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True Blue: A Narrative Inquiry Exploring Instructional Practices Used During Reading Instruction in a Title I, 2010 National Blue Ribbon School in New Mexico

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TRUE BLUE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES USED DURING READING INSTRUCTION IN A TITLE I 2010 NATIONAL BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL IN NEW MEXICO

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Dedication

To Perry, Caleb, Mom, and Dad
TRUE BLUE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXPLORING INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES USED DURING READING INSTRUCTION IN A TITLE I 2010 NATIONAL BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL IN NEW MEXICO

by

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DISSERTATION

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of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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“And miles to go before I sleep…” - Robert Frost

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Abstract

Over the past 32 years, the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program, a trademark of excellence and success in academics, has recognized nearly 7,000 American schools in which students have demonstrated high academic performance and achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Previous studies of National Blue Ribbon Schools have largely centered upon leadership characteristics (Carney-Dalton, 2001; Copeland, 2003; Kushner, 2000; Lyles, 2009; Maslyk, 2012; Sapone, 2001), but studies have not focused on the particular instructional practices that are used within these schools. Since 1982, 36 out of 862 New Mexico schools (NCES, 2013) have achieved National Blue Ribbon status (United States Department of Education, 2012). These schools have achieved National Blue Ribbon status, contradicting reports of the state’s history of its schools’ low academic performance (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2011, 2012). This Deweyian-influenced narrative inquiry tells the story of one of New Mexico’s 2010, Title I, National Blue Ribbon Schools in order to address the research puzzle concerning whether and how the use of particular instructional practices used during reading instruction contributed to student success in one such school. As opposed to research problems which carry with them qualities of definability and the expectation of a solution, narrative inquiries are composed around a particular wonder or research puzzle (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Using Dewey’s (1938) criteria of experience as a theoretical frame for interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), instructional practices were identified as exogenous and endogenous tensions. Instructional practices characterized by exogenous tensions included accountability structures, parental and community involvement, and building relationships. Those characterized by endogenous tensions included teacher-coaching, leveled instruction, classroom discourse, active monitoring of student learning, and fidelity, all
pertaining to the Balanced Literacy Framework. Teachers and principals may find that what was learned through this inquiry may have transferability in other locales and implications for policy and practice.
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Prologue: Narrative Beginnings

“Over time and cultures, the most robust and most effective form of communication is the creation of a powerful narrative.” – Howard Gardner

The First Days of School

In 1976, I entered an El Paso, Texas public school for the first time as I accompanied my mother, who was taking my brother and sister to school on their first day. Upon realizing that only they would be dropped off and not four-year-old me, my disappointed cries rang, repeatedly echoing throughout the crayon-scented halls as I yelled, “Where’s my class?” My dear mother struggled to drag me down the hall, out of the school, after dropping off my school-age siblings. The following year, it was finally my turn to enter “my class”. Eager for my schooling experience to begin, I refrained from looking back as my mother watched me enter my kindergarten class, the space which would be the birthplace for the beginnings of my socialization and my love of learning. I continued to look forward, eager to experience the unknown, the schooling experiences that were in store.

Early Social Stories

In the coming days, I would live through painful, negative schooling experiences that would take years for me to overcome. One of the first and most painful of these occurred when I was approaching a kindergarten classmate so that we could play. Another student grabbed her by the arm, pulled her away from me and said to me, “La negrita…she is not your friend no more.” The two Hispanic girls turned and walked away from me, their sole African American classmate. That night, I went home and asked my mother what the word “negrita” meant. She explained that this meant “little black girl”. Those two little girls were the first of many classmates existing
among the Hispanic majority of classmates who would call me “la negrita” throughout my early school years.

As an African American student living on the United States/Mexico border, I experienced loneliness and isolation as I was often the only African American student in classrooms that were predominantly made up of Hispanic students. During these formative years, I realized that the color of my skin was an important difference that could potentially create barriers between me and others. I learned that for some it would not matter, but for others, it would. I learned that I would have to work very hard in life to overcome racism and prejudice, but that it was possible to do so. I made the decision not to victimize others and to ensure that I would engage in a lifelong pursuit of equity and justice for myself and for others.

**From Lemons to Lemonade**

Despite some of the negative, early experiences, I still loved existing within the school environment that I so longed to join. My teachers made my learning experiences engaging and interesting. Most supported my academic growth and success in learning and ensured that I had equal access to educational opportunities. Although I had some who exhibited having racist ideologies toward me, the majority were accepting, inclusive, and tolerant. These teachers challenged me and encouraged me to excel in school. They ignited within me a passion for learning and catalyzed my desire to become a teacher.

This passion continued during my first years as a classroom teacher, even though I was classified as “highly qualified” to teach, as a new teacher, I still felt unfit and unsure about my practice. Immediately, within my first few days as a teacher working in the state of Texas, I learned about the critical importance of achieving high test scores. This was continuously the central topic of both grade level and faculty meetings. We constantly looked at student data.
Teachers whose students had achieved high scores were praised, while teachers whose students had not, were scrutinized. The teachers who had achieved high scores one year, sometimes had low scores the next. It was difficult for everyone to achieve high outcomes each year. I wondered why there was such unpredictability concerning student performance from year to year. Were these fluctuations solely based on the fact that each year teachers have different groups of students? Was there anything that teachers could do to help them in their efforts to achieve better results and to sustain them?

As a new teacher, I found that my educator preparation program did not provide me with the degree of guidance that was needed to repeatedly achieve such successful outcomes and to sustain this success on an annual basis. I found that I constantly compared myself with my colleagues. Looking at their data, which was sometimes better than mine, I wondered what they had done differently with their students than I had done with mine. I wondered what instructional practices they were using and how they were enacting these practices on a daily basis. What did they do? How did they do it?

I recall seeing my principal comparing our school to other schools in the area. When she saw that schools had out-performed us in certain areas, she too wondered what they had done differently than we had done in order to prepare our students to be successful as demonstrated by the assessment. She too wondered aloud, “What did they do? How did they do it?” As I participated in regional and statewide professional development, I found that my colleagues across the state were equally perplexed concerning what they could do to help their students achieve success.

Moving forward, when I later became a school administrator myself, I was able to identify with my former principal as I began to face the pressures of ensuring success for my
students and ultimately, my school. As I began to compare my school with other schools whose
students had performed better on statewide assessments, I continued my desire to know the
“whats” and the “hows” of other schools, but it became even more critical for me to find out. As
an administrator, my livelihood was on the line. I had observed my colleagues, other
administrators who had been demoted, transferred, or whose professional positions had been
terminated as a result of their schools’ not achieving high test scores. More lives were at stake
than just my classroom of 30 students. Now, hundreds of students, perhaps thousands, beckoned
me to discover how to best meet their academic needs, despite their ethnic or economic
differences.

The Emergence of a Research Puzzle

As the questions surfaced, a research puzzle emerged. The pages that follow will capture
the journey of my endeavors to uncover the answers to questions that ultimately became a
research puzzle. I set out to learn about the instructional practices used in one school that I
believe meets the criteria for what the literature describes as a successful school and
ultimately became a National Blue Ribbon School. In the literature, successful schools endow strong
leadership, positive school climate, student-centered focus, a focus on instruction, an unrelenting
commitment to excellence, extraordinary committal of resources, a focus on data, high quality
curriculum and instruction, high impact professional development for staff, rigor, relevance, and
relationships (Carbaugh, 2008; Taylor, 2000; Hughes, 2010; Landry, 2012; Lauritson, 2012;
Marzano, 2003; Safie, 2012; Williams, 2011). National Blue Ribbons Schools take the phrase
“successful schools” even further. Such schools school attain this status because of their
demonstration of at least five years of repeated success in demonstrating student performance at
high levels or because they made significant gains in achievement. This qualifies them to garner
the Blue Ribbon, a trademark of excellence, a symbol of quality recognized by parents and policy-makers in thousands of communities (United States Department of Education, 2012).

After working many years as an educator and completing a bachelor’s, a master’s and soon, a doctorate degree, I laugh as I ponder my childhood question, “where’s my class?” I have had many classes since then, both as a student and as a teacher, but I was as passionate about the school environment then as I am now. This passion led me to the present inquiry as I deeply desired to help to improve educational experiences for teachers and students by specifically discovering instructional practices that have been used in successful schools, particularly National Blue Ribbon Schools. In Chapter 1, I begin the discussion of this inquiry by posing questions that led to the research puzzle that is explored throughout this inquiry.
Chapter 1: Coming to the Questions

1.1 Introduction

Bartolomé (1994) has argued that although it is important to identify useful and promising instructional programs and strategies, it should not be assumed that simply replicating instructional programs or mastery of particular teaching methods, by themselves, will guarantee successful student learning, especially when considering populations that historically have been mistreated and miseducated by schools (Bartolomé 1994). Historically, schools have fallen short and the public wants more, it demands evidence that our schools can serve as the great equalizer of opportunity, fulfilling the promise of education (Noguera & Wing, 2006). It is my belief that in order to close achievement gaps and provide equitable educational opportunities for students, educators must seek out instructional practices that can be used to support their academic success.

While I agree that methods, strategies, and various instructional practices alone may not guarantee student success, as an educator, I believe that instruction cannot take place without them. I believe that the key is to discover approaches that have been employed within schools having diverse groups of students who have experienced successful outcomes.

While all schools utilize various instructional practices, some schools have found ways to successfully educate students of varying demographics, including ethnicity and socioeconomic status, with success. I believe that there is a difference in the ways in which successful schools approach instructional practices that have resulted in student success, regardless of students’ backgrounds. I believe that it is important to learn what these approaches are to inform teaching and learning for all students. For this reason, I approach this inquiry with consciousness in uncovering instructional approaches, methods and strategies as various practices that may benefit
historically marginalized, “at-risk” students by providing them with access to curriculum in ways that they are able to compete and demonstrate their success in markers of traditional public schooling, using standardized indicators.

This inquiry retrospectively explores the instructional practices that were at work in a 2010 Blue Ribbon School in Southern New Mexico, which became successful while educating a diverse population of students. During the year that the school achieved this distinguishing recognition, 91 percent of the students were Hispanic, 8 percent were white, 1 percent were other races, 71 percent of its students qualified as economically disadvantaged, and 37 percent were classified as English Language Learners (ELLs). All 569 students within the school qualified for free lunch (U.S.D.E., 2010). Demographic reports of the school district reveal that at the time, there were over 14,000 students in the district, of which forty-four percent of them were classified as ELL’s. As an eligible high poverty Local Education Agency (LEA), the school district had high numbers of economically disadvantaged students. As such, under the Community Eligibility Provision, all students in the district were eligible to receive free breakfast and lunch without having to submit household applications (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2014).

The following section articulates the research puzzle that will be explored throughout this inquiry. I specifically discuss my interest in National Blue Ribbon Schools and the instructional practices that they use. I specifically share how I became interested in a particular school and provide some background concerning the literature that contributed to the formulation of the research puzzle.
1.2 The Research Puzzle

After becoming interested in National Blue Ribbon Schools and consulting the literature concerning them, I realized that Title I National Blue Ribbon schools such as those in New Mexico, have found ways to successfully educate students, despite the challenges that their students face. I began to wonder how these schools were able to accomplish this task. As an educator and being challenged by having high numbers of economically disadvantaged students, I wondered how National Blue Ribbon award-winning Title I schools are able to meet federal indicators, although they are likely to have some of the same challenges as lower performing Title I schools. Specifically, I began thinking about the instructional practices that these schools might be using. I wondered whether and how particular instructional practices that are used within such high performing schools may contribute to the academic achievements of students within these schools. Essentially, I wanted to know what these schools were doing to achieve success and how they were doing it.

As I considered these ideas, I became interested in Southern New Mexico Elementary (pseudonym), a particular Title I school in Southern New Mexico City (pseudonym) that achieved National Blue Ribbon status in 2010. Because the city that they worked in is small, the name of the city that the school exists in will not be provided, in order to maintain confidentiality. I specifically assigned pseudonyms for the city and the school in order to conceal the identities of the participants and to protect them from any repercussions which could result from their candidness in sharing their experiences.

As I began to study the significance of becoming a Blue Ribbon School, I learned that these schools have repeatedly demonstrated success in helping “at-risk” populations of students to achieve academically. As I considered the demographics of this New Mexico school, which I
previously discussed as including high numbers of economically disadvantaged students and students who are English Language Learners (ELL’s), I became keenly interested in learning about instructional practices that were at work in this school, which might have made a positive difference for their students. How this high-performing, Title I school in New Mexico implements instructional practices in such ways that it is closing achievement gaps, enabling at-risk students to be successful according to federal standards, and ultimately, attaining National Blue Ribbon status, was something that I believed warranted further understanding in order to uncover practices that might also have implications in other schools.

My personal and professional concerns for New Mexico schools guided me to consult the literature concerning successful schools (Carbaugh, 2008; Taylor, 2000; Hughes, 2010; Landry, 2012; Lauritson, 2012; Marzano, 2003; Safie, 2012; Williams, 2011) and National Blue Ribbon schools (Carney-Dalton, 2001; Copeland, 2003; Lyles, 2009; Maslyk, 2012; United States Department of Education, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). My background in teaching and educational administration led to my strong interest in learning about the instructional practices that they use. In the literature, I found a variety of studies concerning the leadership practices of such schools (Carney-Dalton, 2001; Copeland, 2003; Lyles, 2009; Maslyk, 2012). This may be due to the emphasis that is placed on the role of leadership in navigating the course of schools.

The fact that the literature concerning the instructional practices of such schools was underrepresented, led me to become interested in specifically researching the instructional practices that are being implemented in such schools. Further, the realization that research involving New Mexico’s National Blue Ribbon schools, was not represented in the literature, led to my desire to examine the specific instructional practices that were at work in one of these schools in particular.
In considering how I might go about learning about these practices, I initially considered ethnographic methods, which would have involved participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and artifact collection. When I learned that there had been changes in the performance levels of the school that I was interested in studying, I began to reconsider my methodology. I had to find another way to learn about and to share the story of the school’s past success. I wanted learn what had happened at SNME and the highs and lows that it had experienced. Therefore, I became interested in the retrospective stories that could be shared by participants concerning what they believe had positively impacted student success within their school and what may have led to their challenges. Narrative inquiry seemed like the way to do that.

As opposed to research problems which carry with them qualities of definability and the expectation of a solution, narrative inquiries are composed around a particular wonder or research puzzle (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The research puzzle led me to engage in the practices of narrative inquiry in order to identify the specific instructional practices that were used by one National Blue Ribbon school in New Mexico. As previously discussed in my prologue, I wanted to know how schools having high numbers of ELL’s and economically disadvantaged students were able to achieve success despite their challenges. I realized that some of New Mexico’s National Blue Ribbon Schools have been successful in educating a high number of students who are considered to be “at-risk” due to the fact that they are ELL’s, economically disadvantaged, or both. I wanted to learn about the particular instructional practices that were used in one of New Mexico’s Blue Ribbon Schools, which have a high percentage of at-risk students. My initial hope was that this learning would lead to a better
understanding of whether or how the use of particular instructional methods can make a positive
difference in student performance.

While this has been my truth in seeking out these practices, I continually grapple with the
reality that due to the particularity of all experiences, I and others may not achieve the same
levels of success as those within this school by simply implementing the same practices. Because
of the dynamic nature of schooling and the multiple influences that impact it, student
performance almost inevitably fluctuates, resulting in different outcomes from year to year. As a
teacher, I was challenged by this reality, as were many of my colleagues. Still, through this
inquiry, we may satisfy a portion of our curiosity concerning instructional practices used in Blue
Ribbon schools and consider the possible implications of their use in our own work with
students.

Franzoni (1998) asserts that all classes and human groups have their narratives as it is
infinite in diversity of forms, and is present in every age, place and society. Grbch (2007)
discusses how eliciting narratives reveals our experiences, interpretations and priorities. By
engaging in narrative inquiry, I have provided a platform for the educators who participated in
this inquiry to share their experiences with me and other educators, so that I and others may learn
from them. The stories of the participants are shared through retrospection and meaning-making
within a three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

1.3 Temporality and the Three-Dimensional Space

As a method, narrative inquiry has provided a way for me to understand and share my
own lived experiences while learning through the stories of others. As a distinct form of
discourse, narrative is retrospective meaning-making in which we shape and order past events
into a meaningful whole (Chase, 2010). In coming to the use of narrative to support retrospection
and meaning-making, I was challenged by tensions and complexities described by Clandinin & Connelly (2000), who presented a theoretical frame of narrative inquiry in terms of temporal dimensionality within a metaphorical three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly. 2000; Dewey, 1938). This idea is influenced by a Deweyian (1938) view of individuals’ experiences. Such thinking involves the complexities of temporality, place, personal and social dimensionality, which prompted me to consider the idea of the participants’ and my own experiences as moving through time and pulsating along a continuum of personal and social considerations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a researcher, it stretched me to consider the idea that in theory, life is a matter of growth toward an imagined future involving living, telling stories, and reliving stories all at once (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

My interest in engaging in this inquiry through involving the selected participants stemmed from my interest in their experience of becoming an award-winning school. In the process of this inquiry, theoretically speaking, three dimensions (Dewey, 1938) impacted this experience. It cannot be viewed as only one moment in time, but must also be considered as having past, present, and future implications and having an impact on the participants both socially and personally. Further, the place or the context of this inquiry, which was the school in which they once worked, is now captured in what Clandinin & Connelly (2000) refer to as memory boxes, as their experiences of the past are presently retold. Therefore, the inquiry did not occur within the actual context of the school in which the participants, worked, but in the school as it is remembered by the participants.

Following Deweyian (1938) notions of interaction, narrative inquiry methods guided me and the participants into four directions within the process of research: inward and outward, backward and forward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) There was introspection, or moving
inward, meaning that we had the opportunity to explore our feelings and ideas. There was an outward experience which involved consideration of the environment in which they worked. Rotating in backward and forward directions took us back to the notion of temporality, or past, present, and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938). Moving within these directions allowed for a deeper understanding of my own experiences and those of the participants as we developed the research relationship. This relationship developed as we shared our common interests in teaching and learning. We immediately bonded with one another as I learned the intimate details of the particularities of their experience. Unable to resist, a part of me still wondered whether and how their experience could be connected to the grand narratives of educational research.

1.4 Grand Narratives of Educational Research

Another challenge that I experienced in engaging in this inquiry was the tension between narrative inquiry ideologies and the grand narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lyotard, 1984) of educational research and the aim toward knowledge production:

A contextual or reflexive view of knowledge, including fields of study and practice such as education, puts all knowledge in its context and tries to understand how the dynamics of the social and cultural shape the content, form, and direction of knowledge (Wexler, 2009, p. 1)

Grand narratives of educational research stem from the many aims of education. Such grand narratives relate to generalizations, what is taken for granted (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and a coherent understanding of the various roles of education in society. Because there are opposing viewpoints with regard to the goals, aims, and roles of education in society, these ideas are controversial. These controversial ideas include but are not limited to enduring Marxist ideas of reproduction and capitalism and Durkheimian notions characterized by integration and functionalism (Wexler, 2009). These theories aid in the explanation of how education
perpetuates particular sociological processes within the larger society. They aim to describe how society is held together and how the existing society continues (Wexler, 2009). In this system, some groups experience maldistribution and demand improvements to improve their access to legitimating means of production (Dumas, 2009).

Rooted in the ideas of reproduction and having dire consequences in the realm of teaching and learning, the most prominent of the grand narratives in recent years stem from positivist privileging of experimental designs which seek reproducible, predictable results (Hubert & Knotts, 2012). If this goal were attainable, a formula would exist which would ensure that each year all students achieved at high, quantifiable levels. As an administrator, I believe that it would be wonderful to have a formula of practices that would work with all students within any context. Experimental designs seek this type of replicability in the quest for success for all students, a facet of educational grand narratives.

I must admit that I, too, initially set out to find answers that would lead to replicability as I hoped to uncover practices that were used by SNME that I could use in my own school, which would yield the same level of success that was experienced by SNME. This desire continues to be a struggle for me as I am torn between making a contribution such as this to the grand narratives of research, which is overtly at odds with the idea of staying true to and accepting the reality of the particularity of the participants’ experiences. At times, I have found myself experiencing a turning away-from-experience and a leaning toward quantifying what interests me (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This has been a continual struggle as I contend with these tensions in seeking answers to my questions.
1.5 Staying True

In this inquiry, I aim to stay true to the experiences of the participants, despite my desires to find the answers to my initial inquiry questions, or to contribute in some way to educational grand narratives. For this reason, I will remain cognizant of the potential risks, dangers, and abuses of narrative. This includes but is not limited to distinguishing between fact and fiction, being sensitive and true to my own story as a researcher, by maintaining an awareness of “I” as a critic, setting aside narcissistic and solipsistic tendencies, through maintaining ethics, while staying true to the stories as told by the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To do this, I have engaged in acts of introspection and reflection that were made possible through journaling, in order to process ideas. I found this technique to be the best way to maintain an awareness of my thought processes throughout the course of the inquiry.

Through the process of narrative inquiry I hope to convey the level of trust and friendship that developed between me and the participants. Their level of openness toward me, a complete stranger, was unexpected and allowed for their school’s success story to be told. Narrative inquiry requires a great deal of trust, openness, mutual collaboration, and a caring relationship akin to friendship (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I believe that the participants and I were miraculously able to develop our relationship immediately upon meeting each other, as we recounted that special time in their lives, when winning the Blue Ribbon Schools Award at one time brought them together and now brings us together.

The sections that follow pave the path of “why” questions which led to the development of the research puzzle by sharing the process involved in the formation of the puzzle. I reveal my own positionality as it relates this work. I pose the questions that guided this inquiry and provide background and rationale concerning the use of narrative inquiry in educational studies. I
explain my reasoning for my use of narrative as a method, which is heavily influenced by the narrative inquiry approach framed by Clandinin & Connelly (2000).

1.6 Why New Mexico?

I am a Texas educator residing on the Texas/New Mexico state lines. Schools that I have worked in have frequently enrolled students who were transferring from New Mexico. I have overheard colleagues discussing students who transferred from New Mexico, describe these students as low achieving. I have even heard teachers verbalizing their assumptions that students coming from New Mexico were struggling before they had even formally assessed their learning. The attitudes of teachers toward such students led to my awareness of what seemed to be a stigma concerning New Mexico schools. Whenever colleagues would engage in conversations centering on New Mexico schools, the discussions were laced with negativity concerning the substandard academic performance of New Mexico schools and ultimately, the low academic performance of their students. I wondered what was happening in New Mexico schools that resulted in publicized failures (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2011, 2012) and the negative perceptions of Texas educators, my colleagues, and my friends. Aware of this stigma, I also wondered how some of New Mexico’s schools were beating the odds by becoming National Blue Ribbons Schools. More than successful schools, schools achieving the Blue Ribbon, were distinguished from the rest.

1.7 Why the Blue Ribbon?

In Chapter 2, I elaborate on the processes, distinctions, and privileges of becoming a National Blue Ribbon School. Here, I would like to provide some brief background concerning my interest in these highly esteemed schools. As an educator, I have come to have high regard for schools who have earned the Blue Ribbon. I covet the feeling of pride that comes with
participating in a successful collective effort that results in the national distinction and prestige of my own school. According to the United States Department of Education (2014) many regard schools who have achieved the Blue Ribbon as schools that are worthy of honor and recognition:

Each year, National Blue Ribbon Schools shine under a national spotlight for all the right reasons. The award acknowledges and validates the hard work of students, educators, families, and communities in striving for—and attaining—exemplary achievement. For many, attaining the National Blue Ribbon School award is the realization of a long-held dream. National Blue Ribbon Schools serve as models for other schools throughout the nation, and school personnel are often sought out as mentors. Their applications are posted on the U.S. Department of Education's website, and media eagerly profile recognized schools, helping the school, its district, and community gain additional exposure. Representatives from schools are honored at an annual awards ceremony held in Washington, DC. Each school receives an engraved plaque and program flag with the official seal, which signifies its status and the year of its award (United States Department of Education, 2014).

My quest to achieve the Blue Ribbon in my own school – and to discover some of the secrets to some schools’ success in student achievement – led me to this work.

1.8 Why a Title I School?

Southern New Mexico Elementary was built in 2004 and is minutes away from the U.S./Mexico border. It is a Title I school, which means that federal funds are specifically allotted to this school in order to meet the needs of its economically disadvantaged students in order to ensure that “all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic assessments” (United States Department of Education, 1965). This school is one of seven Title I Blue Ribbon Schools in New Mexico and one of 594 Title I Blue Ribbon Schools in the United States to receive this award since 2009, the year that Title I data for National Blue Ribbon Schools began being compiled (United States Department of Education, 2014).
Title I schools are designated as such when at least 35 percent of their students are economically disadvantaged. Title I funding provides additional federal funding to schools in order to ensure that “high-quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials are aligned with challenging state academic standards so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators can measure progress against common expectations for student academic achievement” (United States Department of Education, 2004). The main goal of Title I is to meet the educational needs of low-achieving students in high-poverty schools. It aims to close the achievement gaps between high and low-performing children, minority and nonminority students, and disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers (United States Department of Education, 2004).

In the year that SNME achieved this distinguishing recognition, of its 569 students, 91 percent were Hispanic, 8 percent were white, 1 percent were other races, 71 percent qualified as economically disadvantaged, 37 percent were English Language Learners, and all qualified for subsidized lunch (U.S.D.E., 2010). Demographic reports of the school district reveal that there are over 14,000 students in the district. One hundred percent of the students are considered to be economically disadvantaged. Forty-four percent of the students are English Language Learners, or ELL’s (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2011). In 2010, the year that SNME attained the award, area census reports for Southern New Mexico City revealed that 25.8 percent of residents were living below poverty level and the median household income was $38,462. This is compared to 19.5 percent of overall New Mexico residents living below poverty level and a state average income of $44,886 (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program has been criticized for rewarding schools whose students are privileged, and have high socioeconomic status:
The problem with this program is a failure to carefully distinguish what might constitute a "Blue Ribbon" or "most successful" school. The simplistic approach, and apparently the one used, is to see where students are achieving and give an award to that school. The problem with that is that it fails to recognize what is termed "socioeconomic status," that is, the backgrounds of the students. It has long been obvious, and proven by studies, that students with advantaged backgrounds in terms of family income, educational levels achieved by the parents, who come from homes with books, computers, opportunities for travel etc., will do better than students who do not have those advantages. With all due respect to the schools receiving awards, what the federal Department of Education is recognizing is not so much blue ribbon schools as it is blue ribbon students, the kind of students who do well by virtue of their backgrounds, both individually, with most of them having advantages, and collectively, since their being together in one school makes it not only possible but inevitable that they will learn from each other. The true Blue Ribbon schools are those where the school makes a difference, where students succeed who are not normally expected to do so. There are such schools, public and nonpublic. They are the ones who most deserve recognition, and, as the Blue Ribbon Awards for nearly 20 years have shown, are the ones least likely to receive it (Kirkpatrick, 2000).

SNME is such a school. Despite having high numbers of economically disadvantaged students, and being a Title I school, it was able to achieve Blue Ribbon status. In the same year, the school also achieved recognition for the outstanding achievement of English Language Learners and led its district in New Mexico Standards Based Assessment (NMSBA) proficiency scores (U.S.D.E., 2010). For these reasons, it can truly be considered as a Blue Ribbon School whose students were recognized for their outstanding achievement, despite the fact that they were economically disadvantaged. For this reason, SNME was of particular interest to me.

1.9 Why Me?

As a researcher and as a scholar, I must acknowledge the significance of my own positionality (Hubert & Knotts, 2012). The multiple identities of parent, teacher, administrator, and scholar have impacted how I view education, particularly processes of teaching, learning, and school leadership. There is an intermingling of the stories of which I am that have shaped my approach to inquiry and these are impossible to completely set aside. The mixing of professional and personal experiences heavily influence my beliefs about how these constructs should be
carried out. For this reason, I may unwittingly pay more attention to some ideas, while ignoring others. This is not my intention. In acknowledging the reality that I bring biases to the inquiry, I aim to make known my own preconceived notions and my preoccupation with finding answers to my questions that could potentially cause me to see what is not there and to be blind to what actually is. Continual reflection, introspection, and journaling have enabled me to maintain an awareness of my positionality. The administrator, teacher, and parent in me wanted answers to my questions. The researcher and scholar in me struggled to locate the most suitable path toward finding them.

My professional experiences as a public school educator have shaped the landscape for my interest in exploring the work of schools. At the same time, in considering the work that I would do for this dissertation, it was important to me to engage in work that would be meaningful in personal, professional and scholarly ways. For these reasons, multiple “I’s” approach this work. These personal, scholarly, and professional “I’s” are at odds, constantly conflicting with one another, and lie in the fact that I approach this inquiry through lenses of multiple identities. A parade of “I’s”, inclusive of me as a parent, teacher, administrator, and scholar equally shared an interest in engaging in this inquiry.

1.10 I, the Parent

As a parent residing in New Mexico, I became concerned about the publicized, negative press, which discussed the alarming statistics of the state’s low-performing K-12 schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2011, 2012). Like most parents, I want the best possible education for my child and it concerned me that a large number of New Mexico schools were not meeting federal academic accountability standards.
Another parent recently told me that she was looking for a new home. I told her that she should consider moving from Texas to New Mexico because of the lower property taxes. Her reply rendered me speechless as she looked at her baby and uttered, “Yes, but the schools.” Her response echoes those of other New Mexico parents that I have talked to, many of whom which have decided to send their children to private schools.

As a parent, I too can identify with her concerns. I have high expectations of the schools in which I enroll my children, just as she does. I expect teachers to do the best that they can to provide them a high quality education. I expect their teachers to prepare them well enough to be able to compete for entrance into colleges of their choice and in their professions of choice. As a parent, I demand these things, but as a teacher, I realize the challenges that are involved in educating students and I empathize.

1.11 I, the Teacher

No matter what positions I work in within the field of education, I will always consider myself first and foremost to be a teacher. I believe that keeping this idea as central to my professional practice has enabled me to continually seek out the best ways to serve my students. In viewing myself as a teacher, I became engaged in this inquiry because I wanted tools that would inform and enhance my teaching practices. Because of my history as a teacher, I wanted to hear the success stories of other teachers. My hope was that learning from them, would help me to be the best educator I could be.

1.12 I, the School Administrator

As I continued in my work as a teacher, I became comfortable with my craft and found success and satisfaction through my students’ learning. I loved the school environment, my classroom, and my students and seeing the positive impact that I could have on their lives birthed
a yearning to impact even more students. So, I decided to become a school administrator, which has afforded me the opportunity to transform the schooling experience of hundreds of students each year.

While I will always be a teacher at heart, I currently serve as a public school assistant principal. As such, I experience pressure to make sure that I produce test score data that reflects my ability to lead teachers toward successful outcomes in teaching their students. Since I feel this pressure to produce such outcomes in order to maintain my employment, I find that I in turn put pressure on my teachers. To put this “pressure” on teachers requires knowing what they need to do in order to be able to successfully educate students and requires providing teachers with the needed guidance. As a school administrator, I see myself as an instructional leader. I feel that I must be able to provide teachers with the instructional leadership, guidance, and support that they need in order to be the best teachers that they can possibly be. For these reason, “I” the administrator wanted to inquire in order to learn about whether and how the use of particular instructional practices may have contributed to successful student outcomes.

Although high test scores are important in maintain my professional position, as a public school administrator, my personal desire is to create the most positive schooling experiences possible for my students, despite the life challenges that they will inevitably face. Poverty, bullying, racism, and abusive home situations are just a few of the difficulties that I have seen my students face. As an educator working within the public school system, I do everything that I can to help them, but sometimes, it is not enough. Compounding the issues is the fact that despite the difficulties that our students face, educators are still expected to demonstrate that we are helping our students to be successful, despite their circumstances. I am learning through facing the unfortunate truth, that passion for education, having love for my students, and the desire for
their success are simply not enough to be able to meet the mandates and expectations of the accountability systems in which schools are structured.

School administrators are expected to produce high test scores, by any means necessary. While our students continue to grow and to change in ways that are not quantifiable, the observable, highly regarded outcome continues to be high student test scores. For this reason, the search for this Holy Grail, desiring to unearth tools to help myself, my teachers, and my colleagues to help students to be successful using these indicators, catalyzed this inquiry. Experiencing the challenges of obtaining and sustaining successful outcomes for students led me to consider educators and schools which have been able to do so. What have they done? How did they do it? While these questions have always been there, as an administrator, I had more to gain if I found out and more to lose if I did not. “I” the scholar would have to explore this issue.

1.13 I, the Scholar

My role as a scholar, more specifically, a doctoral student must be explicated. My experiences as a doctoral student have heavily influenced my beliefs and assumptions about education, more specifically, teacher education and school leadership. This work is a product of the intermingling of these beliefs and assumptions. Engaging in this inquiry has provided me the opportunity to synthesize and to express my learning as a doctoral student.

My initial Teaching, Learning, and Culture doctoral program courses introduced me to the work of Paolo Freire and to the ideas of critical pedagogy. These courses provided an introduction to new terminology and the themes that have continued to emerge throughout my coursework. It was Paolo Freire (2009) who stated that “discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action: nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be praxis” (Freire, 2009, p. 65). Dewey discussed the notion of
reflective thinking as a component to teaching, learning, and curriculum development (as cited in Gitlin & Ornstein, 2009). Through reflective practice, teachers reconstruct, reenact, recapture events, and learn from particular experiences in order to employ analytic knowledge (Shulman, 2009).

As I reflect upon my learning experiences in the program, themes of multicultural education, equity pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy and pedagogical relevance pervade my learning experiences. These ideas have influenced me as I continue to pursue a far-reaching, empowering praxis, which can positively impact the learning experiences of generations of individuals. This researched is shaped my desire to continue to use what I have I have learned in the program concerning reaching diverse groups of learners. In exploring strategies that have been effective in meeting the needs of students in two of New Mexico’s National Blue Ribbon Schools, I am seeking ways to support the academic success of culturally diverse students who are considered to be in at-risk situations. As this population of students continues to grow and as accountability measures persist, it becomes increasingly important for educators to know “what works” in meeting these students varied needs. What do I mean by multicultural education, equity pedagogy, & culturally responsive teaching?

1.14 Multicultural Education

Multicultural approaches enable educators to reach a more comprehensive understanding of diverse groups of students (Takaki, 1993). I am interested in continuously engaging in scholarly research to help practitioners in developing an all-inclusive classroom culture, which allows practitioners and students to see events from the viewpoints of different groups of people and welcomes their varied experiences. Students multiply benefit from multicultural educational practices because they learn how to appreciate diversity and how to practice tolerance in their
interactions with diverse groups. They also benefit from the presence of an empowering, tolerant environment and the absence of an oppressive, racially charged classroom dynamic.

Unfortunately, many individuals are not provided an education that is based on their specific, culturally diverse needs. In fact, millions of students (particularly African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans) attend schools that are segregated, inequitably financed, are teacher-centered, are lacking a student centered learning environment and in which inequities and achievement gaps exist (Valencia, 1997). This mistreatment of students is largely catalyzed by racist ideologies, which result in institutional racism. Banks (2006) urges educators to become effective cultural mediators and change agents as opposed to perpetuating dominant, racist ideologies. Multicultural education provides educators and students with the knowledge base to be able to navigate the landscape of culturally diverse groups of people and allows opportunities for equity pedagogy. Various approaches that I have studied in the doctoral program have helped me to understand how I can implement multicultural education as part of practice. This includes examining curriculum, and researching various methods and strategies that work best in instructing diverse populations of learners. In the next section, I discuss equity pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and pedagogical relevance, all important approaches to multicultural education.

1.15 Equity Pedagogy

Equity pedagogy is the use of various teaching strategies and classroom environments which help racially and ethnically diverse students of varying cultural groups, to attain the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they need to be able to create, perpetuate and function within a just, humane, and democratic society (Banks & Banks, 1995). Practitioners play a critical role in engaging in equity pedagogy which empowers students through optimum
learning conditions, which include consideration of their diverse needs. The needs of students vary and can be cognitive, linguistic, social, physical, or emotional. The most effective practitioners are those who draw from a variety of pedagogical methods and strategies designed to meet the needs of a variety of learners. They seek various research-based practices, which are specifically proven to reach historically marginalized students and unleash their potential. They work to ensure that all students have genuine opportunities to learn in high stakes, standards-based settings by developing their understandings of learner differences (Meo, 2008). They achieve this by involving students in the construction of knowledge, building on students’ strengths, engaging students in examining curriculum from different perspectives, using varied assessment practices and establishing an inclusive classroom environment (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Engaging in equity pedagogy is inseparably connected to culturally responsive pedagogy.

1.16 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy involves acquiring a knowledge base about ethnic and cultural diversity. It requires becoming personally and professionally aware of varied cultures by acquiring specific pedagogical knowledge related to students’ unique needs. The dispositions, knowledge and skills of educators can be developed so that teachers become culturally responsive in their approaches to providing instruction (Villegas and Lucas, 2002). Six strands are proposed which teachers can develop in order to become culturally responsive practitioners (Villegas and Lucas, 2002). These include sociocultural consciousness, developing an attitude of affirmation toward culturally diverse groups of students, becoming committed and acquiring skills that are needed to act as agents of social change, adopting constructivist views of learning, generally learning about students and engaging in culturally responsive teaching practices (Villegas and Lucas, 2002).
In general, the collective ideas of culturally responsive pedagogy involve creating a non-threatening learning environment in which students of varying cultures and backgrounds are celebrated and validated. This means ensuring that structures are in place which provides students opportunities to share their diverse experiences with others, allowing the classroom audience to benefit from this discourse.

Offering students opportunities to share their culturally unique customs, traditions and celebrations is one way to do this. Allowing students to provide input and to make choices concerning classroom activities, is another student-centered, culturally responsive practice. Educators should study the classroom curriculum and consider how culturally responsive practices can be embedded into their lessons. With effective, culturally responsive practitioners, curricular structures and activities present, the key components are in place to create a culturally responsive classroom that provides relevant curriculum and instruction. Engaging in culturally responsive pedagogy assists in providing the pedagogically relevant curriculum that students need to be successful.

1.17 Pedagogical Relevance

Pedagogical relevance in teaching and learning refers to our endeavors to seek methods to provide learners with the basis for understanding why and how new knowledge is related to what students already know. Further, it gives them the affective assurance that they have the capability to use this new knowledge in new contexts and enables them to construct their own meaning for segments of learning (Novak & Gowin, 1984). Gay (2008) suggests that improved teaching and learning is manifested and easier to accomplish, when students of varied cultures are able to find personal meaning during instructional processes. Relevance in a multicultural education is fostered by active participatory learning rather than by passive learning involving
worksheets or lecturing (Gay, 2008). This can be accomplished through student-centered, relevant instructional practices as opposed to traditional teacher-centered practices.

My doctoral coursework has helped me to consider the importance of expanding my repertoires of practice in the classroom in order to meet the diverse needs of a variety of learners. Further, I have learned how to engage in scholarly research that can be used to enhance student learning and how practitioners as change agents can use research to equip themselves to be able to deliver an empowering educational praxis. This is needed as a remedy for historically marginalized students, who are also referred to as the “other” (Nasir, 2006). In seeking ways to ensure success for all students, we can create inclusive environments and expand our knowledge base about students’ diverse histories and the varied sociocultural characteristics of all students.

Although adopting the disposition that all children can learn, may sound trite, but I have learned that this can be accomplished if educators consider students’ varied learning needs and embrace diversity among their students. This is critical to the empowerment of all students in that it fosters pride in minority cultures, helps minority students to develop new insights into their cultures, reduces prejudice and stereotyping, and promotes intercultural understandings (Rubalcava, 1991 in Ogbu, 1992). My emergent scholarly pursuits have empowered me as a learner and as a practitioner. As I continue my scholarly pursuits, it is my desire to continue to explore approaches to multicultural education, such as equity pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and curricular relevance in teaching and learning, to create new knowledge and to empower others.

My quest for scholarly pursuits have catalyzed my interest in engaging in this study, in hopes to fulfill the expectation of addressing the gaps in the literature concerning New Mexico
schools and National Blue Ribbon Schools. I initially approached this work by considering the possibilities of critical literacy and collective efficacy as theoretical frameworks.

1.18 Critical Literacy

As I considered, I believed in the possibility that a school such as Southern New Mexico Elementary, or SNME (pseudonym) which has demonstrated success in empowering historically minoritized students to achieve, perhaps wittingly or unwittingly practiced some of the elements of critical literacy in their approach to reading instruction.

Critical literacy assumes that teaching can never be neutral, but always embraces various ideologies and perspectives (Powell et al., 2001). It supports a strong democratic system that is undergirded by equity and shared decision making and assumes that literacy instruction can empower and lead to transformative action (Powell et al., 2001). The language and ideas of critical literacy should be included in conversations concerning educational reform efforts that emphasize going beyond basic reading and writing and leading students toward empowerment. This practice can occur through critical thinking, developing voice, agency, and the power of production across traditional and new media genres (Morrell, 2010). A critical literacy stance centers on the notion that literacy is not a solely cognitive process, but a socio-culturally situated practice that involves continuous negotiation of meaning. Therefore, all literacy can be considered to be critical or arising from various crises (Mario & de Souza, 2007).

For years, the research base supporting literacy instruction has focused predominantly on cognitive processing, but there is a current shift toward sociocognitive and sociocultural research in literacy which addresses the broader complexities of learning (O’Brien et al., 1995). Critical literacy instruction is one form of pedagogy which confronts deeply embedded values that teachers and students hold and acknowledges the cognitive and sociocultural links of literacy to
various contexts (O’Brien et al., 1995). This can be accomplished by providing students with strategies that empower them to “take control of their learning”. For instance, by using strategies such as the K-W-L strategy (Ogle, 1986), in which students are asked what they know, want to know, and want to learn, this contradicts traditional schooling ideologies in which the teacher is in control and decides what students will learn (Cuban, 1984; Goodlad, 1984). This type of instruction helps students meet the academic challenges they face in encountering ever-increasing ranges of text by supporting them in learning how to evaluate and create texts. Such practices prepare them to become powerful, critical participants both in the classroom and the world beyond (Wilson, 2008).

Critical literacy seeks a pedagogy of possibility for all and challenges the federal accountability system by considering the role of literacy in privileging some and disadvantaging others through standardized assessments which allow or deny access, oppress or empower, and prevent some students’ participation in a democratic education. It provides the opportunity for equity pedagogy and empowers both the school culture and the social structure (Banks & Banks, 1995; Banks, 2006). It makes the case that no matter which methods and strategies are used to support students in learning content, this learning and the making of meaning ultimately occurs within the complexities of individual differences that must also be considered in the teaching of content. It involves the viewing of text meaning making as a process of social construction, considers the underlying agendas within discourse, the positioning of authors and writers and considers texts as tools with multiple interpretations (Stevens & Bean, 2007). Discourse relating to the impact of culture on learning is critical to the discussion of student learning as there are necessary instructional considerations for empowering students of varying ethnicities, races, cultures, and backgrounds. When teachers understand and accept the reality and the existence of
learning as a cultural process, this supports students in moving along the continuum from cultural captivity toward globalism and competency (Banks, 2006). Reyes and Halcon (2001) assert that educators must deliberately mediate across various areas of students’ sociocultural knowledge to demonstrate the positive regard that they have for students’ learning capacities in order to successfully negotiate students’ zones of proximal development¹. Moje et al. (2004) advance the notion of bridging home and school to enhance in-school content literacy.

In critically literate classrooms, educators fundamentally understand the sociocultural complexities that students possess that directly impact their individual knowledge bases. They know that the depth and complexity of learning that takes place in the classroom does not occur accidentally, therefore critically literate teachers deliberately navigate learning landscapes by specifically planning lessons so that the discussions and interactions in the classroom contribute to students’ operational, cultural and critical literacy development (Nasir et al., 2006).

In considering critical literacy pedagogy, it is important to understand how student learning can take place in a variety of settings and constructs. Gutierrez et al., (1999) and Soja (1996) refer to the integration of home and school as a “third space”. In critically literate contexts, the use of this theoretical space can be developed within students through teachers by using experiments, discussions, and varied reading and writing activities. This hybrid language can help educators negotiate or traverse the diverse and often conflicting urban classroom landscape (Gutierrez, 1999). These ideologies are alternative practices to literacy teaching and learning that transcend the boundaries of the classroom. In the critically literate classroom, learning how to mediate within this theoretical third space requires a willingness on the part of the teacher to value the home-school connection in student learning. Teachers who learn how to

¹ Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD) refer to the space between what a child can do with help and what he or she can do without assistance (Vygotsky, 1978).
navigate these territories for literacy development avail themselves of all of the possible avenues through which literacy development can be facilitated.

Critical literacy educators position themselves with knowledge of what powerful teaching looks like and what powerful language and literacy learning entails (Miller & Veatch, 2010). In doing so, they realize that many answers to the most difficult literacy education questions are located within successful classrooms, therefore, they seek out and closely investigate successful classrooms, establishing sources of research which identify successful critical practices that transcend geographic and socioeconomic contexts and accumulate data on effective practices that lead to achievements in high-poverty, high-need schools (Morrell, 2010). In considering critical literacy pedagogy’s reach in teaching and learning for at-risk students, and whether it gives voice to historically oppressed groups of students, various strategies may support students in developing their reading skills so that they have opportunities to learn through contextualized, student-centered reading and writing experiences (Lesley, 2001).

In critically literate classrooms, learning processes are facilitated through structures that support meaning-making, which specifically involve strategies to activate students’ background knowledge and experiences in the knowledge construction process. These processes draw from text and discourse and emphasize student voices and dialogue (Beck, 2005).

The framework of critical literacy considers the ways in which students can be empowered in this standards-based, accountability-driven society. Its use describes how educators seek ways to help students to be successful in the classroom and to be able to demonstrate their success in learning, using standardized assessments as indicators. While notions of critical literacy was initially considered in this study as it pertains to the success of disadvantaged students, collective efficacy is another framework that is considered because of its
use in describing the success of teachers who work together toward the goal of student success. The following section discusses why I initially approached this work through the frame of collective efficacy.

1.19 Collective Efficacy

In order to apply for the National Blue Ribbon Schools Award, members of the school had to complete a detailed application which included the school’s demographics, provided information on academic success indicators, and generally described some of the practices that are at work in the school that has contributed to its success. In the application, staff members described the use of a shared vision, common goals, being a community of learners, and having a culture of inclusiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). These statements suggested to me the possible presence of collective efficacy, a concept that I initially considered which may theoretically describe how the staff members work together to plan and to implement particular instructional practices which may contribute to the school’s repeated success.

Proposing cognitive theory of human agency, (Goddard et al., 2000, 2001) argued that student achievement is systematically associated with teachers’ collective efficacy, which is teachers’ perceptions that their collective efforts will positively impact their students. Collective efficacy among teachers, which is positively associated with student achievement, may explain the differential effect that schools have on student achievement and has the potential to contribute to the understanding of how schools differ in attaining success in educating students (Goddard et al., 2000, 2001). There is a positive link between collective efficacy and group goal attainment and this link is stronger than socioeconomic status and student achievement, as explored by one study which controlled for students’ prior achievement, race/ethnicity, SES and
gender, and found that collective efficacy beliefs had stronger effects on student achievement than did students’ race or socioeconomic status (SES) (Goddard et al., 2004).

Trimble (2002) explored the elements of five high-performing, high-poverty middle schools and found that these schools had well-articulated goals, communicated high expectations, and implemented programs and exercised practices that were aligned to their goals. This included a focus on teaming as opposed to working in isolation, as these schools found the work of schools to be too complex. For these schools, teaming attributed to increased parent involvement, improved working conditions, and ultimately, greater job satisfaction (Trimble, 2002). These successful schools did not collectively cite particular instructional practices, methods, or strategies as being among the reasons for their schools’ success, but instead emphasized the work of their school administrative and faculty teams as the key to their success.

Another study explored a high-performing, high-poverty elementary school on the Texas-Mexico border that has beaten the odds of success and is considered to be a “pocket of excellence” among other lower-performing schools (Lopez, 2012). This study concluded that shared leadership, collective governance, and the work of teams (not working in isolation) contributed to the success of the school that was the focus of the study (Lopez, 2012). For these reasons, collective efficacy is considered as another framework for this study, which considers ways in which the collective efforts of school teams can transcend issues of race and SES to empower students to be successful. Although other frameworks emerged during the process of conducting this inquiry, collective efficacy and critical literacy were the theoretical frameworks that initially guided this study. Just as theoretical frameworks guided my thinking during the process of beginning this work, I also considered various methodologies in order to find the path that was best suited for finding the answers that I needed.
1.20 Grappling with Methods

Although I initially considered ethnography and case study methodologies, I ultimately decided upon the use of narrative inquiry after realizing that the Blue Ribbon school that I was interested in was not performing as successfully as it previously did. Recent reports (NMPED, 2012, 2013). I experienced dissonance as I began to realize that the school that I was interested in because of its success, revealed quantified signs that it was struggling. I will explore this issue in more detail in chapter 8.

My original research proposal involved conducting a series of classroom observations and interviews within the classrooms of the Blue Ribbon teachers. As I continued to review the data published by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED), I became uneasy. The facts could not be ignored and I came to terms with the realization that the school that I was interested in because of its success was facing serious academic and student achievement challenges.

To remedy my situation, I considered researching another school, so that I could conduct research in a school that was currently performing well. My committee prompted me to continue my research using the same school, but to alter the project design in order to retrospectively explore the school’s instructional practices. We agreed that it was important to retrospectively explore what was enacted at SNME which contributed to its great success.

1.21 Why Narrative?

In order to retrospectively explore practices which led to the success of SNME and to learn about how it has evolved as a result of more recent experiences, I opted to engage in narrative inquiry (Chase, 2005; Chase, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Huber, in press; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall &
Rossman, 2006). I believed that such methods were best suited to conveying the stories of other educators, to capturing their experiences, and in connecting their experiences with my own, improving the synthesis of my learning. For these reasons, the narrative approach was considered to be the most appropriate method for this study, which was an inquiry into the experiences of two individuals, a principal and a teacher, who worked within this award-winning school and had intimate knowledge of the processes involved in its becoming a Blue Ribbon school.

Seeking a method for data analysis which provided an opportunity to strengthen the understanding of my own story as an educator and those of my participants, I have chosen to engage in this work as a narrative inquiry. I was drawn to this approach based on the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) in particular, whom I related to in their acknowledgement of the idea that as narrative inquirers, we seek personal justification for our interests and situate inquiries within the contexts of our own lives. Narrative inquirers work to articulate a relationship between their own “personal interests in seeking seek a sense of significance within larger social concerns which can be expressed within the works and lives of others” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 122). As an educator, I view my work in research and practice as social justice as I aim to find ways to support schools in the increasingly difficult work of educating students.

I believe that it is important to engage in exploration within the fields of the storied lives of successful educators who have treaded the path before me and have had a positive impact. I wanted find the best path to learn from the experiences of such educators who would participate by sharing their stories with me. I wanted to share my own story, to convey the particularity of the participants’ experience, and to develop these into a story that could be shared with others. Therefore, I decided to employ the use of narrative inquiry.
1.22 Other Stories in the Field of Experience

I am not the first to consider the use of narrative as a method for telling the story of experience. This phenomenon and method is increasingly and particularly used in studies of educational experience (Chase, 2005; Chase, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For this reason, others have engaged in narrative inquiry to aid our understanding of educational experiences (Cortez-Ford, 2008; Dickinson, 2012; Hunsburger, 2008; Makris, 2012; Smadu, 2008).

To learn about the nature of learning in inquiry-based classrooms, Hunsburger (2008) investigated the experiences of three teachers who enacted inquiry learning, which involves learners in constructing knowledge and understanding by posing questions, theorizing, researching, testing, and revising responses to their own questions. While at the same time exploring the researcher’s journey as teacher, teacher leader, and researcher, Hunsburger (2008) found that reconstructing one’s role as an inquiry teacher involves an iterative process of experimentation, reflection, and construction that is deeply personal and unique to each teacher. The use of narrative inquiry methods provided a path for the researcher to connect her own stories to the teachers that she worked with in order to learn about the use of inquiry-based methods in classrooms. This collaboration provided a synthesis which seemingly provided a deeper understanding for the researcher.

In order to learn about how elementary teachers construct teacher-leader identities, Cortez-Ford (2008) examined the journeys of nine classroom teachers as they pursued leader identities. In this inquiry, the teachers wrote autobiographical narratives to answer specific essential questions such as “Who am I?”, “Where am I?”, “How do I lead?” and “What can I do?” The teachers’ unique stories revealed that they came to understand themselves as member,
servant, model, or change agent and engaged in processes of straddling the lines between their professional-selves, polarized views of leadership, and teaching and leading (Cortez-Ford, 2008). The benefit of this study is that through engaging in this exploration as an inquiry, in-depth, autobiographical narratives provided a vehicle for teachers to share their own stories concerning their individual teacher-identity construction. This study encourages teachers to look within in consideration of their own assumptions of how they make sense of their personal and professional identities and the impact of these in their personal and professional lives.

In a similar study of teacher identities, Dickinson (2012) explored how five pre-service teachers constructed their own teacher identities through interactions with their peers, their supervisors, and their students. In this inquiry, interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. Themes from this inquiry led to implications of the importance of engaging pre-service teachers in discussions that supported them in the process of constructing their teacher identities (Dickinson, 2012).

As educators, we may not always consider the construction of our identities and the role that identity plays in the work of educating students. This inquiry caused me to look within as I considered the challenge of grappling with my own identities as parent, teacher, school administrator, researcher, and scholar. As previously discussed, I have found that coming to terms with these identities can sometimes be problematic as I deal with the personal and professional significance of my work.

Another story of experience involved self-described “outsider teachers” who were identified as such because of differentiating characteristics including race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and social class (Makris, 2012). Intersectionality informed aspects of this study which placed participants in self-defining positions, bringing multiple categories of
identity characteristics “to the fore” (Makris, 2012). This inquiry led me to consider how as educators, we may not always be aware of the many identities that we present to others, that are represented in the work that we do. As an African American woman, this aspect of my own culture and identity, informs the work that I do, although I may not consider this reality on a regular basis.

As a school administrator, I easily identified with a narrative inquiry by Smadu (2008) who explored the experience and role of principals in the context of major policy changes. Smadu (2008) shared insights concerning the daily complexities that principals experience, and the ways in which policy changes can alter principals’ roles, creating internal tensions. Although there were particularities related to the experiences of these principals, as a school administrator, I related to the idea which was put forth that we are in a state of constant change. As administrators, we are expected to adjust to policy changes and to lead our schools in the processes of change on a regular basis. I see this process as a game of “survival of the fittest” in which administrators who can adapt to change and effectively lead their schools in processes of change continue to survive, maintaining their professional positions, while those who cannot do so, may find themselves losing them.

In my own effort to survive in this game in which only the fit will survive, I look to others for answers in how to educate students in a changing world. I ask questions and seek ways to adapt to the changes through learning from the experiences of others. Teachers and learners are storytelling organisms who lead storied lives and narrative inquiry provides the possibility to capture human experiences and to characterize this phenomenon (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). I found that engaging in this inquiry through the lenses of the storied lives of one teacher and one
principal allowed me to address my own research puzzle concerning the instructional practices used in Blue Ribbon Schools.

The following section discusses the purposes of this inquiry. Here, I briefly describe the rationale for this inquiry as it relates to my own interests in discovering effective practices for educating students. I provide rationale, articulate the specific questions that guided this inquiry, and situate the inquiry within the contextual landscape.

1.23 Purposes of the Inquiry

I approached this inquiry because of my belief that exploring the particular practices that were used within the context of one of New Mexico’s Blue Ribbon schools would lead to a better understanding of whether and how there are differences in the instructional practices of such schools. Narrative is the best way to understand and to represent the experiences of others (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, given the research puzzle, as a narrative inquiry, this research allowed for thematic narrative analysis of the complexities of one school, in which the instructional patterns, activities, and behaviors were explored retrospectively, in order to uncover common patterns of activities, and behaviors that occurred within this school, as they related to reading instruction, in particular. My hope is that what I have learned through this inquiry will broaden the understanding concerning the various instructional practices that are being used in schools such as these.

An additional desire that I have is that pedagogical practices will be uncovered that can be used in my own school in the practice of educating students. I hope that what I have learned can be applied in classrooms by the teachers in my school. It would be wonderful to be able to learn the practices that were used by SNME in hopes of achieving similar results. The reality is, I will have to consider the context and demographics of my own school, the strengths that we
have, as well as the weaknesses in thinking about applying what I have learned through this inquiry. Additionally, while it may be possible to apply what is learned within other contexts, because of the particularity of the participants’ experience, replicability of this experience is unlikely. Therefore, other schools may not experience the same degree of success that the participants did. Schools would need to consider what worked well for SNME and what did not, as well as what is working well within their own schools, and what is not. Still, I believe that is beneficial to learn what was deemed to have a positive impact at SNME as this learning may be used to inform the practices of other educators. My hope is that what is learned through this inquiry will enable us to derive the meaning of the experience as expressed by the participants. It will help us to understand the context of this New Mexico Blue Ribbon School, to identify unanticipated phenomena and influences on the experience of this school, and to develop causal explanations concerning this school’s success (Maxwell, 2013).

The rationale for this study emanates from my own desire to uncover ways to help schools, especially those existing in the U.S./Mexico border context, to be successful in empowering at-risk populations of students to be successful, as measured by federal standards, which are often referred to by the general public when considering schools’ success. New Mexico schools have high numbers of at-risk populations, including English Language Learners and economically disadvantaged students. These challenges are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

It is my belief that in order to discover possible ways to help to improve low-performing schools, National Blue Ribbon schools, particularly those identified as having high percentages of at-risk students, should be researched in order to identify particular instructional practices which may be identified as having a strong influence on the success of these schools. It is known
that these Blue Ribbon schools are revered as model schools (United States Department of Education, 2012), but the research is limited concerning particular classroom practices used within and across the content areas, which are used during instruction that the teachers and administrators believe contribute to their schools’ success. In the next section, I articulate the specific questions that guided this inquiry.

1.24 Framing the Inquiry Questions

I specifically designed this inquiry in order to identify instructional practices that were being implemented in a Title I National Blue Ribbon School in New Mexico, which demonstrated repeated success in teaching a diverse population of students, including economically disadvantaged students, those who are ELL’s, and the doubly-challenged who are members of both groups. Through this inquiry, I sought answers to the following questions in the research puzzle:

- What factors do faculty and staff members believe contributed most to their school’s success in becoming a National Blue Ribbon School?
- What specific instructional practices did school administrators and teachers perceive as contributing to the students’ success as demonstrated on state reading assessments?
- How did faculty and staff members plan for and implement strategies that were used during reading instruction in the year and the preceding years that the school was designated as a Blue Ribbon school?

1.25 Situating the Inquiry: The Contextual Scene

The context of the study is based on the professional lives of two individuals who worked at SNME, a Title I, kindergarten through 6th grade southern New Mexico 2010 National Blue Ribbon School in Southern New Mexico City.
1.26 Why Them?

I chose to include individuals from this particular school for several reasons. First, while other New Mexico schools have achieved Blue Ribbon status since 2010, this school was chosen because of its location and proximity, which I believed would facilitate data collection. Other schools that have received the award since 2010 are in New Mexico cities that are much further away, making data collection more difficult. Therefore, because of the convenience of its location, which made rich data collection possible, this particular site was chosen.

Another reason for my interest in this school in particular was that it achieved its Blue Ribbon recognition in recent years and did so during the state’s nationally recognized years of low performance (NMPED, 2011) therefore this school was chosen for the study. Additionally, I was impressed by the fact that this school was able to achieve this level of student success despite having high numbers of students living in poverty and despite being challenged by ever-increasing federal accountability standards. Finally, this school has recently experienced a steady decline in its accountability ratings, so I was interested in what I could learn about the cause of this decline, which I believed could positively impact other schools by helping them to avoid similar negative outcomes. For all of these reasons, I found this school to be of particular interest for this inquiry. The following section describes the organization of the remaining sections of this inquiry.

1.27 Organization of the Inquiry

As a researcher making decisions with regard to the form of this inquiry, I faced tensions in exploring what was for me, an uncharted path. As a structured individual, I am comfortable with blueprints and checklists to guide my work. I enjoy following specific models and knowing what is supposed to come first, next, and finally. In narrative research, I found that it is not so
prescribed, but that I had to determine the structure of this inquiry based on what I found to be the best way to present the participants’ stories. For this reason, I experienced tensions when Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussed the variety of forms that a narrative inquiry could take. In construction of this narrative inquiry and in positioning this work, there was noticeable tension concerning creating a structure that was best suited for sharing the story of this school, uncovering the practices that were used in the school, while sharing the participants’ personal stories and my own simultaneously.

For these reasons, this inquiry is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 2, *Situating the Inquiry within the Research Landscape* provides background to the inquiry and situates the research puzzle in the literature concerning reading instruction, standards-based education, National Blue Ribbon Schools, and New Mexico schools. In this chapter, I provide background concerning the challenges that educators face in educating students, particularly in being inundated with the pressures of the federal accountability system, which monitors school performance. I discuss the existent research concerning the nation’s Blue Ribbon schools, and discuss the issues concerning New Mexico schools, in particular.

In Chapter 3, *The Journey of Narrative Inquiry: Story as Method*, I provide details concerning the research design of this inquiry such as gaining entry to the field, selecting the participants, and data analysis methods. This chapter describes the study’s research methodology, including the rationale for narrative inquiry as qualitative research design, details my experience in gaining entry in the research field, discusses the process involved in the selection of the participants, provides an overview of data collection and analysis methods used, forecasts the use of voice in the analysis, and deals with issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability.
The remaining sections of the inquiry organize the work into five stories inclusive of individual and collective experiences, which present the results of this inquiry, based on the questions, and are organized in terms of continuity and interaction (Dewey, 1938). Temporal dimensions are inherent as the participants reflect upon their distant pasts as educators, share their experiences concerning the recent past as it relates to their school’s becoming a Blue Ribbon school, and finally, they enter into discussions about the future in terms of the school context. Collectively, these sections unveil the plot and tensions of the inquiry, which concern how this school became a Blue Ribbon School, within the contextual scene of Southern New Mexico City.

In Chapter 4, which is entitled *The Story of Who They Were*, I introduce the participants, the individuals whose experiences are shared in the inquiry, by shifting backward with them and sharing their professional backgrounds as it pertained to becoming involved with their award-winning school. They also look outward as they discuss individuals and outside factors that influenced their careers. An inward shift is noted as the participants consider the meaning that they have made from their career-related decisions. Here, I discuss the notion of distributed leadership which was evident in the principal’s decision to share leadership responsibilities with the teacher.

Chapter 5, *The Story of What They Did* describes the actions that were involved in their school becoming an award-winning school, discusses the significance of winning the 2010 National Blue Ribbon Schools Award, and shares the meaning that the participants and I made from this experience.

In Chapter 6 & 7, the participants and I discuss *How They Did It*. Here, we thickly describe (Geertz, 1973) the interactions which occurred within the school context and share the
varied practices that were utilized within the school that the participants believe contributed to their school’s success. When I say ‘we’ it is because these chapters are collaborative stories, or a mutually constructed account, inclusive of my voice and the participants’ voices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Chapters 6 & 7 discuss the specific instructional practices that were used at the school, which the participants believed contributed to their school’s success. These instructional practices were propelled by exogenous and endogenous classroom tensions, with regard to people, place, certainty and temporality. Chapter 6 explores the practices that occurred within the school context impacting instruction, but did not directly occur within the classroom during instruction. These practices were characterized by exogenous tensions. Chapter 7 reveals the practices that were carried out directly within the classroom context during instruction as they pertained to reading instruction, in particular. These actions were characterized by endogenous tensions. Although there are distinctions between the practices which occurred outside of the classroom space and those that were carried out within the classroom, there was a clear relationship between the two. The actions that took place outside of the classroom context heavily impacted the instructional delivery within the classroom.

Chapter 8, The Story Continues shifts forward as the participants and I share our views concerning the school’s present status and its future performance. I look backward and search for clues within the data which may provide reasons for the schools current performance. Here, I consider the boundaries of narrative inquiry in its contrast of thinking in terms of the grand narratives as I face the reality that there is no Hollywood plot, no happily ever after and no “conclusions” to this inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I consider the implications of what I have learned from SNME and how this learning will impact my own practice and the practices of other leaders and schools. As the dynamics of schooling continue, the story will continue to be
told and re-told as my life and the lives of the participants will continue to be relived in new ways. Therefore, the narrative will remain unfinished (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

A written document appears to stand still; the narrative appears finished. It has been written, characters’ lives constructed, social histories recorded, and meaning expressed for all to see. Yet, those engaged in narrative inquiry know that the written document, the research text like life, is a continual unfolding in which the narrative insights of today are the chronological events of tomorrow. Narrative inquirers know in advance that the task of conveying a sense that the narrative is unfinished and that stories will be told and lives relived in new ways is likely to be completed in less-than-satisfactory ways (p.166).

In Chapter 9, *Epilogue - Looking Backward to Look Forward*, I return to the research puzzle to retell and to relive the inquiry by crafting a summary. Again, while my initial hope was that this learning would lead to a better understanding of whether or how the use of particular instructional can make a positive difference in student performance, the reality is that due to the particularity of the experience, I and others may not achieve the same levels of success as those within this school by simply implementing the same practices. Perhaps someday we will share our own stories of whether and how practices that we have learned about here also made a difference for our own students. Still, this inquiry marks the beginning of a scholarly pursuit to learn more about the practices of National Blue Ribbon Schools. I believe that the more that we learn from such schools, the more that we will have in our arsenals of practices that can be used to improve our work with students, particularly those who are categorized as being in “at-risk” situations.

It should be noted that Appendix A contains the definitions of terms that will be used within the sections that follow, including “at-risk” students, Blue Ribbon schools, high-performing schools, instructional practice, low-performing schools, successful schools, and Title I schools.
Chapter Summary

This section provided an introduction to this inquiry through sharing the formation of the research puzzle and the decision to engage in narrative inquiry for this research. Here, I paved the path which led to the development of the research puzzle by sharing the process in the formation of the puzzle. I revealed my own positionality as it relates this work. I posed the questions that guided this inquiry. I provided background and rationale concerning the use of narrative inquiry in educational studies. I explained my reasoning for my use of narrative as a method, which is heavily influenced by the narrative inquiry approach framed by Clandinin & Connelly (2000). Finally, I discussed the organization of the remaining chapters.

The next chapter specifically discusses the challenges that New Mexico schools have faced which are connected to the high expectations and increased pressure that the federal government has placed on schools by implementing the No Child Left Behind Act (United States Department of Education, 2001).
Chapter 2: Situating the Inquiry Within the Research Landscape

2.1 Introduction

As I pondered the research puzzle, I was presented with multiple areas of concern and wonder concerning the history of New Mexico schools and the possible factors which may have contributed to their struggles. These factors led to the stigma concerning New Mexico schools that I perceived among fellow educators, along with the publicized challenges, which led to my desire to learn about New Mexico schools that have successfully conquered them. These ideas have shaped the landscape of research which informed this inquiry, leading me into an in-depth search to gain some background on New Mexico schools. I wanted to learn more about the challenges that are being faced by the state, in educating its students. Putting it simply, I wanted to know why it seems that in general, New Mexico schools are not producing the desired outcome of high test scores. I wanted to know the factors which may be contributing to what seems to be a problem. Is there an economic issue? Is it because of the federal accountability system? Is it because of the state’s accountability structure? Has anyone else researched the problems that New Mexico schools are facing? These are some of the questions that I asked myself as I began to explore the existing literature. My hope was that probing into this issue would enable me to identify the issues that may be preventing so many of New Mexico schools from becoming successful schools. But what exactly makes a school successful? How do we define successful schools? How are National Blue Ribbon Schools different from other schools that can be categorized as successful schools? These are the many questions that surfaced as I began to explore the research puzzle within the literature.

As I initially considered the challenges that New Mexico is facing with regard to educating its students, I began to think about the factors that differentiate it from other states.
One such area is its high percentage of English Language Learners (ELL’s). I will discuss the
statistics concerning this population in more detail shortly. As I thought about my own ELL
students, I considered the pressure that I face as a Texas educator to ensure that they pass the
standardized state assessment and achieve the primary goal of the Texas Education Agency’s
bilingual education program, which is for them to learn English. As I began this exploration into
the challenges concerning New Mexico schools, I looked within as I considered the level of
difficulty that I have faced as an educator in closing existing achievement gaps that exist among
this group of students. This can be somewhat problematic for both teachers and students, at the
same time.

As an educator working in schools existing along the U.S./Mexico border, I have faced
the challenges involved in educating ELL’s and in ensuring that they become proficient in
reading, writing, and speaking English. As I looked within and considered my own challenges, I
wondered the degree to which this issue has played a role in the challenges faced by New
Mexico schools. I wondered how this issue has been compounded by the pressures of standards-
based education and the mandate to ensure that ELL students obtain English proficiency in time
to be successful on their state assessments.

Looking backward, I explored the relationship between NCLB and the multitude of
issues faced by New Mexico schools, which have resulted in educational inequities. Looking
forward, I considered how New Mexico’s newly revised accountability structure may impact
student performance in positive ways. As I contemplated the possibilities of increases in the
number of successful schools in New Mexico, I found it important to explore the many ways in
which the research describes successful schools and distinguishes National Blue Ribbon Schools
from successful schools by examining the background, qualifications, and existing research on these schools. Exploration of these areas situated this inquiry within the landscape of research.

In the next section, I begin this discussion by exploring the struggle that can ensue when educators are pressured to ensure that ELL students become proficient in English to the extent that they are able to perform on standardized assessments to the same degree as their English-speaking peers.

2.2 What’s Language Got to do With It?

It is my belief that one of the main challenges that New Mexico schools face is the expectation to ensure that students who are ELL’s learn English, by any means necessary. In Subtractive Schooling, Valenzuela (1999) discusses how the American school system, in its effort to institutionalize students, subtracts from minority students both socially and culturally. When students come to the U.S. speaking languages other than English, many schools tend to resort to subtractive instructional methods aimed at taking away students’ primary language and replacing these languages with the English language (Valenzuela, 1999). These subtractive methods, which describe American mainstream education methodologies, can lead to negative schooling experiences, causing minority students to become low academic achievers (Delpit, 2006; Reyes & Halcon, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). As an educator, too often I have had observed subtractive instructional models that have failed to build upon students’ prior cultural, linguistic, social, and academic knowledge in their attempts to enculturate students in mainstream education. I have also had the opportunity to observe educators who have built upon students’ prior knowledge, which resulted in positive experiences for their students.

I believe that with regard to the experiences of ELL’s, teachers have the power to “make or break” the learning experiences of students with their choices in instructional approaches. As
sociocultural, sociohistorical mediators, teachers co-construct teaching and learning experiences that can result in their students’ success or failure (Diaz & Flores, 2001). This can be the critical consequence of dual strategies of exclusion and condemnation of students’ languages and cultures which foster disdain by negatively influencing children’s attitudes toward their own knowledge, personal competence, what they know and who they are (Moll, 2001). Macedo (2000) refers to such practices as colonialism, which imposes such ideologies as a” yardstick against which all other cultural values are measured, including language, which he believes over celebrates the dominant group’s language to a level of mystification and devalues other languages spoken by an ever-increasing number of students who now populate most urban schools” (Macedo, 2000, p. 16). As a Texas educator, I have witnessed this occurrence firsthand.

In the state of Texas, the goal of bilingual education is to ensure that all students learn English:

The goal of bilingual education programs shall be to enable English Language Learners to become competent in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the English language through the development of literacy and academic skills in the primary language and English. Such programs shall emphasize the mastery of English language skills, as well as mathematics, science, and social studies, as integral parts of the academic goals for all students to enable English language learners to participate equitably in school (Texas Education Code, §89.1201, 2012)

Because of these mandates, as a Texas educator, I have faced a daily “tug-of-war” as I continually deal with what is expected of me professionally, which is ensuring that all ELL’s acquire English whether they want to or whether they do not, while grappling with my inner convictions to honor and celebrate differences, even with regard to language. For this reason, I have made it my personal goal as an educator, to avoid perpetuating some of the negative, unfortunate realities that exist within the educational realm for so many. It is important to me that I seek out pedagogical methods that will benefit various groups of students, based on their individual academic needs.
As an educator living in what is known as “The Borderland”, or the U.S./Mexico border, I have become aware of some of the challenges that educators face when providing instruction to this population, particularly in the area of reading. Texas and New Mexico, which are states along this border region are two states which are among eight states which have the highest populations of ELL’s, meaning at least 10 percent of their student population are English Language Learners (National Center for Education Statistics (2010). This region has a high population of historically minoritized students, including ELL’s, economically disadvantaged students, and students who are included in both of these subgroups. Educational disparities are recognizable among this group, particularly in the area of reading. In the next section, I share some of the challenges involved in reading instruction in general, then I move into the particular challenges that lie within teaching reading to ELL’s, a rapidly-growing population of students.

2.3 Reading Instruction: The Great Debate

The argument among educators concerning the most effective approaches and best practices for teaching reading has been a continual discussion for decades, perhaps centuries. Few topics in the field of education are as debated as the topic of how to best teach reading (Frey et al., 2004). Schools and districts seek the ideal programs and practices for teaching reading because of the belief that if the best method can be found, the problems of literacy education will be solved (Willows, 2008). Historically, skills instruction (phonics) and holistic literacy (whole language) have been the two warring camps in elementary literacy instruction in terms of the best approaches to teaching reading.

2.4 Phonics vs. Whole Language

Even as far as the 1960’s, there were assumptions concerning which approach was better. Back then, Rystrom (1967) advocating for a whole-language approach to reading argued that
letters do not have sounds, but are arbitrary symbols representing bundles of sounds, therefore teaching phonics instruction encourages students to study meaningless material. Phonics instruction is considered to be a “bottom-up” approach in which students learn to decode the meaning of text and learn to read by being able to sound out words based on how they are spelled (Reyhner, 2010). This methodology is an attempt to break written language down into simple components and to teach children to decode, or learn the pronunciation of words based on their spellings (Stevens, 2014). Phonics or skill-building advocates claim that phonics instruction plays a major role in the teaching of reading because many words in the English language are phonetically regular (Krashen, 2002). The thinking behind this idea is that phonics instruction, especially when it is explicit and systematic, helps children to crack the alphabetic code, paving the way for them to become proficient readers (Henry 2012).

The whole language approach exists at the opposite end of the reading debate. Whole language is considered to be a “top-down” approach to teaching reading that emphasizes the meaning of text over the sounds of letters (Reyhner, 2010). Whole language is considered to be a grass-roots movement in which emphasis is placed upon the power of language and the importance of children being actively involved in their own learning (Goodman, 1989). In the whole language approach, reading is viewed as a holistic process, therefore, users of this paradigm do not use specially constructed reduced texts, nonsense words, word lists, or anything other than complete texts when teaching reading (Goodman, 1992). Whole language advocates claim that the rules of phonics are complex, have numerous exceptions, and skills should only be taught when doing so makes text more comprehensible (Krashen, 2002). I believe that whether whole language or phonics instructional approaches are used, early intervention in teaching reading is critical.
2.5 Early Literacy

Reyes (2001) emphasizes that early literacy interventions support students’ literacy development in their first language and simultaneously supports second language acquisition. Pre-literacy skills, or those understandings that children must have in order to begin to read, are critically important. These skills include developing phonological awareness and ensuring that children understand the relationship between print on a page and communicative language, that letters make sounds, and the shapes and names of letters (Ballentyne et al., 2008). When children have these critically essential skills in place, the child can use these skills interchangeably between one or more languages. These skills together provide the basic support and foundation for literacy (Reyes, 2001).

For dual language learners, certain skills are critical to literacy and for transference skills between languages. The critical skills that they emphasize include but are not limited to developing phonological awareness, ensuring that children understand the relationship between print on a page and communicative language, that letters make sounds, and the shapes and names of letters (Ballentyne et al., 2008). As these are minimal readiness skills, it is paramount that educators and parents understand the dire need for children to attain a working ability and if possible, mastery of these skills prior to entry into schools. These skills together provide the foundation for literacy and academic success, not only for dual language students, but for all students. As I considered the importance of early literacy for my own child, I explored different approaches in my search for the best path toward reading proficiency.
2.6 Learning to Read: Caleb’s Story

My personal belief about reading is that reading and writing are dynamic processes which can improve with background knowledge and a foundational exposure to learning letters and sounds in isolation and in meaningful situations, such as in stories. While I was never a teacher in the primary grades, I had the opportunity to teach my own child, Caleb, how to read. Looking back over the last seven years, I recall reading to him while he was in my womb and I have continued to read to him nightly from the time that he was a newborn until now. The first book I ever read to him was Dr. Seuss’ (1990) *Oh, the Places You Will Go!* While many Dr. Seuss books are used in phonics instruction, my reason for reading this book was the meaning of the story, which I thought was perfect for him as he started out into the world. I exposed him to many books such as this one before he could identify or recognize letters and their sounds. In the beginning, I read to him while he listened and looked at the pictures in the books. When he was around a year old, I began reading to him as I guided him to follow along. I pointed to the letters and words as I read them aloud and I held his finger so that he could follow along with me. I supported his vocabulary development by telling him the meaning of words as they were used in the context of stories.

As he grew older, I began selecting texts that were more complex. As we read together, I continued to lead him in following along as I read, but I also stopped to ask him questions, to allow him to make predictions, and to discuss more advanced, unfamiliar vocabulary words. Some of these words required phonics instruction as I tried to explain, for example, that in words like *garage*, the “g” has two different sounds. Moving along a continuum of teaching whole words at times and phonics at times, in a back-and-forth process proved to be very effective for Caleb. As a result of these activities, he entered kindergarten as a reader. By using these
approaches, I did not intend to experiment with my son in order to determine whether whole language or phonics approaches were the best approaches to teaching reading. My desire was simply to ensure that he learned to read - whatever it took. I found that I did what seemed to be the most natural, based on his development and readiness for the next stages of reading. For Caleb, I found that moving from whole-word to phonics and back to whole-word proved to be the right balance for him in terms of becoming a reader.

As I shift my frame of thinking as mother to that of educator, I think about how this same approach would work with my students. I believe that teachers should provide students with daily exposure to print through reading stories. Particularly when I visit primary classrooms, I enjoy seeing teachers using big books, guiding students in following along as the teacher reads aloud, and encouraging them to try reading the words, along with them. This provides students with the opportunity to learn how letters make sounds and how combinations of letters and sounds make words. At the same time, providing this instruction in the context of reading a story allows students to make meaning from the letters and words, which I see as providing students with a balanced approach to reading instruction. Evidence suggests that using phonics or whole language approaches to the exclusion of the other is not as effective as engaging in Balanced Literacy instruction, which incorporates both whole language and phonics instruction in teaching reading (Pressley et al., 2002). The following section describes the Balanced Literacy framework.
2.7 Balanced Literacy: The Truce

According to the information contained in their National Blue Ribbon Schools application, the New Mexico Blue Ribbon School that will be studied has expressed a commitment to Balanced Literacy, an instructional framework, which was chosen mode of reading instruction (U.S.D.E., 2010). The school specifically reported that the school district selected Balanced Literacy as a district-wide initiative and that “the Balanced Literacy approach has been implemented to develop and demonstrate competence in the skills and strategies of the reading and writing process, including applying grammatical language conventions to communicate” (U.S.D.E, 2010, p. 11). Although Balanced Literacy was chosen as a district-wide literacy initiative, the other schools in the district did not achieve National Blue Ribbon status and demonstrate the same level of success as this award-winning school. For this reason, it is of interest to know the degree to which this practice is used and whether and how other instructional practices are also integrated.

Balanced Literacy, a truce between whole language advocates and phonics advocates, is a term that originated California in 1996 as a result of a perceived literacy crisis in the state of California, which was catalyzed by low reading scores (Frey et al., 2004). This approach stresses that a balanced reading instructional program provides a combination of whole language and phonics approaches, along with instructional practices that are authentic and learner-centered and includes practices such as read-alouds, guided reading, shared reading, and independent reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), which are defined as follows:

- Read-alouds – Students listen and observe while the teacher reads a selected text aloud. This improves students’ listening skills and promotes vocabulary development Reading
aloud plays a significant part for a young child's success in learning to read. The sharing of e. (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996)

- Guided Reading – This is an approach that provides a structure for a teacher and a group of students to talk, read, and think their way purposefully through a text (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). This includes explicit skills instruction, language-rich literature instruction, direct teaching of letter-sound correspondences, providing instruction on word families, working on words and spelling, reading children’s literature, reader response reactions, and writing instruction (Freppon & Dahl, 1998).

- Shared Reading- This involves a teacher modeling, providing students with high levels of support, and attending to the use of print, while working closely with and engaging students in a story (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

- Independent Reading – This is a reading structure in which students are given time to read without teacher support, allowing students the needed practice in the use of sustained reading of continuous text (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Engaging students in authentic pedagogical practices such as Balanced Literacy, endows multiple benefits for student learning and incorporates learner-centered instructional strategies. These increase students’ motivation to learn, makes the content more valuable to them, and helps them to better understand the structure of a domain under study, which requires that educators situate practice in meaningful contexts, make learning elements explicit and sequence learning activities to a developmental progression (Edelson & Reiser, 2006). Authentic practice, as learner-centered pedagogy, contributes to the breadth and depth of content knowledge. It assists students in learning how to organize knowledge around major concepts and principles, enhances retention and retrieval of content, and contributes to students’ development of metacognitive
abilities (Thompson et al., 2003, p. 135). This requires supporting students in setting their own goals for learning, and in determining resources and activities to support them in meeting them. Strategies involved in authentic practice, which are learner centered, are facilitated by the teacher, but the student or the learner is actively engaged in the learning process.

Authentic, learner-centered instruction is the antithesis of teacher-centered instruction, which is characterized by students sitting and listening attentively to their teacher, taking notes and being ready to answer questions posed by the teacher at the end of a lecture or during discussion sections. Instead, structures are provided which include students in each step of the learning process and shifts active engagement from being solely on the part of the teacher to including the learner by making tools and techniques available for them to be heavily involved in the learning experience (Zophy, 1982).

As an instructional practice for teaching reading, Balanced Literacy can be a difficult concept (Shaw & Hurst, 2012). The term “Balanced Literacy” bears a confusing mishmash of conceptions, which really means providing a lot of skills instruction in holistic teaching context (Pressley et al., 2002). Although educators agree that it consists of a balance of elements, much debate concerns which elements of reading and writing must be balanced to achieve literacy (Frey et al. 2004).

There is a critical decision-making process involved for teachers who are considering the one best method for teaching reading. When asked to make the choice, especially for students who are considered to be at-risk, some teachers may feel like medical doctors deciding which approach to use to save the life of a critically ill patient. Theorists suggest that merging decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension instructional approaches, interactively, as opposed to implementing them in isolation, can have a positive impact on students’ learning outcomes.
(Herrera, Perez & Escamilla, 2010). In addition, students utilize background knowledge to construct meaning that they make from text that they read in context (Herrera, Perez & Escamilla, 2010). One conception of Balanced Literacy is the creation of meaning that is derived through reader’s interaction with written text, which foster’s cognitive engagement and promotes oral language fluency and conversational and academic vocabulary development for ELL’s (O’Day, 2009).

Because there is debate concerning how reading instruction is most effectively balanced in Balanced Literacy classrooms, I was particularly interested in learning how the practices involved in Balanced Literacy instruction were carried out within this New Mexico National Blue Ribbon School. Having had the opportunity to observe many teachers in the process of reading instruction, I know firsthand that teachers differ in how they carry out particular practices in teaching reading. A study by Hoover (2006) which specifically evaluated the implementation of a mandated Balanced Literacy program found that that there were differences in the implementation of the Balanced Literacy components, which varied from teacher to teacher. These variations were found to be due to fact that some of the teachers in the study were not committed to the use of the Balanced Literacy program, although it was mandated by the school district. Additionally, there were differences in the quality of Balanced Literacy instruction as this too differed from teacher to teacher. This study shows that although a program can be mandated by a district, teachers make individual choices concerning the implementation of specific practices based on their own philosophies and on their teaching abilities. Teachers’ philosophies and abilities can be particularly impactful in their success in teaching reading to English Language Learners, a growing population of students.
2.8 Reading and the English Language Learner

While deciding which reading approaches are the most effective can be a challenge for teachers, this decision-making becomes especially critical when educators are making this choice upon considering the best practices for meeting the needs of at-risk populations, especially English Language Learners (ELL’s), which may further compound the issue. Reading is one of my interests and due to the fact that I live in New Mexico and work in Texas, one of the states that has one of the highest populations of ELL’s in the U.S., I am particularly concerned with how ELL’s are performing in this area. Since 2002, reading assessments have revealed that the reading performance of non-ELL’s has been significantly higher than their ELL peers as indicated by achievement gaps in 4th and 8th grade reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). My personal belief is that this achievement gap has existed for many years not because the students lack the ability to learn, but because teachers lack the expertise that is required to be able to teach them. As the number of ELL’s rises, it is becoming increasingly important for teachers to become more knowledgeable concerning the best approaches for educating this group of students.

The overall student population of ELL’s in the United States has increased from 3.54 million students in 1998-1999 to approximately 5.3 million in 2008-2009 (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). As this population grows, my belief is that their performance or lack of performance will have a profound impact on the overall academic performance of schools. Schools that learn the best practices for educating ELL’s will be successful, while schools who do not will fail. The schools that learn best practices for teaching ELL’s particularly in the area reading will see performance gains across the content areas as learning the instructional practices that can be used to enhance ELL’s reading abilities in
English, will support their literacy skills in English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies (Turkan et al., 2012).

Of the over 5 million students who are ELL’s in the United States, over 50,000 of these students live in New Mexico alone (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). States, districts, and schools face increasing pressure to ensure that instructional practices are effective in helping ELL’s to make significant academic progress annually (Moughamian et al., 2009). It is estimated that over 14 percent of New Mexico public school students are ELL’s (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). This is a high percentage considering the fact that 10 percent of United States public school students are ELL’s (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). The number of students who are categorized as ELL’s has grown exponentially in the United States, but unfortunately, schools are not educating this population of students well and their academic achievement continues to lag behind the achievement of their English language proficient peers (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2013).

I believe that this is due in large part to the fact that teachers may not know the most effective approaches for teaching ELL’s, particularly in the area of reading. This is important because varying orthographic systems and characteristics in reading and writing in diverse languages can affect reading processes (Alvarado, 2007). The argument among educators concerning the most effective approaches and best practices for teaching reading has been a continual discussion for decades. Few topics in the field of education are as debated as the topic of how to best teach reading (Frey et al., 2004). Schools and districts seek the ideal programs and practices for teaching reading because of the belief that if the best method can be found, the problems of literacy education will be solved (Willows, 2008). While the topic of which reading instructional practices is the most effective, this decision-making becomes especially critical
when educators are making this choice upon considering the best practices for meeting the needs of at-risk populations, especially when these students are classified as ELL’s, which may further compound the issue.

Reyes (2001) emphasizes that early literacy interventions support students’ literacy development in their first language and simultaneously supports second language acquisition. Pre-literacy skills, or those understandings that children must have in order to begin to read, are critically important. These skills include developing phonological awareness and ensuring that children understand the relationship between print on a page and communicative language, that letters make sounds, and the shapes and names of letters (Ballentyne et al., 2008). When children have these critically essential skills in place, the child can use these skills interchangeably between one or more languages. These skills together provide the basic support and foundation for literacy (Reyes, 2001).

For ELL’s, certain skills are critical to literacy and for transference skills between languages. The critical skills that they emphasize include but are not limited to developing phonological awareness, ensuring that children understand the relationship between print on a page and communicative language, that letters make sounds, and the shapes and names of letters (Ballentyne et al., 2008). As these are minimal readiness skills, I believe that it is paramount that educators and parents understand the dire need for children to attain a working ability and if possible, mastery of these skills prior to entry into schools. These skills together provide the foundation for literacy and academic success, not only for dual language students, but for all students.

For me, the challenge to meet the academic needs of ELL’s, particularly in the area of reading and language arts instruction has been a continual challenge. As a teacher, I struggled to
identify adequate instructional strategies that would best meet their needs and ensure their learning. As an administrator, I have been concerned with closing achievement gaps that exist between ELL’s and their English-speaking peers. For schools along the U.S./Mexico border, such as those in New Mexico whose ELL population exceeds the national average, I have observed that conquering this challenge or not being able to do so, delineates schools that are successful or that perpetually struggle. The challenge to provide adequate instruction for ELL’s has clearly been a contributing factor in the struggle experienced by New Mexico schools. While the students are not to blame, perhaps it is a combination of the lack of federal support that is needed to ensure that schools have the resources, materials, training, and support that is needed to educate ELL’s and other groups of students.

As I explore the issues of New Mexico schools, it seems that perhaps a combination of challenges have resulted in a historical background which has been plagued by failure in the area of student achievement, which became increasingly pronounced as a result of the onset of the previous federal accountability structure under NCLB (2001). In the next section, I share some of the background concerning New Mexico schools as I continue to explore the factors which have contributed to the publicized failure of its schools to yield the result of student achievement at high levels.

2.9 School Performance in the Land of Enchantment

As I reflect on the recent past in terms of school and ultimately, student performance, New Mexico K-12 schools have been reported as ranking among the worst in the United States, (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2009). When I compared NCES (2013) statistics, I discovered that 48 percent of New Mexico fourth grade students performed below basic achievement level in the area of reading, further 31 percent performed at basic level, while 18
percent performed at proficient level, and a mere 4 percent performed at the advanced level. Scoring an average of 206, this was significantly lower than average score of 221, for fourth grade public school students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Nationally, in terms of K-12 achievement, which includes academic standards, assessment, accountability, and school finances, in 2013, only 21 percent of students performed at or above the National Association of Education Progress (NAEP) proficient levels. The state ranked 24th in 2010, 32nd in 2011 and 30th in 2012 (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2012). In 2011, it was reported that 87 percent of New Mexico schools did not meet federal accountability standards (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2011). This percentage increased in 2012 when even more schools, a whopping 97.6 percent of the state’s schools, failed to meet AYP standards. When the required minimum number (increases incrementally from year to year) of students are unsuccessful standardized assessments, this results in schools being labeled as not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) by federal standards and perhaps leads to stigmatization, as result of their schools’ substandard performance.

As a parent, educator, and researcher, I find these statistics to be alarming, troubling, and overwhelming and I agree with the recent efforts that the New Mexico Public Education department has taken to answer the present problem of the alarming statistics. For the sake of the children, I believe that every effort must be taken to reform New Mexico schools and this effort has begun with attention being placed on school accountability reform possibilities.

The staggering percentage of New Mexico’s schools that failed to meet AYP catalyzed the need for accountability reform that reflected the needs of New Mexico’s schools. The goal of the new reform efforts is to avoid classifying their schools based on factors outside of their control such as students’ economic disadvantages and mobility. New Mexico schools educate
students who are categorized among the 18.4 percent of the state’s residents who are economically disadvantaged, living below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2010). This is a high percentage compared to the United States as a whole, in which 13.8 percent of persons are living below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Students living in impoverished conditions are especially challenging instructionally for elementary teachers (Brozo & Flynt, 2007). Despite these challenges, using the results of standardized-assessments and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as indicators, New Mexico schools have been expected to demonstrate whether or not students within their schools are achieving in the areas of mathematics and reading as mandated by NCLB (2001). In the next section, I explore the challenges of standards-based education and the NCLB (2001).

2.10 Standards-Based Education and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

My first memories of standardized assessment are when I was a young student in the 1980’s and 1990’s. I recall taking various tests, but I was never pressured to pass the test, nor was I threatened with any consequences, such as grade level retention, if I did not. Further, my teachers did not appear to experience any pressures related to whether or not I passed the tests. When I became teacher many years later, my experience was very different from theirs.

As I look back upon my early years as an educator, which began in the fall of 2002, I recall watching the shift to what became known as “high-stakes” testing. As a new teacher, I observed my mentor teachers in grade level meetings as they discussed the new accountability system and the changes, especially in the area of testing which would change the education arena for years to come. During my first year, I walked into what was a new experience for even the veteran educator, as together, like fish out of water, we all became accustomed to the new
pressures of education, in which sustaining our careers depended upon our abilities to ensure student learning for all, as indicated by high test scores.

Over the past century, standardized assessments have expanded from low-stakes (informational purposes without consequences attached) to high-stakes (having life-changing implications and consequences, such as determining grade placement and college entrance) (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). During the administration of President George W. Bush, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, was renamed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and was restructured in an effort to mandate academic gains among disadvantaged students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Over the last decade, NCLB was created and implemented to ensure the success of all students as indicated by increases in Mathematics, Reading, Writing, Social Studies, and Science standardized test scores. I have observed firsthand, the ways in which the impact of increased rigor in assessment, the focus on student outcomes and the shift from teaching to learning have forced districts to criticize teacher individualization and autonomy and to instead foster collaboration and instructional alignment. To accomplish the demands of NCLB, which requires students’ quantifiable gains, districts vie for research-based methods as charged by congress in order to ensure student success. Additionally, NCLB requires schools to disaggregate student data demographics by identifying areas of weakness by subpopulations such as race, gender and ethnicity and in doing so, this targets areas of educational need (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Although these were some of the intended benefits of the implementation of NCLB, some schools and districts have been concerned because its implementation has produced educational inequities. In the next section, I explore these inequities in more detail.
2.11 NCLB and Educational Inequities

Although the use of research-based practices and the increase of rigor in classroom instruction were positive benefits for students, there are challenges for states to meet the original requirements of NCLB, which mandated that 100 percent of students demonstrate proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Having this expectation is the same as mandating that all states be crime-free by 2014 (Ravitch, 2012). The impossible goals that have been set by this legislation have resulted in concerns over issues of inequity in considering schools having high populations of at-risk learners. For example, one study examined the impact of the NCLB on New Mexico public schools on the Navajo reservations and found that the increased accountability demands are compounded by inequities in funding that unfairly impacted English Language Learners (ELL’s) and special needs children, which made it difficult for schools to carry out state mandates and ensure student success for all populations of students (Bekis, 2008). In my own experience, this pressure has been an important challenge. I have had conversations with my fellow educators who have voiced their concerns about administering assessments to their special needs and ELL students, whom they believed would not be able to pass. This concern had nothing to do with the teachers’ lack of faith in their students, but had everything to do with their lack of faith in the equity of the assessments, which positioned students to fail and caused teachers to question their abilities as professionals. As educators, we have been forced to increase our students’ test scores, which ultimately provide evidence that the federal government needs in order to prove that the new mandates in the educational system are working.

NCLB legislation was created as a result of the hysteria that developed concerning the idea that American education is fatally flawed (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). An additional
contributing factor was the fact that policy makers had observed standardized testing practices in the state of Texas and believed that the use of this approach explained how the state of Texas had reduced its dropout rate and had increased student achievement, when in reality, the testing practices had been arbitrary and discriminatory (Haney, 2000). However, because it was believed that increased testing was the answer to improving student performance, NCLB legislation was developed and standards based assessment became its main method of measuring student learning.

NCLB is at the forefront of media attention when it comes to the discussion of reforming our public schools as it commands that all teachers become “highly qualified”, designates annual increases in student proficiency rates as evidenced by adequate yearly progress (AYP), or educators are subjected to interventions or severe sanctions, such as being taken over by the federal government, if they do not (Du Four et al., 2009). The phrase “highly qualified” is a controversial teacher provision under NCLB which concerns the need for starts to prove that existing and incoming teachers have demonstrated subject area mastery to be considered “highly qualified. The controversy lies in the fact that states have been left to decide what is meant by “highly qualified” and must determine for themselves what existing teachers must do to demonstrate mastery in the subjects they teach (Porter-Magee, 2004). Although NCLB acknowledges that teachers need both subject-matter and pedagogical knowledge in order to be considered "highly qualified," the current leadership of the U.S. Department of Education has pushed a dangerously narrow definition of the knowledge and skills that teachers need and have instead chosen to emphasize the former and have given little weight to the latter (Berry et al., 2004). Because the federal government has not articulated acceptable minimum standards, many states have crafted their own standards that yield the greatest number of “highly qualified”
teachers, rather than risk the political back-lash of admitting that their existing teachers are not “highly qualified” by NCLB's rigorous definition (Porter-Magee, 2004). NCLB posits that increases in student success in math and reading, as achieved by research-based methodology, school accountability and the evidence of adequate yearly progress (AYP), will catapult students into the stratosphere of academic success. This legislation links teacher quality to improved student achievement, especially among low-income urban children of varying ethnicities (Foster, Lewis & Onafowora, 2005). It has been labeled as the NCLB nightmare (Houston, 2005), a crazy horse (Lewis, 2002) a sad saga (Rose, 2007) an unmitigated disaster, and the worst federal education law ever passed (Ravitch, 2012). NCLB is despised for turning schools into testing factories and for setting goals that were initially laudable, but are now out of reach (Ravitch, 2012; Mathis, 2003).

While NCLB legislation was meant to be the solution to the problem of children who are non-literate upon graduation by promoting an increase in the number of students who would be proficient readers, writers, scientists, and mathematicians, it has also become a catalyst for debate as its critics claim that this legislation has spawned a number of other problems that appear to remain ignored and new problems have developed as a result of its implementation. As Luke (1998) put it, schools are being unreasonably held accountable for teacher and student performance, and are being required to demonstrate their worth by increasing test scores and graduation rates. High and lofty expectations must be met despite the educators’ feelings of alienation, inefficacy, competition, scarce materials and financial resources, large class sizes, and annually increasing, quantifiable expectations, and high teacher attrition rates (Luke, 1998). As an educator, I often looked within as I struggled with my desire to answer what I believed to be my life’s “calling” to dedicate my life to teaching and learning as I faced what became the
bottom line – to get high test scores. Inspired by my own teachers through the years, I found satisfaction in observing my students’ achievements, although many of their accomplishments were not quantifiable, or able to be measured by test scores. It frustrated me that my students often felt as though they were failures because some of them could not meet the required standards. I had to reassure my students that were successful no matter the outcome of their assessments.

While I was pressured to produce high test scores for my students, I felt that I was “set up” for failure and ultimately, so were my students. It was often difficult to ensure student success, while dealing with uncertainty in my abilities to achieve high test scores annually, while teaching 150 5th graders. I found it to be challenging work to achieve annually increasing standards, without having the materials and the support that I believed I needed to successfully do my job. I often had to purchase materials using my own money because the school did not have any. I did so not only because my students needed me to, but I found this to be an insurance policy as investing in my students financially, would aid in maintaining my livelihood.

Fontanella (2005) expressed a concern about NCLB and its negative effects on the same students that it claims to help, such as inner city kids and children enrolled in schools with few resources. This is one of the examples of what Merton (1936) describes as the unintended consequences of purposive social action, which might describe the fact that although the processes or reasons behind the implementation of NCLB have been widely recognized and its importance equally appreciated, it still awaits systematic treatment (Merton, 1936). After over ten years of implementation, Ruth (2010) discusses that the act has been problematic for many reasons, especially the financial constraints it has placed upon school districts as well as the fact that it has been a monumental failure because it has contributed to increased dropout rates.
Fontanella (2005) argues that NCLB is forcing a watered down curriculum on students who must demonstrate their knowledge by being successful on state tests and that no matter how much is learned or absorbed, it is the test scores that count. For me, this has been one of the most frustrating aspects of this system because it does not acknowledge the idea that there are multiple methods that can be used to demonstrate and to account for student learning. For instance, in my own experience, I have found that some students are better at expressing their learning orally, while others may prefer acts of constructivism, or producing different types of products. I do not believe that all students should be reduced to demonstrating their learning simply by way of the standardized test score.

Test scores count particularly in mathematics and reading, where they are employed to determine whether students are considered to be “low”, “medium” or “high”. The scores also contribute to a rating system that the government has constructed that parents use to decide whether schools are worth sending their children to. Many school districts have waged war upon NCLB by filing lawsuits that claim that the U.S. government has failed to properly support this reform effort by providing the necessary financial resources to ensure student success, while others actively seek exemptions from NCLB’s stringent requirements. As an educator, particularly as a school administrator, I have secretly applauded the efforts that states have made to bring attention to the problems with NCLB. While I believe that we as educators should be held accountable for ensuring student learning, this cannot be achieved without the adequate resources and financial support.

The pressure to meet the federal and state governments accountability standards under NCLB has resulted in the state and federal government having the power to shape what is taught, how it is assessed and has placed within states the decision making power to decide which
schools and teachers will be disciplined or rewarded as a result of test scores (Lipman, 2005 in Ladson-Billings, 2006). Clamoring for increases in student achievement, as educators, we have been forced to opt for excessive test preparation, including paying for test-prep programs and materials, as opposed to engaging students in “intellectually challenging work, expanded access to advanced courses, and the capacity for critical and analytical thought, which further institutionalizes unequal opportunities to learn” (Lipman, 2005, p. 104). Similarly, the pressure to meet the increasing standards has driven school districts to invest scarce monetary resources in materials that will raise their test scores in this system of test-driven accountability in which rewards are given to those whose test scores go up (McNeil, 2000). In my own school district, we have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on curriculum resources designed to support teachers in their abilities to teach the mandated curriculum with rigorous depth and complexity and to ensure successful outcomes for students, as indicated by high test scores.

The money that we have spent on curriculum resources was intended to benefit students by ensuring their learning, but ultimately, it is an investment to ensure that our district is successful in meeting student achievement mandates in the state of Texas. As previously stated, although the use of research-based practices and the increase of rigor in classroom instruction were intended to benefit students, there have been challenges for states, such as New Mexico, to meet the original requirements of NCLB and the result is the failure of schools to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) expectations. Standards based assessments have been used to set the bar, distinguishing successful schools from unsuccessful schools.

As I pondered the challenges that the NCLB (2001) has presented to states, New Mexico in particular and the state’s overwhelming statistics from the recent past, I began to explore the existing research on New Mexico schools in order to aid in my understanding of the issues
impeding academic achievement. I found that I am not the first to become concerned about the state’s perpetual struggle. In the next section, I share my critical reading of the research that has been conducted which centered upon New Mexico schools in particular.

2.12 Research on New Mexico Schools

In the literature, on New Mexico schools, most studies center on accountability issues and the struggle for academic achievement (Cruz, 2007; Iron-Moccasin, 2012; Schumpelt, 2011; Tolar, 2011; Tom, 2012; Trujillo, 2007). I did not find that there were any studies that centered upon the success of New Mexico’s National Blue Ribbon schools.

One study of New Mexico schools was a survey study based on the content based reading approach (COBRA) model surveyed 153 educators in 110 schools and explored the reading methods used most by New Mexico middle school teacher. The study involved adapting the COBRA model in such ways that it fit the socio-cultural context of New Mexico’s diverse population of middle school students (Martinez, 2007). Results of the study indicated that New Mexico teachers primarily perceived the importance of a conventional framework for middle school reading instruction and secondarily emphasized content reading instruction (Martinez, 2007). The conventional framework teacher espoused was inclusive of skills, narrative literature, and writing instruction that supported communicative competence (Martinez, 2007).

This study is related to the current study in its focus on reading instruction. It sheds light on the type of reading instruction that New Mexico teachers overwhelmingly utilize. Considering the fact that so many New Mexico schools have been categorized as failing to meet state standards, this study is beneficial in helping educators to know what practices are in place across a wide number of schools which may be the answer to the question of where reform might begin. A weakness in this study is that it does not specifically examine low-performing or high-
performing schools, which might enable educators to make judgments concerning the effectiveness of the methods that are at work in these middle schools. One case study examined the characteristics of two elementary principals of rural New Mexico schools that achieved adequate yearly progress (AYP) in the 2009-2010 school years (Tom, 2012). Using an educational leadership perspective, the methodology of this study utilized interviews and observations (Tom, 2012). A strength of this study is that data from the principal, teachers, parents and students was collected and analyzed. Findings indicated that there were similarities and differences between the two schools that were studied, with regard to their leadership characteristics. While this study examined high-performing, rural elementary schools, it did not examine high-performing schools that had achieved the Blue Ribbon Schools award.

Another study focused on the characteristics and behaviors of two rural secondary schools that led to their achieving AYP status (Iron-Moccasin, 2012). This study sampled teachers, principals and parents. Out of 19 school principals that were invited to participate in the study, 4 consented. The study utilized interviews, observations and an on-line survey and found that there were unanimous leadership characteristics present within these schools which included culture, motivation, instructional leadership, empowerment, trust, school leadership and community involvement (Iron-Moccasin, 2012). Although the study focused on high-achieving rural secondary schools, it did not specifically include those which had achieved Blue Ribbon status.

One study explored six New Mexico’s schools in which one or more subgroups of students failed to meet academic proficiency targets for seven years. These schools received corrective interventions from the state’s Public Education Department, as part of a restructuring process that spanned four years (Trujillo, 2007). Findings indicated that the schools experienced
positive changes as a result of the interventions. There was a willingness from staff members to commit to the implementation when interventions, requirements, and support were perceived as helpful to them (Trujillo, 2007). The use of the interventions led to positive changes in staff communication, collaboration, culture, and tone (Trujillo, 2007). While it might be perceived that staff with any school that is experiencing corrective action might respond negatively, the strength of this study is that it provides research on how staff members actually respond to state interventions. It shows that there can be a positive outcome in what can be perceived as a negative situation, as no school would want to be designated as being in need of restructuring. The study showed that the school staff were open to the interventions, and experienced positive changes as a result.

Another study of New Mexico schools focused on the issue of New Mexico’s large population of English Language Learners. This case study explored whether and how the interconnection of social capital, human capital, and instructional tools and routines contribute to the academic success of this population of students (Tolar, 2011). Through creating norms of trust and collaboration, sharing information about their teaching, and developing informal professional communities, the school successfully created a caring learning community which enabled them to individualize students’ instruction, supported the development of students’ social capital, and further met the varied needs of ELL students within this school (Tolar, 2011). This study is beneficial in that it explores how elements of social capital, human capital, and instructional tools may work together in supporting the success of students. It also manifests the importance of staff members working together as professional learning communities in order to achieve positive student outcomes for specific populations of students.
Cruz (2007) conducted a multiple-case study of four underperforming New Mexico schools and their leaders, who were mandated by New Mexico’s Public Education Department to implement the Malcolm Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence. This is a school reform model that is used for continuous improvement (Cruz, 2007). The data collected from this study which employed mixed methods inclusive of interviews, analyses of accountability reports, and questionnaires revealed how student achievement was impacted at each site while implementing the Baldrige system. It was concluded that each principal found it necessary to tailor the Baldrige framework in order to better suit their campuses and to meet their students’ diverse needs, as many were categorized as low-performing, low-income, or having disabilities. While all schools in the study utilized student data to make instructional, assessment, and intervention decisions and ultimately recognized change as a result of using the Baldrige system, only one school met federal adequate yearly progress expectations (Cruz, 2007).

In a related study, Schumpelt (2011) conducted a grounded theory study of the implementation of Baldrige System reform in New Mexico. In this study, out of 18 school districts that were engaged in Baldrige reform, nine superintendents consented to participate in the study. These participants reported that staff buy-in, time for training, materials, and change in building leadership were the most significant barriers to system implementation. Ultimately, the study concluded that there were three categories that were related to successfully implementing the system. These included developing a long-range reform plan, the realization of the significance of the principal’s role in implementation and the use of modeling, monitoring, staff

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Organizations, including schools, use the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence to guide their enterprises, improve performance, and garner sustainable results. The framework offers organizations an integrated approach to key management areas including leadership, strategic planning, customer focus, measurement, analysis, knowledge management, workforce focus, and operations focus (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2013).
collaboration and staff development as being instrumental in sustaining reform (Schumpelt, 2011).

I began to wonder about the next steps for New Mexico schools. How would educators address the problems that its schools were facing? Would they continue to wallow in the past, continuing to blame NCLB for all of its problems? Or, would they find ways to move beyond the issues of the past and toward a bright and promising future for its students? In this section I discussed the existent research on New Mexico schools, which largely centers on its struggle for increases in student achievement and issues in meeting federal accountability expectations. In the next section, I discuss New Mexico’s new accountability structure, which was designed in an effort toward school improvement.

2.13 New Mexico’s New Accountability Structure

In efforts to move forward and to make improvements of the system that had resulted in failing schools and failing students, in the fall of 2011, the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) appealed the federal government, requesting that it be able to establish its own accountability model to measure student performance (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2011). Because the previous system was too limited, lacked variability, and made meeting AYP goals unreachable for many of its schools, in 2012, the department developed an A-F accountability structure. The goal of these newly established progress indicators would reflect students’ gains while accounting for factors beyond schools’ control (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2012). The new system replaced the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) model that was structured under NCLB. The state’s new grading system makes understanding schools’ performance easier, contains a Value Added Model (VAM) and is designed to help schools to identify weak areas so that they may improve (NMPED, 2012).
The VAM approach is a quantitative formula that was developed to “level the playing field” by measuring student and school growth and success by holding schools accountable for academics, while capturing important differences regarding student achievement and avoiding classifying schools based on factors that are outside of a school’s control and catalyzing motivation for their success (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2012). It was designed to acknowledge schools’ population differences by isolating student background variables. The intention of this method is to recognize what schools contribute to student scores by ensuring that schools do not receive credit or penalties for circumstances that they do not have control over. This is achieved by the use of models which consider the growth of the highest performing and lowest performing students and by predicting and accounting for how certain factors such as economic advantage or disadvantage might influence student performance (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2012). The previous accountability system that was in place under NCLB (2001), did not account for these differences and this new system was proposed and accepted in order to improve methods for identifying and recognizing schools’ academic performance.

Looking forward, as a parent and as an educator, it is my hope that the newly designed accountability structure will result in improved academic performance for New Mexico schools and ultimately, New Mexico students. It is my hope that the improvements in what has been a broken system, will result in New Mexico’s historically failing schools becoming successful schools. In the next section, I specifically discuss the research concerning successful schools.

2.14 Successful Schools

In my research, I was not surprised to find that standards and high assessment scores on state and national tests are often used to identify successful schools and those needing remediation (Daggett, 2005; Mosenthal et al., 2004). Over the years, studies have been
conducted in order to identify structures and practices that have contributed to the achievement of successful schools, whose students have scored high on state assessments in order to provide adequate educational opportunities for students, and to identify best practices for schools and classrooms (Pérez & Socias, 2008).

In the literature, successful schools are called good schools (Williams, 2011; Landry, 2012), effective schools (Hughes, 2010; Lauritson, 2012; Safie, 2012), no excuses schools (Taylor, 2000), and beat-the-odds schools (Carbaugh, 2008). I am not the first to become interested in what makes a school a successful school. Such schools have been a focus of education research for over 30 years, and while the intuitive appeal is to look at them and learn from them, the drawback to this methodology is that there are differences in school circumstances, student populations, teachers, communities, and campus cultures, therefore school successes may be based on factors that are often difficult or costly to replicate (Pérez & Socias, 2008). Still meta-analyses have been conducted over the years in a continued effort to capture research-based practices to help to move all students toward a more rigorous and relevant curriculum (Daggett, 2005).

Various studies have been conducted to determine the factors contributing to the achievement of successful schools. For instance Marzano’s (2003) 35-year meta-analysis of research concluded that a guaranteed, viable curriculum, challenging goals, effective feedback, parent and community involvement, a safe and orderly environment and collegiality and professionalism, were found to be critical components influencing student achievement within successful schools.

Taylor (2000) highlighted and celebrated effective practices of low-income schools who have achieved high ratings despite challenges. Principals’ site-based decision-making power, use
of measurable goals, hiring of master teachers, regular and rigorous assessment, a common and central approach to discipline, parent involvement and student effort were seven factors shared by high-performing, high poverty schools (Taylor, 2000). Schools sharing these traits were considered to be “no excuses” schools, because their students yielded high test scores despite the fact that over three-quarters of their students qualified for federal free and reduced lunch (Taylor, 2000).

Collins (2010) examined factors that attributed to achievement in a high-performing, high poverty urban elementary school and found that strong leadership, positive school climate, student-centered focus and goal-setting were related to the success of the studied school. The results of yet another meta-analysis of several successful schools indicated that a focus on instruction, an unrelenting commitment to excellence, extraordinary committal of resources, focus on data, high quality curriculum, high quality curriculum and instruction, high impact professional development for staff and rigor, relevance and relationships were among the central findings that were key to successful schools (Daggett, 2005). The schools that were the foci of these studies are good schools and parents clamor to send their children to schools such as these (Taylor, 2000).

Looking outward, I too examine schools based on such indicators. As an educator, I use these measures in making the decision concerning schools that I apply to work in. I want observers to have positive opinions of the school in which I work and to have high regard for it. Personally, I have an inward desire for my own children to attend what is known as a successful school. I, too, judge schools based on test scores, although I struggling with my personal beliefs that test scores are not the only indicator of student success. To be honest, I find self-
contradiction in the idea that perhaps I desire leniency when outsiders evaluate my school, but I am not as lenient toward other schools.

I too, tend to categorize schools as one I would work in or take my child to, based on their performance. While the schools that were studied have been considered good, successful, effective, “no excuses” and “beat-the-odds” schools, not all of them have attained the National Blue Ribbon Schools award. There are essential and distinguishing factors that delineate the differences between good organizations and great organizations, which allow them to sustain extraordinary results (Collins, 2001). In the next section, I explain the significance of the achievement of the National Blue Ribbons Schools award, which distinguishes great schools from good schools. Because of my own desire to be a part of what observers perceive as being a successful school, I am particularly interested in what it takes for a school to become a National Blue Ribbon School.

2.15 Background on National Blue Ribbon Schools

My interest in New Mexico schools and its nationally-recognized Blue Ribbon Schools led me to explore these schools with greater depth. I learned that SNME is not the only school that has experienced the honor of attaining this prestigious award. Still, it exists among a low number of schools that have had this distinct honor. In my research I was surprised to learn that 35 (4 percent) out of 862 New Mexico schools (NCES, 2013) achieved National Blue Ribbon status (United States Department of Education, 2012). These schools are among the few highly successful New Mexico schools existing within a landscape of low-performing schools.

From 1982 – 2002, 18 schools received this award and from 2003 -2011, 14 schools received it. In 2012, only one school was bestowed this honor (United States Department of Education, 2012) and in 2013, three schools achieved Blue Ribbon status (United States
Department of Education, 2013). Because these schools exist among a high number of lower performing schools and have demonstrated their success in providing classroom instruction, I became increasingly interested in learning the instructional practices, including various methods and strategies that are being implemented to aid in their success.

While many United States schools may demonstrate successes from time to time, National Blue Ribbon Schools achieve such status because of their demonstration of at least five years of repeated success (United States Department of Education, 2012). For this reason, it became important to me to engage in research that aids in the understanding of how such schools are achieving this level of success in educating students. As I began learning about National Blue Ribbon Schools, I began to realize that there was a distinction between these schools and other schools that are categorized as successful schools.

For the past 32 years, the National Blue Ribbon Schools program, a trademark of excellence and success in academics, has recognized nearly 7,000 American public and private schools ranging from elementary, middle and high schools in which students have demonstrated performance at high levels or have made significant gains in achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The blue flag that schools receive upon being named a National Blue Ribbon School is a trademark of excellence, a symbol of quality recognized by parents and policy-makers in thousands of communities (United States Department of Education, 2012). The impact of winning Blue Ribbon status has a positive impact on schools as some notice increases in student enrollment, increases in student per pupil funding, improved school climate, teacher, parent and principal pride, increased publicity and being viewed as model schools which attract other educators (Webb, 1993). The following section contains a summary of the process that is involved in a school’s ability to qualify for this nomination.
2.16 National Blue Ribbon School Qualifications

My interest in National Blue Ribbon Schools and my hope to someday lead my own school in becoming one led me to research the significance of National Blue Ribbon Schools and what it takes to for schools to qualify for this distinction. Achievement of the National Blue Ribbon Schools award is significant because these schools become highly esteemed by other educators. Blue Ribbon School principals and teachers are called upon to give presentations at state and regional meetings about the practices at their schools that have made a difference. District and state school faculty visit National Blue Ribbon schools to learn about effective leadership and instructional methods (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

National Blue Ribbon qualifying requirements are rigorous. In the nomination process, the Secretary of Education invites each Chief State School Officer (CSSO), including the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), to nominate public schools that meet either criterion for recognition. Schools whose students achieve at high levels and are closing achievement gaps are invited to apply for the National Blue Ribbon School designation. The state must certify that the nominated schools meet the minimum requirements established by the department and describe that they meet any other determining criteria used by the state to nominate the schools. States must rely on their state assessment systems, including assessments, which must pertain equally to all schools nominated from the individual state (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Nominated schools are categorized as “Exemplary High Performing” or Exemplary Improving”. In Exemplary High Performing schools, the achievement of the school’s students in the most recent year tested places the school among the highest performing schools in the state on reading and mathematics standardized assessments. “Exemplary Improving” schools are those
in which disaggregated results for student subgroups, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds, are similar to the results for all students tested. Additionally, 40 percent or more of the school’s students are from disadvantaged backgrounds, (such as those in Title I schools) (U.S.DOE, 2012). The school may qualify by demonstrating that it made the most progress in improving student achievement, or is among the top 10 percent of schools that have shown the greatest improvement in student achievement in the state over the previous five years on state assessments of reading (or English language arts) and mathematics. Regardless of demographics, qualifying schools may not have been in federal school improvement status or have been identified as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years before applying and must meet their state’s adequate yearly progress requirement two years prior to being nominated and in the year that they receive the award (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Upon being awarded this designation, the school is invited to participate in the annual awards ceremony and becomes one of the schools that are visited each year so that educational practices that have been successful in closing the achievement gap may be identified (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The following section contains studies that have been conducted involving National Blue Ribbon Schools.

2.17 Research on National Blue Ribbon Schools

Studies concerning the leadership practices of National Blue Ribbon schools are represented in the literature (Carney-Dalton, 2001; Copeland, 2003; Lyles, 2009; Maslyk, 2012). As a school administrator, I looked within as I read these studies and was forced to consider the role that I play in the success or lack of success that is experienced by my school and my students. While I approached this study with concerns about the instructional practices that are used in National Blue Ribbon Schools, I was forced to look within as I considered the weight of
leadership in navigating schools toward successful outcomes and in obtaining National Blue Ribbon status, in particular.

One study was conducted to determine Blue Ribbon principals’ perceptions of their own leadership skills (Carney-Dalton, 2001). This study sampled principals and teachers from 264 schools who achieved National Blue Ribbon Status during the 2000-2001 school year. Principals completed a survey in which they used a rank-order method to determine how they prioritize leadership skills that they use. The study found that vision was mentioned by most of the principals followed by high expectations for quality performance, recognition and appreciation of the accomplishments of others, initiative, enthusiasm, and respect and consideration of others. This study found that a consensus between teachers and principals regarding required leadership skills which included vision, high expectations for quality performance, recognition, initiative, enthusiasm and respect and consideration for others were the reason for their schools’ success in achieving Blue Ribbon status (Carney-Dalton, 2001).

This study has valuable implications from a leadership perspective because it identifies the fact that principals and teachers place importance on a principal’s ability to develop and articulate their vision. As I read this study, I continued to look within as I considered my own approach in articulating my school’s vision. I realized the importance of developing and articulating this vision, which is the academic success of all students.

Another study, utilized quantitative methods and survey 139 National Blue Ribbon school principals from the 2007 school year, to examine the relationship between the leadership styles of principals and student achievement (Maslyk, 2012). Findings from this study indicated that these principals had a transformational leadership style, as opposed to a transactional leadership style.
The benefit of this study is that it helps school leaders to understand the role of the principal in leading a school toward success. Additionally, school leaders could use the findings of this study to examine their own leadership styles and to consider how these affect their students’ academic performance. This study encouraged me to look within and to examine my own leadership style and to look outward at the ways in which my leadership style may impact or impede student success.

Although this study has valuable implications, the reality is that school leaders differ because they are individuals with varying experiences and backgrounds. Additionally, schools differ because of the demographics of their students and because of the communities in which they exist. These complexities may impact the leadership style that a principal adopts. While this study examined the broad scope of skill sets that are needed for principals to be Blue Ribbon leaders, which is has beneficial implications for school leaders, it did not provide specific strategies that teachers could learn and apply.

Using a content-analysis research design, Copeland (2003) investigated the instructional leadership practices of Blue Ribbon middle school principals and identified the fact that Blue Ribbon principals identify themselves as lead teacher and learners, create a climate of high expectations, do not consistently use data to drive instruction nor do they demand instruction that is tied to academic standards, but support the continued learning of staff and engage constituents in the operations of the school.

This study involved Blue-Ribbon principals from the 1999-2000 school year. Because it took place before the new federal accountability measures that were placed upon schools by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), some of the findings, such as the inconsistencies in
using data to drive instruction and in demanding instruction that is tied to academic standards may not be applicable to post-NCLB (2001) schools.

Using interviews as the primary method, Kushner (2000) studied 8 Pennsylvania schools, which included four Blue-Ribbon and four non-Blue Ribbon schools. The purpose of the research was to identify commonalities and differences in Blue Ribbon and non-Blue Ribbon schools and found that Blue Ribbon schools followed recommended practices of teaming, advisory, transition, exploratory and varied teaching (Kushner, 2000). This research is important because it identifies the specific differences between Blue Ribbon schools and non-Blue Ribbon schools and illuminates how these schools have become successful (according to state and federal indicators) when others have not. The findings from this study offered broad, complex categories, which can be observed and possibly put into practice although school staff, communities, and students differ from school to school.

Another study focused on instructional delivery methods used with gifted students in Blue Ribbon schools and found evidence of common leadership in gifted programming, common instructional delivery methods, mainstreaming, enrichment, acceleration, independent study and short term goals were all used in Pennsylvania Blue Ribbon schools’ gifted programming (Sapone, 2001). In that this study is concerned with the instructional delivery methods used with gifted and talented students in particular, it ignores the broad category of students who are not labeled as gifted and talented, but who are instead considered to be at-risk, or those who do not fit into either of these categories. Additionally, students who are gifted and talented, but may never be identified because their groups are under-identified and underrepresented, would not be able to benefit from the findings of this study.
These studies made important contributions to the existing literature on National Blue Ribbon schools, but they did not provide information concerning specific strategies that were instrumental in their success. After reading these studies, I continued to be concerned with the reality that previous studies have not centered on the instructional practices that have been used within National Blue Ribbon Schools. In the following section, I discuss the gap that exists within the literature on National Blue Ribbon schools.

2.18 Gap in the Literature on National Blue Ribbon Schools

While studies (Carney-Dalton, 2001; Copeland, 2003; Kushner, 2000; Maslyk, 2012) focused on the leadership practices of National Blue Ribbon schools and one focused on gifted and talented strategies used in such schools (Sapone, 2001), I found that no studies specifically explored the instructional practices in these schools, which may have contributed to their students’ success in reading. Further, no studies of Blue Ribbon schools were conducted using a southwestern or U.S./Mexico border context. Finally, none of the studies of Blue Ribbon schools focused on any specifically located within the state of New Mexico. While several studies have focused on New Mexico schools, to date, no studies have specifically centered on New Mexico’s National Blue Ribbon Schools. Additionally, studies that were conducted on New Mexico schools are void of information concerning specific instructional approaches that have successfully been used in teaching and learning within this context.

There is a paucity of literature that specifically focuses on New Mexico’s Blue Ribbon schools, the instructional practices that they employ, and whether and how various instructional practices play a role in their success. Because there is a paucity of literature that addresses this gap, it is important to me to engage in research that aids in the understanding of how such schools are achieving this level of success in educating students. Through engaging in this
inquiry, I am seeking to understand whether and how particular instructional practices may contribute to the success of New Mexico’s Blue Ribbon schools and ultimately, their students. This inquiry involves only one of these schools and because of the particularity of their experience, the practices cannot be replicated to the degree that other schools could apply what is learned with an expectation to achieve the same results. However, I still believe that is possible that what was learned from this school with regard to instructional practices may have implications in other school settings. Perhaps educators in other locales will explore whether and how the use of these same practices may in any way contribute to student learning on their own campuses.

2.19 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I looked within as I considered challenges that I face as an educator working in schools along the U.S./Mexico border. As I considered the issues that I have faced, I looked outward as I considered how these may same issues may have impacted the performance of New Mexico schools in the recent past. Seeking answers led me on a journey of how language compounds the problems of providing reading and language arts instruction for students who are learning English. I looked backward as I reflected upon the history of New Mexico schools and the relationship between standards-based education and the educational inequities that have been produced as a result of NCLB (2001). Looking forward, I considered how New Mexico’s new accountability structure may impact student performance in positive ways. As I contemplated the possibilities of increases in the number of successful schools in New Mexico, I explored the many ways in which the research describes successful schools. I identified distinctions between successful schools and National Blue Ribbon Schools by sharing the background, qualifications,
and existing research on these schools. I concluded this discussion by identifying a gap in the research concerning the instructional practices that are used in National Blue Ribbon Schools.

In *Chapter 3: The Journey of Narrative Inquiry – Story as Method*, I discuss the journey in the process of exploring the practices of a Blue Ribbon School narratively. I discuss experiences I had in gaining entry, selecting the participants, data collection and analysis procedures and issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability.
Chapter 3: The Journey of Narrative Inquiry – Story as Method

3.1 Introduction

Whether meaning should be measured in quantifiable terms as in quantitative research or whether knowledge can be obtained through interviews and observable facts as in qualitative research, is often debated in the field of education. The goal of research, whether engaged in through quantitative or qualitative approaches, should be transformative education, which must be meaningful and must allow individuals to attain a deeper awareness of ourselves and others (Brimhall -Vargas et al., 2008). For me, the process of scholarly research has led me through a journey of self-discovery in my exploration of a variety of pathways which would fulfill my personal desires to improve teaching and learning for myself and others.

My scholarly experiences have taught me that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are suitable in providing valuable information that can be used to impart practices which may improve the lives of individuals in different ways. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) assert that researchers must develop a complete and discursive understanding of ethical, ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of research paradigms. Perhaps Salmani & Akbari (2008) said it best in their statement that paradigms are rooted in philosophy and they determine the direction of researchers; how they reach the reality, how they answer the questions of the seeking mind. My own “seeking mind” in its continual search for answers concerning the instructional practices that are used in National Blue Ribbon Schools, led me into a journey to find the most suitable approaches for reaching this reality.

For me, the argument was not about which approach was better or worse, but about which approach or approaches would provide the answers to my seeking mind and would appropriately address the research puzzle. In making the decision concerning how to best learn
from the educators’ experiences and how to best convey their reflections in a way that made sense to me and would facilitate others’ understanding, I ultimately decided to elicit the use of narrative inquiry, a phenomenon and method which is increasingly and particularly used in studies of educational experience (Chase, 2005; Chase, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Huber, in press; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Narrative inquiry “rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures” (Bell, 2002, p. 6). After considering other, methods, I ultimately decided on narrative inquiry as the best method for finding the answers to my research puzzle. Further, its use would help me to understand the experience of a particular Title I National Blue Ribbon School in New Mexico and the practices that the participants believe contributed to their school’s success. This chapter will capture the journey of the narrative experience.

As stated in Chapter One, I initially considered ethnography and case study methodologies to learn about the practices used in New Mexico’s Blue Ribbon Schools. After realizing that the Blue Ribbon School that I was interested in was not performing as successfully as it previously had, I needed a way to peer into the past in order to learn about the practices that were at work in this school during the time that it achieved its national recognition. Looking for a way to address the research puzzle, I decided that a narrative approach would allow me to capture the participants’ stories as they shared their experiences concerning the practices that were used in their school during that time.

My original research proposal involved conducting a series of classroom observations and interviews within the classrooms of the Blue Ribbon teachers. As I continued to review the data published by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED 2012, 2013), I
became uneasy. The facts could not be ignored and I came to terms with the realization that the school that I was interested in because of its success was facing challenges.

In order to remedy my situation, at first I considered researching another school, so that I could find one with a story and conclusion that I could be proud to share while employing my initially proposed methods. I was biased. I was looking for perfection. Honestly, I did not want to learn about a school that was once seen as successful, but was not any longer. After much consideration, I realized that much could be learned from looking at the past experiences of this particular school. I believe that confronting my biases enabled me to see that in reality, for all schools success is a dynamic process characterized by ups and downs, highs and lows. This realization caused me to become more open to what I could learn from this school through a retrospective exploration, reaching back into the past to learn about the practices that faculty and staff members engaged in at SNME that contributed to its great success.

In order to retrospectively explore practices which led to the success of SNME and to learn about how it has changed as a result of more recent experiences, I determined that the narrative approach was considered to be the most appropriate method for this study. This inquiry into the experiences of two individuals, a principal and a teacher, who worked within this award-winning school and had intimate knowledge of the processes involved in its becoming a Blue Ribbon School enabled me to find answers which informed my research puzzle concerning the instructional practices that were used in this school.

Seeking a method for data analysis which provided an opportunity to strengthen the understanding of my own story as an educator and those of my participants, I have chosen to engage in this work as a narrative inquiry. After exploring other methods, I was inspired to apply this approach based on the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000). I was particularly drawn to
their acknowledgement of the idea that as narrative inquirers, we seek personal justification for our interests and situate inquiries within the contexts of our own lives. We work to articulate a relationship between our own personal interests as we seek a sense of significance within larger social concerns which can be expressed within the works and lives of others (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As an educator, I view my work in research and in practice as social justice in my aim to find ways to support schools in the increasingly difficult work of educating students. At the same time, I believe that the narrative approach has allowed me to address the research puzzle in ways that will inform policy and practice. Further, it has allowed me the opportunity to engage in research concerning instructional practices in ways that will inform and enhance my own work with students.

In the sections that follow, I detail the journey of this narrative inquiry by detailing the methodology that was utilized in order to address the research puzzle. I begin by returning to the research puzzle in order to directly connect it to the methods that were used in order to address it. Next, I move into a discussion of the processes involved in selecting participants and collecting and analyzing the data. Finally, I explore issues of trustworthiness, reliability, validity, and generalizability with regard to narrative inquiry.

3.2 Returning to the Puzzle

As opposed to research problems which carry with them qualities of definability and the expectation of a solution, narrative inquiries are composed around a particular wonder or research puzzle (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The research puzzle that this inquiry attends to is the fact that the literature concerning the instructional practices used in National Blue Ribbon Schools was unrepresented. Therefore, I became interested in specifically researching the instructional practices that are being implemented in such schools. Further, the realization that
research involving New Mexico’s National Blue Ribbon schools, was not represented in the literature, led to my desire to examine the specific instructional practices that are at work in the schools in this particular state. This research puzzle led me to engage in the practices of narrative inquiry in order to identify the instructional practices used by one school (SNME), in particular.

Once the research puzzle was formulated and background research was conducted, the journey of narrative inquiry began. The following section details the processes involved in participant selection, gaining entry, and data collection and analysis methods that I specifically chose because of their reach in their ability to address the research puzzle.

3.3 Selecting the Participants and Gaining Entry

Initially, I had hoped to conduct my research at SNME, within the context of the school. I wanted to interview the principal and to interview and observe classroom teachers in 3rd, 4th and 5th grades. “Getting in” this research context proved to be somewhat challenging for several reasons. First, most school districts publish information on their websites regarding how to go about conducting research within their schools. I searched the web in hopes to find information related to this on my proposed school district’s website. Because I could not find any information related to this, I contacted the district’s central office. The receptionist who answered the phone stated that she was not sure how I could go about conducting research in their schools. She transferred me to the superintendent’s secretary and I left her a voicemail message.

When she returned my call, she simply stated that they would not be allowing any research in their district. Feeling discouraged, I immediately contacted a friend of mine who has worked for the district for many years. She shared with me that the district “doesn’t have the best scores in the world.” Therefore, she believed that the superintendent saw my research as a potential threat and was likely trying to protect the district from negative publicity. I shared with
her the fact that my research had positive intentions and she suggested that I contact the principal of the school that I was particularly interested in.

Being the persistent person that I am, I checked the web and found out that SNME was hosting a special community summer camp for the students. I felt that this would be a prime opportunity to make a visit to the school in hopes that I would be able to meet someone who would help me to “get in” and conduct this research that was so important to me for so many reasons. I went into the main office of the school and the secretary told me that I would be able to meet with the assistant principal, but that she was in the middle of lunch duty. I went into the cafeteria, which was bustling with students. Some were in line waiting to be served while others were seated at the lunch tables and eating their lunches. I noticed a woman directing the students as they trafficked from the lunch line to the long, horizontally paralleled lunch tables. Having been responsible for lunch duty on many days myself, I immediately identified that the woman directing the students’ traffic was the assistant principal. I approached her and informed her that I would like to meet with her concerning a research project. She was very cordial and informed me that she was almost finished with lunch duty and requested that I wait for her in the school lobby.

As I waited for my meeting with the assistant principal, I sat in the lobby and began collecting field notes immediately. Taking in the school environment, I noticed the Blue Ribbon award, the flag, and pictures of the staff as they received the Blue Ribbon award. I also noticed a large banner which welcomed visitors to the school and notified the public that the school was the home of the New Mexico state teacher of the year. I immediately began wondering who this teacher might be and if I would get the chance to meet her. While I considered the possibility of this idea, the assistant principal came out of the cafeteria to meet with me. She informed me that they were in the process of getting a new principal. She shared with me that they were school
partners with local universities and is always open to research. She stated that their teachers in particular are very welcoming and allowed outsiders into their classrooms. She asked for my business card and stated that they were hiring a new principal and that she would contact me as soon as the new principal was in place, reassuring me that she did not see any potential barriers to my ability to conduct research at their school.

As I pondered our conversation, I realized that the school administrator that was in position during the time that the school won the Blue Ribbon Award was no longer working for the district. Realizing that speaking to this principal would be important for the inquiry, I began asking around to see if my colleagues knew how to get in touch with him. As it turned out, one of my neighbors knew him very well and had his contact information. She agreed to contact him for me to see if he would be willing to participate.

As I was doing the school announcements one day, I received a phone call from my neighbor stating “he will do it!” I was very excited to hear this news. I asked her if she knew how to get in touch with the teacher who had been the New Mexico state teacher of the year, but she did not have her contact information. I did some research and found her address on the internet. I decided to mail her a letter and consent form to see if she would be interested in participating in the inquiry. Weeks went by, and I did not hear from her. I decided that perhaps just meeting with the principal would be sufficient for the study. It would have to be. My luck finally changed when I met with the principal for the interview. He was able to contact her for me, and she agreed to be a participant. During the process of choosing the participants, I completed the university’s internal review board process and was approved to conduct the research. I began taking steps to begin data collection immediately after I received the university’s approval.
3.4 Data Collection

The process of narrative inquiry involved the in-depth interviewing of the teacher and the principal, which was the primary method of data collection for this study. These interviews were conducted in a three-phase interview series in which participants were asked to provide a focused life history (as it pertained to the teaching profession), the details of the experience (teaching in and leading a Blue Ribbon school), and to reflect on the meaning that this experience has had for them (Seidman, 2013). The three-phase process that Seidman (2013) suggests provided a process for supporting participants in reconstructing their experiences. While Seidman’s (2013) methods are largely used in phenomenological studies, I found it beneficial to draw from this three-phase method in the process of in-depth interviewing. Seidman’s (2013) method provided a format for the grand tour, mini-tour, and experience questioning (Spradley, 2003) that facilitated in-depth questioning and responses. The participants were asked to participate in individual semi-structured, interviews to discuss their views on the factors that contributed to their school becoming a National Blue Ribbon school and whether and how particular instructional practices used during reading instruction were the key to their success, from their perspectives. The act of engaging in the process of in-depth interviewing involved relying on the participants’ recollection of their experiences as sketched in their own memories.

3.5 Memories

While I was initially concerned with whether my participants would be able to recall the details of the experiences that occurred in 2010, I realized that with the appropriate questioning techniques, it was possible for the participants to recall and to story their experiences. People remember what is important to them and the use of in-depth interviews in recording oral histories as shared by participants made it possible for participants to recall and to determine how they
interpret their experiences (Yow, 2005). Further, using recorded interviews, such as oral histories can enable researchers to preserve firsthand memories and provide their accounts of events (Whitman, 2004). Although the memories of individuals as described through the tool of the interviewing can be very helpful in gaining an understanding of an event, there are also challenges with regard to validity in relying on the memories of others.

Because individuals are not placed under oath, there are questions regarding the scales of validity for all interviews, as it is possible that when interviewees are sharing their experiences, what they are sharing may not be the whole truth (Atkinson, 2002). Further, the memories of individuals are subjective and in terms of validity, one may question whether such memories are trustworthy and infallible due to the reality that memories may fade as people age and as time lapses. Memory researchers have found however, that individuals do remember the most important, core information about events, especially those involving high levels of mental activity and emotional involvement, although peripheral details may be forgotten (Yow, 2005). Although the past can be a burden and a resource simultaneously, research on reminiscence has revealed the importance of conscious cognitive mechanisms and the memory reservoir, which can serve as a storehouse of wisdom and meaning (Wong, 1995). In conducting the interviews, I found that the participants remembered the important details concerning how their school achieved its success and were able to share their vast knowledge and were able to make meaning based on the significance of becoming a Blue Ribbon school. Further, they were interviewed separately, yet themes within both interviews bore similarities, contributing to the trustworthiness of their accounts.
3.6 Interviews

Interviewing is based on the assumption that participants’ perspectives should unfold as they view the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The use of interviews in research allows for uninterrupted discourse in data collection (Luttrell, 2010). As a society, we rely on interviews as interactional encounters and take them for granted because they have become the most feasible mechanism for obtaining information about individuals, groups, and organizations in a society characterized by role relations (Fonatana & Frey, 2005). I discovered that in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 2003) was best suited to exploring the events that occurred within this school retrospectively and in obtaining an oral history of the events as recalled by these individuals. Three-phase, in-depth interviewing, allowed for deep information to be provided and for understanding to be expressed by the participants (Johnson, 2002).

I purposefully selected the participants based on my belief that interviewing these individuals would lead to a better understanding of their specific experience (Stake, 2006) of becoming a National Blue Ribbon School. I developed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) which was used initially to guide the interviews with the former school principal and the former teacher. Due to the nature of semi-structured interviewing, some questions were discovered from the participants, therefore additional questions were posed as further questions emerged during the course of the conversations (Spradley, 2003). This semi-structure was aligned to the ideas of Clandinin & Connelly (2000) who caution that interviews at times have an inequality about them because the questions and the interview are solely directed by the interviewer. I found that it was productive to have a semi-structured protocol prepared to guide the conversation. Still, as much as possible, I allowed the discussion to occur naturally and freely by allowing the participants to ask me questions during the course of the interview. This created
a two-way flow of conversation, which allowed them to get to know me both as a person and as a researcher and created a more participatory situation.

The process of in-depth interviewing involved asking the participants to construct an oral account of their personal and professional experiences leading up to their becoming involved with the award-winning school. In general, these questions centered upon their explanations of why they made the decision to go into the field of education and branched out into other personal and professional choices that they made which later resulted in their being associated with the award-winning school. The open-ended questions further provided a vehicle to allow for in-depth discussion of the success-yielding practices that were utilized in the school.

Originally, I had planned for the interviews to take place over the course of three separate sessions as suggested by Seidman (2013), who also stated that the three session process was flexible and could be altered, as long as the basic structure was maintained in such ways that allowed for “participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives” (Seidman, 2013, p.25). In order to democratize the interview process, I asked each participant what their preferences were concerning scheduling the sessions. The participants provided me with the dates, times, and locations that were most convenient for them, and I complied with their schedules.

For the first interview, with the principal, we set up three dates on which to conduct the three phases of the interview. Prior to the interview, I sent him the interview questions and the consent form so that he would have time to look these over. I believe this also gave him time to reflect upon the experience and think about what he would share with me.

When I arrived at his beautiful home, the enthusiastic principal directed me to the dining room, where the interview would be conducted. He was good-natured and seemed to be excited
about doing the interview. He was very welcoming. He laughed and smiled easily and often, as he made light conversation with me. As we sat down at his dining room table, he stated that he wanted to see how far we would get on the first day, and we would use the other days, if necessary. After he signed the consent form, we conducted the principal’s interviews at his house and as desired by him, we completed the interviews in one session. We met for several hours and took breaks between the interview phases. We started early in the day and the conversation continued towards late afternoon. Initially, I was not sure if this was going to be the best way to conduct the interview, but later I realized that it was just perfect because it was done the way that the participant wanted. He was calm and relaxed and we were in rapport throughout the interview. In retrospect, I think that stopping the conversation so that we could do the interviews over three days, based on my own need to adhere to protocols, would have interrupted the continuity and rapport that was vital to this conversation. Once the interview was complete, the principal allowed me to engage in member checking, which I used in the process of analysis in order to ensure that I had understood what he wanted to convey.

After the interview, he called the teacher and asked her if she would be willing to participate in the study. When he called her, they laughed and talked on the phone for a while and I could see that their relationship was strong. This reinforced my desire to interview the teacher, if it were possible. She agreed to meet with me and I contacted her to schedule the interview. Just as I had done for the principal, I e-mailed her the questions and the consent form in advance so that she would have time to look these over. On the scheduled day, I went to her house as we had agreed, but no one was home. I waited for approximately 30 minutes and called her several times on the phone, but did not get an answer. I wondered if she had changed her mind about participating in the inquiry. While I stood there waiting for her, a car pulled up. The
person driving rolled down the window and looked at me. I said, “I have a meeting with Ms. Taylor, is she here?” He replied, “You mean Mrs. Taylor?” Suddenly, I felt as though I were about ten inches tall. I also felt really dark all of a sudden, as I imagined that he was wondering why this strange black girl was waiting on the porch. As it turned out, she had a family emergency. We rescheduled another time after that and she called to cancel. I was beginning to feel as though she was avoiding me and I did not want to come on too strong, or to seem like I was stalking her. Finally, we scheduled a day and she was able to meet with me. She was kind enough to come over to my house for the meeting because I had foot surgery and was unable to drive.

We sat for hours in my kitchen having the conversation that was guided by the interview questions. Like the principal, she too desired to discuss all of the questions in a single day. Again, I complied and again, I noted that allowing her input in this decision, democratized the process and supported the building of rapport. After the interview, the teacher agreed to maintain contact with me so that I could engage in member checking, to ensure that I captured the interview data correctly.

For this inquiry, I decided to conduct the interviews individually rather than collectively. The most important advantage in conducting the interviews this way was that it allowed for confidentiality. Speaking to the principal in a one-on-one setting seemingly allowed him to share ideas that he may not have shared otherwise. At times, he talked to me in an “administrator to administrator” kind of way that he may not have if we had been in the presence of others. Conducting the one-on-one interviews also diminished the possibility of interruptions by other participants. This allowed for a continual, focused conversation with each of the individuals. The participants were each allowed to “have the stage” without feeling the need to compete with one
another, grandstand, or grapple for my attention. I also found that this allowed for the building of rapport between me and the participants. Subsequent research could include group interviews with the teacher and the principal, and perhaps additional staff members.

3.7 Document Review

Through engaging in research using a variety of methods of data collection, the research becomes a holistic account of a problem or issue under study (Creswell, 2007). With this idea in mind, in order to learn more about the participants’ experiences, additional information was obtained from other documents that the participants chose provided me. These included the actual winning Blue Ribbon Schools Application that the participants submitted, which was provided to me by the principal, along with photographs of the data wall that was used for planning meetings, and the Balanced Literacy checklist that was used to evaluate the implementation of Balanced Literacy in the classrooms. Connelly & Clandinin (2000) discuss that there are various types of field texts, a range of documents in any inquiry field and these were utilized because I felt that these documents aided the participants in their explanation of some of the instructional practices that staff members engaged in. To analyze these documents, I engaged in a process of content analysis to support the description and interpretation of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

3.8 Data Analysis

This inquiry does not seek facts, or storied evidence of the accounts that were described, but instead seeks to learn the interpretation of the facts, or the meaning that was made from the participants’ experience (Loh, 2013). In order to understand and to interpret the meaning that was made from the participants’ experiences, I carefully analyzed all of the data that I had collected. The process of analyzing the field texts into research texts involved several steps. For
both interviews, I used two recording devices to record the interviews and did not take notes during the interview in order to maintain rapport. Field notes were recorded immediately following the interviews and initialized the data analysis process. I personally transcribed both interviews in order to connect with the data and to continue the analysis process. This immersion process involved reading and re-reading the data to uncover themes and to begin the process of narratively coding the data by holding different field texts in relation to others. In doing so, I considered complex issues such as plot, scene, character, tension, narrator, context, and tone as well as the Deweyian (1938) experience criteria of continuity and interaction pertaining to context, people, action, and certainty (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

An inductive analysis process ensued as I began to organize and categorize the texts as I uncovered and grouped patterns and themes and located categories (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This inductive process was carried through in this final document as I experimented with forms of representation, selected texts accordingly, and returned to past, present, and future implications of their experiences as I considered the meaning that could be made from winning the Blue Ribbon Schools Award (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Using a burrowing process, I worked to avoid making generalizations and instead worked to restory and reconstruct this event from the viewpoints of the participants, as much as possible (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In doing so, I engaged in socio-cultural analysis (Grbch, 2007) to utilize the broader interpretive frameworks within the oral histories in determining how this principal and this teacher made sense of their school’s Blue Ribbon experience. A sociocultural perspective can aid in the examination of interactions among individuals situated in social and cultural institutions (Herrenkohl, 2008). As opposed to sociolinguistic analysis, which emphasizes the language
structure of the interviews, sociocultural thematic analysis provided for past, present, and future linking in interpreting the participants’ stories (Grbch, 2007).

In developing the story based on the emerging epiphanies, I found there to be no simple, analytical transition. Further, in engaging in these analytic inquiry processes, I encountered tensions and complexities in repeatedly returning to the field texts, considering new research puzzles, and seeing where my own restored life as a researcher fit into the stories of the lived experiences of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I believe that through the use of thematic narrative analysis, I have begun to share my own story as an educator, consider my own priorities, and to interpret the experiences of my participants in a synthesis of narrative inquiry. I use the word ‘begun’ to communicate the idea that narrative inquirers know in advance that there is a task in conveying a sense that the narrative is unfinished and that the stories will continue to be told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

3.9 Issues of Reliability, Validity, Generalizability, and Trustworthiness

Criticized for its focus on the individual rather than on the social context (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), I must acknowledge that there is a lack of acceptability with regard to the trustworthiness of narrative inquiry within the qualitative field. To address this challenge, criteria for quality relies on established techniques which are recommended to establish it (Loh, 2013). Lincoln & Guba (1985) identify criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative studies including triangulation in data collection methods, member checks, and thick description. Quantitative research approaches seek reliability, validity, and generalizability as criteria for what constitutes good research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; 2000). While the language of criteria for narrative inquiry continues to be under development in the research community, apparenty, verisimilitude, transferability, adequacy, and plausibility are possible criteria that can
be used to characterize a good narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2000; Loh, 2013). What is meant by these terms?

By apparency, I mean to make the stories of the participants clear and understood by the audience. By verisimilitude, I aim to be descriptive as I detail the accounts in such ways that I convey their authenticity. I endeavor to adequately portray who the participants are as real individuals who worked to make a difference in their school community. I hope that in sharing these stories, that both I and readers will recognize transferability and utility and are encouraged to utilize what is learned from this account in ways that bears implications upon their own practices. Although, we never actually witnessed the participants as they carried out the actions that they describe, I hope that the detail and language that is used convey their plausibility. In this inquiry, as we restory the experiences of the participants and attempt to make and convey the meaning that was constructed, these descriptors are the goal criteria for bolstering the trustworthiness of this account. I say goal because there are no methods that can guarantee validity. Therefore in acknowledging its relativity, validity is a goal and not a product and will depend upon the relationship of my conclusions to the reality (Maxwell, 2013).

My repeated listening to and prolonged engagement with the recorded and transcribed interviews allowed me to check for consistencies, inconsistencies, and patterns in the participants stories. The intensive interviews enabled me to collect “rich data”, which provided the detail that is needed in order to provide a full, revealing picture of the participant’s experience (Maxwell, 2013). The participants agreed to allow for on-going member checking, or respondent validation at every stage of the inquiry process, providing me feedback about my data and conclusions (Maxwell, 2013). Both were appreciably cooperative in clarifying ideas and aiding to ensuring my understanding of their accounts through ongoing member checks. This clarification took
place orally or through electronic communication as both participants encouraged me to contact
them for additional information, which both provided as needed.

Along with rich data and member checks, I have endeavored to enhance the
trustworthiness of this inquiry by providing rich, thick description of the context and the details
of the participants’ experiences. In this inquiry, a rich, thick description (Geertz, 1973) is
provided of the experiences of the principal and the teacher in one of New Mexico’s National
Blue Ribbon Schools. In describing their experiences, I rely extensively on examples from the
data and incorporate some of the actual quotes expressed by the participants. Additionally, I have
worked to preserve the voices of the participants in my analysis of their experiences. The use of
voice in the analysis has enabled me to capture the detail and language used by the participants
in order to best convey meaning.

3.10 Voice

In the analysis, issues of voice arose as I faced the dilemma of using my authoritative
voice as a researcher, which could potentially connect or separate me and the participants; or the
use of a supportive voice, which pushes the participants’ voices into the limelight; or the use of
an interactive voice, which would display the complex interaction between me and the
participants (Chase, 2005; Luttrell, 2010). Specifically because of its power to elicit voice in
order to validate how the narrator elicits meaning through the expression of feelings and the use
of language, narrative inquiry has a long tradition in the humanities (Marshall & Rossman,
2006). Voice suggests relationships and it is meaning that resides in the individual and allows
participation and connected knowing, personally attaching the knower to the known (Connelly &
there is a multiplicity of voices, therefore I have struggled to find a balance that best tells the
participants’ stories and refrains from silencing them in any way. According to Chase (2010) narrative researchers must listen to the subject positions, interpretive practices, ambiguities, and complexities—within each narrator’s story as evident in narrators’ voices (Chase, 2010).

As a mutual collaboration of storytelling and restorying, it is critical that the participants first tell their story, still I have worked to construct a relationship in which all voices will be heard (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). For this reason, I have decided not to concern myself with unidimensionality in my approach, but have worked to achieve a balance in such ways that I make my voice and the voices of my participants active within the dialogue. So, at times, there are noticeable shifts as I have chosen to utilize different approaches to the use of voice in order to share and interpret the participants’ stories and to express the meaning that they and I have made based on the experiences.

3.11 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the study’s research methodology, including the rationale for narrative inquiry as qualitative research design, further I detailed my experience in gaining entry in the research field, the process involved in the selection of the participants. I provided an overview of data collection and analysis methods used, and acknowledged the concern of trustworthiness with regard to narrative inquiries. I engaged in this discussion by briefly dealing with issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability as inappropriate guidelines for evaluating narrative inquiry. Instead, I established apparency, verisimilitude, transferability, adequacy, and plausibility as criteria for evaluative techniques and forecasted my attention to the use of voice, which will aid in supporting the trustworthiness of the participants’ stories. The following chapter, Who They Were initiates the data analysis phase by providing an in-depth look into the lives of the participants as they shift backward in order to share the background story of “who
they were” before they became associated with their award-winning school. It exemplifies how ordinary individuals can be placed in situations that can lead to extraordinary experiences.
Chapter 4: The Story of Who They Were

4.1 Introduction

Southern New Mexico Elementary would never have been honored as a 2010 National Blue Ribbon School, if it had not been for the people within it. They worked each day to cause what was initially conceived as a goal for success that the staff members set for themselves and ultimately for their students, to actually come to fruition. This chapter represents the experience stories of the participants, who are the voices representing an amazing group of individuals, offering a glimpse into the history of this great school. Although the story is told through the eyes of these individuals, this analysis is not meant to be a micro analysis of them in particular, but to provide background concerning them in order to aid in the understanding of the larger school organization through their eyes.

It is impossible to share the story of the school’s success, without sharing the professional background and experiences of these two key individuals, who were among many who labored within the school day in and day out, to meet the academic needs of its students. The former principal was Mr. Iraheta, (pseudonym) whom I will refer to as “Mr. I.” (pseudonym). Mrs. Taylor (pseudonym) is a former teacher who was positioned as a literacy leader. I ascribed these pseudonyms to the participants as neither cared to select their own.

As I prepared to meet with each of them individually, I wondered how difficult it would be to get them to open up to me, a complete stranger. I wondered whether and how I would be able to break down barriers that would impede my ability as a researcher to be able to uncover truths and to ultimately learn the answers to my research puzzle. As I began making arrangements to meet with them, I realized that by the time that I would meet with them and conduct the interviews that three years would have passed since they had received the Blue
Ribbon award. How much would they remember about that time? Would they be honest with me? Would they tell me only what they thought I wanted to hear? Would the fact that I am a black woman impact their perceptions and interactions with me in a negative way? These are among the many questions that went through my mind as I prepared to meet with Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor.

Though I experienced concerns about the complexities of meeting them and about my ability to uncover the truth in this unfamiliar experience as a novice researcher, I was immediately put at ease upon first meeting Mr. I and later meeting Mrs. Taylor. When I met with each of them, they were friendly, cooperative, and seemed to be ready, willing, and eager to share their experiences in being involved in the success of SNME. Getting them to talk was much easier than I had initially thought that it would be. I thought that I would have to do a lot of explaining and work hard to make them feel comfortable with me. This was not the case with either of them. Each of them talked easily and laughed often. They did not seem rushed in talking to me, but were willing to talk with me for as long as I desired them to.

Although I had prepared my interview protocols and used them, I quickly found that the more I allowed them to talk and refrained from interrupting to pose questions, the more I learned about their experiences. At times, I asked additional questions in order to probe for specificity and clarity, but for the most part, I let them do the talking. I worked to maintain positive rapport during the conversations by paying attention to my body language, posture, and by maintaining eye contact with each of them. During that moment, I felt that these actions allowed me to present myself to them in a positive, respectful manner. I think that this aided and encouraged them to be open to sharing their oral histories with me concerning who they were leading up to and during the time that their school received the Blue Ribbon award.
In this chapter, I attend to notions of temporality and the three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938) to reveal “who they were” through looking backward in order to share the experiences that shaped their ultimate career paths within the field of education. I move forward in sharing the rich backgrounds of their professional lives, as related to the recent past. I sketch the background that is needed to understand the professional experiences of these two individuals leading up to their involvement with their award-winning school. In doing so, I include extensive re-storied accounts from the participants. I emphasize allowing the participants to speak for themselves in order to preserve their voices and to enable me to portray their multiple and diverse perspectives. I specifically endeavor to capture the richness and complexities of school life and its tensions with regard to temporality, people, action, and certainty (Dewey, 1938) within the context of educating students.

Looking outward, each participant believes that the other should be credited for the school’s achievement, rather than themselves. For instance, about Mr. I., Mrs. Taylor believes that he was a tremendous person, who made it all happen and that he did not have to work hard in achieving success for his school because he put his heart into what he did. Similarly, the Principal credited the teachers, but specifically Mrs. Taylor, by sharing that “the teachers really worked hard. They really did. They were led by Mrs. Taylor and again I have to give her all the accolades because she was my spark plug.” This metaphorical reference caused me to consider the idea that in cars, spark plugs ignite the fire that causes the engine to start. Although spark plugs are small they are critical because cars cannot run without them. In the same way, Mrs. Taylor, though of petite physical stature, was believed by Mr. I to have played a huge part in helping SNME to become as successful as it was. I will discuss her role in more detail later on.
While there were many players in this epic adventure, these two key informants, Mr. I. and Mrs. Taylor shared their stories of how this school garnered the Blue Ribbon accolade. I was honored to have met these two amazing individuals. Immediately upon meeting them, it was easy to see the passion that they have for the field of education. It was obvious that simply talking about the school, the students, and the teachers, excited them. I found their enthusiasm for teaching and learning to be contagious as they reignited the fire within me. Though they are now both retired, they continue to be involved with staff members at the school by visiting the school and volunteering there. They still care about what happens at SNME and they maintain their desire for the success of this school, and ultimately its students. They offered insight in order to aid my understanding of their experience by sharing the details of their stories. They provided the specific details of the nature and evolution of their own achievement of such success, enlightening teachers and administrators who are seeking to achieve this nationally regarded ascendancy within their own schools. They did so by reaching back into their own memory boxes and by sharing with great detail and explanation, the secrets of their success in achieving the National Blue Ribbon. I begin by sharing Mr. I’s story, specifically concerning his early education and career experiences leading up to his becoming the principal of SNME.

4.2 The Principal

This story begins with an introduction to Mr. I., who was the principal of SNME during the time that it achieved the Blue Ribbon Award. Mr. I. had many formative experiences that were the precursors to his becoming the principal of SNME and leading his school to become one of only seven Title I Blue Ribbon Schools in New Mexico. It is also only one of 594 Title I Blue Ribbon Schools in the United States to receive this award since 2009, the year that Title I data for National Blue Ribbon Schools began being compiled (United States Department of
Because his work at SNME came late in his career, he decided to retire at the end of the school year during the same year that the school received the award.

Upon being asked why he decided to go to college and to pursue a career in the field of education, Mr. I. immediately looked backward as he recalled that the decision goes back to 1955, when he was 15 years old. His father had taken him to his uncle’s college graduation. He remembered sitting at Magoffin auditorium, at the University of Texas at El Paso, where the graduation was being held. His father said, “That’s your uncle over there and he is the first - he is the first person to graduate from college in our family.” He said that on both sides of his family – his mother’s and his father’s, no one had ever graduated from college. So, he decided to go to college and saw this as his challenge. He believed that if his uncle could go to college, then he could, too.

Hearing Mr. I.’s story about being one of the first in his family to go to college, prompted me to reflect on the parallel of my own experience in being a first-generation college student as well. After seeing my aunt graduate with a doctorate in education, I believed that I, too, could also go to college and be the first in my immediate family to do so. Although my own parents were proud that I desired to attend college, their traditional beliefs were that it was even more ideal for a woman to marry and to stay at home raising the children, while the husband earned the family’s income. Our household abided by this philosophy and therefore, my mother did not work outside of the home. I greatly appreciated having my mother at home whenever I needed her and in this way, I feel that I benefitted from this ideology. For this reason, I respect households in which one parent has decided to stay at home with the children. Still, because I
have always wanted to become a teacher, it became my own desire to go to college in order to become one. Along the way, there were many individuals, including my parents, who supported my dream as a first generation college goer in coming to fruition. Just as in my own experience, the same was true for Mr. I. in that there were key individuals who influenced his early decision-making, inspiring him to become an educator.

4.3 Early Inspiration

In particular, he discussed three teachers, whom were very instrumental in his life. One was his 6th grade teacher, who was also his and 8th grade teacher. He said that she’s still alive, though she is not in good health. The last time he went to see her she could hardly recognize him, but appreciated the fact that she was still smiling. She taught for 50 years at Baldwin School (pseudonym), where he was a middle school student. He saw her as one who exemplified a teacher who had high expectations of children.

Baldwin School was in the middle of the barrio. Mr. I. shared that he and many of the children were from “that barrio culture”. The “barrio” or neighborhood that he referred to is the Segundo Barrio, or second ward, which is one of the oldest and most culturally historic neighborhoods in the city of El Paso. This area, one of the poorest zip codes in the United States, is located on the city’s south side. It has always been an impoverished community and is the first community people see as they cross the border going to and coming from Juarez, Mexico (Martinez-Bustos et al., 2011). In this area, educational attainment is low as 79 percent of adults do not have high school diplomas (City of El Paso, 2010) and 64 percent of the residents live below the poverty level, compared to 14.9 percent of individuals living in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2010).
Despite the demographics of the neighborhood in which he grew up, his teacher insisted, “you will learn” and declared that she was going to teach him and his fellow classmates how to learn. In teaching them “how to learn”, Mr. I described how she would give them the names of various presidents, such as George Washington, John Adams, and James Monroe. This teacher expected her students to learn and to memorize all of the presidents in order. She also expected them to learn the prepositions and to memorize long historical passages, even though they were “only children”. He viewed these expectations as being high expectations and looking inward, believes that his life was touched by her.

His high school band and orchestra teachers were two other teachers whom he believes touched his life. They supported his desire to go to college by demonstrating that they believed in him and they helped him to obtain the scholarships that he needed in order to be able to attend. He believes that because he was from the barrio, and because his parents could not afford to send him, without their help, he never would have been able to get into college. In his desire to touch the lives of other students, he stated that his goal was to be like these teachers whom he believed touched his life and he saw this as a way to “give back”, as he desired to touch the lives of many children and hopes that he did.

He also discussed key educators that made a monumental difference for him by allowing him to experience educational opportunities that he might not have otherwise enjoyed. One such opportunity was being able to travel to Dallas for the all-state orchestra competition. This was one moment during his high school years of which he was particularly proud. His teachers made sure that he had these experiences. He shared that although he was not “a saint” and did not always meet his teachers’ behavior expectations, his teachers provided him with educational
opportunities that supported his development. They overlooked his shortcomings of not always behaving as a model student and supported him in completing his education.

To support his own desire to complete his education, Mr. I played the trumpet for a dance band on the weekends. He had to work and go to school simultaneously. The scholarships he earned helped him to pay for college by covering his tuition and books. Without the scholarships, he believes that he could not have completed college because his parents, residing in the Segundo Barrio, could not afford to send him. The extra money that he made while playing in the dance band aided him in supporting himself and his wife while he finished college. He shared

The trumpet - that’s what got me through college. The scholarships were to pay for my school and books, but to support myself and my family- I got married and to support my family -I played the trumpet at the race track (simulated) on weekends and then I also had a band, a dance band, so that got me through. My music got me through all of it -so that was nice.

It took him six years to complete his bachelor’s degree because he stopped going for two years and when he returned he had to start the process all over again by re-taking classes. Finally, he completed his education, which enabled him to obtain the necessary qualifications that he needed in order to work in his chosen profession.

4.4 Professional Journey

After graduating from college, Mr. I. was offered his first teaching job in an El Paso, Texas school district. He recalled his first day as a new teacher back in 1966:

You never forget your first day...as a teacher. You walk into that classroom and you’re shaking, you don’t know what’s gonna happen and you wanna see those kids and they come in with their big, round faces and they’re smiling and they’re as nervous as you are but they don’t know how nervous YOU are (laughs). Anyway, the first day, what happened was that we – I wanted to make an impression on the students so what I did was- and I never did it again but- I cut up their names, I had a roster of course and I cut up their names in letters and then I put the letter of their name up on the bulletin board like “A-N-D-Y” – and that’s a lot of letters for twenty some odd students and it took me two nights and it took me a long time even to put ’em up but that was my first day of school at that time.
You never forget your first day. I can relate to Mr. I’s experience. Upon listening to his experience, I recall my own first day as a teacher in El Paso, Texas. I remember how nervous I was. I hoped that the blue suit that I was wearing concealed my inadequacies and projected the professional image I wanted to convey, making up for lack of teaching experience. While it may have helped my image, it did not shield me from the many challenges that I would experience as a new teacher and throughout my career.

I recall going into the administrative office, receiving the keys to my classroom, and being escorted down the hallway to my classroom. It was the middle of the school year, and before I became the teacher of record, the class had several substitutes and the classroom was a mess. The students had not been taught rules, routines, and procedures, therefore they did not abide by any. The room was very disorganized and there were papers and books everywhere. There was no defined arrangement for student seating. The classroom environment in general lacked the structure and warmth of having a caring, skilled teacher.

At that time, the new accountability system of NCLB (2001) was just being implemented, hot off of the press, so to speak. Despite the challenges that I, too would face as a new teacher, I was expected to ensure that my students made high scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). To my superiors, this would demonstrate that I, too, had taught my students “how to learn”. I learned quickly that my students’ ability to take and to pass the assessments was the gauge of my teaching ability or inability.

I recall being overwhelmed by the mandates, the expectations, and the reality that was before my eyes. With an emphasis on the fluff - the fun of teaching - such as reading cute stories and finding fun activities as opposed to classroom rigor and data analysis, I felt that my teacher preparation program had not adequately prepared me for the situation that I was immediately in.
I was unsure of my abilities to teach to the level and depth that was needed to produce the desired data outcomes that I was held accountable to.

I worked to do my best with my students despite my inadequacies. Having the opportunity to touch their lives, made facing those challenges a worthwhile experience and is part of what I believe keeps teachers in the game despite the pressures of the accountability system.

Just as I experienced challenges, Mr. I shared that he too faced challenges, particularly in his early career. For instance, he found it challenging because there were no accountability systems in place at that time. He recalled that his principal walked him to his classroom, gave him his student roster and said, “Go teach.” Being fresh out of college, he was not sure if he was doing things right or wrong. As a new teacher, he did not know if he was adequately meeting the expectations of a classroom teacher. He had an education consultant who was hired to observe his classroom instruction and provide feedback. She would visit his classroom twice a year to observe him – once at the beginning of the school year and once at the midterm, but never any more than that. While she did observe him, she did not provide him with what he would have considered to be valuable feedback about his practices. She would simply tell him that what he was doing was “pretty good” or “just fine”.

At that time, there was no professional development, no grade level meetings, and no opportunities for teachers to plan together. Additionally, there were no accountability systems in place, so he felt that his struggle was to make sure that he was an effective teacher, doing his job right, although there was no one to tell him whether he was wrong or right. From his perspective, teachers were on their own and worked in isolation.
To remedy this situation, he began working with other teachers, although it was not an expectation or a mandate that he collaborate with other professionals. He made the decision to partner with other professionals on his own. What he learned about teaching, he learned from his colleagues. He recalls the fact that on his grade level, which was fourth grade, there were only two teachers, which included him and another first-year teacher. He described this scenario as being “like the blind leading the blind”, but they did the best that they could in order to help one another. Despite the challenges of being a new teacher, he looked inward, hoping that he helped some of the students that he had at that time.

After gaining experience as a teacher, Mr. I decided to advance his career. He shared:

I taught for six years in an elementary school- four years in 4th grade and two years in 6th grade and then in 1972, I was asked to interview for a proposal - a grant, a stipend to become a counselor. Albuquerque - the University of New Mexico was having a program out there for teachers to become counselors of Hispanics and there were only four people that were selected from Texas and I was one of those four. So, to me that was a big event because now, not only could I touch my 20-30 kids that I had in my classrooms, but now as a counselor, I could touch 4, 5, 6 hundred in the high school, which I did. I went to Brown High School (pseudonym) and became a counselor there for three years. And that was a spring board for me to go and get my administrative degree and touch even more lives, like 7 or 800 – or the whole school.

After obtaining his administrative degree, he became and elementary assistant principal. He remained in this position for four years at Robinson (pseudonym) and then he applied for and received a principalship at Parkville (pseudonym). He was Parkville’s principal for 12 years and then he went to another campus, Hillcrest (pseudonym). He only worked at Hillcrest for half of a school year because in 1992, he was promoted to the position Executive Director of Employee Relations and remained in that position for several years. All of these positions were in El Paso, Texas. Eventually, he became weary of the job because of all of the grievances. After a while, he felt that the job became negative. His primary role in this position was to listen to all of the teacher grievances, which he said took “all the fun out” of working. In this position, he was
responsible for handling and resolving all of the employee grievances, or complaints. Besides handling teachers’ complaints or grievances, he was also responsible for handling the complaints and grievances of other employees such as the transportation, maintenance, and other departments. In 2000, after eight years in this position, he decided to retire at the age of 65. Still not ready to stay home, he became a part-time teacher at community college, teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to adult learners.

After a while, he decided to return to K-12 education. Upon making the decision, he decided to apply for assistant principal jobs in New Mexico, but had trouble getting hired because having had central office and campus leadership roles, he was considered to be over-qualified. Eventually, he applied at a school for the role of principal. He stated that he “bombed” the interview, from his perspective, because he wasn’t well-prepared for it due to his limited knowledge of Balanced Literacy and math initiatives. Although he felt that he had not performed well on the interview from his own perspective, the committee must have thought differently. He was offered the job and learned about Balanced Literacy and the various math initiatives afterward. Years later, he was given the opportunity to apply as the principal of another school. It was a brand new school that was being built in southern New Mexico. That school would be SNME.

4.5 Coming to SNME

Mr. I. looked backward to describe how SNME came into existence. He explained that in 2003, they decided to build SNME and the superintendent came by the school in which he was working as a principal at the time and said, “there’s a community meeting at the high school tonight and they’re going to talk about the new school. You might want to go if you’re interested – to see what the parents are wanting, what they are looking for.” He said that he decided to go
and took his administrative team with him, which included the counselor and the assistant principal.

He described the excitement and the energy that he felt upon being in the meeting with the parents. There were high levels of parent involvement at the meeting. Using this opportunity to share their sentiments, concerns, and desires regarding the new school, they expressed their support of the new school that was being built for their children. According to Mr. I, these parents were all “gung-ho”. They were ready for this new school that was being built. This school would be the long-awaited solution to the problem of then need to relieve the overcrowded classroom situations that their children were experiencing due to the rapid growth in the area. Southern New Mexico was growing by leaps and bounds. In 2003, there were new HUD apartments being built by the school in the Southern New Mexico area and there were so many students that this necessitated that they build a new school. In 1990, the population of this New Mexico County consisted of 135,510 people and 49,148 homes. This increased significantly by 2000 when the county population grew to 174,682 people that reported living in the area, residing in the 65,210 homes. This was a 22 percent increase in the population over ten years. There was no city data for 1990 because the area was newly developing. By 2000, approximately 2,607 people were living in Southern New Mexico City, which was a small, newly developed city (United States Census Bureau, 2003). The growth of the student population requiring the need for a new school came from these numbers.

After observing and being inspired by the enthusiastic parents who were eager to experience the smaller classes, improved facilities, and other benefits that the new school would bring, Mr. I decided to apply to be the principal of the school. The district’s superintendent called him and notified him that he had been selected to be the school’s new principal. Upon
hearing this news, he informed the superintendent that his decision to accept the position was conditional. He said:

I’ll take it under one condition- that you allow me to pick my faculty. That’s so important because sometimes they just throw at you – what they want. Like HR (Human Resources) will say ‘this teacher’s in trouble, let’s move ‘em now.’ The superintendent said, ‘okay, I’ll give you as much leverage as I can.’ So I got to pick about 90-95 percent of my teachers.

As a school administrator, my own experience has been that for the most part, we are not given the opportunity to select all of the teachers. Administrators have to learn to work with the teachers that are placed in their schools, whether they have chosen them or not. As teachers make the decision to retire, leave the profession, or transfer to new schools, administrators can generally replace them with teachers of their own choosing, through a formal hiring process. In my experience of opening a new school, the principal was able to hire some of the teachers, but did not get to choose all of the teachers. Instead, teachers were assigned by the Human Resources department to work in the school. Some were assigned there because their previous positions had been dissolved and their sections had been cut. Others were assigned there because they had asked to be transferred there. The few teachers that the principal was able to select turned out to be the best teachers that we had.

Great principals work diligently to hire the most talented teachers to help them to achieve their goals for their schools (Whitaker, 2012). They realize the fact that hiring the best teachers can result in long-term school quality differences by increasing student learning and often help to improve the practices of fellow teachers as well (Peterson, 2002). In selecting the teachers, Mr. I. had to choose among teachers who were already working in the district since the idea was to divide the overcrowded schools.
One of the first teachers to be hired was Mrs. Taylor. Because of her depth of experience and professional knowledge base, she was a dynamic individual with a strong professional background as an educator. As such, she was later named as a New Mexico State Teacher of the Year and became a significant individual in the school’s accomplishments.

4.6 Meet the Teacher: Like Mother, Like Daughter

Mrs. Taylor admired her mother, who was an educator, and inspired her to become an educator. She looked back to when she was five years old and knew then that she would become an educator someday. Inspired by her mother, she used to go with her to her school, in El Paso, which was also in the second ward or Segundo Barrio. As discussed previously, this is an area of high poverty and is one of the highest areas of poverty in the nation. In fact, the median household income is $10,240, as 41 percent of households in this area earn less than $10,000 annually and 47 percent of the neighborhood residents have limited English proficiency (City of El Paso, 2010). She felt that her mother was a wonderful individual because she sought ways to help many of these impoverished neighborhood children who only spoke Spanish. She went to their homes, bought them coats, and got medicine for them.

Mrs. Taylor described her mother’s classroom as being “like magic”. She was able to visit her mother’s classroom often and observe her in the process of teaching. While in her mother’s classroom, she helped her mother with her students and classes by engaging in various activities such as making charts, filling Christmas stockings, and going with her on trips to the students’ houses. She was so impressed with the relationships that her mother had developed and the learning environment that her mother had created for her students. After seeing her mother teach, she “just knew” that she, too, would become a teacher. She wanted to be a teacher, because she wanted to be like her mother.
4.7 Landing the Jobs, Garnering the Accolades

She recounted her first experiences in landing a teaching job in El Paso, Texas. She shared that when she was initially hired, the principal shook her hand and said to her “you’ve got the job”, right after the interview, but that it was going to take a while to process her paperwork. She said that another district told her “you’ve got the job and here’s a contract” and gave her a job as a Language Arts in English (LAE) teacher. Although she accepted the position, she did not favor the idea that she was not going to be in what was considered to be a general education classroom, which was what she desired. Though she was disappointed with this, she decided that it was a really good way to get her “feet wet”. She feels that she learned a lot through being an LAE teacher. After about two years, she was placed as a remedial reading teacher before she finally had the opportunity to teach third grade. This grade level became her niche and she remained in this grade level throughout the remaining years of her career.

During her career, Mrs. Taylor was an award-winning educator and achieved campus, district and state-level success. She attributes this success to being firm with her students and having school administrators who would allow her the opportunity to take risks in order to help students. She shared:

I used to have all these ideas and I wanted to do all these different things. I was always ‘come on let’s try this and let’s try that’ and he says, he would sit back in his old cowboy boots and put his feet up on his desk and he’d say, “explain to me how it’s gonna work.” He said, “If you can talk me into it, you can do it.” And so then it was on me, wasn’t it? Which is the way it ought to be and I loved it because he gave people the opportunity to take a risk to help a kid.

At one Texas school, she was selected as their Teacher of the Year and became one of the finalists in the city of El Paso. After retiring as a Texas educator, she became employed as an educator in New Mexico and her success as an educator continued. In 2004, she was selected as
campus level Teacher of the Year at a New Mexico school. She then advanced as the district, regional, and state Teacher of the Year during the same year.

Mrs. Taylor described the many wonderful experiences that she had as a high-achieving educator. As she reflects, she feels that they were all wonderful honors to have achieved. In describing these impactful events that she experienced as a teacher, she shifted into discussing her school winning the Blue Ribbon Award and feels that being a part of winning this prestigious award was an amazing end to what she regards as a beautiful career that she enjoyed. Immediately, she looked outward and shared that with all of the awards that she has won – campus, district, regional, and state Teacher of the Year and being a part of a school that garnered the Blue Ribbon award, the credit goes to the students, because they made her look good. Mrs. Taylor shared:

You know what I told the kids and what I would say whenever I had to speak – and I had to speak a lot and I’m a timid person. And the credit always – the credit always went to the kids and when I got it, I went back to the kids and I said, ‘it’s your fault. It’s your fault. You made me look good.’ [laughs]. ‘Cause they did.

In comparing her experiences of being selected as Teacher of the Year at the campus, district, regional, and state levels, she does not believe that one that was better than the other, although becoming New Mexico’s state Teacher of the Year came with national recognition and unique opportunities.

This experience afforded her the opportunity to go to Washington, D.C., which she regarded as a beautiful place. While she was there, she met the president of the United States and the First Lady, in the oval office. She recalls going out to the rose garden and described it as such a beautiful experience because of all that she was able to do and to see. As part of this experience, she and the other state teachers of the year went to a National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA) camp. While teachers from all over the world visit the camp, state level
teachers of the year nationwide were particularly invited to attend. At this camp, they engaged in a variety of activities bearing connections to the field of Science. These activities bore classroom implications that the teachers would be able to link to their own classroom science content. Looking inward, she stated that through this experience, she learned some things about herself. She shared, for example, that she faced her inner fears when she had to jump from a line and pulley into some water and later had to get into a helicopter that was submerged. These activities were physically challenging and being the risk taker that she was, she shared that she was “blown away” by them and enjoyed participating in them immensely.

Having had many rewarding experiences in her career and being an individual who enjoyed taking risks, in 2004, Mrs. Taylor decided that she was ready for yet another experience. This desire prompted her to approach Mr. I. in hopes of becoming a part of SNME. She directly told him that she would really like to be part of the faculty at his new school. She recalls that they had many discussions afterward and that there was a lot of good faith and trust between them. Together, they declared “within three years, we’re gonna be exemplary” and Mrs. Taylor believes that having this goal is how they were able to make it come to fruition, and their school later became a National Blue Ribbon school. With the goal of success in mind, Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor worked together to hand-select the teachers for their school.

4.8 Selecting the Teachers: Who They Wanted – And Who They Didn’t Want

In their search for the right teachers for this new school, Mr. I. and Mrs. Taylor had specific ideas concerning whom they wanted to hire and the characteristics of good teachers. Mrs. Taylor had a vision of good teachers and described her as follows:

Her passion, her knowledge, her background experience her willingness to do whatever it takes to make sure that all of their students are reached. I mean, they just need to be married to the job [laughs]. You end up that way anyway because it’s so important what you’re doing, so you need to be passionate.
While they knew what kind of teachers that they wanted to hire for the school, they also knew who they didn’t want to hire. Mr. I specifically, alluded to the type of teachers that he avoided hiring for his school. Having many years of experience, Mr. I had observed the following to be true about some teachers:

Schools have a mixture of the can-do’s and the don’t-wanna do’s – and the ones that just come in and punch in and punch out - things like that. You don’t want them to come in, collect their paycheck, and go home. I’ve seen a lot of those in my time. A lot of those kinds of teachers – punch in, punch out- one minute to show time and boom they’re out the door. There’s nothing wrong with that, I do that, too, but not every day.

Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor knew the kinds of teachers that they wanted and did not want at their school. In being able to select the teachers, it is possible that they were able to choose malleable teachers who were willing to teach in the ways that Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor expected them to and who perhaps subscribed to their vision of becoming an exemplary school.

The desire to be an “exemplary” school comes from the fact that both Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor were originally Texas educators. For many years, under accountability guidelines, Texas schools were rated as “exemplary”, “recognized”, “acceptable”, or “unacceptable”. Exemplary schools were those in which 90-100 percent of the students passed their standardized assessments. Recognized schools were those in which 80-90 percent passed. Acceptable schools were categorized as such when 70 percent, or the minimally required number of students passed. The standards or minimal passing standards varied from year to year and differed across content areas. An unacceptable school was one in which an insufficient number of students had met the required standard. These schools were often required to participate in federally mandated school improvement initiatives.

In setting a goal for their school to become exemplary, Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor were using the language of the Texas rating system. Being previous Texas educators and sharing the
understanding of what it would mean to for their school to be an exemplary school. Exemplary schools were those in which the majority of students had successfully met at least the minimum standard on the NMSBA. They set a goal for their school to achieve this level within three years. After setting their goal, they began to set the stage for experiencing student achievement far beyond their imaginations – rising above the performances of other local schools and exceeding accountability standards. Working together to set goals for their school was part of Mr. I’s vision of shared leadership and ownership.

4.9 Distributed Leadership: The Notion of Shared Leadership and Ownership

Leadership is everything; everyone talks about it, yet few understand this intriguing subject (Maxwell, 2005). Leadership is vital to the effectiveness of schools and any other institution or endeavor (Marzano, 2005). The preponderance of leadership in SNME and in any school, impacts the academic achievement of students (Marzano, 2005).

As I considered the leadership structure of SNME, the principal’s decision to share instructional leadership responsibilities with teachers, such as Mrs. Taylor, indicated a distribution of leadership within the school as opposed to traditional views of leadership in which a concentration of leadership responsibilities belong to a sole individual. Although campus leadership is largely concentrated among principals and assistant principals, a reading coach, Mrs. Taylor shared in the leadership responsibilities by participating in the hiring and evaluating responsibilities along with the principal. First, he allowed her to help him in making decisions concerning the teachers that they hired. He gave her the authority to go into classroom in order to observe and to evaluate the classroom instruction and to provide him with feedback concerning her observations because he trusted her expertise in the area of reading.
A distributed leadership perspective has the potential to generate new knowledge about leadership and management, therefore scholars use a distributed perspective to frame studies of leadership and management (Spillane & Healey, 2010). Distributed leadership is a leader-plus practice which foregrounds the practice of leading and managing schools, having multiple individuals, in addition to the principal, in leadership and management positions (Spillane & Healey, 2010). As an emergence of a new leadership perspective, distributed leadership challenges the view of leadership as a solely vertical process and focuses on the mechanisms through which diverse individuals contribute to the process of leadership in shaping collective action (Van Ameijde et al., 2009).

The notion of distributing leadership responsibilities across multiple school actors other than with the site administrator gained its currency beginning in the 1990s (Goldstein, 2004). This idea was prompted by heightened student learning expectations, and inquiry has focused on shared forms of educational leadership, in which teachers and principals share the leadership impact on the learning that occurs in schools (Printy & Marks, 2006). Further, it has recognized leadership as the performance of tasks rather than the holding of roles; as an organization-wide resource of power and influence; encompassing the interactions of individuals rather than the actions of individuals; and as social distribution that is shared among two or more leaders in their interactions with followers (Goldstein, 2004). In my experience, the tasks that administrators are expected to perform include but are not limited to conducting teacher and staff performance evaluations, leading teachers in professional development activities, leading staff meetings, meeting with parents and community members, maintaining building facilities, planning and implementing the school budget, and leading school improvement activities.
Distributed leadership at SNME was evident in the ways in which leadership was shared, as responsibilities were distributed and “buy in” was solicited from the staff, students, and community. These processes facilitated the development of a sense of ownership concerning the school and its overarching vision, the goal of student achievement at high levels. Mr. I. strongly believed in the act of delegating, as he firmly expressed that good leaders delegate. He attributed his success as a principal to his delegation skills, having delegated authority to people in the school such as Mrs. Taylor. These individuals, specifically Mrs. Taylor and the math leader, participated in instructional leadership responsibilities as they aided in informing decision-making concerning instructional processes.

Discussions of leadership in the context of educational organizations have built upon behavior theories of principals as instructional leaders (Daresh, 2006). The concept of instructional leadership involves decision making concerning the practices involved specifically as they pertain to teaching and learning, which at SNME was shared by the principal and his lead teachers. While a clear definition of what constitutes instructional leadership is fuzzy, ambiguous, and problematic, it is a critical component of leadership in today’s schools and exists among the multitude of school factors that influence student achievement (Irvin & Flood, 2004). These factors include school related factors, factors in the local community, teacher and teaching-related factors, student-related factors, students’ backgrounds, and familial factors (National Education Agency, 2014). Community issues, students’ backgrounds and familial factors exist outside of educators’ control. School and teacher related factors include but are not limited to having low expectations for student achievement, lack of rigor in the curriculum, large class sizes, tracking groups of students into a less demanding curriculum, unsafe schools, culturally unfriendly environments, uncertified and inexperienced teachers, insensitivity to
different cultures, poor teacher preparation, low expectations of students, and inadequate materials, equipment, and resources, including technology-based resources (National Education Agency, 2014).

In my own experience, I, too, have found the definition of leadership to be problematic at times. I find that there are moments when I feel that I am the leader and I take charge, but with limitations. I find that ultimately, the superintendent, central office, and the school board are actually the ones who are in charge. As well, there are many times when I realize that in many ways, the parents, or the teachers are in charge. I find that although I am the leader, my role is to actually carry out what central office expects me to, in the ways that it expects me to. Additionally, I must carry out the expectations of the students, parents, teachers, and the community. If I should fail to carry out these expectations, then I face repercussions. Administrators are expected to meet expectations, although we wear many hats. As instructional leaders, principals and those with whom they share this role actively support day to day instructional activities and act as resource providers, act as instructional resources and communicators, and provide visible presence to ensure that teachers have the materials, facilities, and budget necessary to adequately perform their duties (Marzano, 2005).

Although he practiced distributed leadership and believed in delegating authority, such as in allowing lead teachers to assist in making instructional decisions, he strongly believed that responsibility was not something that could be delegated. He felt that ultimately, he was responsible for the school and if something bad were to happen as a result of poor delegating, he was ultimately responsible, and would ultimately have to explain to parents, the superintendents, school board, and community, if he made any decisions that negatively impacted the school. Still, he felt that allowing others to share in the school’s decision-making processes enabled him
to accomplish certain tasks more efficiently than making all of the decisions himself and simply
telling people what he wanted them to do. When he allowed staff members these decision-
making opportunities, he believed that this gave them a sense of ownership, which in turn
granted him his desired outcomes, including having high test scores and becoming a Blue
Ribbon School.

One of the ways in which I immediately connected with Mr. I., was by sharing with him
the fact that I am a school administrator. Having been given this nugget of information about me,
he shared a secret with me. He told me that I should give teachers with whom I work ownership.
He said that whenever he needed something done at SNME, he would call all of the teachers in
for a meeting and would let them know what the needs were. He allowed them to brainstorm
ideas on how these problems should be solved. One example of this that he gave was when he
did not have any money for tutoring, yet he knew that there was still a need for students to be
tutored. He called the faculty in and expressed the concern to them and asked for suggestions on
how to handle this. In giving them ownership of the situation, the teachers made the decision on
their own that they would tutor students without earning additional pay.

As I consider the idea of not receiving additional pay from a teacher’s perspective, I
would imagine that they would have appreciated getting paid for tutoring. Since funding was not
available, it is likely that the teachers did it for free because in some ways it may have provided
them with a little job security. If the teachers tutored the students and they were successful, then
the teachers were able to maintain their employment. If they did not tutor the students, and the
students were unsuccessful, then the teachers could have faced losing their jobs. Although the
teachers took ownership in this area, it may have been for both personal and professional reasons
all at once.
Mr. I. shared that this idea of ownership was also employed when it came to decisions concerning teachers’ professional development activities. He believed that teachers should make their own decisions concerning their professional growth needs, by allowing them ownership in this area also. He did not “throw professional development down the teachers’ throats”, so to speak, but instead, he gave them the opportunity to express what they wanted. Whether it was in the area of reading or in any other subject, he wanted to know what the teachers needed more of and he used this information to plan professional development activities. For example, if they felt that they needed additional training in the area of Balanced Literacy, or in any of the other district initiatives for the other content areas, he was willing to ensure that they received the training.

A sense of ownership extended beyond the staff members and was encouraged among the parents by sharing data, communicating needs, and providing guidance by explaining to parents exactly how they could help their children, based on the data. He would guide them to help their children with math or reading in order to help them to achieve. Mr. I. also desired for the parents to have ownership concerning the needs of the school. At school open house or meet the teacher nights, not only would he introduce the staff to the community, but he would also go over the test scores so that parents knew what the goals were for that year and they were apprised of how they would be able to help the school in achieving those goals. He would explain the school’s current state of performance and would provide students with ideas on how they could support the school in achieving desired outcomes, such as by reading with their children.

Mr. I believed that the success of the school could be attributed to the shared vision that characterized the school’s leadership structure. As part of having shared leadership and vision, which he believed were important for student success, he solicited input from stakeholders
including staff, students, parents, and community members, allowing them to have ownership in of the vision and goals toward student achievement. An example of this is the way in which he allowed businesses in the surrounding community to serve as partners in education. Restaurants, the Department of Public Safety, the Sherriff’s Department, the Police Department, and the Fire Department partnered with the school on a regular basis to interact, bond with students, and provide off-campus support with food drives, gift drives, and other activities designed to help less fortunate individuals living in the community (United States Department of Education, 2010).

Mr. I encouraged these partnerships to meet the needs of those in the community and to encourage all stakeholders to be involved in the school. Through establishing a shared vision between staff members, parents, and the community, Mr. I created an environment for the SNME community to work together toward the goal of student success.

As I consider Mr. I’s practice of distributing leadership roles and responsibilities among teachers and the administration, I am reminded of opportunities that I have had to share such roles while working as a teacher. I appreciate the principals who gave me leadership opportunities because engaging these roles and responsibilities enabled me to discover my ability and desire to lead others. It also challenged me to work on my communications skills and my ability to be a creative problem solver, which are among the many traits of effective leaders. Without having the opportunity to participate in leadership roles and responsibilities, I may never have looked within to discover these traits.

Having the opportunity to work closely with principals allowed me the chance to learn from them and to see issues from their perspectives. Before having such opportunities, I misjudged their reasons behind certain decisions that were made. For example, I did not
I understand why campus money could not be spent on certain things. By working with principals I learned about how money was allocated for certain things and about how spending was tied to the campus improvement plan, therefore money could not be spent arbitrarily.

I believe that not only did I benefit from working with my principals, but I also believe that allowing me and other teachers to work with them was also beneficial because, hopefully, it made their jobs a little bit easier. Principals do not know everything. For this reason, just as in the case of SNME, I believe it is important for campus teachers and staff members to work together and to be willing to take on additional responsibilities, which helps leaders, but ultimately, benefits the students.

4.10 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the principal and the teacher, Mr. I. and Mrs. Taylor. I shared the stories of how they were inspired to become educators. I painted the path of their professional careers which brought them together by ultimately leading them to SNME, their award-winning school. I discussed their decision to hand-select teachers who were able to assist them in carrying out their vision of becoming an exemplary school. Finally, I discussed the distribution of leadership in the school, which was shared between Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor. He worked to share his vision with staff, students, parents, and community members and welcomed their input in order to give them a sense of ownership concerning the activities within the school.

Upon being selected to lead SNME and beginning the teacher selection process by hiring Mrs. Taylor and positioning her as a leader, Mr. I. began setting the stage for what would someday become an award-winning school. In the next chapter, we shift from sharing the story of the participants’ backgrounds and move into the story of “what they did” in order to explain some of the steps that staff members took in the process of becoming a 2010 National Blue
Ribbon School. Finally, I discussed the significance of winning this award as well as the impact that winning the award had on the school community.
Chapter 5: The Story of What They Did – The Details and Significance of the Blue Ribbon Experience

5.1 Introduction

In 2007, upon being offered a position as an instructional specialist, I had the opportunity to assist in opening a new school. Having had this experience, I can relate to Mr. I. as he looked back and described the experience of opening SNME and its transformation from a building to a school:

When we opened the school in 2004, when the teachers moved in, it was empty. There was very little furniture and things like that, but we tried to get as much as we could going. But without the students there, it was an empty shell. I mean, you could feel the school come to life when the students showed up on their buses. Busloads! Here comes all the bus loads of people from the other school coming to their new school. My goodness! You could feel the building, it woke up! And it’s been woken up ever since. It was a good feeling…look I’ve got chills! Because it’s true and I would tell the people at the PTO (Parent Teacher Organization) meetings and say, ‘without your kids, this school would be an empty school like it was without students.’ It’s empty. You don’t hear the laughter, the hollering, the footsteps, the shrieking, the crying. You don’t hear it. Then it’s an empty shell. Go over there at night and it’s, it’s horrible. It is.

Upon opening its doors in 2004, SNME soon began to stand out among other schools in the area. Mr. I. shared the experience of SNME becoming a choice school because they were doing well in meeting AYP expectations. Because some of the other area schools were not meeting AYP, parents had the option of taking their children to a “choice school”, such as SNME. This is one of the stipulations of NCLB (2001), which provided new education options for many families that were not previously available. This federal law allows parents to choose other public schools that are meeting AYP and are designated as “choice schools”, or take advantage of free tutoring if their child attends a school that needs improvement (United States Department of Education, 2003). After being designated as a choice school, SNME was honored to experience additional successes as they simply strived to meet AYP.
5.2 Serendipitous Success

While I have opened a new school, I have never been a part of a school that was honored as a Blue Ribbon Schools Award recipient, which is one of the reasons for my engagement in this inquiry. SNME was honored with the Blue Ribbon Schools Award in 2010. While being bestowed this award was a tremendous achievement, Mr. I. candidly shared that SNME was not specifically trying to garner the Blue Ribbon Award when the staff received the honor of having the opportunity to apply for it. Being that it is a desirable accomplishment for schools, some may set out to merit this distinction. Mr. I. shared that the school staff did not even know about the Blue Ribbon before they achieved it. They were just trying to ensure that their students received high test scores, and that is all. They never said to themselves “hey, let’s become a Blue Ribbon school”. Mr. I. said that having put it in the back of his mind, he had even forgotten about what a Blue Ribbon school was. Although he had had first heard about the Blue Ribbon Schools Program when he was in Texas, Mr. I. stated that they were not specifically striving for a Blue Ribbon status, but discovered it serendipitously, while looking for high test scores. The Blue Ribbon Award did not come easily. There were requirements that the school staff had to fulfill upon being considered for the award.

5.3 The Process of Becoming a Blue Ribbon School

Achieving the Blue Ribbon award was not an easy process. There were challenges involved, including fulfilling the requirement of completing the lengthy application in a short amount of time. Mrs. Taylor remembered that when the Department of Education sent them the application materials, the package arrived late because the documents were sent to another school and so the SNME staff did not receive the package until it was “crunch time.” When the staff saw what we needed to be done, they set goals immediately in order to ensure that they
accomplished the necessary tasks involved in completing the application packet and submitting it. Mr. I. continued to look back, remembering the experience of being asked to apply for the award, recalling the key ingredients for eligibility. He fondly reflected on the details of receiving the Blue Ribbon flag. He described this time as being a beautiful experience, although there was a lot of work that was involved in completing the application and in maintaining eligibility.

He explained that there are certain eligibilities that schools need to have to before they could be considered because the invitation comes from the United States Department of Education (U.S.D.E.). The office of the Secretary of the U.S.D.E., Arne Duncan, contacted the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) because they had noticed the school’s high test scores. After the U.S.D.E. contacted N.M.P.E.D., this department subsequently contacted the district superintendent, who then contacted Mr. I. and informed him that the U.S.D.E. wanted S.N.M.E. to apply for Blue Ribbon Schools Award. Mr. I. discussed criteria involved in the eligibility requirements, such as the school had to have been open for five years, and the school had to have made AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress). He discussed that the AYP factor was really the key ingredient because not only did the school have to make AYP to be accepted for the program, but that the school also had to make AYP in the year of its nomination. Mr. I articulated the magnitude and significance of the award-winning experience:

I have to brag, okay? This is bragging rights, so I’m gonna brag. Around 350 schools went to Washington that year in 2010, so there were 350 schools that were Blue Ribbon schools. There’s 175,000 districts in the United States so again that shows you how out of all of those, only 350 schools – ‘cause this is nationwide- were able to make the cut that year. So, I just wanted to show you that it’s quite an elite group that Blue Ribbon schools are. We were one of three schools in the state that year that went to Washington, D.C. to receive our big award, which is beautiful. I don’t know if you went to the school, but maybe you saw the flag. I put it in a glass case. That’s the flag that they gave us out there. It’s supposed to be flying, but it would have been gone by now, I mean tearing and all of that. So, we put it in that glass frame.
In fact, I had been to the school and had admired this prestigious award. Figure 5.1 is a photograph that I obtained during a field visit. The photograph is of the Blue Ribbon Award banner, which bears the United States Department of Education seal. As I stood gazing in awe at this award, the first that I had ever seen, in-person, I was filled with awe and wonder. I imagined the work of the teachers, the students, the administration, and the community. I imagined the reach and the impact of winning this award. I hoped that I would someday lead my school to achieving this prestigious award.

5.4 The Impact of Becoming a Blue Ribbon School

To recapitulate, SNME is one of seven Title I Blue Ribbon Schools in New Mexico and one of 594 Title I Blue Ribbon Schools in the United States to receive this award since 2009, the year that Title I data for National Blue Ribbon Schools began being compiled (United States Department of Education, 2014). Additionally, it is one of the 35 (4 percent) out of 862 New Mexico schools (NCES, 2013) achieved National Blue Ribbon status (United States Department
of Education, 2012). Although the school was not deliberately seeking to become a Blue Ribbon school, the staff appreciated the distinction, recognition, and benefits that achieving this honor allowed them to experience. They were interviewed by the local newspaper, they were invited to make presentations at other schools, and numerous educators have visited their school to observe the practices of their teachers in order to learn from them.

Mr. I. looked inward as he recalled the personal satisfaction that accompanied receiving the award. He shared that it was such a high honor and that he only knew of one another school that received accolades as high, and that was his wife’s school, where she also worked as a principal. She, too, was invited to Washington, D.C. She was asked to go there and to sit with President George W. Bush and his wife, Laura Bush, at one of his State of the Union addresses because her school had made the most gains for Hispanic students, English Language Learners, in particular. She had made such high gains, that she garnered the attention of the Bush family and they invited her to meet them. He laughed as he recalled the experience of watching his wife on television, sitting next to Laura Bush. For him, this was another proud moment.

In hearing about his wife’s success with ELL’s, more questions began to form. I began wondering about this woman. I wanted to know who she was. I wondered about her professional background. More inquiry questions began to emerge and I wanted to meet this woman. How did she do it? What instructional practices did she engage in at her school? Having ELL’s at my own school and being challenged to ensure that they make progress, I wanted to know exactly how this woman made such high gains that she received national attention. But these new questions would have to wait, for now.

Continuing to look inward, Mr. I. shared that winning the Blue Ribbon Award was and is something to be proud of and is something that no one can ever take away from you. It felt so
good to him to win the award and he found it to be a great personal achievement. He was
honored to be able to say that he was a part of winning the award.

It’s something nobody can take away from you. It’s something that you can wake up in
the morning and be proud, “hey, I won one of those!” It’s a personal gain that I got. Of
course I can’t deny that. Of course it felt good. Of course it was nice. And everybody
said, “wow, your school, you did it!” No, I didn’t do anything. If they only knew.

Mr. I. shared that the school’s staff and the community at large were equally proud of
having achieved the Blue Ribbon award and boasted its significance while engaging in activities
to celebrate their success. The staff, everyone in the school, was very proud of what they had
accomplished. They wanted everyone to know what they had achieved. They took a faculty
picture and placed it next to the new Blue Ribbon flag. The staff was deeply proud and they, too,
experienced the thrill of personal satisfaction because they were able to accomplish such a feat,
although they had not deliberately set out to do so.

He continued to share that although they had not been striving to become a Blue Ribbon
School, the staff boasted about their success. They had t-shirts made and on the shirts, there was
a big, round emblem that said, “Blue Ribbon School, 2010”. They wore these shirts proudly. As
for the parents and the community, they were just as proud to have their children to be a part of
such a high honor. They enjoyed saying that their kids were part of the experience and that they
helped the school to become a Blue Ribbon school.

Mr. I. acknowledged that schools are not just made up of teachers and administrators, but
parents, students, and other staff members as well. He recognized that there are nurses,
custodians, kitchen cooks, and dishwashers, too. He believes that all of these individuals
contribute to the making of a school, and were all a part of this school’s success. Mr. I.’s
observation was that everybody had pride in their school. He specifically talked about the fact
that the custodians would work on the weekends to buff the floors so that the school would look
good for the staff and students on Monday mornings. He appreciated the role that each staff member played in contributing to making their school the success that it became. He expressed that they wanted to be proud of their school. They wanted to be part of the school’s success and achieving the award affected them all in a positive way. They believe that they have acquired something that will always be there. They will always have the award – the plaque, the banner, and the flag, no matter what happens. They will never forget that time.

Mrs. Taylor believes that the achievement of the Blue Ribbon signifies the fact that student learning took place and expressed that the success of students was always the ultimate goal:

The impact has to be that they learned, that they were successful because of all of the things that we did to get to our goal because they’re the ones that are the most important of that equation. The impact is that they improved, that they became more proficient. That’s the impact. If they are achieving that, then each teacher should have that feeling that, ‘yeah, we did it! We did it – look at Bobby, look at Sammy! He was so far behind and now, he’s right where he’s supposed to be.’ So, that’s it!

Although she celebrated the success of the students as providing the greatest satisfaction, Mrs. Taylor admitted that receiving the award also reflected the hard work of the staff, epitomized teamwork, and resulted in personal satisfaction:

It was a wonderful way to go out, right? Only, I didn’t really know until the following year that we had won. I knew we had won. We won. We won because at that time and place in our history all of us were working so hard together to achieve that. So, it was a really wonderful way to go. ‘Cause I already knew. I knew. There’s no way that they could turn us down. Look at what we’ve done! – Together!

Winning the award was recognized by the state of New Mexico and the surrounding community. A local newspaper announced that the school had won the award. In the article, Rogel (2010) shared that within a five-year period, the school had achieved in the top 10 percent of schools in the state and had demonstrated a 14 percentage point increase in reading and a 25 percentage point increase in math. Additionally, the state of New Mexico published a news release from
New Mexico’s Secretary of Education Designate, Dr. Susanna Murphy announcing the fact that SNME had been chosen as one of three New Mexico Blue Ribbon Schools during 2010. In the press release congratulated SNME and the other schools for winning the award. She explained that the schools had received the award because:

“They have demonstrated dramatic improvements for all students in their school by increasing reading and mathematics proficiency. These schools can provide excellent best-practice examples for instruction to other schools” (Murphy, 2010).

Winning the National Blue Ribbon Schools award had a significant impact on the staff, students, and Southern New Mexico community, as they felt that they experienced personal gains and newfound pride in their school. The sense of pride that the school experienced was because of their success in student achievement. I agree with Dr. Murphy (2010) in her observation that Blue Ribbon schools can offer best-practice examples for other schools. This is the reason that I have engaged in this inquiry. I truly believe that what educators can learn from these schools, may have implications for students learning.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the steps that staff members took in the process of becoming a 2010 National Blue Ribbon School. After being invited to apply for this national distinction because of their high test scores, the staff engaged in the process of completing the application and fulfilling the eligibility requirements. Although they did not deliberately set out to achieve this award upon opening the school, the school’s staff and the community at large were proud of having achieved the Blue Ribbon award and boasted its significance while engaging in activities to celebrate their success.

In the next chapter, I begin to present the findings of the inquiry questions in the discussion of “how they did it” through restorying school life experiences and by detailing the specific practices that were enacted within and outside of the classroom. I have categorized these
as exogenous and endogenous tensions. These distinctions will aid in the consideration of how practices occurring inside and outside of the classroom impacted instruction. Chapter 6 specifically explores practices involving place, people, context, interaction, certainty, and temporality that occurred within the school, but not directly within the classroom. These are exogenous tensions.
Chapter 6: The Story of How They Did It-
Exploring Practices Narratively, Part I

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I share the answers to the research puzzle regarding the specific instructional practices that were used during reading instruction during the time that SNME was awarded the Blue Ribbon. Our conversations revealed that there were multiple practices in place which can be categorized among the instructional practices which may have impacted student outcomes. The participants shared stories laced with vivid description so that I could envision how the myriad of practices which were been carried out from day to day. In considering this inquiry, for some reason in seeking to learn about the instructional practices that were being used, based on my own experiences as a classroom teacher, I initially imagined these actions as primarily taking place in classroom spaces. During our conversations, and more so as I began to analyze the data, I came to the realization that while many instructional practices occurred directly within the classroom context, others that were utilized occurred during meetings, or at other times when staff engagement centered on instruction, but did not occur in the classroom environment. Therefore, instructional practices occurred both outside of the classroom context and directly within directly within the classroom context, during instruction. To aid in my own understanding of both the distinctions and the relationships between these instructional practices, I considered Dewey’s (1938) criteria of experience in order to provide a theoretical frame for identifying tensions at the boundaries (Clandinin & Connelly (2000). I used this narrative notion to construct a framework to show that instructional practices are utilized at pre-instructional, instructional, and post-instructional times and to distinguish in-classroom and out-of –classroom spaces on the school landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
In order to explore instructional practices narratively and to frame them as occurring outside of the classroom environment or occurring during classroom instruction, I have categorized the practices as being characterized by exogenous and endogenous tensions. This is explored in a two-part discussion. In this chapter, I begin by defining exogenous and endogenous tensions and I explain in more detail how and why instructional practices have been categorized according to these tensions. Then I move into explaining the exogenous tensions and the practices that were carried out which were characterized by them. Chapter 7 explores the endogenous tensions and the practices that were impacted by these tensions.

6.2 Exogenous and Endogenous Tensions

A characteristic of the narrative genre is that there are tensions involved which drive the interactions. At SNME, these tensions centered upon the instructional practices that took place both within and outside of the classroom and before, during, and after instruction. For the purposes of organizing and explaining the instructional practices that may have directly impacted student achievement outcomes, but did not directly occur in the classroom, I categorized these as exogenous tensions. Actions that took place directly within the classroom were categorized as endogenous tensions. These tensions were negotiated on a daily basis due to the fact that teaching and learning are multi-dimensional, problematic, unsettled, and unprescribed as no two teaching situations are identical, and teachers must repeatedly discover the ability to extract knowledge within unique and messy situations (Ayers, 2004).

In my experience, these messy situations can be experienced outside of the classroom, for example, during planning meetings. This can be experienced as teachers plan before lessons and consider the instruction that will need to take place based on what they are required to teach, students’ background and work to make decisions on what and how to teach students. I have
found that this can be problematic when dealing with diverse groups of students who are performing at differing ability levels. Despite these challenges, we continuously negotiate these tensions, perpetually engaging in the struggle of trying to educate students in dynamic situations characterized by student mobility and teacher attrition rates. Messy situations can also be experienced directly in the classroom during instruction as teachers work to make on-the-spot decisions based on the feedback that they are receiving from their students. An example of this is when teachers are delivering instruction and they come to the realization that their students are failing to grasp the concept. In that moment, a teacher must re-adjust the instruction and scaffold students toward understanding.

As I return to the work of Clandinin & Connelly (2000), who suggest the use of distinctions between in-classroom and out-of-classroom places within the school context, I began to consider the idea that the instructional practices that occurred at SNME can be more easily understood when grouped into two categories. To facilitate this organization, I have categorized these as exogenous and endogenous tensions. Exogenous tensions are those practices involving people, context, certainty, and temporality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938) which occurred within the school context, but not directly within the classroom. Endogenous tensions are those practices involving people, context, certainty, and temporality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938) which occurred either before or after instruction. These practices occurred in meeting spaces within the school context during which individuals interacted with one another when instruction was not occurring. Although exogenous and endogenous tensions occurred at different contexts, involved interactions between different groups of people, had different foci of certainty, and occurred at different times, these tensions were interdependent. For example, the endogenous tension of fidelity to the Balanced Literacy Framework, although it occurred within
the classroom during instruction, it was a central topic of discourse during block meetings. Figure 6.1 depicts the relationship between exogenous and endogenous tensions.

**Figure 6.1 Graphic representation of the relationship between exogenous and endogenous tensions and related practices**

In considering the idea that exogenous and endogenous tensions centered on people, context, interaction, certainty, and temporality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938), I must share what I mean by these terms. What do I mean by people? Here, I refer to school
administrators, teachers, other staff members, students, and parents. “Context” refers to the school setting itself as a place in which interactions occurred and meaning was made, along with the various locations within the school setting in which group meeting structures occurred, such as classrooms, or other areas that were named as meeting spaces, in which people interacted. The interactions that I describe are the types that were repeatedly referred to in our conversations, which were structures for staff, students, or parent engagement. Certainty refers to the certain knowledge that was derived within particular circumstances. Student test score data provided the certainty within the exogenous tensions. This data informed administrators, teachers, parents, and students of their achievement or lack of achievement. Fidelity to the Balanced Literacy Framework provided certainty within the classroom environment.

Temporality refers to the relationship between notions of time, as it pertained to the interactions of the individuals within specific locations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Practices characterized by exogenous tensions occurred during classroom instruction, while those characterized by endogenous tensions occurred outside of the classroom environment during meetings such as teacher meetings or parent-teacher conference meetings.

Although there is a relationship between these tensions, they differ with regard to the people that were involved in these tensions, the contexts in which they occurred, the foci of the certainty, and the times (temporality) during which they occurred. These components of these tensions are categorized and distinguished in Table 6.1.
### Table 6.1 Components of Exogenous and Endogenous Tensions

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<td>Involved the principal and the reading coach; the principal and the teachers; the reading coach and the teachers; teachers and other teachers; teachers and parents; the principal and parents; the principal, the teachers and parents</td>
<td>Involved the reading coach and teachers; teachers and other teachers; the reading coach and students; teachers and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Place</strong></td>
<td>Occurred in meeting contexts, outside of the classroom</td>
<td>Occurred within the classroom context</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Certainty</strong></td>
<td>Student test score data</td>
<td>Teacher Coaching, Balanced Literacy Framework fidelity</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Temporality</strong></td>
<td>Before and after classroom instruction</td>
<td>During classroom instruction</td>
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The instructional practices that were carried out on a day to day basis were negotiated by these tensions which required the cooperation of individuals working together in order to facilitate the practices in being carried out. Both exogenous and endogenous tensions centered upon student learning and achievement as being the desired result. In order to achieve this goal, staff members, parents, and students engaged in practices that were negotiated through these tensions. In the next section, I describe exogenous tensions and practices that were characterized by them.

### 6.3 Exogenous Tensions

In this chapter, I specifically attend to exogenous tensions which involved practices which occurred outside of the classroom environment. These include the accountability structures that were utilized, block meetings, building relationships, and parental involvement.
Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor saw these practices as essential for student achievement, although these practices were demonstrated outside of the classroom setting. Exogenous tensions required interactions between the following combinations of groups of people:

- The principal and the reading coach
- The principal and the teachers
- The reading coach and the teachers
- Teachers and other teachers
- Teachers and parents
- The principal and parents
- The reading coach, the parents, and the students
- The teachers, the parents, and the students

The daily negotiated tensions by these varying combinations of people enabled practices to be carried out toward the goal of student success. I say that these tensions were ‘negotiated’ because of the ways in which these varying combinations of people had to work together, make daily compromises, decisions, and come to agreement concerning the ways in which tasks would be carried out. The practices involved in holding staff members accountable for student learning were largely carried out in the processes of block meetings in which the staff utilized data walls to pinpoint strengths and weakness for staff and students.

### 6.4 Accountability

Many of the practices that the staff engaged in were centered upon the practice of ensuring accountability. This was largely propelled by the challenge that was set forth among the staff members to work toward student success, especially on the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment (NMSBA). The expectation to meet AYP as indicated by the state and federal
accountability system (NCLB, 2001), spawned multiple discussions that were centered upon student test scores, which became the data that was used to measure teacher success and ultimately, the school’s success. This data was disaggregated and translated in ways that could be understood by various groups within the school community. Not only was the disaggregated data used at open house and meet-the –teacher nights, when it was shared with the community, but it was largely used as a point of structured conversations by the staff members in grade level meetings, which they referred to as “block” meetings and made visible to all through the use of data walls.

6.5 Transparency through Block Meetings and Data Walls

Reading assessments were administered regularly so that the staff could continually maintain their knowledge base concerning student progress. This information was recorded on a board that could be observed and utilized by all staff. Mr. I shared how this method facilitated accountability measures by displaying each teacher’s performance as indicated by the performance of the students in their classes:

They gave out quarterly assessments to the students, and of course end of unit tests and they used that. It was data driven. So, on an ongoing basis if you wanted to know how they were doing, I could look at the board and I’d tell you if it’s working in that classroom or not. And again it’s accountability, it might be a negative one ‘cause your name’s on the board and everyone’s gonna see it. All your colleagues are gonna see it. Your principal’s gonna see it. Mrs. Taylor’s gonna see it. So, you wanna look good, so what do you do? You strive. You don’t have time to get lazy. You don’t have time, cause you want to look good.

By stating that he did not want the teachers to ‘get lazy’, Mr. I meant that he wanted the teachers to work hard and to implement the instruction that was necessary for students based on the data. If students were struggling, this meant that teachers would need to devote additional time to them in either small group settings during classroom instruction, or in after school tutoring. The student data was discussed at weekly planning meetings. The information was used
to make particular instructional decisions that were based on students’ learning needs. In those weekly meetings, they would plan and they would use their data so that they could refer to it in order to see where the students were, in terms of their progress. The data was also used to identify teachers who were struggling in their ability to teach reading and to help students to make reading gains.

We had block once a week, every week – block. So for half a day, morning or afternoon, the teachers would go to the coaches. We’d all meet to discuss, okay, where are we? And all we had to do was turn around like this [demonstrates] and look at the board because they would have on the board where the students were reading – their reading levels. It was beautiful because you could say, ‘look at Johnny, he’s doing pretty good. He’s a ‘J’ now.’ ‘Cause they’re coded. A person (non-staff) could walk in and see it, but they did not know what it was.

As an administrator, I believe that this practice was put into place in order to help students through putting peer pressure on the teachers. I can imagine that having the data displayed likely created an environment that was probably uncomfortable for the teachers whose students were not performing well. While having the data wall facilitated the idea of pin-pointing student strengths and weaknesses, having been a former teacher, I can only imagine how this practice might have made the teachers feel. Some who had low scores may have felt uneasy or uncomfortable as the group discussed their data. Others who had high scores may have felt proud or cocky even as the group discussed theirs. While this can be awkward situation for teachers to be in, I still believe it is necessary. I believe that if schools do not set aside times to regularly examine data, teachers and staff will be unaware of issues that exist, so these discussions can prove to be very helpful. Although the idea of the data discussions that took place during the block meetings were designed to help teachers and ultimately students to improve, the block meeting context was likely a situation that the teachers dreaded.
6.6 Block Meeting Context

Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor described the context in which their weekly block meetings took place. It was a large portable building that was shared by the math and reading coaches. This area was used as their work space and housed the school’s instructional resources. Half of it was all their books, which was a reading library. The other half was where their desks were and they also had a big conference table where they would all sit around and go over the test scores. Mrs. Taylor had an office part where she did her desk work and she had a book room part, where teachers would go to get their books and their materials for the next week. When they would visit her room, she would share with them what they were expected to do and how they were expected to do it.

Working within the portable, staff members would go over the test scores and plan what they were going to do. The planning would begin at the block meeting and they discussed who was going to teach what and how they were going to teach it. They shared strategies with one another and demonstrated how these strategies should be carried out during instruction. They also planned their parent-teacher conference nights and other school wide events. These school wide events included their math and literacy nights, parent breakfasts, holiday events, and fundraising activities. Mostly, the conversations centered around student test scores as they reviewed data and discussed how students were performing. In the next section, I discuss how these data driven conversations were carried out.

6.7 Data Driven Dialogue

Continuing to look backward, participants reminisced about the data conversations that they had during the block meetings. These meetings centered around student data, which informed their instructional planning and student-based decisions. These meetings were critical
because during these meetings, teachers learned from each other through the sharing of information and ideas. At the block meetings is where everything happened - teachers and administrators worked together and did all of their planning. They talked and used their materials or “tools” and made decisions about what they needed to work on in order to help their students to achieve.

During the data discussions, teachers would sometimes express that they were trying really hard, but were still unable to make the needed gains. Upon hearing the concerns, another teacher would share what it was that he or she was doing that they found to be making a positive difference in student learning. In this way, a lot of sharing occurred. They shared experiences and ideas to help students to become successful. For example, if one teacher was having difficulty in teaching students a particular concept, another teacher would share how they have been successful in the concept and provide that teacher with ideas and strategies to improve his or her instruction. They shared ideas with one another because they all wanted their students to be successful, in order to make the whole school look good.

During the meetings, which were held weekly, teachers looked at the various levels that students were on and planned their instruction according to students’ particular needs, based on the indicators of the data. They looked at data a lot, referring also to the levels that students were on using the Balanced Literacy approach, which will be further discussed. They checked the data, going student by student and whenever they noticed that a student was not “getting it”, they asked what could be done to help the student. They tried various approaches to meet students’ particular needs, based on the areas in which they were having difficulty. In reading, students could experience difficulty in phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension. If students demonstrated having weaknesses in any of these areas, the teachers
could provide targeted instruction based on any of these components. Test score data and student reading level data were indicators that they used to gauge students’ abilities and areas of concern.

Some of these meetings were held as horizontal grade level meetings, during which all of the teachers from a particular grade levels would meet. At other times, the meetings were in the form of vertical team meetings. In these types of meetings, representatives from each grade level was present for the discussion in order to share information concerning the instructional deficits that they were seeing students with as they advanced to the next grade level. They also planned vertically from elementary to middle school with teachers from 6th and 7th grades because they wanted to know what the middle school teachers were thinking about the level of preparedness of the students as they were advancing from elementary to middle school. For example, if the 7th grade teachers identified the fact that students were coming to them demonstrating weaknesses in the area of vocabulary, the 6th grade teachers would make sure that they targeted vocabulary instruction in their work with students. This information was used to help teachers to improve their preparation of students for the next grade level.

They planned vertically and horizontally because they felt, for example that the 3rd grade teachers needed to know what the 4th grade teachers were expecting of the students, as well as students going from 5th to 6th grade. The teachers felt that if they were doing something wrong, or not preparing the students well enough, they needed to know about it so that they could change their instructional approaches and do a better job of preparing students for the next grade level. These were the kinds of open conversations that took place in the block meetings.

6.8 Data Walls

The participants described the data walls, which were effective in creating an environment of transparency and shared decision making. Figures 6.2 and 6.3 are photographs
that were provided to me by Mrs. Taylor. They used these data walls so that they could refer to them easily during the block meetings. With all of the student data posted on a wall, it was easy to identify students who were struggling and to anchor discussions centering on how to help them. At the same time, this wall also facilitated the ongoing evaluation process so that it was easy to identify teachers whose students were high-performing, as well as those teachers whose students were not achieving at the expected rate.

Figure 6.2 Data Wall
The posted data was based on students’ reading levels as indicated in Balanced Literacy and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), which are correlated and are two approaches that are used to determine students’ reading levels. Students who are reading at level “A” in Balanced Literacy, are “A-1”, according to DRA and have a kindergarten grade level equivalency, while students who are reading at a “U-V” level in Balanced Literacy, are at level “50” in DRA, having a 5th grade level reading equivalency (Reading A-Z, 2014). The levels are determined by the complexity of the text and the number of words in the text, so that teachers can help students to improve their reading by allowing them to spend time reading at appropriate levels (Klein, 2005). Mrs. Taylor described how the data walls were used:

We had the letters – a,b,c,d,e,f,g, and so forth. I had them on blackboards. And then you’d have the letter “a” and then I used colored tape in between. And then you’d have first grade and the tape goes across this way and then you’d have 2nd grade, 3rd grade and then by class and then we’d have the teacher’s name on the side and the color that we’re
gonna use for that teacher and then each of her students’ names would be on a little strip of that colored paper. And we put all the kids that are in “a” in Mrs. Soto’s class are in pink and the ones that are in “a” are gonna go there, and the ones that are in "b" are gonna go there and the ones that are in “m” are gonna go there. We also had it marked off to show where the kids were supposed to be -when you start, at Christmas time and at the end of the year. And I had that marked off with a different color. So that, say your 3rd grade kids are supposed to be at “m” at Christmas time and you look at the board and you go ‘holy cow, all those kids are ‘m’, ‘n’, ‘o’”, or you say, ‘holy cow, all those kids are ‘k’, ‘l’ [laughs]. We need to work with the ‘k’, ‘l’. So, it’s really good. It’s a good way of reminding yourself of who needs help. Or, the Reading coach walks in and she says, ‘look at all of Mrs. Jones’ class, all of them are below level and it’s Christmas time! We’d better go work with Mrs. Jones! We’d better go see what Mrs. Jones is doing.

In reflecting upon the data walls that they used, Mr. I. had similar reflections. He too, saw these as a method that facilitated the observation of student and teacher strengths and weaknesses in reading instruction and learning:

All we had to do was turn around like this (demonstrates) and look at the board because they would have on the board where the students were reading – their reading levels. It was beautiful because you could say, ‘look at Johnny, he’s doing pretty good. He’s a ‘J’ now.” ‘Cause they’re coded. A person could walk in, but they didn’t know what it is unless you told them, but they’re coded. We could say, “Okay, Mrs. Lopez, look at your students right here uh-oh…you need to work a little bit more on this.” So, it’s an ongoing evaluation process. Once a week they would change that board, or twice a week. At least it would change accordingly and the teachers would know the progress or lack of progress that they were making. So they were on the spot, too. It (the chart) went by teacher and the students were underneath (teacher’s name). And then you’d go diagonally and there were A, or J or A’s and B’s and C’s depending on the grade level that they were in. You could get a bird’s eye view or a snapshot on how your kids were doing in reading at that particular time. And the board is still there today.

Mr. I. discussed that they gave out quarterly and end of unit assessments to the students. The scores students received from these tests were also discussed. The activities were continuously data driven. They always used data to drive their instruction and to make instructional decisions. On an ongoing basis if they wanted to know where they were doing, in terms of how students were performing, they simply looked at the data wall and were able to tell if things were going well or “working” in a classroom, or not.
They shared that the data walls were used for accountability purposes also, mentioning that at times it might have seemed like a negative situation, having everyone’s names on the board so that their performance could be observed and scrutinized. Everyone was able to see the data, the administrators, colleagues, everyone. The continual review of data and specifically the use of data walls facilitated the practice of holding all stakeholders accountable for student success.

As we discussed the use of the data walls and how teachers sometimes felt that it was a negative situation, I thought about the many data conversations that I have been a part of. As a teacher, I remember my principals making charts with our standardized test scores on them and the average percentage of students who had passed, along with each teacher’s name. This was always an uncomfortable situation because the teachers that did well and were praised by administrators, worried about what would happen if they did not perform so well the next time. The teachers that did not do well were ashamed and worried about whether they would be placed on corrective action plans and ultimately fired. Administrators thought that presenting the data in this way would make people work harder, and maybe it did, but it also hurt teacher morale.

As a school administrator, I have worked to help teachers to understand that the use of data is important. We need to know the areas in which students are having difficulty so that we can help them. I also need to know which teachers are performing well and which are not and determine whether and how we can provide the support that is needed to help them to be successful. At the same time, I am trying to present data in ways that do not negatively affect teacher morale. The best approach that I have found in doing this is to share data from a strengths perspective. Most of the time, we can find strengths in our data – students who are
improving, or certain areas in which our students might have performed better than other areas. This does not mean that I ignore the weaknesses. I have learned that if we start with the strengths and celebrate them, the teachers are more open to having conversations on what we need to work on. No matter the approach, data conversations can often be difficult, as they lead to certain knowledge concerning how well individuals are performing and holding them accountable for student achievement.

6.9 All Aboard! Encouraging Parental Involvement

As a Title I school, receiving additional federal funding, SNME was expected to facilitate and encourage parental involvement, which is a centerpiece of Title I, which encourages the substantive participation of parents as integral to assisting in their child’s learning (United States Department of Education, 2004). Parental involvement is seen as an important strategy for the advancement of the quality of education and in expanding the social and cognitive capacities of students (Driessen et al., 2005). Parents can play an active role in supporting students in maximizing their potential by providing them with their full support (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). Because parents make the decision as to whether or not and the degree to which they will be involved in the education of their child, this issue is a challenge for educators as they work to entice parents to become involved in the educational experiences of their children.

In my own experience as an educator, I have found that most parents want to be involved in their children’s education. I have noticed that many times, parents do not know exactly how to become involved or they do not realize that their involvement is valued by the school. I believe that it is important that educators create an environment in which parents feel welcome in the school by facilitating their participation. I have found that this can be accomplished by sending school-related publications home that are written in the languages that parents can understand.
and conducting meetings in languages that parents understand. In the United States/Mexico border community, this means that publications need to be written in English and Spanish.

Parents need to be informed concerning the specific ways in which they can help their children. When it comes to the topic of homework, for example, I have found that many parents desire to help their children with homework, but often do not know how to do it themselves. Teachers can send home guides that explain in detail how parents can help their children with their homework, or make themselves available after school hours to answer questions that are related to homework. In my own experience I have found parental involvement to be a significant factor in school success.

Just as I realize this importance, each of the participants emphasized the significance of parental and community involvement in school success, which is ultimately the success of each student within a school. The administration created structures so that parents and others in the community were informed about and involved in school activities, events, and student progress. This involvement was made possible through meetings such as “meet the teacher”, parent-teacher conferences, coffee with the principal, and other special events in which parents and community members were invited to participate.

Mrs. Taylor discussed the fact that as part of completing the Blue Ribbon Schools application, the staff was required to discuss the ways in which parents were involved in the school. She shared the fact that one of the things that they would do was that they would have meetings with parents whenever they were employing certain learning interventions in order to plan the use of the intervention and to later discuss the outcome of its use. In order to connect with parents, letters were sent home in English and Spanish, inviting the parents to come to the school. Mrs. Taylor mentioned the meeting structure in which she, the child’s teacher and the
child’s parent would meet to discuss academic goals. They would discuss how the student was performing and what they wanted to accomplish with the student. This meeting was in addition to meetings that the classroom teachers had with the parents. This was an additional meeting that was held in order to ensure student success. At these meetings, Mrs. Taylor shared the student goals and provided parents with strategies on how to help their children at home.

Mr. I. considered himself to be most fortunate because the large majority of the parents were very supportive of the school at large. They participated in the various school functions that were held at the school to promote parent involvement and were willing to help at the school by volunteering. He expressed that although most parents, roughly 99 percent of them supported what the school was trying to do for their children, not all of them were supportive, though and some of them were difficult to interact with, to the detriment of their own children. He expressed that some of the parents argued with him and some refused to become involved in their children’s educations. However, for the most part, they found that parents were supportive of the ways in which the school was trying to help their children.

There were multiple meeting structures that were created to allow parents the opportunity to become involved in their child’s education. These included data meetings in which the teachers shared with parents about their child’s performance in math and reading. They discussed with them the distinct areas in which the children were progressing or failing to progress. In addition, parents were also invited to math nights, literacy nights, and meetings with the principal himself. These connecting opportunities were provided in addition to the usual parent-teacher conference nights that are held in most schools, just as they were regularly held at SNME, where Mr. I. would say things such as:

I’m gonna be contacting you, your child’s teacher will be contacting you and working with your particular child – ‘cause we had the data on where and how that child did in
Parents and students were held accountable for students progressing in their learning. Parents and students signed individualized learning contracts, along with their teachers, signifying that they understood the areas in which the student was expected to grow. Mr. I. shared that when they had their first parent-teacher conference in September, they had an individualized plan that the teachers made for each particular student. So, when parents would come to the conference, they would say, “here’s where Johnny’s at, oh, we need to work on his division, or his two digit numbers, so here’s a plan.” The teacher, the parent, and the student would sign it and it became a contract that the parent was going to help teachers by working with their children at home and it committed them to being a part of their child’s education.

This triad union forged by a written agreement ensured that all three parties were aware of the progress that the student needed to make and held each party accountable for ensuring that each student met his goal. This is just one of the many structures designed to foster collaborative relationships and to welcome families within the school.

During the school year they had many functions that were going on to promote parent involvement. At the literacy nights and the math nights, parents were invited to come and work with their children. “Coffee with the principal” was held once a month during which Mr. I. could share what was going on with the academics, with any particular problems, or share any information that they thought the parents might be interested in knowing. Not only were parents welcome in the school, but grandparents were also welcome. At SNME, the staff believed that grandparents played an important role in student success, therefore they were encouraged to
participate in the school in meaningful ways. For example, grandparents were invited to the school to tutor students or to read with students.

Mr. I. emphasized the fact that everyone was a part of the SNME’s success. He believed that the parents, the community members, and all staff members within the school, not just the teachers and the administrators, played a significant role in supporting the students and contributing to their achievement:

A school is not just a school of teachers and administrators and counselors. There’s nurses, there are custodians, there’s kitchen cooks and dishwashers – all that makes a school. All of it, not just the people in those higher places if, you want to talk about it that way, but it’s everybody. My custodians used to go work on weekends to keep those floors buffed. Everybody had pride in their school.

The interconnectedness of the families working collaboratively with the school staff, toward the goal of student success and making this outcome a reality, was made possible through the work of building relationships of people within the school and in the community.

6.10 Building Relationships

Block meetings, data walls, and parent-teacher conference meetings were valuable communicative spaces during which vital information was shared concerning students’ and teachers’ abilities to succeed. These meetings were effective because there was there was an established relationship among teachers and students. At SNME, Mr. I. worked to build relationships among his staff and exemplified one who cared about the teachers and garnered their respect by being honest, yet nurturing concerning the areas in which they needed to grow as professionals. If he found that teachers were having problems in their instructional delivery, he allowed Mrs. Taylor to help them in this area and only became involved if the teacher resisted her attempts to help them. He stated that he rarely ever had to become involved and could not recall having to do so. Mrs. Taylor valued Mr. I’s willingness to nurture teachers and to allow
her to coach teachers. She appreciated the fact that seemed to know how to talk to people. Even if it meant telling them about areas that they needed to work on, he was able to be honest with them so that they could improve. Mrs. Taylor felt that honesty was not only important in teacher-principal relationships, but also in teacher-teacher relationships. This trait of honesty was critical to the relational trust that was also viewed as a necessary component.

Through honesty, she felt that she too, had the opportunity to talk to the teachers and ask for example, if they thought that they would like a little more help with particular concepts. Because of the level of honesty, teachers were not afraid to tell each other what was really happening in their classrooms and to openly discuss what they felt they needed more help with. Mrs. Taylor felt that honesty and trust were so important to relationships in school settings.

I don’t feel like there was ever a teacher who went back to her classroom thinking, ‘I don’t know how to do this’ and would not have told me. Instead, they would say, ‘I don’t know how to do this, would you please come in and show me?’ We had that trust and that’s why I could go in and write down everything that they said and did and go back and sit with them and tell them, ‘this was good’ and ‘this is something that we need to work on, so next time I come in, let’s see if we can’t make that a little stronger.’ And you have to have a good relationship in order to say that.

Mr. I. felt that trust was critical to the working relationship as well. He mentioned that there should be trust among teachers and between the principal and the teachers just as there must be trust amongst other staff members within the school. He felt that there has to be trust in school relationships. This is important in the relationship between the principal, the assistant principal, and the counselor as well as with the teachers.

Equally, trust was a critical factor in the relationship between the principal and the reading coach. This trust was essential to their working relationship. Mr. I. trusted Mrs. Taylor’s work with the teachers and he did not violate the trust that was between Mrs. Taylor and those she was working to support. Mr. I. trusted her and encouraged her to forge strong working
relationships with the teachers and he made sure that his actions did not get in the way of that. While he gave her opportunities to vent her frustrations concerning her work with teachers, he did not violate the trust between them by sharing her concerns with the teachers. Instead, he listened to her, while trusting her to handle the situation in the best way that she could, knowing that she had his full support:

She would just come in and say, “well, I’m frustrated with this teacher.” She would say that. She’d say, “but I’m working with him or her. So, as long as she said, “I’m working with her”, then I’m not in the picture. I don’t want to go out there as a henchman. They would say, “she told on me” and I would destroy the trust that they had, or the respect they might have of her.

Mr. I felt that building relationships among staff members was essential to cultivating a teaching and learning family in which teachers were nurtured to grow as professionals and students were able to flourish academically. He deliberately endeavored to create a team of teachers who could work well together. This is what he described as being the right “chemistry” that is needed for a school to be successful. He felt strongly that:

If you get the right chemistry – and chemistry is another big part of it – you get good chemistry and they will make you look good.

When teachers make administrators “look good”, this, along with almost everything else that happens on a campus is related to test scores. When teachers get high test scores, principals are celebrated. When teachers get bad test scores, principals risk losing their jobs. Mr. I believed that if he achieved getting the right chemistry on his campus, that the campus would be successful. To aid our understanding of exactly what he meant in his use of the word “chemistry, he further unpacked this idea and explained how schools could go about getting the good chemistry that he deemed as being so critical to school success:

Through trust first of all, the chemistry is not only with yourself but with your colleagues, with your administrators and with your parents, of course with your students. So, those four. Those four areas I would say you need to have the chemistry. What kind of
chemistry? Well, chemistry is where you have the right attitude that you want to teach, or you want to learn. If you’re a student, that you want to learn. You want to please the teacher. You feel good about learning because that’s another part of that chemistry that you want to make the students feel good about learning as well. With your colleagues, that your respect each other, that you help each other, that you’re not jealous of each other or knock each other down, but make the whole school look good including yourself, so that chemistry is what I’m talking about. The team play – team players. That’s a big part of chemistry, if you’re a team player – and just wanting to be part of the group.

Establishing the right campus chemistry and building relationships were important precedents for setting the tone of the campus in order to create a culture of success. This chemistry, which Mr. I. described as being the trust among staff, was important to building collaborative relationships amongst staff, fostering a culture for success.

I recently moved to another campus and at this time in my life, I am more aware then ever of the importance of building relationships and the fact that doing so takes time. As I meet new staff, they are quick to tell me how much they are going to miss the administrator who worked at the campus prior to my arrival. Still, they are very welcoming toward me and seem open to building relationships with me. Looking within, I find myself looking for ways to establish trust between us. I am aware of how small things will make a difference in whether or not the teachers and staff will trust me. Looking back, I am reflecting on past mistakes that I have made that may have destroyed trust and work relationships. Sometimes, I said too much and other times, perhaps not enough. As I think on past mistakes, this allows me to move forward while looking toward new opportunities to show myself that I have learned from such mistakes which will help me as I work toward building new relationships.

6.11 Chapter Summary

Our conversations revealed that there were multiple factors that these former staff members identified as having contributed to their school’s success. There was a relationship
between practices that happened outside of the classroom which directly impacted which occurred inside of the classroom. These included but were not limited to practices such as block meetings, parental and community involvement. These practices were characterized by exogenous tensions, which were negotiated on a daily basis as staff members took engaged in particular practices within the school, but outside of the classroom, apart from students’ instructional time. Though these practices did not occur directly within the classroom space, they heavily impacted instructional decisions that were carried out within the classroom during instruction. In the next chapter, I explore another category of practices involving place people, context, interaction, certainty, and temporality (Clandinin& Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938) that occurred directly within the classrooms. These practices were characterized by endogenous tensions, which occurred directly in the classroom, during instruction.
Chapter 7: The Story of How They Did It – Exploring Practices Narratively

Part II

7.1 Introduction

There was a relationship between practices which occurred outside of the classroom and those that occurred inside of the classroom. The practices that were carried out outside of the classroom heavily impacted what happened inside of the classroom during instruction. The block meetings, inclusive of data meetings, enabled the staff to identify student strengths and weakness, as well as teacher strengths and weakness. Essentially, teachers whose students were observed to be performing well were viewed as being stronger teachers; therefore they positioned to help teachers whose students were not performing as well by providing teachers with strategies that would help their students to improve. In addition to teachers providing other teachers with strategies, Mrs. Taylor would work closely with teachers in order to help them to be successful in the classroom. The practices that were carried out in the classroom to ensure student success in the area of reading were characterized by endogenous tensions. Endogenous tensions required interactions between the following combinations of groups of people within the classroom setting during instruction:

- The reading coach and the teachers
- Teachers and other teachers
- The reading coach and students
- Teachers and students

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the teacher coaching practices, which involved teacher modeling in the classroom setting. Then I move into describing how the Balanced
Literacy Framework was expected to be carried out at SNME. I say ‘expected’ because although the reading coach and the principal shared their expectations for the ideal Balanced Literacy classroom, whether these were actually carried out in the desired manner varied based on teacher ability and willingness to meet these expectations. In order to support teachers’ capacity in being able to teach reading using the prescribed Balanced Literacy Framework, Mrs. Taylor and other teachers engaged in coaching practices in order to ensure their success.

7.2 It’s all about the Teacher: Building Capacity through Teacher Coaching

In his meta-analyses synthesizing factors affecting student achievement, Marzano (2003) discussed the teacher-level factors which have the capacity to be impactful. Teacher-level factors include strategies that are used during instruction across content areas as well as classroom management practices and the design of the curriculum (Marzano 2003). Southern New Mexico Elementary placed importance upon the use of other teachers as leaders, as opposed to solely relying on building administrators, in an effort to coach their teachers in such ways that they were empowered to make better decisions concerning these factors which impacted student achievement. This required building capacity among teachers through positioning expert teachers, or lead teachers to be a part of the leadership structure, which was a component of the concept of distributed leadership within the school.

At SNME, teacher leadership involved the use of lead teachers working together toward a common goal of improving the practices of the other teachers within the school. Teacher leadership employs the dynamic leadership of big-spirited, compassionate, inventive teachers who lead by looking for ways to enhance teaching practices through sharing professional development and technologies (Stone & Cuper, 2006).

In this context, the school positioned their math coach and their reading coach as two teachers in particular who were empowered to help lead other teachers, and ultimately the
school, to successful outcomes. Mr. I. sincerely believed that his teacher leaders were the reason that the school was able to achieve Blue Ribbon status. He shared with me what he believed to be the true secret to his success

But you really want to know how we became a Blue Ribbon school? My coaches. I had two coaches – my math coach and my reading coach. Mrs. Taylor was what they call a coach – a reading coach and they’re there full time and they help teachers out and they help with planning, they come up with the programs, they do the in-services, they do the professional development – they do all of that- and keep the teachers motivated and going.

He specifically described Mrs. Taylor’s role and responsibilities, which primarily involved working with other teachers by modeling lessons and providing professional development. She would conduct observations and would provide coaching and modeling where needed based on what she learned during the observations that she would conduct in teachers’ classrooms. So, when it was warranted, she would model the lessons to ensure that teachers learned how to employ certain practices correctly and becoming more effective and they were able to improve student learning as demonstrated by their test scores. Because their school had demonstrated success, professionals from other schools would visit their school in order to watch Mrs. Taylor as she modeled lessons centered upon Balanced Literacy so that they could learn the practices that were yielding such desirable student outcomes. Mr. I. was proud of that fact and welcomed these teachers when they came to watch his teachers teach in order to see how they were doing things, so that they could learn how they were becoming so successful. They would come over to see what the teachers were doing right and the SNME staff enjoyed having the chance to” toot their horns”.

The staff enjoyed sharing with the visiting teachers the various practices that they were using which were resulting in student gains. While they were at the campus, Mrs. Taylor and
other teachers modeled lessons and shared how they used data to make instructional decisions. They answered any questions that the teachers had and they shared materials with the teachers.

Mr. I. believed that having good coaches was critical to his school’s success and that these coaches should build relationships with the teachers and garner their respect so that they would have effective working relationships. He felt that if a campus has a good coach that knows “his stuff” or “her stuff”, but does not have the respect of the teachers, the teachers are not going to follow the coaches’ lead. In the case of SNME, the teachers respected the coaches and worked for them in the same way that they worked for him. Mr. I believed that the teachers were confident in Mrs. Taylor’s ability to teach reading and that she wanted them to be successful. For these reasons, they trusted her in coaching them to be experts in teaching reading.

Mrs. Taylor also believed in the importance of having a strong relationship with the teachers in order for effective teacher coaching to take place. She expressed that building these relationships allowed teachers to trust her and enabled them to be honest with her. When the teachers were honest with her about areas in which they were having difficulty, such as in teaching particular concepts, she was able to go into their classrooms and to provide them with the assistance that they needed. While teachers were supported, she touted that ultimately, the students benefited. To her, having an open relationship with the teachers was so important so that she, as a coach, could provide the assistance that a teacher needed so that the teacher would then be able to help the students in his or her classroom.

To ensure that teachers were prepared to teach their lessons, Mrs. Taylor would meet with them at her book room so that they could check out their resources. She would also discuss with them how to use the resources appropriately so that they would experience the desired learning outcomes. If teachers expressed to her that they did not understand how to implement a
practice just by her explanation, she would offer to model the practice for them in their classrooms as many times as they needed her to in order for them to be successful.

She was willing to model absolutely everything for the teachers and once she did, she would meet with them later the same afternoon to check their levels of understandings of what they had observed. She would then ask them if they felt they were ready to engage in the practice, or if they felt that they needed her to model it again, then she would do so. Once the teacher felt she was ready, the teacher would teach a similar lesson to demonstrate that she understood how to provide the instruction. After this lesson, the two would have yet another conversation during which Mrs. Taylor would share her notes with the teacher. She felt that it was important to take copious amounts of notes whenever she observed teachers because she felt that this helped her to know how to help them the most. In her notes she recorded information on the classroom structure, environment, and activities as well as what the teachers and students were saying and doing.

Mrs. Taylor mentioned a book that she had in which she would make notes about what she had observed in teachers’ classrooms when she made coaching visits. Recording her observations in her little book helped her to remember specific practices she had observed—good or bad—in particular teachers’ classrooms. Whether good or bad, she shared all of the information that she had gathered with the teachers during their conference meetings. In recording her observations and sharing them with the teachers, she was able to communicate with them concerning their pedagogical strengths and weaknesses. When the teachers met with her privately in her book room to discuss the observations, she would reference her observation notes that she had made while she had been in their classrooms, so that they understood exactly
what she was talking about. She took her time and was willing to meet with them for as long as the teachers needed her to so that they could discuss the pros and cons of a particular lesson.

Like if I told them, ‘you really did that piece where you ask the students to pair up and discuss what was going on- with each other, and I loved the way that you walked around to the two – the pairs and chose the ones that were getting it the way you wanted the rest of the class to “get it” and called on them later so that all the other kids could go, ‘ah I understand where I messed up, this is what she wanted’ and then you could say, ‘but when it came to the part where they were working on their own, I felt like you were not really attentive enough to those students who you had listened to and weren’t giving those good answers, that you were mainly helping the students that you knew already knew how to do it.’ You know, stuff like that.

Because teachers trusted Mrs. Taylor and they believed that she wanted them to be successful, they were accepting of her feedback and used it to improve their teaching practices. The coaching-modeling-teaching cycle involved a lot of back and forth interactions that took place to ensure teacher learning. Mrs. Taylor felt that her role was to teach the teachers so that ultimately, they were successful in teaching their students.

I had the opportunity to work as an instructional coach for many years. I found the opportunities to help teachers to grow professionally to be a very rewarding experience. I found it very fulfilling to see a struggling, ineffective teacher grow to be effective and ultimately support students in being successful.

Although I loved working in this position, I found there to be times of ambiguity as I dealt with role conflicts. These conflicts arose when some teachers did not have the right to tell them what to do because I was not an administrator, yet I was placed in the position of telling them what to do instructionally so that they could be effective in their classrooms. There were also times when administrators did not allow me to make certain decisions because I was just a teacher.
I also found that it was a challenge to build relationships as a teacher coach. Although I wanted teachers to trust me and to tell me how they were feeling about various issues, sometimes they did not trust me because they feared that I would tell the principals. Additionally, although I wanted the administration to trust me, sometimes I felt that they were concerned about the relationships I had with the teachers. I worked hard to find a balance because I needed both sides to trust me and to effectively work with me for the good of our students.

Ultimately, the goal of the teacher coaching relationship that Mrs. Taylor had with teachers was to support them in increasing their pedagogical effectiveness, and to systematically support teachers who were deemed as struggling or unsuccessful, based on their students’ tests scores, to improve. The goal was also to ensure that the teachers fulfilled Mr. I’s and Mrs. Taylor’s vision of what a successful teacher ought to be.

7.3 Diamonds in the Rough: Helping Unsuccessful Teachers to Become Successful

Teachers who are lacking in adequate preparation for the field are likely to leave the profession (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, Darling-Hammond, 2009; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education). As a reading coach, Mrs. Taylor’s primary goal was to support teachers and ensure their success, thereby avoiding this reality. She described the coaching practices that she would engage in order to support teachers’ success in the classroom. What would happen is, if she noticed teachers simply weren’t “getting it” – even after she had gone in their classrooms and had demonstrated a practice many times, then she would pick another teacher who she felt knew how to carry out the practice then she and that teacher would find time and they would find someone to take over that teacher’s classes and she would take the teacher to watch this teacher while she was instructing her students. The teacher who was in the room, learning the practice was expected to take notes and if they did not, then they were in trouble, because they were not taking advantage of the opportunity to learn. Afterward, Mrs.
Taylor would go back to their classroom to see if they had learned something through going to the other teacher’s classroom.

Mrs. Taylor valued the expertise of other teachers in the building. Therefore, if a teacher was not being successful through learning from her demonstrations, she arranged for the unsuccessful teacher to observe another teacher. In order to do this, this often required creative scheduling in which she would have to ask someone to cover the teacher’s class so that he or she could go and learn from another teacher. In her experience, there are teachers who get it, for whom the art of teaching was second nature to and who could put that spin on a lesson so that the kids would come alive in their learning and there are those who do not. They need other ways to learn, such as by working with a master teacher in order to observe and learn the practices. Mrs. Taylor evaluated teacher talent and effectiveness by the skill with which they carried out instructional practices within the Balanced Literacy Framework such as leveled instruction.

According to the interview data and the Blue Ribbon Schools application that the school completed upon its selection, teachers at SNME used the Balanced Literacy Framework, (I discussed this in detail in Chapter 2) and the embedded practices to provide reading instruction in the year and in the preceding years that the school was designated as a Blue Ribbon School. Teacher coaching practices centered around ensuring their abilities to carry out the practices of the Balanced Literacy Framework. At SNME Mrs. Taylor’s constant concern was to make sure that these practices such as leveled instruction, the prescribed lesson cycle and its delivery, and active monitoring of student learning were carried out with fidelity.

7.4 **Leveled Instruction**

According to Mrs. Taylor, one of the main features of the Balanced Literacy Framework is leveled instruction. She believed that the Balanced Literacy Framework and its various
components facilitated the work of teachers in preparing students to be good readers and writers. This work came through the Balanced Literacy expectations and included – the different strands that they had to teach, which included comprehension, determining importance, and making inferences. Using the Balanced Literacy Framework, these ideas needed to be taught to children at their levels, allowing for differentiated instruction to occur, as opposed to students being taught at the same level regardless of their specific needs. Mrs. Taylor liked the idea that she could use Balanced Literacy to teach a lesson in a whole group teaching structure and then break the students into smaller groups in which they worked with other students who were at the same level, so that the students could be taught using materials at their levels, which they could understand.

She also favored the idea that through using the Balanced Literacy Framework, a teacher could address a struggling reader’s particular needs, helping them to go from where they were at, to where they needed to be. She noted that one of the beauties of Balanced Literacy was the fact that whenever a student was struggling, a teacher could assess the student to determine why the student was not where they needed to be and using the materials, a teacher could address a student’s particular needs.

Mrs. Taylor did not believe students should be leveled based on categories such as ELL or economically disadvantaged. She felt that all students should be provided instruction only according to their needs. She believed that no matter what challenges students might have, it was the teacher’s job to get them to the instructional levels that they needed be functioning at. She shared her position on this as follows:

You know, ELL, economically disadvantaged students, GT students…you’re treating them all the same. You’re looking at them as individuals. You’re finding out where they are and if they’re not where they’re supposed to be, you’re going to find a way to get them there and it doesn’t matter if they’re ELL or economically disadvantaged, or what!
There’s that pat answer that …If you’re an administrator you probably would say, well yes of course we do, economically disadvantaged – we do whatever. I treat them like I’d do anybody else! That’s what really happened. The kids that had trouble were obviously the ELLs and the students that had learning disabilities – and not so much the economically disadvantaged really, no I don’t think that, hey, maybe I was economically disadvantaged (laughs)! But you know, that’s not gonna get in the way if you’ve got a good teacher in a classroom and I think that’s just the vey most important thing that you can do. And if they’re not up to par – that teacher – get her there

Mrs. Taylor made recommendations concerning how ELL’s should be situated within the classroom in order to ensure optimum learning situations for them. She strongly believed in having a mix of students in the classroom, consisting of students functioning at differing ability levels. She believed that it was important for students of varying abilities to work together. About ELL’s she said:

They’re gonna be paired up with people that might not be ELL please. You need to have that mix in your classroom so that everyone is able to listen to everybody else’s ideas and then that’s gonna help. Also, have them read together. Have one of your, oh, medium readers – pair ‘em up, let ‘em sit together and read for pleasure and even if you have like the Winn Dixie and there’s a chapter that –and you have a “K” and he just doesn’t understand, ‘cause he doesn’t understand, he doesn’t know how to read it, he doesn’t know how to you know, get that expression in his head, then you have him, the person here reads aloud and they talk about it.

Mrs. Taylor paired students up so that they could support one another in their learning. Pairing them up provided them with opportunities for them to talk to one another. She believed that classroom discussions were critical to student learning.

7.5 Classroom Discussions

Providing students with opportunities to talk to one another in the classroom was another key component that Mrs. Taylor believed was important to integrate into language arts instruction. She firmly believed that students needed to hear each other talk and that in the use of mandatory computer based programs, classroom conversations, such as those centered on the content of science and social studies, are going to go away.
She reflected upon the fact that early on in her teaching career, she came to realize the importance of classroom discussions. She described how she provided opportunities for students to verbally connect with one another. Looking back to when she was a Gifted and Talented teacher, she found that one of the most important aspects of teaching was allowing students to talk about themselves. Every morning she had “perception sessions” and allowed students to talk about their feelings, how they saw themselves, and how they thought other people saw them, and why they were thinking in such ways. She felt that these conversations were essential and that teachers needed to create opportunities for students to have such discussions in their classrooms. While students were having classroom discussions, as a teacher, Mrs. Taylor would listen to their conversations in order to assess their learning.

7.6 Active Monitoring of Student Learning

Another key feature of the instruction was to actively monitor student learning. In order to do this, Mrs. Taylor would make sure that students knew that she was paying attention to what they were learning by writing down what students were saying during their classroom discourses.

There would be that modeling, watching, seeing how the children were getting it. I would walk around to all the children and I would write down – Oh, you had to write so much! I had notebooks full of stuff, but you needed to do it so that they thought, ‘hmmm…it’s important what I’m saying. This is good. She’s writing it down.’ Then you know because it’s there in black and white – this is what I have to do. So, it’s just a lot of work, but it’s so worth it because they really did improve.

The classroom discourse was specifically structured and integrated within the Balanced Literacy Framework in such ways that students were not just talking for the sake of talking, but the teacher was using the information during the lesson to provide instruction at varying levels during small and whole group instruction. Teachers were expected to actively monitor their students during the course of the entire lesson cycle.
7.7 Lesson Cycle and Delivery

Mrs. Taylor described a typical lesson in a language arts classroom in which the Balanced Literacy Framework was being implemented. She provided details on the lesson cycle components and the typical features of the lesson as the teacher was delivering the instruction. Further, she detailed how teachers would go about their whole and small group instruction and she role played by using the specific language that teachers would use during the lesson delivery. She explained that a teacher would teach the lesson whole group, then with smaller groups, all the while monitoring students so that she can observe which students were not understanding the concept. Students who did not understand, would work with teacher, by working on specific issues by using letter cards, for example, to learn the sounds of letters, how to put them together, and the various words that could be made when using particular letters.

In teaching the Balanced Literacy components whole group, small group, and individually, teachers would begin by having the students to come to the carpet to give the lesson. They would begin by introducing students to what they were going to be learning about, such as determining importance, for example, which was a strategy to help students to help students to identify the most important, or main ideas in a text. Teachers would write the definition of this on the board so that students could see it visually and make reference to it, along with hearing it as the teacher talked about it. Mrs. Taylor believed that it was important for students to have visuals during instruction that were aligned to what the teacher was teaching.

After providing an auditory and visual definition of determining importance, the teacher would prepare students to listen to a story. She would ask them to listen to the story and while doing so, think about examples in the story that would be a good example of determining importance. After sharing the story with the students, the teacher would give the students time to
think about examples of determining importance as related to the story. After a minute or so, the
teacher would provide students with an opportunity to turn to their partner, or whoever was
sitting next to them- and would allow them to talk about their thinking with one another. As
students were talking, the teacher would walk around the room listening to the conversations.
She would find a student who seemed to have understood the concept and allowed the student to
come to the front of the room to share with the rest of the class. The teacher would ask the
student what they came up with and how they made this determination. This student and other
students who had grasped the concept would model the thinking for the other students.

After the discussion, she would ask students to go back to their seats, get their workbooks
out, read a certain chapter, and write down three examples of determining importance. The
teacher would continue to walk around, monitoring to observe whether or not students
understood the concept. If she observed that someone was not “getting it” she would sit beside
them and she would talk to them about this. As soon as she finished doing that, while students
were still working the teacher would call up her reading groups, which would be by level and by
letter in Balanced Literacy. All of the students who were on a specific letter, or level, would
work together in a group, along with the teacher as a guide. In this setting, the teacher would use
the small group structure as an opportunity to teach students even more about determining
importance, using a leveled book, or a different piece of material, such as a poem, that was at
their level and the teacher would ask them to demonstrate that they understood the concept.
While the whole group lesson was short, the teacher would spend most of her time working with
the small groups of students. In the small group settings, students were learning several different
things – comprehension, evaluating, along with determining importance, continuing to work with
students on the particular concepts that they were not grasping.
Using this example of the lesson cycle and delivery, Mrs. Taylor modeled the components of Balanced Literacy so that all teachers in the school were implementing the Balanced Literacy Framework in the same way. Because it was a district initiative she had the support of the principal in ensuring that teachers were effectively integrating the Balanced Literacy components in their classrooms.

7.8 Balanced Literacy Framework Fidelity

To be sure teachers were using the framework in their classrooms, the principal, Mr. I., was also familiar with its components. He desired for all teachers to become committed to its use and stated that “you have to become acquainted with the Balanced Literacy part and the components. That’s where it starts and it’s a commitment around the table.”

To ensure that teachers were implementing the use of Balanced Literacy correctly and effectively, Mrs. Taylor used checklists as she went in to observe teachers and she would look for the various components within the classroom. Mrs. Taylor utilized a checklist in order to monitor the instructional practices that were occurring in the classroom. Although the district had given them a checklist to use, they created their own which were better suited to their needs. The checklists were a tool that Mrs. Taylor and administrators used to remind teachers of the instructional practices, tools, and materials that were expected to be a regular part of their daily routines, particularly during reading instruction.
Table 7.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Inadequate</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Accomplished</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word Study</td>
<td>☐ N/A</td>
<td>☐ Notebook with evidence of use; Children grouped based on developmental stage; Evidence of word study on a daily basis</td>
<td>☐ Based on multiple sources of data; Echoes across the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Wall and Parking Lot Words</td>
<td>☐ N/A</td>
<td>☐ Correct number of sight words; 5 sight words</td>
<td>☐ Correct number of words written in large, bold black print with variety colored backgrounds and cut around shapes. 5 sight words based on student assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Poem and/or Shared Reading</td>
<td>☐ N/A</td>
<td>☐ Focus poem posted with evidence of use such as highlighted vocabulary, strategies, skills; evidence of following 5 day plan</td>
<td>☐ Evidence of use such as highlighted vocabulary, strategies and skills – following 5 day plan. Poem journal used consistently showing student comprehension; Same challenging text is used throughout the week Evidence of 5 day plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer’s Workshop</td>
<td>☐ N/A</td>
<td>☐ Use notebook/folder for seed ideas. Students not publishing on a regular basis. Conference notes on 1 concept to learn.</td>
<td>☐ Workshop structure is predictable and consistent. Use notebook/folder for seed ideas. Students publish regularly and work is displayed in room. Use of writing progress board (not K-2) Consistent use of conference notes/all children – conferences on 1 concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Charts</td>
<td>☐ Reader’s Workshop</td>
<td>☐ “Figuring out Words” “Fix Up Strategies” but not unit of study Anchor charts on display</td>
<td>“Figuring out Words” “Fix Up Strategies” and unit of study Anchor charts on display. Anchor charts not laminated but created with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Writer’s Workshop</td>
<td>☐ Anchor charts on display. Anchor charts not laminated but created with students</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>☐ N/A</td>
<td>☐ Data not organized individually and used regularly to meet individual needs</td>
<td>Data placed individually in DRA continuum and students assessed on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Writing samples</td>
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<td>Spelling inventory</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>DRA/EDL Assessment</td>
<td>• DRA/EDL Assessment</td>
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Comments:
The checklists that they made were developed by central office staff, but the reading coach adapted them to how they could best be used at SNME. They consisted of particular things that they expected to see in the teacher’s classrooms during reading instruction, including particular Balanced Literacy components, which pertained to the Balanced Literacy classroom environment. They contained rubrics to evaluate the implementation of the various components. The Balanced Literacy checklist for classroom environment was used to ensure that all classrooms were utilizing the specific components. This included word study, word wall and parking lot words, which were designed to improve students’ vocabulary development. Additionally, this included focused poem and/or shared reading, writer’s workshop, anchor charts, and data. Shared reading involved a teacher modeling, providing students with high levels of support, and attending to the use of print, while working closely with and engaging students in a story (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Reader’s and writer’s workshop involved the teacher conducting a short mini-lesson that was focused on a specific skill, providing students with time to work independently on the skill, and then allowing them time for share their thinking and journal entries with the teachers and other students. The anchor charts were used by the teacher and the students to record their ideas during the lessons. The data that was displayed included student work samples as well as assessment data.

An observer, such as Mrs. Taylor, would use the checklists to evaluate whether or not and the degree to which these components were in place based on the rubric scales of inadequate, adequate, or accomplished. An inadequate Balanced Literacy environment was one in which word study was not used on a regular basis, word walls contained few words, the response journal was not regularly used, a focus poem was not posted, few anchor charts were on display, and only sporadic assessment took place. An accomplished Balanced Literacy environment was
integrated across the curriculum and utilized multiple data sources, such as writing samples and spelling assessments. In addition, it incorporated sight words based on student assessment, provided opportunities for journal use on a daily basis. In using the checklists, observers assessed classrooms to ensure that the teachers incorporated the required Balanced Literacy components based on the ideal expectations of implementation. About the checklists, Mr. I shared his observations of how Mrs. Taylor utilized them:

She could see ‘is she teaching shared reading?’ No, okay, she didn’t teach it today. Is there a poem of the day? ‘Cause the teachers all had a poem of the day as part of Balanced Literacy. You’d look for it, okay there it is, okay yes. So, she would check ‘em off. She’d be in those classrooms once a week with those that were doing well. If you weren’t she’d be there more than once a week. You knew she was coming to see you. If you didn’t have what she wanted, she’d say ‘you’re lacking this, this, this and this and I’m going to be back in two days and I want to see them.’ So, you’d have ‘em up [laughs].

Being held accountable for their practices through evaluative tools such as the Balanced Literacy checklists, teachers at SNME were expected to carry out the district mandate to provide reading instruction within the Balanced Literacy Framework.

Mrs. Taylor shared the checklist with the teachers in order to help so that they would know what she was going to be looking for whenever she was going to go into their classrooms to conduct an observation. An area of frustration for her was the knowledge that although teachers may have been following through with the expectations concerning Balanced Literacy when she was in their classrooms, she had no control over what teachers did when she left their classrooms:

With the checklist, you’re going to share it with the teachers, right? I shared every single thing that came to me. Now, I wasn’t supposed to but if I’m going to be watching them to be sure that they’re doing this, then they need to know what this is. But the problem that you see with a checklist is that they are so on it while you’re there, but then when you walk out the door….And it’s like…[gasp]
By sharing the checklists and other resources that she had, Mrs. Taylor felt that she was creating an environment in which teachers could trust her. She wanted to be open with them about the checklist because she felt that they needed to know exactly what she was looking for when she went into their classrooms. She felt that if the teachers did not know what she was going to be looking for, then she would not see it happening in their classrooms. By deliberately sharing the checklists with them, the teachers knew what the expectations were and Mrs. Taylor was able to coach them in meeting these expectations.

Although she shared the checklists with the teachers and they knew what she expected to see whenever she visited their classrooms, she gasped as she shared her frustrations concerning the fact that she had no control over what teachers did once she left their classrooms. As a school administrator, I can relate to the feeling of frustration that Mrs. Taylor had in not being able to control what teachers do behind closed doors. While we work hard to influence their practice by peeking into classroom windows, and conducting walkthroughs and observations in classrooms each day, spending from a few minutes to an hour or so in any classroom, ultimately teachers have the power to control what actually happens in their classrooms. They make the decision to either teach or not teach, as well as determining what is taught and how. Systems are put in place to hold teachers accountable for teaching what administrators want them to and in the way that they want them to, but the teacher decides whether or not he or she will agree with and follow through with our expectations.

Despite having particular checklists and rubrics, not being able to control what teachers did once she left their classrooms and therefore, not being able to ensure program fidelity, was one of the challenges that Mrs. Taylor found with the use of Balanced Literacy. She also
described other drawbacks that she found which were concerned with the implementation of this program.

7.9 **Drawbacks of Balanced Literacy**

Mrs. Taylor believed that although there were benefits to employing the Balanced Literacy Framework, there were also drawbacks. She found that it was difficult to implement in her school. As we discussed Balanced Literacy, I shared with her the fact that my school district is beginning to implement the Balanced Literacy framework. In hearing this, she told me that I am going to have more fun than a barrel of monkeys in trying to get it started. Then, she shared some of her frustrations concerning the implementation of Balanced Literacy.

First, she felt that using the components correctly requires an enormous amount of work on the teacher’s part, which she found that teachers did not want to do. They had weekly training session and they would come up with what to do if a child was having certain kinds of problems. She told me that at my school, I would begin to see lots of problems in implementing Balanced Literacy, but shared that most of it comes from teachers’ inability to accept change. She found that in working with her teachers, the paradigm change was difficult for them and that they wanted to rely on their old methods of teaching. They constantly complained about Balanced Literacy.

I mean, what are you telling me this for? And you’re taking all my materials away and here I am with this silly little book. What am I supposed to do?’ So, yeah, it’s all a struggle! [laughs] It really is! There were days when I would leave and I felt like I was going like this (clenched teeth) all day long [laughs].

Being a school administrator, I am familiar with the challenges involved in the implementation of new district initiatives while experiencing resistance from the teachers. Teachers, especially those who have been in the profession for many years, seem to resist new initiatives because they may feel that they are already doing something that is better for the work
with students, or they may feel uneasy about implementing something new in the classroom while not knowing how their students may respond to it. I have found that some teachers become frustrated because each year, administrators get excited about implementing new initiatives, but after a while these initiatives lose support for different reasons such as lack of funding, or learning that it is just not what is best for the school and the students. Having worked as a teacher, I can understand how frustrating it can be to invest time and energy into learning a new initiative only to see it go away sometime in the future. Whatever the reason, as an administrator, I have learned to listen to teachers’ complaints about initiatives because this can provide valuable information about what is working for students and what is not.

Another drawback in endeavoring to implement the framework was the fact that because it was a district initiative, everyone was expected to implement the program. Although this was the expectation, Mrs. Taylor felt that she did not receive enough support from the district level lead reading coach, who was expected to provide support to the campus level reading coaches. She stated that she was never anybody’s favorite reading coach because she did things “her way”. She believes that the district level reading coach did not help her because being a new school, they were different and she felt that there was jealousy involved because of the new facilities that they had. Not having the needed support that she desired in order to implement the mandated Balanced Literacy Framework, Mrs. Taylor was left to find other practices to achieve student success.

7.10 Beyond Balanced Literacy

Although Mrs. Taylor believed that there were many instructional benefits to the use of the Balanced Literacy framework, she also noted that there are other practices that teachers can implement with success as long as they keep their student population in mind. She believes that
teachers need to branch out from just using the Balanced Literacy materials, because they are not enough. Being an experienced teacher, she found that there are so many things that teachers can do that don’t cost a thousand dollars for a program. These things simply require just using your head and thinking about the student population, then getting together with fellow teachers and talking about what can be done and sharing ideas. In planning, she believes that teachers need to think about the needs of the student population and considering what the students might need in order to achieve. Mrs. Taylor believed that meeting students’ needs was not always possible through the use of one particular program.

7.11 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I continued the discussion of instructional practices with a focus on those that occurred in the classroom, during instruction. These practices were categorized as endogenous tensions, which characterized the practices of teacher coaching, included leveled instruction, classroom discourse structures, active monitoring of student learning, and framework fidelity, as each of these issues pertained to the Balanced Literacy framework. These practices required social interactions between teachers, students, and school administrators, working together to ensure that the instructional practices were carried out using the desired approaches.

In the next chapter, I return to Clandinin & Connelly’s (2000) notions of temporality as we shift forward in exploring the idea that The Story Continues. Here, the former principal considers the school’s present levels of performance and looks toward the future.
Chapter 8: The Story Continues

8.1 Introduction

As Mr. I. and Mrs. Taylor reflected upon the moment in time when their school became a Blue Ribbon School, they did so with enthusiasm, fervor, and great pride. They smiled continuously and laughed often as they reminisced on what they believed to be one of the highlights of their careers. Now, Mr. I. and Mrs. Taylor look forward as they consider the present state and future possibilities for their beloved SNME. There were immediate, noticeable changes in their demeanors as they shifted from pride and enthusiasm to concern and dismay as they considered the present state of the school. Although they are both retired, they are still connected to the staff members and visit or volunteer at the school from time to time. Though they are no longer responsible for what happens at the school, they expressed that they still care about the staff and students. Looking forward, they will continue to monitor the school’s annual performance, hoping for improvements, although they will not be directly involved in the processes of change. Mr. I. and Mrs. Taylor look outward as they considered the circumstances that are presently impacting the school.

8.2 Where Are They Now?

Mr. I. shared that he is very worried about SNME whose PED rating for the 2012-2013 school year, was a “D”. The year before, which was the 2011-2012 school year, the school was rated a “C. Prior to that, during the 2010-2011 school year, the school earned a “B” rated. The school became a Blue Ribbon School during the 2009-2010 school year and the school’s performance has steadily declined since then.

The letter grade ratings are based on the current A-F grading system. It rates schools on their overall growth, the growth of their highest and lowest performing students, and
opportunities that they provide students to learn (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2012). To measure conditional status, the state uses the New Mexico Standards Based Assessment (NMSBA) and evaluates overall student performance on the assessment to determine how well or poorly students in the school performed during the school year. To assess a school’s growth, the state looks at how well a school performed over the last three years in increasing grade level performance (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2012). For example, a school would look at a grade level such as 3rd grade and compare scores over the past three years in order to determine whether or not the grade level is making gains from year to year.

In measuring the growth of the highest performing students, the state is concerned with ensuring that students within top 75 per cent, based on the NMSBA, continue to make gains. This aspect of the model looks beyond whether or not students passed, but also wants to ensure that students who pass continue to increase their levels of performance. The state is also concerned that the lowest performing students, the remaining 25 percent, continue to improve, even if they do not pass. In providing the opportunities for students to learn, schools are expected to create an environment for learning within their schools. Student attendance rates and surveys are used to make this determination (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2012). With a current overall rating of “D”, the lowest in years, Mr. I. searched for answers as he tried to pinpoint what has happened to the school’s performance, since his retirement at the end of the 2009-2010 school year. He tried to makes sense of what has gone wrong.

8.3 What Went Wrong?

Mr. I. believes that overcrowding of the school is to blame as he believes that the space accommodations at the school are negatively impacting student performance and may also be
affecting the teaching quality. He stated that the current class loads are between 30 and 35 students and feels that teachers cannot teach students as well under these circumstances as they could in the same classroom with 18-20 students. Looking back to the time when he was at the school, when they were a high achieving school, he shared that at that time the teachers had a maximum class size of 22 students, and were able to perform well because of this.

He feels that the geography of the area, and the fact that there are multiple new housing developments is contributing to the overcrowding since the students from the newly built homes will attend SNME, since a new school has not been built. He discussed the idea that if 20 families move into the area, this could mean approximately 60 new students added to the school. The county in which SNME exists continues to grow. To recapitulate, in 1990, there were 135,510 people and there were 49,148 homes. This increased significantly by 2000 when the population grew to 174,682 people that reported living in the area, residing in the 65,210 homes. Currently, the population consists of approximately 213,460 residents in living in 82,920 homes (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Many of the new homes that have been built in the county, are near SNME.

Mr. I. feels that teachers can only “do so much” with the increasing student population. While he believes that the larger class sizes can negatively impact student outcomes, he also does not believe that having smaller class size can guarantee student success. Instead, he believes that one of the most important determining factors to student success is to have a teacher that embodies the compassion and the chemistry that is needed to work with their students. Still, believes that if a classroom is over crowded with 35 or even 50 students, some students might be successful, but for the most part “they’re not gonna be successful.”
When Mr. I. was the principal, the school was beginning to become overcrowded. He handled this situation by calling the fire marshal to pay visit to the school.

I got the fire marshal to come by and look at my school. I said, ‘look how overcrowded I am, do you see this? It’s a hazard...’ (laughs). I had to do something, so I convinced him and he agreed that the school was overcrowded. “Look”, I said, “in the plans it says 550 kids and we’ve got 600 already. He said, ‘you’re right, it's a safety hazard. So, he said ‘Okay’ and he wrote a letter to the superintendent...

Working with the fire department was a temporary remedy as the fire department’s marshal, could only do so much to help with the overcrowding situation, especially since it was impossible to tell people who were moving to the area that their children could not attend the school. If the fire marshal could have said “no more new students at all,” Mr. I. believes that this statement would have taken care of the issue, but this would have required additional school board sanctions, which were not invoked.

He shared that a new developer is coming to the area and will be building hundreds of new homes. He believes that something needs to be done about the overcrowding situation, such as building another new school. He is concerned though that since there is not a lot of money available, if a new school is built, the district might improperly project the area’s growth, or build it based on the low financial resources available and could fail to build the school large enough to accommodate the structural and resource needs of the growing number of students in this rapidly expanding community.

Mr. I. explained that when SNME started to grow, the district began adding portable buildings, which was only a band aid. The six portable structures provided temporary relief for the larger problem of overcrowding. He fears that this could happen if the district builds a new school and does not build it large enough. Additionally, they must consider the possibilities for expansion based on increases in the student population.
Despite the overwhelming growth in the student population, the staff members continue to forge on, working to continue the instructional practices that were established when Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor were their leaders.

8.4 The Practices Continue

Though retired, Mr. I continues to be in contact with the staff members at SNME. He talks to some of them on the phone from time to time and he still visits the school often. They have shared with him that they are continuing the practices that were in place when he and Mrs. Taylor were there. This of course, could only be proven through further inquiry, involving interviewing additional staff members and conducting observations to determine whether the practices are still being utilized and to what degree. However, based on what he has been told by staff members that he remains in contact with, the staff continues to implement Balanced Literacy, block meetings, and the use of data walls. He believes that the teachers continue to have the same passion, but are frustrated because they have so many students. Teachers have voiced their concerns to him as their former principal and have shared that they do not know what to do. They have so many students and they do not know how to deal with this problem. Although they continue with many of the same practices as before, the perception is that seemingly, it is no longer the same school.

8.5 It’s Not the Same School

Mrs. Taylor attributes other possible explanations for the decline in the school’s ratings. She stated that leadership is an important factor in school success and that it takes someone with the right leadership skills and whose heart is in it, to make success happen for a school. Additionally, the school never hired anyone to replace her when she retired. Currently, the person who was previously the math leader is juggling her own responsibilities while trying to
incorporate the duties that Mrs. Taylor had. Because this person is trying to do so much, it is difficult, even impossible for her to carry out all of the responsibilities to the degree to which the two of them did.

Because so much has changed, Mrs. Taylor’s perception is that overall, it is not the same school. She believes that so much of what happens in schools depends upon the faculty and believes that the staff quality has gone down.

It’s just gone down, really gone down. I mean I don’t know where they find some of these people. It’s like, my God, they must’ve taken that person off of the cotton farm! Because they might know cotton, but they don’t know education.

In summary, Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor shared their perceptions as to the reasons for the school’s demise:

1. Overcrowding – High teacher-student ratios
2. Staff Quality: Lack of quality leadership
3. Lack of Human Resources: reading coach needed
4. Staff Quality: Lack of quality teachers

Although Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor perceived these as being some of the reasons for the school’s demise, I wonder whether and how the degree to which knowledge and power were concentrated and shared between Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor may have impacted the school once they left. Were the teachers prepared to continue the practices? Were they equipped to continue leading the school in order to sustain their success? If so, was this impacted in any way by the arrival of the new administration?

I also question whether or not teachers bought in to the practices that Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor found to be important in teacher and ultimately student success. If teachers were carrying out certain practices that they did not truly believe in, then it stands to reason that they
discontinued the practices once Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor left. If they did believe in the practices, it is possible that there may have been changes to the practices over time and with changes in administration and perhaps changes in teachers as new teachers are hired as others quit or retire, each year. Further research would be needed in order to explore the teachers’ attitudes toward the practices that were being implemented. Although so much has changed since 2010 and there are questions regarding what led to the school’s demise, some things have remained the same. Despite the challenges that the school has faced in recent years, they continue to display the flag, boasting the fact that they were once named a Blue Ribbon School.

8.6 The Banner Yet Waves

Although SNME has experienced highs and lows with regard to their test scores, it will always be considered a 2010 National Blue Ribbon School:

A school's National Blue Ribbon School status does not expire. Once a school receives the award, it remains a National Blue Ribbon School. However, school representatives must always use the year of the award when identifying their school as a National Blue Ribbon School (United States Department of Education, 2014).

Despite the fact that the school has faced multiple challenges which have negatively impacted their PED rating, the flag, the plaque, the pictures, all of the proof remains at the school as a testament to what once was. Mr. I. believes that the Blue Ribbon will remain a part of their school’s history, no matter what.

Our flag is still there and they can’t take that away. We have a big plaque that we received as well. In fact, we have it by the door as you walk in. They’re not gonna say, ‘take it down ‘cause you’re a D school, or B school or a C school…’ They can’t take it away. No one can take this honor away from these teachers, or the students, or this community. No one…it is a gift that they gave us that nobody can take away and we earned that – and again I’m bragging. But it was hard work and the teachers really worked hard. They really did.

Although Mr. I is retired, he still takes ownership of the school in his own mind and affectionately calls it “our school”. Despite the school’s present levels of performance, he wants
people to remember it as being a Blue Ribbon School. He still wants people to see at as high-performing school, but the current scores do not reflect that. Although it would have been ideal for SNME to garner its Blue Ribbon status and to maintain high test scores and ratings for years to come, this is not Hollywood. The ideal is not always what happens in reality.

8.7 No Hollywood Plot Here

As we consider the current story, we return to the work of Clandinin & Connelly (2000) who warn narrative inquirers against the “Hollywood plot” in which everything works out well for the characters in the end of the story. I have found the work of schools to be dynamic, cyclical, and unpredictable. In the story of SNME, it seems that the highs and lows that the school has experienced, are directly connected to student test scores. When students performed well, the school achieved Blue Ribbon status and all of the attention, respect, notoriety, and tangible awards that went along with being ascribed such status. Now that the scores have changed, there are questions as the school’s New Mexico Public Education Department (PED), rating continues to decline. Seeing that this story did not have a happy ending, I search for answers in order to determine what happened to this school that was once regarded as a highly successful school, Blue Ribbon School and now appears to be struggling.

8.8 So…What Really Happened?

Additional research is needed in order to gain more information and answer questions concerning the factors which may have contributed to the steadily decline in SNME’s test scores. Is staff quality really the issue? Looking back, I recall that Mrs. Taylor was very instrumental in aiding in the hiring process and helped Mr. I to select the teachers that would be a part of SNME. In her opinion, since she and Mr. I retired, those in authority have not hired quality teachers.
Recall the following statement concerning the teachers that were hired since their departure. Mrs. Taylor commented:

I don’t know where they find some of these people. It’s like, my God, they must’ve taken that person off of the cotton farm! Because they might know cotton, but they don’t know education!

The teachers who were recently hired do not have her coaching them and peering into their classrooms to check on them periodically to ensure that they carry out the Balanced Literacy Framework with fidelity. For these reasons, they may not be teaching according to what is required on the classroom checklist (see Table 7.1).

Is leadership really the problem? Remember, leadership is everything; everyone talks about it, yet few understand this intriguing subject (Maxwell, 2005). Leadership is vital to the effectiveness of schools and any other institution or endeavor (Marzano, 2005). The preponderance of leadership in any school, impacts the academic achievement of students (Marzano, 2005). Since Mr. I left four years ago, the school has had two principals. It is unknown whether or not and the degree to which they subscribed to the same practices that were being carried out when Mr. I was the principal.

Is overcrowding the main issue? It is unknown whether Mr. I is accurate in his assertion that the high student population has resulted in the challenges. It is unknown whether the hiring practices have changed and whether Mrs. Taylor is accurate in her observation that the staff quality has declined. There are many unknowns, but as I consider possible explanations for the school’s demise, looking backward, I am reminded of my conversation with Mr. I in which he shared his belief that the reason for the school’s success was having the reading coach and the math coach. Recall the following statement:

But you really want to know how we became a Blue Ribbon school? My coaches. I had two coaches – my math coach and my reading coach. Mrs. Taylor was what they call a
coach – a reading coach and they’re there full time and they help teachers out and they help with planning, they come up with the programs, they do the in-services, they do the professional development – they do all of that- and keep the teachers motivated and going.

The words expressed here demonstrate Mr. I’s strong belief in the power of the coaches in leading the school to success. From his perspective, they had the ability to develop school programs, provide professional development and keep teachers motivated.

I initially approached this inquiry with the assumption that collective efficacy aided in the theoretical explanation of how SNME achieved Blue Ribbon status. I presented the idea that student achievement is systematically associated with teachers’ collective efficacy, which is teachers’ perceptions that their collective efforts will positively impact their students (Goddard et al., 2000, 2001). I believed that collective efficacy among teachers, which is positively associated with student achievement, explained the differential effect that schools have on student achievement and had the potential to contribute to the understanding of how schools differ in attaining success in educating students (Goddard et al., 2000, 2001). While it is possible that collective efficacy played a role in the school’s success. The data did not present overwhelming evidence of this.

Although Mr. I credited the teachers, for their hard work, he specifically underscored the role of Mrs. Taylor when he said, “They were led by Mrs. Taylor and again, I have to give her all the accolades because she was my spark plug.” In returning to my previous metaphorical reference to the idea that in cars, spark plugs ignite the fire that causes the engine to start and that although spark plugs are small they are critical because cars cannot run without them, causes me to consider that perhaps SNME could have not been able to function without Mrs. Taylor. She, too, recognized the importance of her presence in ensuring that certain ideas were carried out I am reminded of the frustration that she expressed concerning the reality that she had no control
over what teachers did once she left their classrooms. To recapitulate, upon sharing how she used the checklist to ensure that teachers were carrying out specific practices, she shared that:

    But the problem that you see with a checklist is that they are so on it while you’re there, but then when you walk out the door….And it’s like…[gasp]

This statement leads me to believe that Mrs. Taylor had doubts concerning the practices that teachers engaged in when she walked out of their classrooms. Therefore, when she left the building entirely upon retiring, she was absolutely powerless concerning the actions of the teachers. When she left, the school’s scores began to steadily decline. This issue causes me to consider the power that Mrs. Taylor had over the actions of the teachers at SNME.

8.9 Sociocultural Theory, Power, and Structure

    Sociocultural theory can be used to shed light on how leadership improves the quality of instruction and ultimately student learning for a diverse population (Knapp, 2008). Its use can aid in the examinations of interactions among individuals situated in social and cultural institutions (Herrenkohl, 2008). As sociocultural constructions, schools position individuals to make decisions and to maintain the roles of individuals as being in positions of power in order to perpetuate the societal structure and organization upon which we have come to rely. In my own day to day work at school, this is not something that I think about – that I am positioned as an administrator and I make decisions regarding the lives of students and teachers because they allow me to. At the same time, this role provides me with power, authority, and the respect of my constituents. At the same time, I and other school administrators are public servants of the federal government, positioned to carry out its desires and to educate students in ways that the government sees fit. When we succeed at this, we are rewarded, when we fail we are sanctioned.

    In general, educational practice, inclusive of teaching, learning, school organization, and curriculum belongs to wider social economic processes, which results in power and knowledge
distribution and stratification, reflecting economic differences (Wexler, 2009). This idea of sociocultural theory as it relates to education can be used as a way of explaining power structures and of knowing social life in everyday situations through the use of analysis techniques and well-defined concepts (Harrington, 2005). It helps us to understand social processes, such as those involved within the work of schooling. In order for the work of schools to be carried out, school structures are put into place as well as role stratification, which position some as leaders and others as followers. In the case of SNME, Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor were placed as leaders within the school and were given the power to determine the ways in which day to day responsibilities and interactions among the teachers and students, as followers, would be carried out. Foucault (1982) questions the complexities within power relations, stating that power only exists when it is put into action and is a way in which certain actions, within a social nexus, structure and make other actions possible. The power that was given to Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor was used to control the actions of the teachers and to ensure that they did what they were being paid to do: to engage in activities that would result in student learning as demonstrated on test scores.

But is power a bad thing? In this case, it seems that Mrs. Taylor used the power that she had to influence teachers toward positive outcomes for students. She used her power to create learning structures, such as those within the Balanced Literacy Framework, which appeared to have been critical to student learning. Bruner (1977) discusses structure as being one of the most critical components of teaching and learning. Students need to be provided with structure in order to make relationships between past, present, and future learning. Mastery of content knowledge is dependent upon mastery of structure, which results in the transfer of knowledge and principles (Bruner, 1977). Bruner (1977) discusses that providing the structure necessary in supporting students’ understanding of fundamental principles is critical to making content
comprehensible, which in turn results in knowledge transfer. Structures provide educators with an established direction for learning, which helps students in being successful (Marzano, et al., 2001). These are springboards for any content area from which knowledge can be built. They can be considered as the basic elements that students need to be able to understand any other content. All of these together are important to the notions of teaching and learning because without such structures being in place, teachers will experience difficulty in being able to provide learners with the basic components from which knowledge builds.

Mrs. Taylor recognized the importance of structure in classrooms, more specifically, in student learning and she used her power to ensure that these structures were in effect within the classrooms. According to the data, she did not use the power that she had for her own benefit, but all was used to benefit the students, with positive intentions. Whenever she was given accolades for her achievements such as becoming a state level Teacher of the Year or when the school became a Blue Ribbon School, Mrs. Taylor did not take the credit. Instead, she credited the students. She said:

And the credit always – the credit always went to the kids and when I got it, I went back to the kids and I said, ‘it’s your fault. It’s your fault. You made me look good.’ [laughs]. ‘Cause they did.

When Mrs. Taylor retired, she was not replaced by another reading coach. During the time that SNME won, it seems that school and ultimately the students, benefitted from having her there – at the right time and place.

Looking back, this causes me to reconsider the idea of the particularity of this experience with regard to people, place, and temporality. It seems that at the time that SNME obtained the Blue Ribbon, the right people, such as Mrs. Taylor and Mr. I, were in the right place at the right time. They enacted what seemed to them to be the right practices - focusing on high test scores,
along with fidelity to the Balanced Literacy Framework, to the degree that such practices yielded positive outcomes for their students, and ultimately their school.

In considering the experience of SNME and its current status despite its early success, what are the implications for practice as we continue the work of educating students while continually facing the roller coaster ride which is so characteristic of the unpredictable outcomes?

8.10 From Experience to Implications for Practice

As I consider the highs and lows of SNME, I am reminded again of one of my own stories of experience in being a school leader in this era of accountability. In Texas, at one time, schools were designated as “exemplary”, “recognized”, “acceptable”, or “unacceptable”, based on test scores and the percentage of students who passed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills or TAKS test. The goal of schools was to achieve exemplary or recognized status, meaning that the majority of students passed. What it meant to achieve exemplary or recognized status fluctuated from year to year and was based on a fluctuating criterion.

In 2007, we achieved recognized status. We celebrated the entire year and felt really confident about where we were headed as a school. In 2008, we hired a new fifth grade teacher who demonstrated a stellar science lesson during her interview, so we were confident that she would be able to help us boost our test scores, helping us to maintain or to exceed or “recognized” status. In January of that school year, she found a higher paying position in another district, at a school that was located closer to her home. We toiled over the decision to let her out of her contract for two reasons: we believed that if we forced her to stay, binding her to contract, she could become disgruntled and could ultimately take out her frustrations on the students, or the rest of the staff, which would have negatively impacted morale. We also knew that in letting
her leave, it would be difficult to find a fifth grade teacher in the middle of the year, but we hoped that she had been with her students long enough that her departure would not make a difference. In this dilemma, we felt that either decision would have negatively impacted the students, but we did not know the degree to which they would be affected.

Ultimately, we decided to let her out of her contract. About one month after her departure, the students took their math, reading, and science assessments. When we received their test scores, ours were the lowest scores in the district, as only about 40 percent of the students in this class passed the test. This brought down the cumulative scores of the entire grade level. We received multiple phone calls from central office asking us what had happened. When we questioned the students, they expressed their anger and resentment concerning the fact that their teacher had left them. Because the Student Success Initiative in the state of Texas allows fifth grade students three opportunities to retake their assessments in math and reading in order to avoid retention, we implemented intense interventions with the students, to try to help them to improve their performance when they were assessed for the second time. These interventions included direct instruction in small groups based on the specific areas of low performance. We also provided them lots of love, attention, and encouragement through pep talks. When the students were assessed again, the second time around, their scores were significantly higher, with approximately 80 percent of students passing the second time around. Because the students did not receive additional opportunities to take the science test, there was no recourse for the results of this assessment. Therefore, we were stuck with having the lowest science scores in the district.

That year, every other elementary campus in the district achieved “recognized” status, except for ours. Going to the annual district convocation where all of the other schools were being celebrated for their success was a humiliating, embarrassing experience for our school.
People repeatedly asked, “what happened to you guys?” We became known as the district “hiccup” that year. We spent the rest of the school year dealing with the staff’s low morale that resulted from this experience.

The staff joined together and worked hard in the year that followed and we were able to rise from the ashes. That year, our school was one of only two elementary schools in the district to achieve recognized status. I tell this story to express the dynamics of educating students and the challenge that school teams face in achieving and sustaining success. Sometimes, I feel like I am blindfolded, hitting a piñata as I try to hit the target, to find the best ways to support students, many of whom are struggling learners whose cognitive, social, and emotional needs are multifaceted and complex. Through trial and error, we learn from our experiences.

8.11 Learning from Experience

The experience of having the teacher leave her class in the middle of the school year taught me three things. First, I realized how much impact that teachers have on their students’ performance. I learned that the student-teacher bond, or lack of a student-teacher bond can impact student outcomes as this relationship matters. Secondly, I realized the far-reaching implications of decision-making on the part of leaders. Sometimes a decision that might seem so simple, such as letting a teacher go and hiring one to replace him or her, can have repercussions that negatively affect the entire school and can never be reversed. Finally, I learned that leaders must make their decisions based on the needs of the students, rather than the needs of the adults. While the teachers and the rest of the staff are critical components of a school’s success, the needs of the students must come before their personal desires.

Despite the fact that our school improved the following year and we learned a great deal from this experience, every year, just as in the case of SNME, we are challenged to stay at the
top of our game. It seems that every year, the game gets a little harder as the stakes become higher. Despite the many challenges that schools face with regard to budget cuts and overcrowded classrooms, student achievement at high levels continues to be the expectation. The constant struggle involving the annual production of high student test scores despite the many factors that can impact the results is what originally led me to the research puzzle, as I was hoping to find a formula for success. I learned that schools experience highs and lows and changes from year to year. For this reason, although a school may be considered to be a successful school, even a National Blue Ribbon School, this may not necessarily be the case forever after.

8.12 No Happily Ever After

I set out to discover the secret to success. I experienced the boundaries of this research as part of me desired to provide a practical “how to guide” for educators that want to get results. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of Marzano (2003) and find out “what worked” in this school. I wanted to provide conclusions and implications for further research. I wanted to share the story of a school that had figured out the formula to yielding repeatedly high results. I thought that I had found a school whose story would have a “happily ever after” ending, in which the staff and students would load a school bus and ride off into the sunset as they continued to experience continued success.

The reality is that the story of SNME bears implications for the rest of us in the work of schools. As leaders, it is imperative that we set up systems within our schools in order to prepare teachers and students for life after our departures. It is important that other members within the school staff are trained to take on leadership roles in order to support a school in sustaining
success long after the leader departs. When a school is able to sustain success years after the departure of the leadership, this is a true sign of legacy.

As mentioned previously, at the onset of this inquiry, I began to experience dissonance as I began to realize that the school that I was interested in studying because of its success, was beginning to struggle. I struggled with the idea of whether to approach this inquiry by only sharing the practices which led to the school’s success, or to share the practices along with the story of the school’s ups and downs. I initially engaged in the inquiry with a vision to simply learn about instructional practices, but what I have learned will both now and in the future, inform my own professional practice as I work to become increasingly deliberate in leading teachers to become expert practitioners.

8.13 From Practices to Deliberate Practice

As I return to the literature on successful schools and the qualities that they endow, I realize that according to the data, during its successful years, SNME seemingly endowed such qualities. These include strong leadership, positive school climate, student-centered focus, a focus on instruction, an unrelenting commitment to excellence, extraordinary committal of resources, a focus on data, high quality curriculum and instruction, high impact professional development for staff, rigor, relevance, and relationships (Carbaugh, 2008; Taylor, 2000; Hughes, 2010; Landry, 2012; Lauritson, 2012; Marzano, 2003; Safie, 2012; Williams, 2011). I pause to consider how they achieved these qualities and I question the barriers which may have existed which impeded the school’s ability to continue experiencing the same levels of success.

An insight for me was the realization that it seems that success for SNME lay both in what they did and how they did it. It seems that the Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor were very deliberate concerning what they wanted teachers to do and how they wanted them to go about carrying out
these ideas. Essentially, they engaged in deliberate practice (Erickson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Marzano, 2010). Some (Campitelli & Gobet, 2011; Meinz & Hambrick, 2010) argue that deliberate practice is necessary, but not sufficient, arguing that other factors play a role in the levels of success that individuals experience. In reality, individuals can acquire distinguishing characteristics of being expert performers through deliberate practice, or the use of relevant practice activities aimed at high levels of performance (Erickson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). Collins (2001) suggests that unlike good organizations, great organizations carry out breakthrough strategies and concepts with fanatical consistency. Although Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor never specifically stated that they were working to engage in this idea, evidence of deliberate practice lies in the fact that they set goals for their students and in order to achieve these goals, they developed a common language of effective instruction, focused on specific strategies, tracked teacher progress, and provided opportunities for teachers to observe and to discuss expertise (Marzano, 2010).

A perfect example of this was the way that they implemented the Balanced Literacy Framework. Simply put, they agreed upon criteria for evaluating teachers’ effectiveness in carrying out the various components of the framework. Focusing on instructional strategies, Mrs. Taylor coached the teachers and ensured that they knew how to carry these out by tracking their progress, allowing them to observe her and other expert teachers, and by having discussions that were centered on what expertise in Balanced Literacy implementation looked like in a classroom. While there were many practices that were no doubt utilized in the school on a day to day basis in other content areas, such as math, science, and social studies, Balanced Literacy was one area in which Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor were deliberate in their expectations and approach to implementation. Although implementation of the framework was a district initiative, all schools
in the district did not experience the same level of success as did SNME, so many visited this school to learn how they were carrying it out. While it cannot be proven, there may have been differences in the other schools’ methods of implementation and levels of deliberate practice. While I recognize this possibility, I also acknowledge that other factors that cannot be identified may have also played a role in the level of success that SNME experienced.

A major area that lacked in deliberate practice was in the area of planning for the future. It seems that the staff, particularly Mr. I, may not have been intentional about ensuring that individuals were in place and trained to take the lead once he and Mrs. Taylor retired. After he left, a new principal took over and no matter what practices were in place, it would have been up to the new principal to make the decisions to maintain what was in place or to initiate new practices. For this reason, I am not sure that Mr. I had very much control over what happened after he left. The teachers shared with him that they are trying to maintain the practices, but without having all of the same people in place, having the same ideas and vision, I would imagine that certain ideas would be difficult, if not impossible to maintain.

After seven years of being at one school, I have recently transferred to another school. The school was considered to be high-performing while I was there and I can only hope that it continues to do well long after my departure. While I was there, I endeavored to create a climate of success. I hope that the work that I did while I was there in terms of leading teachers to guide students toward high academic levels will continue. While it is up to the current leadership to continue what I have started, I hope that I have left a legacy of success and that I have awakened the appetite of high academic achievement. I will take what I have learned through this inquiry as I now look forward and consider how I will leave a legacy for success in the school in which I currently work.
My observation of the possibility that deliberate practice may have played a role in the success of SNME, particularly in the area of reading instruction, leads me to consider how deliberate practice can make a difference in my own school, as well as other schools. This idea inspires me to have discussions with teachers that I work with in order to establish and agree upon criteria for what expert teaching looks like. I will be more intentional about providing teachers the opportunity to coach and to observe other teachers to support them in becoming expert practitioners. While I already do this to some degree, I am encouraged to become more intentional because of the possible implications for improved teaching and learning experiences. Similarly, I believe that there are great practices in which other schools and other educators engage in that might carry great potential for student success if only educators would become more deliberate, more intentional about how they implement them. I believe that educators should be willing to experiment with practices that are believed to have been used successfully in other schools.

Although I believe that deliberate practice is important, I caution against what Merton (1936) recognized as a common fallacy in making the assumption that actions that have led to desired outcomes in the past will continue to do so. He called this action an unexpected consequence of conduct in which habits become automatic and undeliberative because of continuously repeated actions (Merton, 1936). In the case of SNME, it is possible that the staff members believed that they had found what worked and perhaps failed to continuously adapt practices based on the needs of the changing and rapidly growing community. Only further research could reveal what led to the steady decline in test scores.

In changing social environments, it is critical that educators remain cognizant of the fact that certain practices that may have worked in the past, may not work in certain circumstances.
(Merton, 1936). So, this means that because a certain practice yields great results one year as we work with students, it may need to be altered the following year and adapt the different needs of a new group of students. It could also mean that perhaps an entirely new practice needs to be used. Teachers need to remain aware of what works with different types and groups of students.

Once they determine the best practices to meet the needs of their students, they should be deliberate in enacting them while consistently remaining aware of school dynamics and the reality that our practices should evolve and change in the same way that society, and therefore our students, evolve and change. We should engage in active research and support policies that allow us to learn about such practices so that we may implement them while remaining aware of ever-changing needs of our students. We must continue to remain aware of how to use and adapt practices to meet the needs of our students, particularly those that may be making a difference for students who are considered to be in “at-risk” situations.

Whether the staff is continuing the practices that were previously in place or not, it is also unknown the degree to which the change in federal policies may have impacted SNME’s academic performance. Since becoming a National Blue Ribbon School, the state changed its accountability system. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, because the previous system was too limited, lacked variability, and made meeting AYP goals unreachable for many of its schools, in 2012, the New Mexico Public Education Department developed an A-F accountability structure. The new system replaced the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) model that was structured under NCLB. The state’s new grading system was designed to make understanding schools’ performance easier by incorporating a Value Added Model (VAM) in order to help schools to identify weak areas so that they may improve (NMPED, 2012).
In addition to implementing the new accountability model, in 2010, the State of New Mexico adopted the use of new standard known as New Mexico Common Core State Standards, for English Language Arts and mathematics. These were implemented in order to better prepare New Mexico students in being college ready and able to compete globally in national and international job markets (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2014). As I think about these two new initiatives, I am not sure as to whether and how these have played a role in SNME’s steadily declining performance. Further research into the ways in which the new Common Core Standards are impacting school performance as well as teacher and student attitudes towards the new standards is further research that I desire to engage in. This research is important as we considered past and present policies and their impact on student learning.

8.14 From Practices to Policies

As I return to the research puzzle, I look introspectively as I consider the power of this inquiry now extending from simply learning about instructional practices to informing policy. Inquiry must endow personal and social significance (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Although this inquiry was limited to the discussion of one school and two particular individuals who worked within the school, the implications are broad as other teachers and principals may relate to the challenges that these individuals faced as they worked to meet (and ultimately exceeded) the expectations set by the federal accountability system of the United States Department of Education.

Looking forward, state and federal accountability expectations, though dynamic, continue to play an important role in the public school system and will continue to set the bar for student achievement at high levels. In order for educators to continue to meet these expectations, it is critical that policy makers support research that is centered upon learning more about
instructional practices, particularly those that have yielded successful outcomes for students who are categorized as being in “at-risk” situations. Although schools differ with regard to location, student population demographics, and other factors, it is possible that schools might notice improvements if they implement practices that have been used with success within other schools.

I believe that educators should continue the work of learning best practices from schools such as National Blue Ribbon Schools, in order to discover and implement the use of instructional practices which may make a difference for their students. For this reason, I encourage scholars, researcher, practitioners, and policymakers to support research to uncover best practices that are used within successful schools that seem to be making a difference for diverse populations of student, those living on the United States – Mexico border, in particular. In recent years, the United States Department of Education National Blue Ribbon School Program began collecting data on the number of Title I National Blue Ribbon Schools. I would recommend that the program make it their policy to begin to conduct research concerning the practices that are used within these schools. Making it their policy to conduct research concerning practices used in Title I schools would allow for a much larger collection of information from a variety of schools in different locales. Schools could implement this learning to determine whether and how such practices could make a difference in their own schools.

I initially set out to uncover instructional methods, strategies, and practices that were used successfully in schools that were like those that I have worked in, having high numbers of ELL’s and economically disadvantaged students were able to achieve success despite their challenges. My hope was that this learning would lead to a better understanding of whether or how the use of particular instructional can make a positive difference in student performance. I have learned that this work continues as I must remain committed to learning about and being
open to the use of various practices, but realizing that although certain practices may work for a while, as educators we must remain in a state of constant change, continuously evaluating ourselves and utilizing what is relevant to our students as they grow and change as individuals and as our populations change demographically. Educators must act and reflect upon our practices and actions in reflexive ways that transform ideas and future action.

8.15 From Reflection to Reflexivity

The experience of learning from the participants and the prospect of implementing what I have learned from them and allowing it to inform my practice causes me to once again, look backward as I prepare to move forward. I am reminded of my first doctoral course called *Praxis and Reflexivity*, which I took several years ago. After engaging in this inquiry, reflecting on this course yields additional meaning for me. True reflection can lead to the transformation of social life or reflexivity (Carr & Kemmis, 2002). Throughout this inquiry, I have engaged in processes of reflection as I made connections to this work and how it relates to the parade of I’s - parent, scholar, teacher, and administrator) that approached this work. Again, as a parent residing in New Mexico, I became concerned about the publicized, negative press, which discussed the alarming statistics of the state’s low-performing K-12 schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2011; 2012). As a doctoral student, my quest for scholarly pursuits catalyzed my interest in engaging in this inquiry, in hopes to address the gaps in the literature concerning New Mexico schools and National Blue Ribbon Schools. Because of my history as a teacher, I wanted to hear the success stories of other teachers. My hope was that learning from them, would help me to be the best educator I could be. As a school administrator, an instructional leader, I wanted to inquire in order to learn about whether and how the use of particular instructional practices may have contributed to successful
student outcomes in order to find ways to support the teachers that I lead and to help the students that we serve. Now, I move from reflection to reflexivity as I consider the social significance of this work.

Social life, and for that matter, school life, is reflexive and has the capacity to change as our knowledge and thinking changes, which can reconstruct social life (Carr & Kemmis, 2002). The social significance of this work yielded the learning of some of the practices that were implemented in the school such as shared leadership, parental and community involvement, accountability structures, leveled instruction, classroom discourse, active monitoring of student learning, within the Balanced Literacy framework, which the participants described as contributing to the successful outcomes of one school.

It is my sincere hope that this work yields positive outcomes for other schools. I desire that educators reading this account will become increasingly encouraged to work toward learning about and enacting practices and policies which may potentially narrow and close achievement gaps. Further, I hope that this work brings positive attention to schools in the State of New Mexico and will catalyze additional research that will be conducted in its schools that are experiencing high academic outcomes and making difference for diverse populations of students. Finally, I hope that what has been learned through this inquiry will allow others to acknowledge the benefits of narrative inquiry as a method for conveying the stories of other educators and for capturing their experiences, so that others may learn from them and improve their professional practice.

As I move forward in my craft as an educational leader, what I have learned in this inquiry concerning the significance of exogenous and endogenous classroom practices, will inform the decisions that I make concerning my work with my learning community, inclusive of
teachers, students, and parents. First and foremost, I will continue to work to establish the necessary trust among staff, which provides a vehicle for the successful manifestation of other practices, such as accountability structures, data conversations, and teacher coaching.

This learning has yielded personal significance for me in my own work as I have begun to implement some of the practices that I have learned through this inquiry. For example, I have already begun to implement what I have learned from the participants regarding how to conduct block meetings. Immediately upon implementing this practice in the ways that they described, we began noticing student gains in our math and reading assessment scores. Additionally, our teachers have begun to receive training in Balanced Literacy implementation, which is coincidental as it is now one of our district initiatives. The practices described by the participants have helped me to understand how to implement the framework appropriately and to be cognizant of the possible pitfalls and challenges that we may encounter as we begin this practice. Eventually, and as opportunities arise, I will incorporate the other practices, following their instructions on how to carry these out. I will see how the use of these practices impacts my own story.

Additionally, the personal significance of this research has led me to the realization that student achievement is a continuous process for every school. Educators will continually be challenged to meet state and federal expectations while facing a myriad of challenges. In doing so, some will defy the odds and we will continue to wonder “how they did it”. While many schools have achieved Blue Ribbon status, and many have been alluded within the literature and clustered within the meta-analyses of good schools (Williams, 2011; Landry, 2012), effective schools (Hughes, 2010; Safie, 2012; Lauritson, 2012), no excuses schools (Taylor, 2000), and beat-the-odds schools (Carbaugh, 2008), they each have and will continue to experience their
own stories of ups and downs, highs and lows as their work and our work toward student achievement continues.

Clandinin & Connelly (2000) remind us of the temporality of our existence which frames the notion that this work will continue as long as there are students and as long as there are transformative educators who are willing to engage in continual praxis and reflexivity. To the present inquiry, there are no conclusions and there are no concluding thoughts. The thinking and the work continues as simultaneously looking inward and forward, I continue processes of critical self-examination as I consider my role as a principal in the near future and the possibilities for implementing what I have learned under the tutelage of one dynamic principal and one gem of a teacher. Years from now, as I face the challenges of my work and the day to day tensions with regard to temporality, people, action, and certainty (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938) within the context of educating students, I will reflect upon this inquiry experience and draw from the ideas that catapulted this school to its success, in hopes that I too, will experience similar success in my own school. I will continually, reflexively, re-examine the process of this inquiry and maintain an awareness of the ways in which it will continue to inform my praxis as an educator.

8.16 Possibilities for Future Inquiry

As I consider the possibilities for future inquiry, I would like to know more about SNME and what has contributed to its demise. I would like to engage in additional inquiry to continue learning about SNME from the perspectives of the current leader and teachers who were at the campus when the school achieved its Blue Ribbon status. What might they say concerning the current state of SNME? How would the current principal’s perspectives differ from the teachers? Has the staff been supportive of the new principal? As an administrator, I know that it is difficult
to go into another school. I can only imagine the challenge of trying to fill the shoes of a leader as great as Mr. I. was considered to be. I would like to learn about the experience of the principal in trying to take his place.

Another area of inquiry that I would like to engage in would be to conduct in-depth interviews with Mr. I’s wife in order to learn how she was able to garner recognition because her school made the highest gains with Hispanic students, ELL’s in particular, and she was honored in Washington, D.C. I would like to learn about the approaches that were used in her school.

Additionally, I would also like to continue to engage in narrative inquiry methods in order to study practices of other Blue Ribbon schools in similar and differing contexts. Further, it appeals to me to study the practices that these schools use in other content areas, such as math, science, and social studies, which are also subjects that are assessed in a standardized approach. I would also like to continue to learn from these schools by employing additional methods. I believe that much can be learned through acting as a participant observer in a National Blue Ribbon School and by interviewing administrators, teachers, parents, and students in such schools. Additionally, I believe that it would be beneficial to employ the use of surveys in order to be able to include more schools and to gather data that can be used to compare the instructional practices that are used in a wide range of schools. While I believe that each of these methods might prove to be beneficial in increasing our knowledge about instructional practices that are used in Blue Ribbon Schools, I believe that the narrative approach provides the best way to tell the stories of these schools with greater depth and complexity.

Finally, as mentioned previously, I believe that an important area of research is to learn about whether and how the State of New Mexico’s new accountability model and the Common Core Standards are impacting teaching and learning. These were two initiatives were designed
with hopes to remedy the problem of the state’s history of low academic performance. I would like to engage in research in order to learn the reach of the impact of these initiatives.

As an educator and community resident, I will continue to have an interest in SNME’s performance and will continue to observe the changes that they undergo from year to year. I am sure that years from now, the staff members will reflect upon the Blue Ribbon experience. As I write, the story of SNME continues. Long after the ink has dried and these pages have been published, I will continue to watch and to celebrate their successes, while empathizing concerning the challenges that they now face, as I can relate to the all-too-familiar challenges of sustaining success. SNME will live on despite the ups and downs that will be included in their continuing, epic saga. Their experience reminds me of the legendary phoenix, which dies by fire, but is continually reborn. The story will continue for the SNME community and I believe that just as the legendary phoenix, despite the fiery trials, tests, and challenges that schools continuously face, SNME will rise again and the story will continue to be retold as the qualities of a life are marked by living, telling, retelling, and reliving (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

8.17  Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explored the ways in which the story of SNME continues to unfold. I shared the current state of SNME, having declining test scores, and shared reasons that the participants gave for the schools’ challenges. I made a connection with SNME as I shared my own story of experiencing highs and lows as I engage in educating students while being subjected to the ever-changing accountability system. I suggested the idea that schools are dynamic institutions characterized by challenges in obtaining and sustaining successful outcomes. I explored possible explanations for the school’s current performance challenges while considering sociocultural theory and power structures which characterized the school as an
organization. Beyond practices alone, I proposed deliberate practice to aid in the explanation of how SNME may have enacted instructional practices in such ways that their school became a model for other schools. I cautioned against failure to recognize the need to alter practices as the needs of students change. I considered the process of moving from reflection to reflexivity as I begin to apply what I have learned to my own practice. Finally, I shared policy and practice implications of this inquiry as well as some possibilities for future inquiry. In Chapter 8, *Epilogue - Looking Backward to Look Forward*, I continue to depart from framing a sense of conclusion to this inquiry, but instead I summarize and briefly retell the narrative in order to recapitulate this work and to reflect upon the experience.
Chapter 9: Epilogue – Looking Backward to Look Forward

*We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed.*” - Peter Brooks

In the next few pages, I refrain from a sense that the story has ended. Instead, I pull together narrative threads as I retell and relive this narrative inquiry in hopes that through retelling it bit by bit, its connectedness may be re-captured (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In *Chapter 1, Coming to the Questions*, I began by acknowledging my positionality as a researcher through revealing multiple identities through which I approached this work, I, the parent, the teacher, the administrator, and scholar were identified as being positioned within the parade of “I’s” that guided me to this inquiry. I revealed the research puzzle which catalyzed my interest in New Mexico schools. I discussed the issues that led me to engage in the practices of narrative inquiry in order to identify the specific instructional practices that were used within one of its National Blue Ribbon Schools.

I wanted to know how schools having high numbers of ELL’s and economically disadvantaged students were able to achieve success despite their challenges. I realized that some of New Mexico’s National Blue Ribbon Schools have been successful in educating a high number of students who are considered to be “at-risk” due to the fact that they are ELL’s, economically disadvantaged, or both. More specifically, I wanted to learn about the particular instructional practices that were used in one of New Mexico’s Blue Ribbon Schools, which have a high percentage of at-risk students. My initial hope was that this learning would lead to a better understanding of whether or how the use of particular instructional can make a positive difference in student performance. While this has been my truth in seeking out these practices, I
continually grapple with the reality that due to the particularity of the experience, I and others may not achieve the same levels of success as those within this school by simply implementing the same practices. Still, I believe that there is value in learning about the practices that were used as we may consider the possible implications of their use in our own work with students.

The contextual scene was the professional lives of two individuals who worked in Title I, kindergarten through 6th grade southern New Mexico 2010 National Blue Ribbon School in a small Southern New Mexico city. I sought answers to the following questions in the research puzzle: What factors do faculty and staff members believe contributed most to their school’s success in becoming a National Blue Ribbon School? What specific instructional practices did school administrators and teachers perceive as contributing to the students’ success as demonstrated on state reading assessments? How did faculty and staff members plan for and implement strategies that were used during reading instruction in the year and the preceding years that the school was designated as a Blue Ribbon school?

Chapter 2, *Situating the Inquiry within the Research Landscape* provided background to the inquiry and situated the research puzzle in the literature concerning standards-based education, National Blue Ribbon Schools, and New Mexico schools. I provided background concerning the challenges that educators face in educating students, particularly in being inundated with the pressures of the federal accountability system, which monitors school performance. I discussed the research concerning the nation’s Blue Ribbon schools, and discuss the issues concerning New Mexico schools, in particular. I provided information concerning the background of issues related to New Mexico schools, standards-based education as required by the No Child Left Behind Act (United States Department of Education, 2001), and educational
inequalities. Additionally, I shared the research concerning successful schools and provided the background and the literature on New Mexico schools and National Blue Ribbon Schools.

In Chapter 3, *Story as Method*, I provide details concerning the research design of this inquiry such as gaining entry to the field, selecting the participants, and data analysis methods. This chapter described the study’s research methodology, including the rationale for narrative inquiry as qualitative research design, details my experience in gaining entry in the research field, discussed the process involved in the selection of the participants, provided an overview of data collection and analysis methods used, while forecasting the use of voice in the analysis and dealing with issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability. I discussed that in inquiry, these are replaced by apparency, verisimilitude, transferability, adequacy, and plausibility as possible criteria that can be used to characterize a good narrative inquiry.

In Chapter 4, *Who They Were*, I introduced the participants, Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor, the individuals whose experiences were shared in the inquiry, by shifting backward with them and sharing their professional backgrounds as it pertained to becoming involved with their award-winning school. They also looked outward as they discussed individuals and outside factors that influenced their careers. An inward shift was noted as the participants considered the life meaning that they have made from their career-related decisions. Themes of shared leadership inhered as Mr. I and Mrs. Taylor began working together, setting goals for their school, and began hiring teachers to aid them in carrying out their vision.

Chapter 5, *The Story of What They Did* described the actions that were involved in their school becoming an award-winning school, discussed the significance of winning the National Blue Ribbon Schools Award, and shared the meaning that the participants made from this experience. We learned that the school obtained the award serendipitously, discovering it on
their road to obtaining high test scores for their students upon setting the goal to become an exemplary school. The participants discussed the tremendous feeling of pride and their feeling that they had acquired something that will always be there. They will always have the award—the plaque, the banner, and the flag, despite the highs and lows that they will inevitably, continuously face.

In Chapter 7 and 8, I discussed *How They Did It*. Here, I discussed the interactions which occurred within the school context and shared the varied practices that were utilized within the school that the participants believed contributed to their school’s success. There were multiple practices in place which can be categorized among the instructional practices which may have impacted student outcomes. The participants shared stories laced with vivid description which enabled me to envision the myriad of practices which were carried out from day to day. I came to the realization that some of the instructional practices that were utilized, exceeded the bounds of the classrooms. At the same time, what took place in the classrooms was heavily impacted by actions that took place outside of the classrooms.

For the purpose of organizing and explaining the instructional practices that may have directly impacted student achievement outcomes, but did not directly occur in the classroom, I categorized these as exogenous tensions. Actions that took place directly within the classroom were categorized as endogenous tensions. These exogenous and endogenous tensions centered on people, context, interaction, certainty, and temporality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938). Exogenous tensions included the leadership structures, accountability structures, teacher professional development, and parental involvement. Endogenous tensions included instructional practices that directly occurred in the classrooms such as the teacher coaching, the use of the Balanced Literacy Framework and its related components such as leveled instruction, classroom
discourse, active monitoring of student learning, the prescribed lesson cycle and delivery, and fidelity to the framework.

Chapter 8, *The Story Continues*, shifted forward as the participants shared their views concerning the school’s present status and its future performance. Here, I considered the boundaries of narrative inquiry in its contrast of thinking in terms of the grand narrative and the aims of educational research in finding solutions to problems. The challenge for schools to sustain success is an ongoing challenge from year to year. I faced the reality that there are no “conclusions” to this inquiry, as the dynamics of schooling continue, the story will continue to be told, as my life and the lives of the participants will continue to be relived in new ways, therefore the narrative will remain unfinished (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I acknowledged the fact that many questions remain and further research is needed in order to explore possible answers.

I connected the personal and social significance of this work as I leaped from learning about instructional practices to the implications of becoming increasingly deliberate concerning the instructional decisions that I make. More specifically, I came to the realization of the critical role of deliberate practice and its reach in impacting student outcomes. I cautioned against failing to recognize when practices which have led to successful outcomes require adaptation to the ever-changing society. I shifted from practice to policy as I encouraged scholars, researcher, practitioners, and policymakers to support research to uncover best practices that are used within successful schools that seem to be making a difference for diverse populations of students. Finally, I advanced from reflection to reflexivity in connecting the personal and social significance of this work as well as possibilities for future inquiry.

At this moment, I pause to connect my reflections with foresight. I return to the *Prologue* in which I looked backward and considered the impact of my own schooling experiences and the
role of these in shaping my decision to become an educator, which led to personal, professional, and scholarly experiences. This intermingling resulted in this inquiry. What I have learned in this inquiry now leads me to look outward as I think about the individuals - the principal and the teacher, whom made learning through this inquiry, a possibility. I look forward as I consider the impact of what I have learned from them through engaging in the process of inquiry. I believe that what I have learned will have far-reaching implications. My hope is that it will continue to inform policy and practice and will continuously impact my life and the lives of students and teachers that I have the opportunity to engage with in acts of teaching and learning. I believe that this inquiry will positively impact others, many whom I will never meet, but whom share the same passion and burning desire to create an educational landscape in which all students, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or other differences, are empowered to achieve at high levels.
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Appendix A

Definitions of Terms

At-Risk Students – A controversial term that is used to describe students who for a variety of reasons, are at-risk of not graduating from high school. The controversy lies in the idea that the use of labels such as these is like placing blame on the victim. The reason is that while schools may attribute outside factors such as poverty, language, or home factors for predisposing students to at-risk situations, schooling takes place both within and outside of the school, therefore inadequacies in any arena, including the school, can contribute to academic failure (Costello, 1996).

Blue Ribbon School- A school that has received the National Blue Ribbon Schools Award that is awarded by the United States Department of Education because it has demonstrated repeated success in teaching closing achievement gaps and in helping at-risk students to be successful.

High-Performing Schools – Schools that have met federal accountability requirements and have met adequate yearly progress (AYP).

Instructional Practice- This includes the various pedagogical methods, strategies, and approaches that are used in teaching and learning in classrooms.

Low-Performing Schools – Schools that are not meeting federal accountability requirements and have not met adequate yearly progress (AYP).

Successful Schools – Schools that have met federal accountability requirements and have met adequate yearly progress (AYP).

Title I Schools – Title I schools are designated as such when at least 35 percent of its students are economically disadvantaged. These schools receive additional federal revenues in order to supplement programs, services, and resources to improve the academic achievement of
disadvantaged students, especially those in high-poverty schools which have students who are limited English proficient, are disabled, neglected, delinquent, and in need of reading assistance (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured Interview Questions for the Teacher

**Interview One: Focused Life History Interview (Relative to Teaching & Learning)**

1. Why did you become an educator?

2. What are the earliest memories you have of your teaching career?

3. What pressures or struggles did you experience as an educator?

4. What was the most significant event of your teaching career? Why?

5. How did it come about that you joined the staff of Southern New Mexico Elementary school?

**Interview Two: The Details of Experience**

1. Please tell me about what this school was like, as you recall it.

2. Please tell me the story of how SNME became a National Blue Ribbon School?
   a. What were some of the practices that staff/students/community members engaged in?
   b. How did staff/students/community members engage in such practices? Why do you think they engaged in practices in this way?

3. What factors, actions, or events do you attribute to your school’s success in receiving the Blue Ribbon award?
4. What do you believe that SNME may have done differently from other schools?

5. Describe a typical day (instructionally) at SNME during the time that the school received the award.

6. How did you plan for reading instruction for all students (of varying demographics)?

7. What was considered when planning reading instruction for English Language Learners?

8. Did you specifically set out to consider the experiences of economically disadvantaged students when planning reading instruction? If so, how?

9. a. What does the term “instructional practice” mean to you?

b. What instructional practices did you consistently use which you find to be most effective in providing reading instruction for a diverse group of students?

10. What were the challenges of teaching in this school?

11. What were the benefits of teaching in this school?

12. What are the qualities of a successful teacher?

13. What are the qualities of a successful school leader?

14. Describe your professional development practices or experiences during the period that you received the Blue Ribbon award. Was there a relationship between what staff learned in professional development activities and their actual teaching practices? If so, please give me some examples of this.

15. What was the key or keys to this school’s success in receiving the Blue Ribbon award?
16. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss concerning this school’s success?

**Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning**

1. How did becoming a National Blue Ribbon school impact the staff, students, and community?

2. How did this experience impact you?

3. How does this experience compare with others that you have had during your career as an educator?

4. How did this experience inform your teaching practices?

5. Given what you have reconstructed in this interview, how do you envision this school in the future?

6. Is there anything else that you would like to add concerning the meaning of this experience as it pertains to your teaching career?
Semi-structured Interview Questions for the Principal

Interview One: Focused Life History Interview (Relative to Teaching & Learning)

1. Why did you become an educator?

2. What are the earliest memories you have of your teaching career?

3. What pressures or struggles did you experience as an educator?

4. What was the most significant event of your teaching career? Why?

5. How did it come about that you joined the staff of SNME?

Interview Two: The Details of Experience

1. Please tell me about the school.

2. Please tell me the story of how SNME became a National Blue Ribbon award recipient.

3. What factors, actions, or events do you believe contributed to student achievement and ultimately, this school’s success in becoming a Blue Ribbon award recipient?

4. What did you differently from other schools?

5. How did grade levels plan for reading instruction for all students?

6. Were there any special considerations upon planning reading instruction for English Language Learners? If so, what were they?

7. What was considered when planning reading instruction for economically disadvantaged students?
8. a. What does “instructional practice” mean to you?

b. What seemed to be the most effective instructional practices in providing reading instruction for a diverse group of students?

9. How were decisions made concerning professional development as it relates to reading instruction?

10. What instructional practices did you consistently observe in classrooms during reading instruction that may have impacted student success?

11. What qualities must a teacher possess to be successful in a Title I school?

12. What are the qualities of a successful leader?

13. What were the challenges of leading this school?

14. What were the benefits of leading this school?

15. What was the key to this school’s success in receiving the Blue Ribbon award?

16. Is there anything else that you would like to share concerning this discussion?

**Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning**

1. How did becoming a National Blue Ribbon school impact the staff, students, and community?

2. How did this experience impact you?

3. How does this experience compare with others that you have had during your career as an educator?
4. How did this experience inform your teaching practices?

5. Given what you have reconstructed in this interview, how do you envision this school in the future?

6. Is there anything else that you would like to add concerning the meaning of this experience as it pertains to your teaching career?
Appendix C

July 1st, 2013

Dear School Principal:

I, Debra Y. Kerney, am an assistant principal in Canutillo ISD and a doctoral student pursuing a Ph.D. in Teaching, Learning, and Culture at the University of Texas at El Paso. I am writing to request permission to conduct research at Southern New Mexico Elementary School, during the fall of the 2013-2014 school year. The research project that I desire to conduct would enable me to fulfill one of the requirements for completing my doctoral dissertation.

The tentative title of my dissertation is *True Blue: A narrative inquiry exploring instructional practices used during reading instruction in a Title I, 2010 National Blue Ribbon School in New Mexico*. I am interested in understanding better the experience of educators who provide reading instruction in a school that has achieved the National Blue Ribbon Schools Award. I believe that conducting research in this school will enable me to learn practices that can be shared with other schools, which can perhaps support them in their efforts toward successful student outcomes.

Given my focus, I ask your help in three ways: 1) permission to observe in order to learn from teachers during the fall semester. More specifically, I would like permission to observe six classrooms at least three times (for a total of at least 18 observations), during the time that reading is being taught 2) permission to receive copies of materials that the principal and teachers might share with me which might include lesson plans and student work (and 3) permission to interview the principal and each of the six participating teachers, which will include two teachers from each grade level from grades three through five. I would like to interview these prospective participants individually and as a collective focus group.

It is projected that each of the seven individual interviews and the focus group interview will last about an hour. They will occur at a mutually convenient time and place, which will be determined by the principal, each teacher, and me. With your consent, I would like to audiotape the interviews and the classroom instruction. All observing will also occur at mutually agreeable times. Of course, you may withdraw from participation at any time should that prove necessary.

Part of my dissertation completion includes writing about and discussing with others what I learn about reading instruction. I will be careful to protect your identity and your institution’s by using pseudonyms rather than real names. In addition, while I will quote directly from interviews, documents, and observations, I will be attentive throughout to protecting confidentiality.

This project requires no modification in your instructional services. However, it does require having me in the back of the classroom and finding time for interviews in what must already be an over-busy schedule. I would appreciate your generosity in facilitating my learning and dissertation completion. In addition, if there are ways in which I might give back something to you for the help you provide me, I hope you will let me know. I am also willing to arrange to share the results of my study with you, should you wish.
If you have questions about the project, please feel free to ask me. My email address is dkerney@canutillo-isd.org. You may also contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Char Ullman, who is also knowledgeable about this project. In addition to providing your consent, please inform me if there is a district process that you are aware of which requires that I obtain consent from other individuals within your school district prior to conducting this research. Please remember that one of the goals of this research is to illuminate the positive contributions to teaching and practice that your school has made.

Sincerely yours,
Debra Y. Kerney

Doctoral Student
College of Education
The University of Texas at El Paso
Appendix D

July 1st, 2013

Dear School Teacher:

I, Debra Y. Kerney, am an assistant principal in Canutillo ISD and a doctoral student pursuing a Ph.D. in Teaching, Learning, and Culture at the University of Texas at El Paso. Your principal has given me permission to conduct research at your campus, during the fall of the 2013-2014 school year. The research project that I desire to conduct would enable me to fulfill one of the requirements for completing my doctoral dissertation.

The tentative title of my dissertation is True Blue: An ethnographic case study exploring instructional practices used during reading instruction in a Title I, 2010 National Blue Ribbon School in New Mexico. I am interested in understanding better the experience of educators providing reading instruction in a school that has achieved the National Blue Ribbon Schools Award. I believe that conducting research in this school will enable me to learn practices that can be shared with other schools, which can perhaps support them in their efforts toward successful student outcomes.

Given my focus, I ask your help in three ways 1) permission to observe in order to learn from you during the fall semester. More specifically, I would like permission to observe your classroom at least three (or more) times, during the time that reading is being taught 2) permission to receive copies of materials that you might share with me, which might include lesson plans and student work (and 3) permission to interview you individual and in a focus group. Each interview is projected to last approximately one hour and will occur at a mutually convenient times and places, which will be determined by the principal, each teacher, and me. With your consent, I would like to audiotape the interviews and the classroom instruction. All observing will also occur at mutually agreeable times. Of course, you may withdraw from participation at any time should that prove necessary.

Part of my dissertation completion includes writing about and discussing with others what I learn about reading instruction. I will be careful to protect your identity and your institution’s by using pseudonyms rather than real names. In addition, while I will quote directly from interviews, documents, and observations, I will be attentive throughout to protecting confidentiality.

This project requires no modification in your instructional services. However, it does require having me in the back of the classroom and finding time for interviews in what must already be an over-busy schedule. I would appreciate your generosity in facilitating my learning and dissertation completion. In addition, if there are ways in which I might give back something to you for the help you provide me, I hope you will let me know. I am also willing to arrange to share the results of my study with you, should you wish.
If you have questions about the project, please feel free to ask me. My email address is dkerney@canutillo-isd.org. You may also contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Char Ullman, who is also knowledgeable about this project.

Sincerely yours,
Debra Y. Kerney

Doctoral Student
College of Education
The University of Texas at El Paso
Appendix E

TRUE BLUE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY EXPLORING INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES USED DURING READING INSTRUCTION IN A TITLE I, 2010 NATIONAL BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL IN NEW MEXICO

CONSENT FORM

I, ____________________________________________ agree to participate in the research project entitled True Blue: An ethnographic case study exploring instructional practices used during reading instruction in a Title I, 2010 National Blue Ribbon School in New Mexico. This research will hopefully inform the practice of educators in understanding the experience of educators providing reading instruction in a Title I school that has achieved the National Blue Ribbon Schools Award. It is believed that conducting research in this school will enable me to learn practices that can be shared with other schools, which can perhaps support them in their efforts toward successful student outcomes. I also understand that in order for the researcher, Debra Yvonne Kerney to examine this topic, I will be asked to complete one or more interviews, and the research will include classroom observations. Additionally, I understand that reflection, thoughts and analyses of my lived experiences may be audio recorded, transcribed, and used as additional data to contribute to the synthesis of the research. I understand that I may withdraw from participating in the study at any time. I understand that my name will not be used in the study and will not be associated with the research findings in any way. My identity as a participant will only be known to the researcher.

The results of this study will be used to improve the teaching and learning of students through gaining an understanding of whether and how particular instructional practices that are utilized during reading instruction, may contribute to school success. There is no anticipated cost or burden to the participant other than time spent participating in the interview(s). I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I may end my participation at any time without consequences. I also understand that there are no known risks with my participation in this study. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and they have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that every effort will be made to keep my data confidential with the knowledge that interview data, written, or audio recorded will be stored and locked in a file cabinet and disposed of when the study is complete.

If I have any questions about this research, I understand that I can speak to Mrs. Kerney’s dissertation chair, Dr. Char Ullman, (915) 747-7646.

I have full knowledge of the nature and purpose of these procedures. I have received a copy of this form and understand its content.

___________________________________________              _________________________
Participant’s Signature                                  Date

I have defined and explained in detail the research procedures in which the participant has agreed to participate and have given him/her a copy of this informed consent.

___________________________________________              _________________________
Researcher’s Signature                                   Date
Curriculum Vita

Debra Yvonne Kerney earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Social Psychology from Park University in 2002, graduating summa cum laude. She is a member of the Pinnacle National Honor Society and the Pi Gamma Mu International Honor Society for the Social Sciences. She was the 2003 recipient of the Dr. Sue Shook Outstanding Teacher Award. She received her Master’s degree in Educational Leadership in 2005 from The University of Texas at El Paso. In 2009, she began doctoral coursework toward a Doctor of Philosophy in Teaching, Learning, and Culture with a concentration in Literacy and Biliteracy. While obtaining her doctorate, she served as an Elementary Assistant Principal for the Canutillo Independent School District in El Paso, Texas.

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This dissertation was typed by Debra Yvonne Kerney.