of the nursing home attended one of our school assemblies to accept the gift on behalf of the residents. The entire school community stood taller and applauded the presentation, the result of a community building, authentic, and engaging project.

The above example demonstrates student-centered teaching, but doesn't articulate Julie's beliefs regarding the topic. In an interview in March 2011, I asked Julie how she would explain student-centered instruction.

> I think a student-centered classroom is where it's more centered on what the students are doing and not so much on what the teacher is doing. I really see all these lesson studies where teachers keep watching each other teach and questioning what they are doing and asking, "What should they do differently?" And that isn't what a focus should be in a student-centered classroom. When you observe a classroom you should be watching what the students do and that is my primary concern when I plan my day. It isn't what I'm doing. It *is* [emphasis added] what are my students doing? What are they going to be doing and how does it fit their spectrum of learning, wherever they are at on that continuum of learning? What are they going to do and how is this going to go? So it's not even about lessons anymore....It just makes more sense. There isn't guessing or teaching for the sake of teaching. (3/31/11)

Julie conveyed a continuous growth mindset and recognized that becoming a better, more student-centered teacher was a process. She acknowledged her past misconceptions and realized that even with the experience of trial and error, no one right way existed.

> My goal has always been student-centered, but the picture of that become clearer and clearer every year. How that looks becomes clearer to me and issues where I thought I was student-centered, were still very teacher-centered. There is a fine line to becoming student-centered. You know, I don't want to go to the place where I just let kids go. I want to teach them, but I want that union to be a perfect blend. So, finding that, how much control and how much to teach and when to step back and when to give them control and how to give them that gradual release of responsibility....So, it's not like I come up with the perfect system and then it's going to work next year. Every year is different. (2/9/11)

Attitude and philosophy determine how we look at the world and the actions we take. In Julie's case, her attitudes and philosophy defined the environment she provided for students, as well as her instructional decisions. These aspects will be discussed individually with the understanding that their interconnectedness is inseparable.

Environment

The sense of community felt ubiquitous in Julie's room. It wasn't something that was easily identifiable. It wasn't a conversation an observer might overhear or an action she might view. To Julie's own admission, "You walk in the room and you can feel it" (12/29/11). Although it would be impossible to perceive and detail the plethora of factors that play into creating a feeling of community, three stood out in Julie's classroom: an expectation that all students would learn, the necessity of a safe and accepting environment, and the attitude that learning necessitates social interactions and collaboration.

An unbending expectation to learn enveloped Room 4S and its inhabitants. The typically affable teacher, Julie, refused to yield in her expectations for students and angered easily when others reduced or failed to uphold standards for all children. This lowering of expectations seemed most prevalent in students that left the classroom for support from other teachers.

> I have this girl that I am worried about. She is always being pulled out of my room so I have trouble fitting in conferences with her. I am talking with her parents to see if she can stay after school so I can work with her. She is pulled out all the time and she isn't improving. I don't think she is being pushed. They (Special Education teachers) don't expect much from her. They aren't helping her. (10/5/11)

Julie truly believed that the way she taught and set up her classroom enabled students of varying abilities to be successful, even if they had never experienced it. It was not an expectation that was stated as much as experienced.

A conversation about the students in Julie's 2011-2012 classroom identified a challenge she hadn't faced before. This group of students was not the group Julie taught during the bulk of my data collection, but the following year. Out of approximately 100 fourth graders in the school, most of the students with low performing reading scores were placed in Julie's room.

> I have a class mixed this year with a lot of struggling readers. Most of them are below 40th percentile. Out of 29 kids, I have 22 kids below the 40 percentile. And those are kids that we put in what we call in our district's problem solving meetings and we try to work with them and help them be proficient. But, I get these kids and I have very unengaged learners. For whatever reason, they're just not engaged in learning at all. So we've been at it for five weeks now and they're getting better. I had a talk with them before they took the test (Measures of Academic Progress) and just said, "You know this information that I use decides what group you're going to be in and what I'm going to teach you next. You guys are smarter than what your test scores are showing." Because I came to this class thinking, oh never before have I seen these smart kids way better than their test

> scores. And so they took it today, with that in mind, that this was a place to prove how smart they were. I said, "Not just to the whole school, to me, prove to me how smart you are." And so they went in with eager hearts... And it worked. You could just see it in their eyes that they were trying their best. Of the scores I saw for the kids that were supposed to be not proficient, they were proficient for me. (10/5/11)

In addition to demanding high expectations, Julie provided students with a safe environment where she yielded control to students, paradoxically garnering more power and respect. It seemed that when students had more control over educational decisions, they were more comfortable.

The following teacher-student exchange described by Julie demonstrates a high level of comfort on the student's part.

> We were sitting in a circle and I can't remember what the kid said, but it was something that wouldn't normally be said in front of a teacher. I'm like, "You're not afraid of me at all, are you?" He's like, "No, no, not at all!" I get kids telling me a lot that normal teachers do not hear because they are comfortable in my classroom. There's give and take. There's give with that. I don't have a quiet, always-do-what-you-are-supposed-to-do classroom. I definitely have kids comfortable in their environment. (2/19/11)

On February 8, 2011, perched in a chair at the back of the classroom, I witnessed an example of Julie's relinquished control.

After a seven-minute, large-group lesson on the meaning of the Greek root, hydros, and the Latin root, Vulcan, students dispersed to various spots in the classroom for independent-work time. A small pale-faced girl with shoulder-length blond hair retrieved the book *Walk Two Moons* from a student desk near the front of the room and walked to the teacher's desk, pressed against the back corner of the room. The girl shifted a pile of papers, opened the middle drawer of the desk, placing a pen and pencil from the desk top into the drawer, and plopped into the office chair. She placed her book on the

desk, opened it and held it open by placing her inner forearm across both pages. Her left elbow rested near the wrist of her right arm, allowing the left forearm to serve as a prop for her head, which sunk chin first into her palm. Eyes focused downward to the pages of the book, she began to read.

The fact that this young girl felt completely comfortable rearranging items on her teacher's desk and sitting in her chair signifies a leveling of the typical classroom hierarchy. Other students in the room demonstrated comfort in choosing their reading spots too. Some were sprawled on the floor in the back of the room. One wedged himself between a bookcase and a desk. Another laid on her stomach, propped on elbows, under a table. All of them moved to the spots quickly, not so quietly, and began reading immediately after reaching the destination.

Julie seemed to see herself as an older and more knowledgeable member of the class, but not necessarily more powerful. She granted students the same level of respect she would any adult in her life. She was conscious of words and actions that showed disrespect for students. Disdain for demeaning, as well as hypocritical practices surfaced in a conversation Julie and I had regarding a double standard of student versus adult behavior.

Carolyn It seems that many times we have higher expectations for our kids than we do for ourselves.

Julie Yeah! I have a specialist where kids go to art. Before they line up– it kills me. I cringe every time I walk in that room to pick my kids up. She's a great art teacher and actually does really cool things, but when they are done they have to put their heads on the table. It is such a submissive position for them to be in. It just cringes me to see us make kids cower before we let them leave. It's like okay, you have to cower to me and then I'll let you line up.

Carolyn I'm in charge.

Julie	Who cowers first? Okay, this group got submissive first and…
Carolyn	That's what is being rewarded.
Julie	Yeah! And it's just that little thing, but I cringe when I walk in there and see my kids having to do that, and it's…
Carolyn	The hidden messages of school.
Julie	Yeah. (2/19/11)

Many teachers may lack awareness of actions and practices that marginalize students, but Julie was keenly aware of such actions. Her attitude and leadership have cultivated a culture of mutual respect in the classroom.

The topic of safe environment now shifts to that of socialization being essential to learning. These two factors are bridged by the idea that kids need to be able to talk freely to each other and to their teacher without fear of punishment, intentional or not. Many classrooms prize silence and independent learning, but 4S does not. The subsequent excerpt establishes the importance of discussion between students, as measured by Julie, and insinuates that direct instruction may at times be inferior to such discussions. The conversation followed a discussion of students working together on writing projects.

Carolyn	That makes me think of how social learning is and how in many traditional classrooms students sit down and read to themselves or sit down and write by themselves and that social part isn't there.
Julie	It's the whole process. It goes back to weighing the pig and testing the pig. I have a teaching partner that hates how much I let kids work together. "Well, how do you know what they know? Isn't that so and so's work?" If you have someone working with someone else, they are learning while they are working with that person. Why does everything have to be that kid's work if it is the learning process? If it is making him a better writer, isn't that what we want? Does a deadline have to be this day that he is independent and ready? Can't we look at it as a life-long continuum of learning? He is learning by working with this person. He's learning and they learn from each other. They get ideas from each other and they brainstorm together. I tried teaching limericks and it was just blah. They couldn't get it. I even told them they could work together and they still struggled and then all of a

> sudden, kids were coming up with limericks because they hit the right conversation with the right person and the ideas started flowing. They need that stimulation, especially in writing. I feel that way, especially in writing. Social writing is better writing. (5/5/11)

Julie acknowledged that not all students process information best through interpersonal sharing, but the students in her 2010-2011 classroom certainly did. When comparing her own class to that of a teaching partner's, Julie stated:

> Her kids are so quiet and I don't want my kids quiet. This class is an exception because they are social, social, social learners. If I kept them at their desks and just talked to them, they would learn nothing. I mean nothing. That is not how they process stuff. I have them so brainwashed that when I do ask them to be quiet, they say, "How are we supposed to learn? You know we learn by talking, Miss Smith." They give it right back to me… I feel sorry for their next year's teachers because they will be telling those teachers, "We are social learners. We need to be talking to learn." (5/5/11)

Integral to socialization, dependence on one another must be nurtured and groomed. In Room 4S students had come to depend on themselves and each other as the teacher decentralized her role in the classroom. This shift in teacher role will be discussed at length in the Instructional Practices section of the study. At this point, it is important to note that because the teacher spent less time in front of the class delivering content to students, changes to the environment helped build independence, as well as interdependence with other students.

In the following example, students in Room 4S had recently begun forming book clubs to discuss books of shared interest. Julie encouraged students to recruit members for clubs. If a student found a book he was interested in and could convince three to five members of the class to read it, a book club was formed. Julie taught the students various

ways to discuss books and posted a visual chart of possible jobs students could take if they needed direction, but refrained from requiring a particular approach.

When asked about assigning roles to students, Julie responded, "I don't want to control it. And so you find that fine line of-I guess what I want to control is, they have 10 minutes" (3/23/11). When asked what the purpose of the book club meetings were, she had this to say:

> This is new. They get to talk about a shared book experience. That's the bottom line for me. Do I want them coming up with new vocabulary? Yes. Do I want them practicing summary skills? Yes. Do I want them practicing questioning skills? Yes. The bottom line is they're talking about books. (3/23/11)

Julie seemed to understand that academic progress sometimes took an indirect route. If she could get her students hooked on books, the vocabulary and skills would follow.

Julie frequently lamented the benefits and detriments of giving up control in her classroom, knowing that her vision and the way she carried it out contrasted with that of other, more traditional teachers. At times, she would pose a question indicating that her efforts were not perfect, followed by an anecdote affirming the decisions she made. Our conversation about student book clubs was no exception.

Julie	I don't micromanage that. Do I want it to get a little bit more structured? Probably, we are kind of leading our way through that one. There is a girl that is always working on comprehension and so her group recognizes this and they are always making her take the Retell (job of summarizing the story). And, I didn't tell them to do that, but they had an explanation when I talked to them about it. They were like, "Well, it's what she's working on, Miss Smith. We need to make sure she understands what she is reading."
Carolyn	And was she offended by that?
Julie	No, because that's her goal. She picked that goal so there is no offense because she knows. She tells people that's what she is working on. You know, and she's a good reader. She just tends to be lazy reader where sometimes she doesn't focus on what she's

reading and she doesn't take the time to monitor and go back and reread. And so this is holding her accountable and that's what she wants because she wants to be a better reader. She hasn't showed me that she is offended in here.

Carolyn And just the way you phrased it, it wasn't in an offensive way. Or the way the students phrased it...

Julie Yeah. You know, this is her goal. Why wouldn't we have her do this? (3/23/11)

Julie's story assured her that, despite her uncertainty regarding the amount of instructional directives and misalignment with what other teachers would allow, her students benefited through building independence and supporting each other.

Julie's attitude and beliefs enabled her to create a sense of community in Room 4S. Three of many factors that contributed to a building positive, productive environment were discussed. Julie maintained an expectation that all students would learn. She provided a safe and accepting environment. She understood that social interactions and collaboration play key roles in cultivating independence and interdependence among members in the classroom. Next will be an examination of Julie's instructional practices.

Instructional Practices

The First Weeks

Julie's literacy block at the beginning of the year followed a routine set up in a book she had read several times and treated as a handbook, referencing frequently. *The Daily 5* (Boushey & Moser, 2006) provided detailed instruction on how to teach students to work independently so that the teacher is freed up to work with small groups or individuals. The process delineated in the book included five authentic tasks that students learn. They are Read to Self, Read to Someone, Listen to Reading, Word Work and Work

on Writing. The process included multiple practice sessions, where students work to build stamina for each of the tasks, and extensive modeling by teacher and students.

Julie also used this early training phase to assess students' reading and writing skills. She met with students individually multiple times to determine which skills and strategies students knew and to what degree they utilized them. She also took note of the degree to which students were engaged in the learning process. Predictably, the skills and strategies acquired, as well as the level of engagement, varied from student to student and, as a group, from year to year. This framework for independent time worked well for Julie because once the students had built stamina to sustain independent work for more than 10 or 15 minutes at a time, it afforded Julie ample time to meet individual needs of students through small group work and individual conferences.

Before discussing literacy instruction beyond this initial 4-6 week training period, it is important to note two of Julie's assumptions embedded in this phase and carried throughout the year. First, offering students choices and helping them develop purpose for tasks are essential. Second, if each child is to make choices and find a purpose for tasks, those tasks cannot possibly be identical for an entire group of students or chosen by the teacher. Julie expressed these opinions in one of our early interviews.

> When you give kids choice, when you give them purpose, that's huge. When you give them purpose, that there is a purpose to what you are doing, and when you don't give them busy work and when you don't give them meaningless work that has nothing to do with what they are doing. You're just having them do it because somebody says it's a good thing to do. And when you do it for each kid, what this kid is doing is totally different than what this kid is doing. (2/9/11)

The assumption that choice and purpose are important demands a format that lends itself to individualized instruction because given choices about what books to read or what topics to write about, students will choose differently.

Some classroom teachers follow an anthology or choose books for small guided reading groups. These teachers may make futile attempts to supply purpose for students. "Read to page 15 to find out why Sydney stole his mother's watch." Students will likely do as the teacher asks, but one wonders if the student does so purposefully or simply to please the teacher. Julie seemed to think "bigger picture" when it came to motivating and engaging students. She wanted her students to love reading, not merely read countless pages. She wanted them to determine the purpose for their choices. The conversation below, regarding Julie's participation in piloting a reading program for her district, serves to illuminate her opinions on providing students a purpose for reading.

> If you have engaging material you don't have to discipline kids. They're engaged. It's not, "Would you please do what there're asking you to do?" Teaching should never have to be like that. And that's what I'm going through. Once again, the first couple weeks I thought maybe it was just my presentation, but they're not engaged. For some parts of it, they are. Some parts of it, I like. There are some good lessons, some mini lessons that work really well and that my kids like. It's just hard. It's too long to keep them engaged and there is no purpose to it.... Kids have to have their own purpose for it. You can't give somebody purpose for doing something. They have to have their own purpose. When you are forcing it down their throat, there is no purpose.... And that purpose can't come from you. It has to come from them. (10/5/11)

Julie struggled with teaching the pilot reading program "with fidelity" and refraining from reverting to methods of teaching that had been successful with past students. The basal reading program stifled Julie's ability to provide authentic reading opportunities for students making it difficult to help students find a purpose for reading. Teaching the

program with fidelity required Julie to teach skills and strategies from the basal utilizing the grouping structures suggested in the text. The teacher focus was more on following the text than being responsive to students.

When asked how Julie's more student-centered way of teaching helped students initiate a purpose, the following conversation took place, connecting the idea of supporting choice and purpose with individualization.

Julie	Well, first of all, it fits their needs. So if you have kids talking to themselves and to you about being readers and what they need to become readers, when you are finding something for them that fits their needs, their style and their background…
Carolyn	When you say, "Something," do you mean books?
Julie	Yes, what they read, books or skills, not just books. If they are a kid who is struggling with fluency, then their focus should be working on that. If that's what they want to become better at, then you are supporting that. And you are not giving them all of these other things that they don't need. They are just working on fluency. And when you have a class of 29 kids you are really teaching to the middle when you use a program like this and you don't have to. So my old way was set up more individually with what they needed and what they were working on. And you would end up with groups to fit that, but they had choice, which is huge too. Sometimes you have kids that aren't ready for a choice, but you guide them and you teach them and they get there. Quoting from *The Daily Five* (Boushey, & Moser, 2006), "Purpose + choice = motivation" (p.21). (10/5/11)

The process of making choices and understanding and finding purpose carried the additional benefits of responsibility development and authenticity of student activities.

The exchange below continued the preceding conversation and highlighted Julie's frustration with having a set curriculum imposed upon her.

Carolyn	I think that brings in the responsibility for self. It's kind of interwoven with purpose and choice.
Julie	That's so, so, so, so true. Last year I had a behavior class, students with a lot of behavior problems. That's how they were grouped. So

> I have the kids that were driving the teachers nuts in past years and, yes they have their moments, but I have never had a class take more responsibility for their learning, ever. They had choice and they had a purpose and it gave them motivation. And once they have that motivation they do become responsible for their learning. You don't have to worry about what they're going to do next because they tell you. Going back to a program after I taught that way is so fake. It is so, not authentic. It is so fake. I feel like a fake up there. I feel like a fake. I can't do this. I mean, in my self-dialogue, I can't go back to this. (10/5/11)

Julie struggled to reconcile what she thought her district leaders were asking her to do with what her past experiences as a teacher deemed successful for her students. She wanted to follow directions from superiors and make an honest effort to test the new curriculum, but felt compelled to put the needs of her students before either the leaders or the curriculum. This constant inner battle, to some degree, defined Julie as a teacher, always weighing directives and opportunities to determine what the effect would be on her students.

I have included Julie's assumptions regarding choice, purpose, and individualization, as well as challenges that impede Julie's ability to act on her assumptions, because they serve as a basis for her instructional decisions throughout the school year. Her work with students in the first weeks of the school year helped prepare them for the remainder of the year. Most students have not been afforded as much choice as Julie offered them. Nor have they been asked to monitor themselves to the degree that Julie required. In order for Julie to help students make these paradigm shifts she gave them rationale and opportunities to build proficiency in their new skill sets.

Although Julie's literacy instruction looked different the first month and a half of school than it did the remainder of the year, important groundwork had been laid and

expectations and tone were set. To review, groundwork included assessing students to determine skill level, interests, and level of engagement. It also meant explicitly teaching students how to read to themselves, listen to reading, read with others, write and work with words for extended periods of time.

Ford and Opitz (2010) argued that "the power of instruction away from the teacher needs to rival the power of instruction with the teacher. Independent work needs to be intentionally planned around meaningful reading and writing practice opportunities" (p.11). Julie's early investment of time and instruction ensured that her students would garner powerful instruction during independent work throughout the entire school year. Expectations set early on included; students would take responsibility for choosing reading materials, writing topics and skills to be developed, as well as determine the purpose for their choices. An overall attitude of authenticity inspired students to reengage in the learning process. Next, I examine the framework of the literacy block and the day-to-day decisions that combined, comprised Julie's literacy instruction.

Instructional Planning

The literacy block schedule in Room 4S alternated large group instruction with small group instruction, individual conferences, and independent work. Toward the beginning of the year when students were less able to attend to an activity, Julie taught four large group mini-lessons lasting five to ten minutes each. As time passed and the students' attention spans increased, she dropped to three, slightly longer whole group lessons. Below is a typical midyear schedule. The whole group sharing session ended the Daily 5 rotations. Although writing practice was included in one of the Daily 5 choices

for independent work, writing instruction, guided practice and more independent writing time followed, and were included in the schedule to represent Julie's literacy instruction more completely.

- Whole group – word study lesson
- Small group lesson
- Individual conferences
- Whole group – fluency or accuracy lesson
- Small group lesson
- Individual conferences
- Whole group – comprehension lesson
- Small group lesson
- Individual conferences
- Whole group sharing
- Whole group writing instruction
- Small group or independent practice of writing skill/individual conferences

Julie found a rhythm in the structure that allowed flexibility to teach skills and strategies that all fourth graders need to know and to individualize for each student. She used the large group lessons to introduce and review skills and strategies expected of fourth grade students. Small group sessions afforded some students extra instruction and/or more guided practice of specific skills or strategies. Other students were introduced to more challenging concepts and skills. Individual conferences specifically addressed individual goals chosen by each student, with input from Julie. The format, as

well as the content, continuously evolved to meet the needs of current students. Julie reflected on a former version of her reading instruction.

> I used to sit at a table and have guided reading groups and they (the students) would come up to me and there wasn't any teaching in between. So now, that transition of just bringing them back on the carpet, giving them a brain and body break so they get to move around. They physically get to leave an activity and then they are with me for another lesson. (3/23/11)

Julie described how she organized the content of her large group lessons and some of the factors that contributed to her planning decisions.

Julie	So, I do three mini lessons and the first cycle is always word study. The second cycle is supposed to be fluency or accuracy, but comprehension gets in there, and the last cycle is always comprehension. So that middle cycle, in the beginning of the year, I had I broken up. One was fluency. One was accuracy, but I didn't have enough fluency to keep working on.
Carolyn	Do you mean going through the fluency skills?
Julie	Yeah!
Carolyn	And they have already mastered them?
Julie	I have strategies to make them more fluent readers. And once they learn those strategies, they have to keep practicing those strategies.
Carolyn	You don't have to keep teaching them.
Julie	I don't have to keep teaching them. That doesn't mean they are all fluent or where I want them to be, but they have the strategies to become more fluent. And so, that middle one is kind of different.
Carolyn	Flexible?
Julie	Yeah! Sometimes it is study skills. It's just stuff that I see a need for, like when they are using the dictionary. I still have kids flipping through pages and pages and can't find the word and they come to me, "I can't find the word," and it's on the very next page. So, we're working on guide words right now. The first day I introduced it two kids got the sample question right after I explained how it worked. Now I'm down to about five or six kids (that don't have the skill yet).... And then the last cycle is the bigger idea because I spend more time on that. So that is more like a 15 minute slot. Those are the big things that we really need to tackle with fourth graders. You know, so main idea, supporting details is in there. That's where I introduce my big lit devices. Then after that they have their last rotation (for independent work). Then we come back and we share and that's relatively new. At first

> it was kind of a nightmare. Then it got to be a tolerable nightmare and now I'm seeing–starting to see–really cool things happen. Yesterday they were arguing whether something was a metaphor. It was so sweet because it was a good argument and it helped kids identify, is it a metaphor or not? (3/23/11)

Julie organized the skills and concepts so that they would be introduced in the whole group setting. The large group sharing gave students opportunities to articulate what they had worked on each day.

For large group instruction, the children in Room 4S often gathered, sitting cross-legged on the carpet, in an open area of the classroom. It was in this large group setting that Julie introduced and taught new skills and concepts to her students, similar to what many other teachers do. The difference between Julie and most other teachers was clarified in what happened at the end of the brief direct instruction. Students were required to demonstrate what they had learned before being excused from the carpet. The mode of demonstration varied. It might have been a verbal response, an answer written on a wipe-off board, or the student pointing out a word in her book. The following observation from February 8, 2011, exhibits the student accountability piece missing from many traditional direct instruction lessons.

As students moved toward the carpet, Julie said, "I need you to sit with a partner." Each pair of students rested wipe-off boards on their laps and held Dry Erase markers and old socks that served as erasers. Julie began, "Eyes up here. Yesterday we talked about antonyms and synonyms. What do they mean?"

A dark-haired boy with round, black spectacles tentatively answered, "Antonym means opposite and synonym means homophone?"

"You are right about antonym, but not synonym. This has to do with meaning, not sound."

A girl in the back yelled out, "Synonym is similar."

Julie responded, "Yes. Let's try one, bully."

A voice emanating from somewhere in the middle of the group said, "Antonym, friend, nice."

Within one second, another voice exclaimed, "Synonym, meanie!" Julie smiled and said, "Yes! Good. You got it! Now, with your partner, you write a word and your partner has to come up with an antonym and a synonym, and then switch. You have two minutes. No, you have one minute."

Julie stood, glanced at the white boards of several pairs before squatting next to two girls. She pointed to the word, "boy" and said, "Remember, antonym is opposite, so what might be the opposite of boy?"

"Girl."

"Yes." She stood, visually scanned more white boards, and then held up one hand and counted backwards, "Five, four, three." She stopped, exhaled, and said, "I shouldn't have to get to three before everyone is quiet." As she paused, the students squirmed and then settled. "This is review and we probably won't be coming back to it so if you need more practice or don't understand it well, talk to me and I will help you."

Large group lessons like the one in the example above served as a springboard to forming small, flexible groups. By employing formative assessment, having students demonstrate the skill or strategy before leaving the carpet, Julie was able to make

grouping decisions. If most students needed more practice, she would continue teaching or practicing with the entire group. If only a small number of students still needed reinforcement, those students became a small group. The next section attempts to explain Julie's odium for ability grouping and detail how she utilized short-term flexible grouping to avoid more permanent ability grouping.

Grouping Practices

According to Kulik (1992) "Ability grouping, or homogeneous grouping, is the separation of same-grade school children into groups or classes that differ markedly in school aptitude" (p. ix), usually based on test scores and school records. Julie echoed some of the complaints Jeannie Oakes and Robert Slavin raised in the 1980s regarding ability grouping, particularly the potential damage to student's self-concept and self-efficacy (Oakes, 1985; Slavin 1986). When asked if her teaching partners held similar views regarding grouping students for reading, her immediate response was, "No, they think I'm a little crazy" (2/9/11). The conversation continued, pointing out the rarity of Julie's approach and offering further explanation for Julie's aversion to ability grouping.

Julie	I know I'm not supposed to ask you questions, but you've been in a lot more classrooms and I have not. What do you see that is different? I mean, if you went into a different fourth grade classroom, what do you see happening compared to what you see happening in my room?
Carolyn	I think in many classrooms, and in most classrooms, teachers don't know how to get away from putting kids in set ability groups. That's how they grew up. That's how they've always taught. They don't know how to do it another way.
Julie	Right. I sacrifice, probably good teaching to never ability group because I saw what it did to kids. I worked with those low kids. And I saw kids who had ability that couldn't even get out of their shell because they were so pegged as poor students. That's how they saw themselves. And so I went to the extreme where I didn't

> care if I wasn't teaching right. I was never going to put kids in an ability group because I saw the damage it did. It's damage that changed their lives. I'm not just talking about their school career. This is life changing how these kids see themselves and that, to me, was the bottom line. And so, I was probably a horrible reading teacher, but I wasn't going to hurt my kids' self image. (2/9/11)

Julie wasn't a horrible reading teacher, but she made it clear that the self esteem of her students took precedent over academics.

A conversation during a later interview reinforced Julie's belief in a connection between reading groups and self esteem.

Carolyn	From what you just said, it made me think about self-esteem issues. Do you have that much? I think it would be minimized in this type of a setting, but is that what you have seen? Do you see students that because they are not as good of readers, do they…
Julie	When I started teaching and I would get these kids that have been in groups all their lives, the low group or high group, they are so pigeon-holed and they don't see themselves as readers. So, yeah, if you don't see yourself as a reader, there is no point to the whole morning. But, the way we do this, they all become readers. (3/23/11)

Because Julie had found a format that empowered students to become better readers by acknowledging and accepting where they were on the reading continuum and moving them along that continuum, her room exemplified inclusivity. Inclusion is:

> a core value and set of practices that support the belief that all students in a school, regardless of their strengths, weaknesses, or labels-should be full members of the general education school community with their individual needs met within that general education context (Sapon-Shevin, 2007, p.xii).

Julie valued and strove for an inclusive classroom, yet lamented that for students with special needs placed in more traditional classrooms, they may be better off pulled out of the room for instruction.

Carolyn	So do you think that all rooms should be inclusive. I know that is a rhetorical question, but I read an editorial in the paper yesterday that was very much against inclusion and the author basically said that if parents knew that their kids with special needs were in the classroom, they would not want it.
Julie	In a traditional classroom, she is right. In a traditional classroom, you put a kid in the classroom two grade levels behind into a class where everything is above their heads. That kid is going to struggle. But, if you put him in a student-centered classroom where you are responding to everybody's growth, it can be done. You are teaching so everyone can grow. It might sound nuts and it's not easy. It's this whole blend of the mainstream, the curriculum, and where do kids fit into this spectrum and then turning so they can learn. In a student-centered classroom that wouldn't be an issue because, it isn't an issue. It is so not an issue in my classroom. (5/5/11)

The comments above implied that the structure of traditional classrooms countered inclusivity. Julie was determined to provide an inclusive environment so she needed to change the traditional structure.

Julie's desire for inclusion and her abhorrence for fixed-ability grouping, determined the way she restructured her reading instruction. Rather than put students into fixed groups based on test scores or grades, Julie began with the fourth grade content and student needs as determined by early assessments and conferences with students. One way she formed groups was by organizing the content into five-to-ten minute lessons to be taught to the whole group. After teaching, practicing and reviewing a skill or strategy for a time period required for most students to grasp, those that needed more practice became a group. Since strengths and challenge areas vary for each individual, groups were rarely ever made up of the same students.

Individual goals served as another method Julie used to group students. Students reading books with significantly different text levels might have the common goal of

improving their ability to infer, or to make connections to the text, or to predict what might happen next in the text. Julie enabled these students, reading various texts levels, to simultaneously participate in a group by bringing books that they could read independently to the group. Typically she would spend a couple of minutes directly instructing, followed by discussion and then students finding and sharing examples from their own books. This approach offered students instruction in a self-selected goal area; authenticity of practicing the skill or strategy in a self-selected, appropriately-leveled text; and an escape from the eagle, bluebird, or buzzard label.

Julie shared a conversation she and her principal, Mr. Jones, held regarding her atypical approach to teaching reading.

> The district leaders are not sold on the way of my teaching and trying to become more student-centered. So, he (Mr. Jones) called me in and just asked how I pulled groups and he wasn't accusatory. He was just interested and at first I was very defensive, but then we talked more and it got to a good discussion and, I always wish I had those chances over–to go back in with a different frame of mind because I thought he was going to come in and tell me that I couldn't do that (flexibly group students). But he wasn't. He was like, "So, kids at different reading levels will sometimes actually need the same thing and kids at the same reading level actually don't always need the same thing." And I'm like, "Yeah. It's such a poor assumption just to put kids in a (group) because they got the same number on a test. When they could have all gotten different questions wrong, but yet they ended up with the same score. Are we looking at those subtests? Teachers aren't looking at the subtests. And it (the test) doesn't measure accuracy or fluency so how can you even use that test? So you're using a score, a test score, that doesn't even measure two parts of the reading process and still putting kids in a group by it. It just doesn't fit their needs." He recognizes that and I really think if push came to shove with him, I can get him on board with this. (2/9/11)

Julie was relieved that her principal understood the reasoning behind her instructional decisions and felt hopeful about support he might offer.

As the same interview continued, Julie verbalized differences in the way she taught reading with others in the district and expressed frustration with mixed messages from the district's language arts curriculum leader.

> Most of the teachers I talk to can't let go of ability grouping and they can't give that up to pull out kids by skills, grouping them by a skill that they might need. But at the same time, we had a meeting with our language arts thing [study] and she [district language arts curriculum leader] was asking how we do things and I am like, "Well, I'll teach a mini-lesson and the kids will have to write the answer on their wipe-off board and sometimes they have to let me see it one-by-one, if it's a complicated answer, and sometimes they just flash it. And then I can see right there who's getting it and who's not and if I have 5 kids not getting it, that becomes a group." Or I'll say something else I'm doing where students set that as a goal, or whatever, and she's like, "Well, that's best practice. That's all best practice." Everything I said, [she responded] "That's best practice. Best, best practice." And my teaching partners, who think I'm crazy, are like, "Wow! Really?" You know, you could just see their eyes 'cause she just kept saying that back to me. And then when I told her what I was doing she said, "Oh, we're not going there." (2/9/11)

On one hand, the district leader affirmed Julie's practices. On the other, she refused to support them, aggravating Julie. Julie's research and experience indicated that she was on the right track, yet she seemed to need approval of superiors.

The description below of a small group lesson on figurative language, observed on March 23, 2011 serves to demonstrate Julie's use of flexible grouping, a practice that garnered conflicting responses from the district language arts leader and other educators. The group was made up of students that had not consistently demonstrated understanding in large group sessions, individual conferences and/or journal writing.

Teacher and students gathered near the front of the classroom on the carpet, forming an unevenly distributed semi-circle around a portable white board. The students, individual white boards in tow, sat either on their knees or cross-legged, girls to the

teacher's right and boys to the left of the portable white board. Julie kneeled, buttocks pressed into the heels of her brown, Oxford shoes. She pointed to the white board and said, "Today we are going to review figurative language, simile, metaphor, those kinds of things. I just want to give you the big picture of what figurative language is. Figurative language is figuring it out. So, when you read, you have what we call literal language, meaning, words mean what they say. Red, blue, and green are red, blue, and green. A blue car is a blue car. You don't have to think about it. You don't have to worry about it. It is exactly what it means. Figurative language means you have to figure out what it means. Okay?" She paused, and then said, "So, I've got your back. What does that mean? I took your back away from you?"

Several students responded, "No!"

Mindy, a blond-haired girl kneeing next to Julie said, "No, it means that they're safe because you are taking care of them."

Julie responded, "Yeah, it means that if Dylan (she nodded at him) has Andrew's back (Julie swept her left hand to the left, stopping it in front of Andrew.), he's going to take care of him. Okay?" She looked at Andrew. He nodded.

"You're a doll. When I call you a doll, Timothy, what does that mean?"

Timothy's cheeks reddened. "I'm sweet."

Julie cut in, "You're cute! Okay? So, that's the big overview of what figurative language is. You have to figure it out. So, then we worked on hyperbole, when somebody exaggerates, like when I told Christopher I spent 45 minutes on his reading. I really didn't, so that was hyperbole. You are exaggerating to make a point. Now, we have

personification." Julie shuffled her papers and held up a sheet of paper with the word personification centered on the page, a picture of a pig holding a pen and writing a letter, in the lower left corner of the page. "When you give human traits to objects or ideas that aren't human. So, you have, the sunlight danced. Sunlight doesn't dance." She continued in the same manner reviewing metaphors, similes, and understatement.

A little girl, clad in bright pink, matching t-shirt and leggings, held a pendant between her right thumb and forefinger. The pendant was affixed to a black leather string tied around her neck. As her teacher spoke, the girl rocked back and forth, leather string in her mouth, sliding the pendant back and forth from one side of her mouth to the other. The girl's eyes never left Julie and when Julie asked, "What is this one? He drew a line as straight as an arrow," the girl released the pendant from her mouth and shouted, "Simile!"

Julie moved on to the guided practice portion of the lesson. "Okay, now let's see how you are doing. Most of you have this down and my group might change tomorrow depending on who has it." She placed the palm of her left hand next to the white board and said, "These are the ones we have been working on. I will read a sentence or phrase and you have to write down which form of figurative language it is." She shuffled papers and read, "Knowledge is a kingdom and all who learn are kings and queens."

The heads of the students simultaneously dropped to the boards in their laps. They scrawled answers on their boards and flashed them toward Julie as they finished. She nodded or verbally acknowledged each student.

One boy commented, "This is a hard one."

Julie said, "This is a hard one. I had to really think about this one."

When Dylan sheepishly held up his board with a question mark on it, Julie said, "The first part of the sentence is a clue. Knowledge is a kingdom."

Dylan's eyes scanned the choices on the front board, stopping on a word toward the bottom of the board. He swung head down and then to the right, sending his bangs flying upward, coming to rest slightly higher than their previous spot, but still partially covering the left eye and completely covering the right. He hunched over his white board and formed the letter m with his blue Dry Erase marker. He capped the marker and jerked the white board up, turning it toward Julie as it rose and then waited motionlessly until she smiled and nodded.

Julie looked to a girl in the center of the semi circle and said, "Are you getting this Abbey, because you haven't been working on this as long as everyone else? Make sure to ask me if you need more help."

"Okay, the next one. Can I see you for a second?" Three of the girls wrote quickly and flashed their answers to Julie. She nodded and looked toward the boys. Christopher shrugged his shoulders. Julie smiled, turned her hands palms up and said, "Is a second a really long time? Which one would it be?" She looked at the board of the boy next to Christopher and said, "Yep." Two more students gained approval and then Christopher flashed his board with the letter u written on it. Julie nodded and said to the group, "So, this one is understatement. Understatement is when you are trying to make something sound minimal so, in this case you are trying to get someone to come and telling them it will just be a second. Is it ever just a second? Like when I say, 'Ellen, I want to meet with you for a second.' Is it ever just a second? How long is it really?"

A red-haired girl held up her hand, fingers extended, "Five minutes."

"Yeah, five minutes, so that's an understatement."

Mindy piped in, "It could be hyperbole because you exaggerated."

"You are right! It could be, but in this case, I am trying to make it sound minimal so it's understatement. So, see that?"

Mindy bit her lower lip, leaned forward to look at the words on the board and said, "Oh, yeah, but they are alike."

"Yes, they are."

Julie read a few more examples and students pondered the answers to each. Finally, Julie said, "Here is the last one." She read a six-line poem. "First of all, what are they talking about?"

Christopher yelled out, "The Ocean!"

Julie reread the poem and said, "I don't know if they are talking about the ocean." Her eyebrows drew together and she focused in on the poem, her lips moving.

One of the boy's voices broke her concentration. "It might be the moon."

Another boy questioned, "Could it be the night?"

Julie considered his answer and then repeated his question. "Could it be the night?"

She began reading the poem from the beginning, only to be interrupted by Timothy as he popped up from the floor to point at the poem on the white board. "It's kind of like, this part is the night and this part is when the sun comes up."

"Wow! Very Good! So, in this whole poem, is it ever telling you what it is?"

Multiple students answered, "No."

"It is comparing itself to something it is not and it is saying it is, so that is..."

Most students answered, "Metaphor."

Mindy, who had been scratching the backside of her white board with her fingernails, seemingly inattentive, moaned, "Oh, I thought it was personification because it says it is swelling and it can't swell."

Julie lifted and then dropped her left hand, harrumphed, looked at Mindy and said, "It could be personification too."

Mindy bounced up and down on her heels, "Yeah!"

Julie closed the lesson, "Very good, guys. Tomorrow this group is going to be a little bit different depending on how we are doing. Good job!"

This small group lesson modeled the typical fast-paced, interactive flexible grouping strategy Julie used. The number of students and the members of the groups varied from day to day depending on whether or not students needed more instruction or practice on the particular skill, strategy or concept.

The groups described thus far have focused on skills and/or strategies with students bringing to the table independent books for practice after the teacher's instruction and modeling. Julie also had small groups of students read common texts in order to develop background knowledge on a particular topic or simply to promote conversation. Approximately three times a year Julie organized themed units around a content area topic. She found a number of books on each topic, but did not assign books

to students. She allowed them to choose and provided guidance as they decided. The following conversation illustrates the process.

Carolyn	I notice that all of these books have to do with the Civil War or slavery.
Julie	Yes, actually they are all African American experiences during the 1800s. Not all of the characters were slaves, but they are all touched by slavery by the end of the book.
Carolyn	Did the students choose the book that they wanted?
Julie	They had choice. I had seven different choices and they had a day of Read to Self that they could come up and grab it. They are not supposed to move in Read to Self, but that day they could come up and exchange books and see if it was a good fit book for them. And then, from that, they got to pick. About 75% of them get their choice and 25% of them I have to have a little talk with them. I just can't have a group of 22. (5/5/11)

The instruction of these small groups capitalized on contextual features of the book including vocabulary, plot, themes and literature devices. They also demanded more time from the schedule. Julie explained,

> It does take longer to get through everything you need when you have them all in the same book because when I take strategy groups we are just working on one thing....You are covering two to three things and sometimes that changes, so books do take longer. (5/5/11)

The various grouping structures served different instructional purposes.

The other opportunity students in Room 4S had to share a common text was the student-formed book club referred to in the Environment section of this study. These groups formed when a student showed interest in a particular book and recruited other members of the class to read it. Julie refrained from using these groups to instruct students. Shared conversations that mirrored behaviors of avid adult readers served as the purpose for book clubs. Julie's role was to flex the schedule so students would have time to meet. For the most part Julie resisted intervening, but found it necessary on occasion.

The first example of intervention in a book club surfaced in a conversation about students assigning how many pages the group would read each night.

> What they read a night is a group decision, but I had to intervene because the one girl came to me and she was spending two hours reading to keep up. And so, I said, "Well, do you want to get out of the book club or do you want to keep going?" And she goes, "I want to keep going. I like the book and I like the discussions." So, I sat down with the group and talked about, "You know, this is a true book club. You want everybody to enjoy the experience and some of us read this fast and some us read this fast. It doesn't make us better or worse readers. It's just who we are and you need to make sure everybody is happy." And this girl is a quiet girl and I'm sure she didn't speak up for herself. So, they dropped it down to 15 (pages per night). (3/23/11)

The next example originated from later in the same interview and concerned students reading ahead of the group.

Carolyn	I heard that conversation today because some kids wanted to read ahead.
Julie	And that commitment of, if you are going to be in a book club, you have to commit so you don't ruin the story for someone else and you can have a shared discussion. Otherwise, don't be in a book club. Being in a book club is a choice. If you want to read this book so fast then drop yourself out of the book club and just read it. Then talk to them when they are done with the book. You know, so it's choice. You're committing to being at the same place as they are. (3/23/11)

Julie's interventions typically offered students choices that had them weighing their needs and wants with consideration for classmates.

The book clubs served more as a place for students to practice and discuss ideas, skills, and strategies than as a mode of direct instruction. Despite this fact, I chose to discuss the book clubs under the Grouping Practices heading to highlight the contrast between the way Julie grouped students for instruction and more traditional ability grouping. In a more traditional classroom this shared book experience would have had

students grouped by ability and more teacher-directed instruction. Selection of the text would likely have been made by the teacher. It would have been a guided reading group where the teacher asked questions of the student to make sure they read, to hold them accountable. Students wouldn't likely have been reading the book because they wanted to, but because it was assigned and was within their determined reading level. Julie's skill and strategy-based approach to grouping for instruction combined with students' choice of books motivated students to read. The authenticity engaged students and created readers.

To summarize Julie's grouping practices; she had three types of groups: skill or strategy groups, determined by student need; common themed texts that explored content areas and allowed instruction in vocabulary and story elements; and book clubs that offered students opportunities to share and discuss books of their choosing. Where other teachers focused on teaching certain books or content, Julie started with content (skills and strategies), but quickly shifted the focus to the students and their current and evolving needs. She was cognizant of the benefits of having students read a common text and found ways to do so while maintaining her dedication to offering students choice.

Building Independence

Individual conferences, goal setting, teacher role, strategy instruction, visual aids, student journals and authentic activities all contributed to building student independence in Room 4S. Although I attempt to discuss each of these factors individually, they remain interrelated and inseparable.

Meeting students for individual conferences was a key component of Julie's literacy instruction. At the beginning of the year conferences helped Julie determine what skills and strategies students knew and could employ when reading or writing independently, diagnosis being the primary goal. As the year progressed, students set and evaluated progress of learning goals, demonstrated skill and strategy use and discussed story elements or nonfiction content with their teacher during the conferences. Along with conferences, student journals provided students with individualization. Both allowed Julie to tailor instruction to exactly what each student needed at a particular time. She made students equal partners in their own education by teaching them how to decide on a goal and assess progress toward that goal.

Conferences fit into the schedule during independent work time. Students were typically scattered throughout the room reading or writing by themselves or with a partner when Julie would move from one person to another. In an observation on February 8, 2011, I watched as Julie performed this ritual. Because I stationed myself in a corner of the room, I caught only parts of various conversations, but enough to offer an account of how Julie held conferences with students.

Julie approached a boy sitting at his desk. She sat in the desk next to his and said, "Are you still working on suffixes? How do you think you are doing?"

"Good," he replied.

"Do you think reading is going better for you now? Do you think you are understanding better?"

"Yes."

Julie flashed cards containing words with various suffixes added to them. The boy read each word and detailed how the suffix affected the meaning of the base word. "Okay, let's do some reading," she said. He read from his book, stumbled, backed up and reread, and then looked at Julie. "Good job showing me the Back Up and Reread strategy."

Julie made a note in her three-ring binder and moved to another boy sitting in the corner of the room on the floor out of my hearing range. She wrote something in her binder and instructed the boy to read for a bit more on his own as she checked on students at the Word Work station. She returned to the boy in the corner and asked questions to which he nodded, shook his head, and then responded by sliding his finger across the right page of an open book. Julie moved to another boy sitting at a desk reading. She asked questions. He listed several incidents happening in the story he was reading. He proceeded to tell her why he thought each was happening. I heard Julie say, "Are you inferring?"

He cocked his head to the left, lifted his eyes to the right and said, "Yes, I guess I am."

Julie moved to yet another girl on floor and sat next to her and the two talked for about two minutes. Her final stop before the rotation ended took her to a dark haired boy hunched over an open notebook. "Oliver, are you working on your bibliography? Remember I showed you these books that have resources in them. You can look at them to help you. Think about the information you need to include in a bibliography. I will check back with you after you have had a chance to think and look at some samples."

The observation above highlighted students progressing toward individual reading goals. They read from books they chose and worked on writing projects of their choice. They also helped decide which skills, strategies and concepts they should focus on. Julie empowered students by acknowledging their choices and giving them a voice in the decisions that affected them. As the school year progressed students latched on to their new roles and took charge of learning goals. The exchange described in the interview below demonstrates the positive effects this empowerment can have on students.

Carolyn	I was amazed. I think it was last Wednesday, when you were meeting with kids about their upcoming parent-teacher conferences. Those college students were in here observing. You were quizzing the one little boy and you were saying, "This is what you are going to learn next." And he said, "Oh, that's…" and then he told you what it was and what it meant. You were like, "Oh, so I guess you do know that." (Both laugh.) There were like three things you mentioned that he already knew.
Julie	One of the times, I had three students (college observers) really close and I'm going through his list and he was like, "I know that." I'm like, "You haven't shown me that you know that. Find the five points of a plot." So he told me intro. He told me rising action. He told me climax. He told me resolution. He told me conclusion. And he told me to check it off. (Both laugh.) And so, I think that I got more out of him because he had an audience.
Carolyn	They seemed impressed.
Julie	He is just a riot. He's a kid that has floundered in school and I'd keep him for another year if I could.
Carolyn	Do you feel like he is having success this year?
Julie	Oh, yeah!
Carolyn	So then, how did his conference go?
Julie	He has a single mom and she is in heaven and this kid is serviced by our behavior program and I hear it every week. This mother used to call almost daily about concerns and worries and she has called twice this year. I've gotten in trouble with her twice this year because one day I didn't send home gloves and something else, but nothing academic. She is tickled to death that he-he used to be carried out of the room on a daily basis. He used to throw himself on the floor and throw tantrums because he had no choice

> in his day. And when you are on the spectrum, choice is a big thing. (3/23/11)

The student mentioned above demonstrated cognitive complexity in monitoring his learning, but equally important is the effect Julie's student-centered approach had on this boy's motivation to learn and ultimately his behavior in the classroom. He went from being hauled out of the classroom daily to rarely causing problems and engaging in the learning process.

Although the abovementioned student conferences focused on academic goals that affected behavior, at times, conferences focused on behavioral goals. Regardless of the goal or type, the student controlled many of the decisions and had a sense of purpose. The following interview demonstrates how Julie used conferences and goal setting with Abbey, a new student, to increase her stamina for independent work.

Carolyn	I've been in here several times now during your language arts block and I have been really impressed as I look around the room and students really are doing what they are supposed to be doing.
Julie	It really stood out for me when I got a new student and we introduced everything to her, which was a great reminder to my students, but we did it in three days so she didn't have that gradual release or that build up, but she said she was a reader. So, we get to our first chunk of Read to Self for 20 minutes. She made it two. I mean, coming to me supposedly a good reader, a strong reader. I have kids that are entitled for behavior or on the spectrum or RAD (Reactive Attachment Disorder) that are reading without looking up for 20 minutes and within two or three minutes this little girl was looking up because she doesn't have the stamina. She doesn't have the gradual release of responsibility. That's just something I need to address. I'm giving her different goals where she gets to pick. She can switch halfway in between because she has to build her stamina and she has to get her goals and she's not there yet. (3/23/11)

Julie didn't experience much turnover in students, but her format of teaching and her individual approach made it easier to adapt to new students and their needs.

As our conversation continued, Julie explained other ways she might differentiate to help Abbey build stamina for independent work.

Julie	What we are doing with her now is, she has her own schedule at her desk. She's up on the board like everybody else, but at her desk she can go to Read to Self and she can go to Work on Writing half way through, and it's her choice. If she wants to keep reading she can, but the minute she starts losing focus, she knows she should move on to something else. I'm going to try that. She has only been here for two weeks. And if that doesn't work, I think maybe we'll start giving her own little timer and start setting goals like, "Today you read five minutes without…
Carolyn	That whole independence thing.
Julie	Right. And tomorrow, "Okay, so today you made five minutes without starting to daydream and stuff. What do you want to for tomorrow? How long do you think you can make?" Because if she's trying to hit a target, it's much better than if I try to make her hit a target. You know, if I say, "You have to read for 20 minutes." There is not purpose in it for her. So, we'll try this halfway thing and see if she builds stamina. Today she did better already. (3/23/11)

Regardless of whether goals were academic or behavioral, they clearly helped students become more independent. Julie gave students control and they accepted and maintained it. She didn't disappear after relinquishing control. Rather, she guided student decisions by asking questions and sharing her viewpoint and opinions. If students weren't successful, she created back-up plans, but never gave up on a student and his or her goals. This masterful technique insured student buy-in and more effectively met student needs. The effects of Julie's teaching on student achievement and less measureable variables will be discussed in the next section of this study.

Observing Julie hold conferences with students and discussing such conferences with her in interviews highlighted for me the role shift that happens when teachers become more student-centered. In her article, "Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side," King (1993) described this change in the focus of instruction as a move from the teacher being the distributor of information, lecturing while students take notes, to one that actively engages students.

Julie still taught content, the primary focus of teacher-centered instruction. She seemed to have levels of content, some that all students needed, content that some students needed for reinforcement or enrichment, and then more individualized content. All students needed foundational information for fourth grade students, strategies and procedural information. Julie used short, large-group lessons to teach this type of information. Based on observation and other formative assessments, she determined what content needed to be reinforced or extended and then used small group instruction to insure students learned content at that next level. Finally, Julie analyzed student learning through one-on-one conferences to determine what content needed to be individualized.

The way Julie organized her schedule allowed fluid movement through each of these three levels multiple times a day. The content students wrestled with each day included grade-level content, extensions to, or reinforcement of, that grade-level content, as well as individualized content. The role of the teacher then varied throughout the day as well. In the large group mini lessons Julie delivered content, but also engaged students in activities that helped her gage whether or not students were meeting the objectives. Julie frequently asked students to write on wipe-off boards or use independent books to

demonstrate objectives. The small group structure mirrored that of the large group, but allowed tailoring of content to meet specific student needs. The individual conferences facilitated content selection based on need and/or choice of each student. As the structure of the classroom group narrowed, the content filtered to specific needs and the role of the teacher became less central and more sidelined.

Julie compared her role of teacher to that of a coach.

> I liken it to a coach. Okay, so if you look at baseball, and if you want your players to improve, you cannot give them skills they are not ready for. And if you have a strong player, you need to push him to the next level by giving him new skills, adding on. You cannot teach a beginning hitter how to stand and how to hold his arms and how to flip his wrist over if he hasn't even made contact with the ball yet. (10/5/11)

The coach's role is different from that of the traditional teacher because the coach continuously focuses on making the players better, not on teaching the team general lessons. She analyzes performance and instructs players based on their current skill levels and position they play, not on a predetermined curriculum.

The coach analogy emphasizes strengthening of the individual skills of each player and the idea that together these diversely skilled players make up a team. A baseball team composed of players with identical skills would not win many games. A world, or even a classroom, composed of people with homogeneous skills is certainly boring and likely unsustainable. This concept circles back to the interconnectedness of themes throughout this study as it highlights the importance of inclusivity, diversity and acceptance of all class members discussed earlier.

One-on-one conferences with their individualized content, student input and goal setting were not the sole responsibility engineers in Room 4S. Other independence-

building tools in Julie's figurative toolkit ranged from teaching strategies, to posting charts on the walls for later reference and from using journals to demonstrate growth to providing authentic, real-world challenges that required higher-level thinking.

I have already discussed how Julie formed flexible groups to teach, reinforce, and practice strategy use. In one of our interviews Julie and I discussed whether or not she thought her students effectively used the strategies taught in class.

Carolyn	In your read aloud lesson, you were really keying in on the strategies and it seems to me that this is vocabulary that you have used with the students. You were talking about inferring and you were talking about using the context and their background knowledge, putting the two together to figure out or understand either a word or the text. Do you feel like your students own those strategies now?
Julie	I would like to say yes. We have worked a lot on inferring and we did a lot of inferring content. We've just begun turning that to words. What is the difference between taking a word in context or inferring the meaning? And that's that background knowledge and so we are making that next step. So, inferring is something that just gets continuously harder the harder the text is. So, it's nothing that you know because the text gets harder so you have to have those strategies. You have to understand that you use background knowledge and the context or clues that the book gives you. So, it's something that I would never drop and I hope they get it again next year and the year after that because it is just a skill that you have to keep practicing to keep getting to that next level. It's not something that you master and then you are done with. It is a continuous practice. So, at some level, yes my kids know it, but then you make the text harder and all of a sudden they get scared and they don't rely on those skills. So, you have to just keep drilling. (5/5/11)

Julie spoke very specifically about inferring. I asked her to speak more generally about strategies the students used and if she thought the students had internalized them. It had been my observation that her students grappled with strategies more than students in other classrooms that I had observed. I was curious as to why that might be so.

Julie attributed the student strategy use to motivation to learn. She felt that students were motivated to learn and use various strategies because they chose which strategies to work on and the order in which they did so.

Julie	My kids talk the talk. It is so a part of our conversations and it's student-centered where they get to go where they want to go. They get to direct their reading growth where they want to direct their reading growth. When you're directing your own growth, you want it, not me telling you what you have to learn. So, yeah, I get ownership. It's a constant discussion with figurative language, lit devices, inferring. They use these as part of their language. Are they skills that they have mastered? No, they have to keep going back to them and they have to keep working on them. They are in the developmental part of becoming higher-level thinkers.
Carolyn	But, they are aware of those strategies and they use them. Have they mastered them? Maybe not, but they are able to use them.
Julie	Right, and they have mastered them at their level. So, yeah, they know them. I would say they own them, if that's the word you want to use. (5/5/11)

Although Julie was hesitant to acknowledge student mastery of strategy use, the responsive and often individualized instruction she employed had students modeling and demonstrating various strategies. A board at the front of her classroom listed reading strategies categorized under the titles Comprehension, Accuracy, Fluency, and Expand Vocabulary.

In an observation on February 8, 2011 I witnessed a one-on-one conference between Julie and a student named Colby. She sat on the floor beside him and asked, "What are you working on?"

"Cross-Checking," he replied.

"What is that?" Julie asked.

"Make sure to read the words that are there."

Julie smiled, nodded and asked him to read to her from his book *Dragon Rider*. Colby read a few lines and stumbled on the word trembled. He paused, furrowed his brows, pronounced the word wrong again and then correctly. After he completed a paragraph, Julie asked what it was about. Colby didn't answer Julie's question, but looked around the room and said, "My group is ahead of me. I can't catch up."

Julie looked into his eyes and said, "The most important thing is that you read. I don't care if you catch up, but I want you to read and understand what you read. Let's meet tomorrow again. I want you to work on the strategy Check for Understanding between now and tomorrow."

Colby pointed to the CAFE board (strategy lists) and asked, "Where is it on the board?"

Julie pointed toward the board and said, "It is the first one under comprehension."

Colby nodded his head, looked down at the book and began reading.

The fact that Colby verbalized and demonstrated the Cross-Checking strategy and then questioned visual placement on the bulletin board for the Check for Understanding strategy suggests a metacognitive complexity honed by practice.

The CAFE strategy board wasn't the only visual support Julie afforded students in her classroom. Often Julie and the students would create a chart, brainstorming what a particular task, concept, or behavior might look and sound like. They would document their ideas or steps on paper and post it on the wall for later reference. Some contained uneven letters, crossed off words, and barely legible handwriting, obviously student created.

> When they are learning stuff, you can't just expect kids just to know it. They have to keep using it and using it and using it. And they need that resource. So, everything we learn is posted, constantly, throughout the year so they can keep referring to it, to become natural to it. (5/5/11)

Julie valued the visual reminders and encouraged her student to utilize them.

Another support, student journals, facilitated skill and strategy practice and served as a vehicle for demonstrating growth toward goals. Julie had used journals with students since first teaching in a classroom setting. She shared with me how the use of student journals evolved as the school year progressed. "In the beginning it's just to tell me what they read, but as their goals change, and as they come further along, this is where they can prove to me that they've met goals." (2/18/11)

In Room 4S student journals and graphic organizers have replaced worksheets. Julie's student journals have evolved through the years to a mode of communication that enables students to share ideas with the teacher and demonstrate learning goals. Graphic organizers offer students structure for scaffolding knowledge while remaining open-ended enough to meet cognitive needs of students at varying levels. The following interview offers a glimpse of Julie's opinion on the purpose of organizers and journals.

Carolyn	Today when I was in your classroom and the students in the literature group were filling out a paper...
Julie	One paper for the group. Each of them has a job. And it's just a place for them to record the words they are talking about or if they found examples of literary devices. They don't have to write down the story, but they do have to take key points like rising action. It's something my whole class is working on, rising action, introduction to climax, falling action, resolution and conclusion. So I just gave them a framework to jot some of those things to keep so at the end of the book, they have to do a project to present to the class. And this will be a reference to them because it has to be something that will improve other kid's reading. So they have to teach them something that they learned out of the book.... I don't

> have kids do things just to prove to me they can do it anymore. (2/9/11)

Julie demonstrated progress in her philosophy of teaching and learning. The concept of accountability morphed over time from obtaining evidence that a student completed a given task to empowering students to choose what they wanted to learn and then substantiate their learning.

Our conversation continued as Julie detailed her journal metamorphosis.

> Julie They don't have to turn them in. This is for their reference. I used to do a lot of things where it was just to prove to me that you read. Prove to me that you did what I asked you to do and I don't do that anymore. I do it sometimes. Sometimes you have to. I mean, so, I have response journals that kids write every night. And when I started response journals, honestly it was to make sure kids were reading. And you could fake it for a while, but eventually I would find out you were faking your response journal. Now it has become so much more a learning tool where they are showing me what they are learning and I am responding back and trying to pull out more and trying to push them to their next level. It's become so much more than proving that they are doing it (reading). If you get kids motivated, getting them wanting to make their goals, and getting them engaged in what they are doing, then you don't have to have them prove anything to you. (2/9/11)

Perhaps the most motivating support Julie offered students for building independence, embedded in supports already mentioned, was authentic, real-world challenges that required higher-level thinking. She treated students as if they were people that wanted to learn, not people that had learning thrust upon them. The tasks and activities students completed and participated in mirrored those of adults. Adults read books for pleasure and discuss them with friends. They do not typically read assigned books and answer questions that if responded to correctly, confirm accurate reading. How many adults would keep reading if this were the case?

Authenticity is also built into independent work time and writing activities. The Daily 5 activities mentioned earlier in this study parallel those that literate, growth-minded adults might participate in, reading to self and others, listening to reading, working on writing, and word work. I have already discussed the choice offered students in regard to books and the opportunities that students have to read shared books and have book discussions. Developing an awareness of and an appreciation for words and the manipulation of words serves as the main function of the Word Work station.

A patchwork of words, definitions and examples covered the wall above the station. I asked Julie to explain it to me.

Carolyn	You have interesting words on the wall and you have some for each letter and the students put them up…
Julie	Yep. And the students write them and I need to check them every now and then to make sure they are all spelled right.
Carolyn	So, do you think students in the class know all of these words or just the student that puts each one up?
Julie	The biggest thing about the student wall is getting them to notice words. You know, they get excited about getting to share a word. They find a cool word and so some of the kids are good verbal listeners and probably have a lot of these words down because they have heard them and that's how they learn. But, 75% of my kids do not learn that way this year and so I would say, "No, they don't know them, but they have been exposed to them." And the next time they hear it and the next time they hear it and it starts that process and it connects to a different word and it's just that whole process because words are a part of the conversation we have daily around here.
Carolyn	So, these words are from their own reading?
Julie	Yes, these words are from the books they are reading. (3/23/11)

My questions regarding the word wall fed directly into the question of what students do at the Word Work station and how the posted words were generated.

Julie	Well, in the word station, we work on different parts of the words. So, we have done prefixes and suffixes and now we are doing Latin origin.
Carolyn	So, like roots?
Julie	Yeah, like the base and the connections, it is so funny when that clicks. You know at first they are just like blends and stuff. And then about January when you start hitting word parts like "metron" and now they are doing "dia" and all of a sudden they are like, "Diameter. Diameter means measure and di means across and it goes across the circle, the center of the circle." And they start making these connections and that's when the light bulb starts going on for these kids about how words work. And that is the cool part about the Latin.
Carolyn	How if I know this one little unit meaning, then I also know 10 other words.
Julie	Right. And it's just how it all fits together and how things are built. And the "aha" moment that 75% of my class goes through. 25% do not get there, but they get the suffixes and prefixes. I push them in a different way because they are not quite ready. (3/23/11)

Having an interest in words and their meanings cognitively engages students. Julie's Word Work station had ignited a fire in students that will hopefully burn far into the future.

Like other activities students were asked to do in Julie's room, her approach to teaching writing was authentic and thus motivating to her students. Early in the year Julie told her students that they would write a fourth grade book. They each spent the entire year writing, rewriting, editing, and eventually publishing a book. She had done this for several years and had honed the process and perfected the final product by finding a company online that published paperback, student books free of charge. In exchange, the company requested that the teacher send home a written offer to purchase additional copies of the book. Even if every family declined the offer the company would still publish one copy of each book for free.

With the motivation of creating a meaningful product, students considered the potential of each writing skill and concept for their book.

> Every year I have my kids working in the background on a book. It is something where they get an idea until the end of the year. All through the year we make a list of things you would include in your story. So when I teach dialogue and how to write dialogue, we talk about, "Is that something we could include in our 4th grade book?" Then we put it on our list and we write an example of what dialogue looks like so they know. Then we talk about imagery. "Is that something we could put in our book?" As I am teaching, we refer back to the book, but it is still just in the background. It is never me saying, "You have to have this done by Friday." Some kids have started it over three times as they learn to become better writers and some had a good story line and kept it going. So we work on it all year and then I make them into what I hope are cool books. Every year I try my best to make them look cool and every year I'm very proud of them. Every year we get the books done, but this year I found a website that makes them into books. It has raised the bar and most of my kids are so excited to become published authors. (5/5/11)

Authentic activities logically require students to incorporate knowledge, skills, and procedures and necessitate higher-level thinking. They are more enjoyable and more effective in scaffolding new learning for students. Julie's book publishing activity maximized learning by engaging students in a meaningful, authentic task.

Student independence in Julie's classroom was built upon many practices; holding individual conferences, setting and working toward goals, shifting the teacher's role to that of a coach or guide, strategy instruction, use of visual aids, communication through student journals, and insistence on authentic activities. These practices would have been difficult, if not impossible, to carry out had Julie not provided solid instruction and a welcoming, inclusive environment with high expectations for all students. She would not have provided such instruction and environment if she had deviated from her well articulated attitude and philosophy. This point prompts memory of the interconnectedness

of the factors that characterize the student-centered teaching described in this study. A combination of many factors convened to make a positive impact on students. The next section details how Julie viewed her effect on students.

Impact on Students

Growth and Achievement

Students in Julie's classroom benefited from their placement in her room and her literacy instruction in measurable ways, as well as in less quantitative forms. Her district used the BRI (Basic Reading Inventory) to determine if students read and comprehended on grade level. At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, only six of Julie's 22 students were not reading on grade level. Five were already reading above grade level. At the end of the year all 22 students were reading on grade level and 16 of 22 were reading above grade level according to their BRI results.

Another assessment tool Julie's district used to measure growth of students was the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) computerized test. According to the company website (https://reports.nwea.org), "MAP for Primary Grades tests provide teachers with an efficient way to assess ability levels of early learners so they can spend less time on individual diagnostics and more time teaching." They also provided teachers with reports of students' scores relative to growth, proficiency and norms. For the 2010-2011 school year all but one of Julie's students demonstrated growth on the reading portion of the MAP test. 19/22 met or exceeded "typical" growth, 9/22 by more than 100%. Prior to that school year, five of Julie's students were below the 40th percentile. By year end, all students were above the 50th percentile with 18/22 above the 70th percentile. Using the

same data, Julie determined that 20 out of 22 of her students exceeded the average district reading score. Of the same students, only 14 of 22 exceeded the district average the previous year. The normative reading data of three students stood out. One student increased from the 17th percentile to the 70th percentile. Another moved from 27% to 75% and another from 48% to 81%. These quantitative results verify academic achievement in reading for all of Julie's students.

Although data are affirming, Julie did not need it to know that her students improved. In an interview she expressed confidence in her students' learning, but concern for their ability to perform on the upcoming Spring MAP test.

Carolyn	You have made comments that you think this year's class is further ahead than any other class that you have had.
Julie	Oh! They are better than when I taught a grade above (5th grade). They know more than those kids. I just worry about their generalization ability. Can they take this and generalize? I gave them practice, practice, practice. We put it in books. We talk. We talk. We talk, but they are only 9 years old. You know, how high can they think, developmentally? (3/31/11)

In a conversation after the Spring MAP test Julie supplied me with a possible reason for the student growth demonstrated on the tests. She had created checklists based on the skills and concepts the students would be tested on. They each had input on the skills, strategies and concepts they would work on. Once students demonstrated accurate use or clear understanding three or more times, they could check it off and move to another skill, strategy or concept. At various intervals students would be required to review every item that had been checked off. The lists gave students concrete goals and visual benchmarks.

> It wasn't some arbitrary test. They had ownership. You know, "I learned this. Check me off. I know this and I know this." They saw themselves grow. It's really cool when you get kids excited. They are so excited about being able to check something off that list and about being able to go on to the next thing and proving it to you because they know what is expected and they know this is what I need to get to the next level. So, it's pretty cool. They were excited about the test. They saw it as a place to show their learning and how much they had learned. (5/5/11)

The MAP test and the checklists that led students to success on the test exhibited academic growth.

Beyond academic growth, students in Room 4S became engaged in learning and rediscovered a love for learning. One of the paraprofessionals assigned to a boy in Julie's classroom who had followed the group of students for several years, noticed and was emotionally moved by growth in academic behavior of the students.

Julie	My associate was crying.
Carolyn	Why?
Julie	She came up with these kids all the way through and they have a bad reputation as far as doing what they are supposed to do. She goes, "I never thought I'd see these kids fighting to read a book." And it's not a short book. It's like a 400 page book. And they are 4th graders. (3/23/11)

The shift toward student engagement as the school year evolved signaled a different type of success that also promoted more measurable forms of growth. Because it was a gradual process, Julie didn't realize the improvement in student engagement until after the winter break.

One of our conversations delved into this transition.

Carolyn	At what point in the school year did you notice kids engaging in the learning process? I suppose it is different for every kid.
Julie	Right. But, it's very gradual so you really don't notice it. It always hits me when I come back from Christmas because they've had a break and you kind of remember what it was like in the beginning

> of the year because those behaviors are always there, but yet they're reading. You know, and you just remember the struggles to try to find a book. I don't have to find them books anymore because the conversation is so huge. You know there is one girl that I have to find books for and that's because she reads three books a week (laugh). So, I'm constantly trying to find new books for her, but other than that, these kids have a list ten books long. They go, "I'm reading this one next and after that I'm reading this one." I mean, those are the conversations they have. (3/23/11)

The students had transformed from nonreaders to engaged readers displaying positive literacy habits. Julie knew that she was positively affecting students because she had observed and documented learning and had quantitative data to support such claims, but at times questioned herself and the decisions she made, so affirmations from other adults, like the paraprofessional in the earlier scenario, were appreciated.

Julie's principal, Mr. Jones, was another source of verification. At one point, she had expressed concern for a girl in her classroom to Mr. Jones. The young girl that Julie described as having some mental issues and a difficult home situation also lacked self-esteem and confidence. Besides encouraging the girl in academic subjects at school, Julie suggested she go out for basketball and join the Girl Scouts organization.

> Just yesterday I talked to my principal about being worried about her in the future and not knowing how much good I am doing her. At the end of the day my principal called me up to his office and out his back door was where the Girl Scouts were meeting. He pointed to her and he goes, "Don't tell me you're not helping that girl." (2/19/11)

The affirmations Julie received from her principal gave her recognition she needed and provided anecdotal verification of her students' progress.

Julie and her students had checklists that evidenced mastery of skills, concepts, and strategies. She had witnessed conversations and arguments between students that

demonstrated understanding and synthesis of literary devices, story elements and other literary concepts. At times her students surprised her with their eagerness and ability to recognize and utilize newly learned information. The example below shows how one boy demonstrated understanding of the concept of irony.

> So, one of my students who in the past always was put in the low group because he's not a good accurate reader, struggles. So, we are working on that. We don't give that up, but he's still a higher thinker so he's been working on higher concepts. One of them is irony. I had a visitor to my classroom and we just served birthday treats that were little lifesavers. And he goes, "Ms. S., what would happen if you choked on a life saver?"
> I'm like, "Well, you'd have to give the Heimlich."
> He goes, "And if you died, wouldn't that be ironic?
> And I'm still not getting it.
> He goes, "A life would die from a life saver."
> He had to explain it to me. "Oh! Yeah! That is ironic." (2/19/11)

Julie had known this boy was a higher-level thinker and targeted instruction at his strengths, as well as his weak areas. Creating an example of irony served as evidence of understanding.

Students in Room 4S demonstrated growth in reading in both quantitative measures, as evidenced by test scores, and qualitative measures, evidenced through observable behaviors. Nonacademic areas of growth could also be observed. The boy, who in previous years had been physically removed from the classroom daily, remained in Julie's room, leaving only a handful of times by his choice. The little red-headed girl, that in previous years didn't see herself as a student, became the class expert in division and Greek and Latin word study. Julie empowered the students in Room 4S to choose reading goals and monitor progress toward those goals. They were encouraged to help each other and took that responsibility seriously as demonstrated in the book club group

that assigned the Retell job to the girl that needed to work on understanding what she was reading. Though somewhat intangible, student growth in Julie's classroom was undeniable.

School Beyond Room 4S

Julie anguished whether the time spent in her classroom was a benefit or detriment for students. She knew that her accepting, inclusive environment helped students while in fourth grade, but wondered of it provided fragile students with a false sense of security that would be ripped from them when they promoted to fifth grade. In one interview Julie and I discussed the way traditional schooling produces "cookie cutter" students that possess the same strengths and weaknesses and by their homogeneity are accepted in society. Contrasted with that, are the odd students that never seem to fit in.

Julie and I discussed the fact that her classroom prized all students, even ones that would be considered odd in other classrooms. She then reflected on the topic.

Julie	Sometimes those cookie cutters get along better in society.
Carolyn	It sounds like you wrestle with that.
Julie	All the time. (laughs) I do, all the time. I wish I was putting them in a world where they would be accepted for who they are because you get more out of kids when you accept them for who they are and are comfortable in their own environment. So I guess I go back to that bottom line of my job is to educate them and by accepting them for who they are, they get to grow more than if I try to force them into something they can't fit. But then they go beyond me and they have to fit and they're not prepared for that so I struggle with that balance. (2/9/11)

Julie's concerns were legitimate. She had been told of problems experienced by students she had taught in previous years, as well as students in her 2010-2011 class. She shared

the following story about a student that had been successful in her classroom, but regressed after moving on to middle school.

> When I was in 5th grade, I had one boy, for example, who just blossomed and parents were so excited and they just couldn't stop talking about how wonderful a year their kid had. He was actually exited out of Special Ed in my classroom because he was being so successful and so engaged in what he was doing and just leaps and bounds. And then he went to middle school and hit the wall because they didn't accept him for who he was. They tried to put him into a box he couldn't fit into. He couldn't. He never could have been successful in my room if I had done that. He will never fit in that box. (2/9/11)

At a different interview Julie told me about an encounter with the parents of a former student that had flourished in her classroom, but found few successes after leaving her.

> A lot of them get shut down in future years after they leave me. You think, did I have a big enough impact that that would last? But, sometimes I haven't. I've had parents that come back and are like, "Can you come back because he is dying where he is at. All the confidence has been drained out of him." And that breaks your heart. And some kids get over it. Some kids hit a bump and go on, but they might have anyway. But, that's fine. They know that they have a voice and their voice matters in life and in their education. (3/31/11)

Julie was truly disturbed when she shared that conversation with me. I sensed the inner battle that raged within her. Was it better for kids to have one successful, happy year even if it may set them up for failure and disillusionment in the future or should one not encourage acceptance and inclusivity at all? The second option may better prepare kids for the reality of a hard-knock life.

The issue wasn't solely one of the distant past. In an interview in the fall of 2011, Julie expressed concern for two of her previous students that had been in her fourth grade class during the spring of 2011 when I conducted the bulk of my research.

> Julie I have a paraprofessional that was in my room last year that came back and told me that two of my students are struggling. They have special needs. She goes, "He (the current teacher) just doesn't get

	that glazed look in the kids' eyes." You would change if you saw that glazed look. Something would change. Something would happen. But, he just keeps going.
Carolyn	So you're referring to your students who've moved on and their teacher this year?
Julie	Yeah, and it is a teacher I have a lot of respect for, but he goes on when the kids aren't getting it. But, it doesn't matter because he's teaching the curriculum.
Carolyn	So he just plows through the lesson and they're not following?
Julie	Right, and I see that as a complete waste of time. (10/5/11)

Made clear in the above scenario, Julie refrained from criticizing the teachers of her former students and usually focused on their strengths. Instead she reflected on factors she could control that might make future school life smoother for her students. This battle Julie fought was not one sided and she didn't dwell on the negative.

Concerns Julie had regarding her ability to prepare students for life beyond Room 4S were tempered by avowals from students and a keen awareness of the concrete tools for building independence she had provided for her students. She knew that her determination to offer students choice motivated them and she relished her students' response to her question. "What will you remember the most about fourth grade? One of the things was that they got to pick the books. They had choice in what they got to read." (5/5/11)

While the offer of choice motivated students, Julie figured out how to make learning manageable for students. She devised a plan and communicated it to students, giving them clear options for becoming better readers and writers. She helped them visualize the big picture and a long-term goal. Then she helped them articulate short-term goals that would help them reach the long-term goal. In one interview, Julie shared with me how this process empowered and motivated students.

Carolyn	Why do you think your students are motivated and engaged?
Julie	When you are student-centered, kids have a say in how they learn and where they need to go next. They understand the expectations. When you are student-centered your targets are clear and you give kids the path with which they can learn it.
Carolyn	It gives them control?
Julie	Yeah, power. It gives them power. It's not this huge enigma that I'm supposed to learn to read and I need to be at a fourth grade level. They know steps. They are shown the path of how they get where they go and they have control over it, instead of me just telling them where to go or what to do. (3/31/11)

Julie made learning transparent for her students and provided them with tools they could use in the future.

In addition to student feedback and positive self assessment, Julie had been acknowledged by other faculty members in regard to her students' preparedness and success. In one faculty meeting the teachers were working on Think-Alouds, a strategy used to model metacognition used in reading, and Talk-Alouds, a strategy used to model what authors do to help reader understand the text. Julie had used these strategies with her students and helped them incorporate the strategies into their own reading practice.

Julie	The fifth grade teacher said, "One of my students was doing it so I used him to model." It was a student I had had last year. And he got up and he was reading and they were working on main ideas or something like that and he was doing it right. But within his reading he stopped. Because he came to a word and he didn't know how it was used. I can't remember the word but he goes, "When I was reading this word I didn't know what it meant so I just went on and then I figured out what it meant and then I came back and now I know what it means. And that helped me find what they were working on." It was so cool and she was like, "Kudos to Julie because this is what she does with her kids."
Carolyn	And he was able to use that strategy.
Julie	Yes. It was a strategy he'd worked on. He'd been expanding his vocabulary most of last year because he was a good reader and so that was the area he needed to work on to become a better reader. And he worked on it, and it worked.

Carolyn That's nice to hear, isn't it?
Julie Oh yeah! And right in front of the whole staff. I loved it. (10/5/11)

The positive attention Julie received from the fifth grade teacher at the faculty meeting boosted Julie's spirits and alleviated some of her concerns regarding the success of her former students.

Because Julie read voraciously and kept up on educational research and best practices, she was typically confident in her decisions. However, many of the people that surrounded Julie lacked up-to-date information and questioned her practices, consequently causing her to second guess herself occasionally. Student and parent affirmations, quantitative data and anecdotal evidence, as well as verification from the principal and other staff members combined to assure Julie that she was a good teacher. She knew that she positively affected her students and no matter what problems they faced after leaving Room 4S, they were better off for having had her as a teacher.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, LESSONS LEARNED, AND IMPLICATIONS

> I think a student-centered classroom is where it's more centered on what the students are doing and not so much on what the teacher is doing… I keep telling them (the students) that I don't care how long it takes them to learn something as long as they learn it. (3/31/11)

Are you a teacher if your student does not learn? According to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Mish & Morse, 1994), teacher is defined as "one that teaches; *especially*: one whose occupation is to instruct" (p.1209). Instruct is defined as "to give knowledge to: teach, train" (p.606). These definitions imply that knowledge is simply handed to another person, something passively accepted from the instructor. The definition of the word learn is, "to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience" (p.663). It is imperative that teachers ensure that the learners "gain" knowledge, understanding, and skill, rather than simply receive information. As evidenced by the above quote, my participant, Julie, believed that student learning was the top priority.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

What does it mean to the participant to be a student-centered teacher? How are her beliefs and understandings enacted within her literacy instruction? As I reflected on these research questions I contemplated that student-centeredness and teacher-centeredness serve as endpoints of a continuum on which every classroom could be situated. This placement isn't static, but can fluctuate over time, or from activity to activity. I didn't find a silver bullet for creating a student-centered classroom. Rather, I

found multiple context-dependent factors that contribute to the culture and community of a student-centered classroom.

I found that central ideas from the learner-centered frameworks (APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs, 1997; Weimer, 2002; Zemelman et al., 2005) cited in my review of literature manifested themselves in my study. Overlapping concepts among these frameworks included: promotion of a constructivist approach; a shift in the role of the teacher from content dispenser to guide; endorsement of complex, deep and active learning by students; and advocacy for a more democratic and less authoritarian approach to teaching. I considered aligning my findings with one, or all three, of these frameworks, but instead chose a different route.

After having completed and rejected three drafts of this chapter, I found the book *Best Practice: Bringing Standards to Life in America's Classrooms* (Zemelman et al., 2012) in my school mailbox. It was an updated and expanded version of the 2005 book. The book included an updated model of the framework I referenced in Chapter 2. The principles remained the same, but one of the three cluster headings had been renamed. What was previously labeled Social, and included the principles Collaborative and Democratic, was now labeled Interactive and included Sociable, Collaborative, and Democratic principles. The other two cluster headings continued to be labeled Student-centered and Cognitive. I considered drawing parallels between this updated framework and my findings because the principles aligned with and supported my findings.

Upon further reading, I discovered that Chapter 2, The Seven Structures of Best Practice Teaching, delved into what Best Practice teachers do differently from other

teachers and how these teachers implement the Best Practice principles. Since a large part of my research dealt with how Julie's beliefs and understandings were enacted within her literacy instruction, I felt that aligning my findings with the Seven Structures of Best Practice presented by Zemelman et al. (2012) would allow the inclusion of pedagogical practices, as well as the theories characterized by the various principles presented in the frameworks.

It is important to note that Zemelman et al. (2012) have drawn information and research from key organizations and reports including Common Core State Standards 2010; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards 2003, 2008; National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association 1996, 2009; and National Reading Panel 2000. A complete list of Zemelman et al.'s sources of consensus of best practice can be found on page five of *Best Practice: Bringing Standards to Life in America's Classrooms (4th ed.)*. The compatibility between the best practice structures and my findings affirmed for me that student-centered teaching is effective and superior to traditional teacher-centered instruction.

Connections to the Seven Structures of Best Practice

In this section I highlight connections between the Seven Structures of Best Practice Teaching and the findings of this study, supplying examples that evidence effectiveness. The seven structures are: Gradual Release of Responsibility, Classroom Workshop, Strategic Thinking, Collaborative Activities, Integrative Units, Representing to Learn, and Formative-Reflective Assessment.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

The Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) expounds the transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the student. It refers to the steps teachers take to help their students build independence for learning tasks and behaviors. Almost everything Julie did contributed to empowering her students to become independent learners. In a general sense, she understood the magnitude of offering students choice and of helping them determine purpose. These two factors seeded intrinsic motivation, and when carefully groomed and cultivated, produced engagement and acceptance of responsibility for learning. Structures built into the classroom environment and purposeful instructional planning lent themselves to the gradual release of responsibility to students.

For much of the first six weeks of school, Julie and her students learned, practiced, discussed, and reflected upon the five independent activities students would participate in while Julie instructed small groups or met with individuals. As students worked to build stamina for the tasks, visual aids posted on the walls of the room supported their journey to independence. Individual conferences, journals, goal setting, and checklists served as both maps that helped plan the route and vehicles that drove students toward independence on specific tasks.

Julie seized upon gradually releasing responsibility within lessons. In both large group and small group lessons, she frequently captured students' attention, directly instructed, modeled the skill or strategy, offered guided practice to students, and then allowed for independent practice. Julie organized the independent practice so that

students were required to find examples or create responses using reading from their personal book boxes, self-selected and at their level, and personal writing. The authenticity offered by this practice engaged and motivated students, further encouraging acceptance of responsibility for learning.

Another authentic activity that spurred independence in Room 4S was the book club. Students were responsible for recruiting members of their book club and then allowed time to share thoughts, ideas, and feeling about the book. Early in the process, Julie taught the students various ways to hold discussions and how to make democratic decisions. They took the responsibility seriously and even surprised Julie when one group made the decision to require the same girl tell what happened in the story every day because she needed to work on comprehension and they wanted to help her with her goal.

Other anecdotes modeled students taking on responsibility. Julie's former student modeled for his fifth grade class how he figured out a word he didn't know. Another young man told Julie he already knew the five points of a plot and she should "check it off" on her list. A boy named Colby modeled two strategies, Cross Checking and Checking for Understanding, during a conference with Julie, despite being distracted by the fact that he was behind the rest of his group in the reading for the day. The students in Julie's classroom benefited from the multiple ways she embedded the Gradual Release of Responsibility.

Classroom Workshop

"Probably the single most important teaching structure to be developed in literacy education is the reading-writing workshop" (Zemelman et al., 2012, p. 46). Julie

recognized the value of the workshop model and spent many weeks at the beginning of each school year preparing students to be active participants. Her literacy workshop consisted of five independent, open-ended activities that engaged students while Julie met with small groups and individuals. The five activities were: Read to Self, Read to Others, Listen to Reading, Work on Words, and Work on Writing.

Students chose which books they would read, writing projects, and the order in which they would work on the activities. Julie prized the workshop format and insisted that she got to know her students better and that her teaching was more effective because of it. She also felt that her current students learned more than students from previous years and credited the workshop model and its student-centeredness.

Julie craved authenticity for her students and found the simple acts of reading and writing to be the most authentic practices.

> Workshop derives from the insight that children learn to read by reading, write by writing, to learn math by investigating math concepts, and that too often schools have not provided enough shared, guided, or independent practice. The workshop model recognizes that kids need less telling and more showing how, more modeling from teachers, and more time doing literacy or science or history, and less time hearing what these endeavors look like. (Zemelman et al., 2012, p. 46)

As a teacher piloting potential curriculum for her district, Julie lamented the idea that district leaders might require her to revert to what she considered less effective models of literacy instruction after she had found success with the workshop model. She compiled student data to support her instructional decisions and found ways to utilize the curriculum as a resource that blended with her workshop model.

Strategic Thinking

When Zemelman et al. (2012) discussed strategic thinking they included a list of strategies to be explicitly modeled: monitor your comprehension, make sensory images, make connections with background knowledge, ask questions, draw inferences, determine importance, and synthesize meaning. They further divided strategies into before, during, and after reading categories, depending on where each might best scaffold thinking for students.

Julie embraced flexible grouping rather than ability grouping because it allowed her to focus on skills and strategies students needed to work on at that particular time in history. She loathed traditional ability grouping, finding it to be an ineffective way to teach reading and detrimental to students' self-esteem. Individual conferences with students gave Julie opportunities to assess, teach, model, and guide goal setting toward useful strategies. A bulletin board in Julie's classroom boasted the letters CAFE and had lists of strategies posted in fourth-grade writing under the categories Comprehension, Accuracy, Fluency, and Expand Vocabulary. Julie specifically discussed with me teaching her students fluency strategies and strategies for drawing inferences. She shared that her students had mastered the strategies at their given reading level and voiced concern that they may not maintain mastery as the text levels increased. As a solution she vowed to have students continually practice.

Exhibiting once again the interconnectedness of the structures of best practice and factors that make up student-centeredness, three examples listed under the Gradual Release of Responsibility section demonstrated students utilizing strategies. The

examples also highlight Julie's ability to make theories and practice concrete for her students.

Collaborative Activities

"Across all content areas, state-of-the-art instruction requires much less teacher presentation and controlling, and far more active student learning, taking place in flexibly shifting, decentralized groupings" (Zemelman et al., 2012, p. 57). These authors underscored the importance of social relationships and listed various structures that involve students in discussion and higher-order thinking. Julie appreciated student-led conversations and collaborative work. Her 2010-2011 group of students identified socialization as key to their academic success and often reminded Julie that they needed to talk. Book clubs, peer writing and editing, partner reading, and group work exemplified social practices ubiquitous in Room 4S.

At times, Julie found it necessary to defend collaborative practices, acknowledging that more noise escaped from her room than other classrooms. It seemed natural for Julie to consider discussion and student sharing as part of the process of learning, unlike her teaching partner who was concerned about crediting the right student for work completed. Julie focused on long-range learning goals of her students, allowing time for practice without constant assessment. She also recognized that her students could often explain an idea or concept to a peer in a more understandable way than she could. This fact did not threaten her because she didn't need the power that comes with being all knowing.

Integrative Units

> In Best Practice schools and classrooms, administrators and teachers refuse to accept the randomness in learning that comes with the traditional march of separate subjects through the school day. They believe that content does matter and that for school to work, it must *make sense* to students-ideally, make sense all day long. (Zemelman et al., 2012, p. 68)

As I reflected on this structure, I felt that my data lacked evidence of integrated units because my observations and interview questions focused mainly on literacy. Upon further reflection and expansion of the concept into authentic learning, connections emerged. A theme that permeated this study was that engagement significantly increased when students were given authentic tasks and projects.

As I held conversations with Julie, she shared growth in her thinking and in her actions in regard to providing meaningful work for students. She frequently criticized the use of worksheets and jokingly claimed that it had to be a really bad day for her to give students worksheets. She continuously sought ways to immerse students in real-life experiences. Julie shared how the use of student journals had grown from students proving they had read text to conversations about books and demonstrating understanding of self-selected goals. The student book clubs mirrored those of adults that gather to discuss characters, plot twists, and connections they have made to the text. All independent tasks allowed student choice.

The year-long project of writing a fourth grade book had the potential to encompass all subjects as each time students encountered a new skill, idea, or concept they were encouraged to consider whether or not it could be included in their books. Literacy concepts such as figurative language and dialogue nestled themselves into

multiple stories. The fact that the books would be commercially published in paperback format increased intrinsic motivation exponentially.

Most significantly, students in Room 4S became readers. Few entered the classroom loving books and craving opportunities to discuss similes, character flaws, and surprise endings, but change in reading behaviors was enough to make their long-time paraprofessional cry.

Representing to Learn

> To really grasp and own a concept, we must *act upon it*, using every possible sensory modality to do so: write it, tell it to others, draw it, debate it, sing it, dance it around the room. Whatever it takes to light up those key brain regions for maximum impact. (Zemelman et al., 2012, p. 71)

I, like Zemelman et al. (2012) recognize the importance of students' expression, as well as their reception. Analyzing the structure Representing to Learn reminded me of learning about and, more recently teaching, Bloom's Taxonomy, asking my students to synthesize and create representations of their thoughts and ideas.

Many practices previously described in other structures overlapped with this one. Certainly, the authentic activities of book clubs and writing a book for publication have students representing their learning. Student journals and conversations held during individual conferences qualify as well. Julie's practice of having students demonstrate a skill or strategy through practice on white boards and with books from their book boxes shifted learning from a passive state to an active one.

Formative-Reflective Assessment

> More and more, teachers are adopting and adapting the tools of ethnographic, qualitative research: observation, interviews, questionnaires, collecting and interpreting artifacts, and performances. They use information from these sources

> not mainly to "justify" marks on a report card, but to guide instruction, to make crucial daily decisions about helping students grow. And above all, they see the main goal of assessment as helping students set goals, monitor their own work, and evaluate their efforts. Nothing more conclusively marks the well-educated person than the capacity to run one's own brain, have clear self-insight, and follow through on projects. (Zemelman et al., 2012, p. 79)

Formative assessment was so pervasive in Room 4S that not only did Julie continuously assess students, but they assessed themselves and their classmates. This practice alone is rare and when coupled with the growth-minded attitudes of the students in Room 4S, astounding. When deciding roles for book clubs, students assessed which skills each of them needed to work on to meet individual goals and assigned roles accordingly. The number of pages to be read each night was negotiated by assessing what all members of the group could successfully read.

Each time Julie worked with students in large or small groups, they held wipe-off boards and used them to demonstrate understanding of the current skill, idea, or strategy. Reading groups varied from day to day because once a student demonstrated mastery of a skill or strategy, she no longer needed to continue in that particular group. Common individual goals served as criteria for membership in other groups and changed frequently as students met goals and moved on to new goals.

Modeling, clear expectations, guided practice, and independent practice set students up for success. Checklists, journals, and individual conferences were vehicles for assessment. Julie constantly assessed students in nonthreatening, respectful, and productive ways. Students were made part of the assessment process and supplied with tools to garner success.

Clearly, Julie's student-centered teaching benefited her students academically, socially, and emotionally. As demonstrated by the examples above, many of her practices exemplified those touted as best practices. Julie's story moves beyond the body of knowledge on student-centered teaching and exposes it, offering deeper understand to those that aspire movement along the continuum of student-centeredness. My experience of observing and interviewing Julie and her literacy instruction has produced interpretations, schematics, and heuristics (Eisner, 1983). I am hopeful that my findings and my conclusions, as aligned with the Seven Structures of Best Practice (Zemelman et al., 2012), will provide "Rules of thumb…that make interpretation and judgment more acute" (Eisner, 1983, p.9).

Lessons Learned

As I contemplated what I had learned throughout this study and how what I have learned could benefit my own practice as an instructor, my thoughts continuously circled back to the gravity formative assessment plays in education. For some, the paradigm shift from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning is like leaping the Grand Canyon. It seems that in our data-driven, accountability-seeking world, some teachers feel the need to record and average every task a student completes, never allowing him to practice or develop skills in a risk-free environment. Julie taught me to focus on the journey of learning rather than on rigid deadlines. Knowing that people learn in various ways and lengths of time, Julie refrained from grading assignments and instead offered feedback for improvement until skills, strategies, and concepts were mastered. At that point the grade served as a check mark rather than a reward or punishment.

The reward of a grade, the result of summative assessment, seems to negate learning and wipe out motivation to learn. Kohn (1993/1999) in his book *Punished by Rewards* decried the use of punishments or rewards, documenting their ineffectiveness, and questioning the practice of grading, listing three justifications typically offered for grades. First, they make students perform better. Second, they sort students. Third, they provide feedback to students. Kohn refuted the first justification stating, "The carrot-and-stick approach in general is unsuccessful; grades in particular undermine intrinsic motivation and learning, which only serves to increase our reliance on them" (p. 201). It seems that when descriptive feedback and a grade are affixed to student work, the grade is prized and the feedback ignored, stunting any growth. Julie masterfully avoided this problem.

Closely aligned with grades and summative assessment, is the practice of fixed ability grouping which fails to utilize formative assessment. If formative assessment were consistently used in grouping students, fixed groups could not exist because each student possesses unique strengths and challenges, making static group membership highly unlikely, if not impossible.

It is difficult at best for teachers to make a paradigm shift regarding grades and fixed ability groups when society demands the status quo. As a parent, I am cognizant that learning skills, concepts, and big ideas trump any grade my child might receive, yet I frequently need to resist inquiring about grades because, I too, am a product of my environment. I pondered, if I struggled to make this shift after having read multiple books and articles proclaiming the detrimental effects of grading, how could the average teacher

or parent, alter his or her thinking? Until I observed, discussed, and interpreted Julie's words and examples of flexible grouping, it was difficult for me to imagine how it would look. Julie showed me the academic benefits of flexible grouping as well as the emotional benefit to students. In Julie's experience, reading group labels, verbalized or not, had profoundly negative effects on kids. By refusing to ability group, thus removing labels, Julie helped some students build self-confidence and find a voice. Other students learned to accept all voices and learn from everyone. Consistent use of formative assessment served as a powerful vehicle to achieving these accomplishments. Perhaps conscious, purposeful use of formative assessment by teachers could help shift a paradigm.

I learned that gradually releasing responsibility calls students to take back their learning. For many years well-intentioned teachers have toiled countless hours preparing lessons for students as if the information could simply be passed along. Students in turn allowed teachers to do the work, developing apathy toward learning.

When a teacher steps back and requires students to be responsible for their learning, eventually they do. It isn't easy and teachers need to exercise extreme self-control when tempted to do something for a student that he could do for himself. Like the parent who always carries his daughter, time is initially saved, but the girl never learns how to walk. Does that mean the father should dump his daughter at the top of a set of stairs? No, he should support her under the arms and when she demonstrates that she has the strength and balance at that level, he should hold her hands as she walks. Eventually he encourages her to take one step on her own as he crouches next to her, hands open and arms extended to catch her if needed. One step builds to two and then three until, over

time the little girl can walk independently. The father's role was anything but easy. He needed to know how to assess his daughter's readiness to walk and how to support her in each phase of the process. Likely, the father made errors in judgment or wasn't quick enough to catch his falling daughter. Progress was still made and the goal of walking met.

Julie didn't "carry" her students, rather she supported them. She knew the content well enough to continuously scaffold learning for all students at their various stages. She gave students clear targets for which to aim and empowered students with tools to monitor their own learning and encourage each other. Julie's lack of need for control impressed and humbled me. Small acts of relinquished control made significant impacts in her classroom: students permitted to sit at the teacher's desk, students choosing their own books and writing topics, students forming book clubs, students choosing goals and avenues with which to meet those goals. Julie trusted her students to make choices and then helped guide the learning that followed. She, in turn, was rewarded with independent learners.

Sadly, for many students school has become something to "get through" rather than to embrace. Julie shared the transformation her students made from detached, nonreaders to fully engaged students choosing to immerse themselves in books and conversations about words and books. She inspired me to become a better teacher and filled me with hope for the future of education.

Implications for Teacher Education

This study, as with every study, raised more questions for consideration. My analysis and interpretation of Julie's literacy instruction produced rich, contextualized

data that have the potential to influence educators who are interested in becoming more student-centered. Questions raised by this research include the following. How did Julie arrive at this point, an inclusive, student-centered teacher who defies societal norms? How does she sustain this position when schools and society reinforce opposing values? How can institutions of higher education graduate more teachers like Julie? These questions illuminate the societal nature that enforces conformity and hierarchies, sorting and selecting in our schools. More research is needed to discover how teachers like Julie manage to ascend and remain above the fray.

In Julie's case, it appears that her coursework in special education, experience in classroom settings, and voracious reading of research all helped form the student-centered teacher she became and thus far has sustained. One possible explanation for Julie's ability to maintain her minority philosophy of student-centeredness might be that she closes her classroom door and focuses so intently on her students that the outside world fails to exist for her. She cares so deeply about her students and their progress that little time or energy is spent on socializing in the larger school environment.

When it is necessary to participate in the larger school environment Julie's kind manner, along with her willingness to accept and share ideas, minimizes her potential threat to other teachers. She hasn't been outwardly rewarded for her success or the success of her students so other teachers wouldn't be intimidated by her. On the other hand, it must be difficult to work so hard and earn accolades that are rarely acknowledged.

In order for institutions of higher education to graduate more student-centered teachers like Julie they should explicitly and implicitly teach, and provide opportunities for practicing, the Seven Structures of Best Practice (Zemelman et al., 2012). The seven structures are: Gradual Release of Responsibility, Classroom Workshop, Strategic Thinking, Collaborative Activities, Integrative Units, Representing to Learn, and Formative-Reflective Assessment. In addition to honing skills characterized by the structures, institutions should help teacher candidates develop student-centered philosophies through practice and reflection.

A challenge requiring further research is how to bridge the philosophical change from student-centeredness to teacher-centeredness that appears to occur between preservice and inservice teaching. Instructors of teacher education should ask themselves if they are preparing teacher candidates to simply complete a program or to function in a minority philosophy of student-centeredness when they enter the world as licensed teachers and are faced with a barrage of teacher-centeredness. Assuming that preservice teachers learn student-centered practices in their educational program, are the institutions of higher education offering students tools to maintain student-centered philosophies and practices? These questions indicate the need for program assessment, as well as further research of teacher preparation in regard to acquiring and sustaining student-centered philosophies and practices.

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