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## Effective Professional Development: A Study of a Teacher-Initiated, Interdisciplinary Professional Learning Community

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Effective Professional Development: A Study of a Teacher-Initiated, Interdisciplinary  
Professional Learning Community

Mary Quantz

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Effective Professional Development: A Study of a Teacher-Initiated, Interdisciplinary Professional Learning Community

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This is a narrative inquiry study that describes the experiences of five junior high school teachers who participated in an interdisciplinary, voluntary professional learning community (PLC). Using identity as an analytic lens for the participants' experiences, and content-area literacy as the context for the PLC, the study describes how teachers involved in a PLC focused on inquiry and teacher learning storied their own experiences in the PLC. The participants' experiences highlighted three main themes which were (1) experiences with past ineffective professional development, (2) inadequacy, and (3) changes in thinking. The study highlights how these themes demonstrate the development of the participants' professional and group identities in their school setting. This study also includes a literature review and expanded methods section in the appendices.

Keywords: professional learning community, interdisciplinary, voluntary, ineffective professional development, inadequacy, identity

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## DESCRIPTION OF STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

This thesis is a narrative inquiry study written in the form of a journal-ready article rather than a traditional thesis. The journal in which I am seeking to publish this article is *Teacher Development*. This is an international journal focusing on teachers' professional development, both on practical and critical levels. The journal also includes articles in a variety of styles. It is published four times a year.



## **Introduction**

At Western Junior High School, teachers of all content areas gathered for a professional development meeting organized by the administration. The school had been working on several initiatives relating to accreditation, one of which was to implement a school-wide writing rubric, which, as directed by the administration, was created and presented by the language arts department. This rubric would, in theory, allow all the teachers in the school to grade short-answer questions and essays exactly the same way, and would demonstrate student learning through writing. When the administration mandated that each department use this rubric once a term, many teachers expressed frustration and resistance because the type of writing the rubric described did not fit with their curriculum. The math department was especially frustrated as they rarely, if ever, had any reason for their students to write in such a way. The administration and several of the language arts teachers determined these teachers simply had poor attitudes about writing and would have to move past their resistance and implement the writing rubric into their curriculum.

### **Ineffective Professional Development**

While this is only one example, public school teachers often must sit through professional development activities that have little to do with their content area or that do not fit with their beliefs and teacher identities (Cohen & Hill, 1998; Kennedy, 1998). There are a myriad of reasons for this, including a focus on structure over content (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Kennedy, 1998), as well as a desire on the part of professional development organizers to find quick and easy solutions to the problems of education (Guskey, 2009). It is not often teachers are even consulted about what they wish to learn in a professional development setting (Flint, Zisook, & Fisher, 2011).

As a public school teacher, I have often felt frustrated by the professional development activities I have been asked to attend. No administration has asked what I needed for professional development. My overall experiences with professional development, in my seven years of teaching, have been negative or irrelevant to what I believe is important for my students and classroom practices. I had a desire to find an alternative to the traditional forms of professional development (conferences, in-services, etc.). Being wary of professional development myself, I was concerned that others would not be interested in participating in yet another professional development activity, or that the professional development would not be effective once we started, but I felt it was important to try something different than what we had all experienced many times before, and would, hopefully, be effective in helping teachers change or develop their professional, or institutional, identities (Gee, 2001).

### **Teacher-Initiated Professional Learning Community**

Research has not yet focused professional development that is organized and conducted by teachers themselves, in part because this type of professional development rarely happens. The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to describe the experiences of secondary teachers from various content areas who participated in a teacher-initiated, voluntary professional learning community (PLC). PLCs are a widely researched topic (Harris & Jones, 2010; Hord, 1997; Lieberman & Miller, 2008) and have been defined as “groups of teachers meeting regularly to discuss their own learning and the learning of their students” (Pella, 2011, p. 107). Because formal PLCs are often burdened with scheduling issues, departmental business, standardized testing data, or other administration-mandated business, it is not often teachers can come together and delve into inquiry and learning in ways that would benefit their students

(Dooner, Mandzuk, & Clifton, 2008). I wanted to describe the experiences of an interdisciplinary group of teachers who experienced a PLC focused solely on teacher learning.

The PLC consisted of six meetings in which we discussed professional literature concerning content-area literacy. We read professional articles and chapters from *(Re)Imagining Content-Area Literacy Instruction* (Draper, Broomhead, Petersen, Nokes, & Siebert, 2010). The readings I chose provided a breadth of ideas about content-area literacy rather than one narrow view of the topic, something the administrators of the school failed to do in the introductory example of professional development.

It was also important that the PLC in this study contained teachers with very different professional, or *institutional*, identities (Gee, 2001). Research has shown that teacher learning, in order to be effective, must be focused on teachers' identities because identity is the driving force behind the decisions teachers make in their classrooms. (Al-Amoush, Markic, Abu-Hola, & Eilks, 2011; Gee, 2001; Pajares, 1992; Putnam & Borko, 1997). Organizers of professional development often do not appear to consider are teachers' identities when developing professional development activities, yet teachers are more likely change their practice based on what they believe and how they identify with the information they are given in a professional development setting (Guskey, 2002).

Another important aspect of PLCs is the opportunity for teachers involved to gain a stronger group, or *affinity* identity (Gee, 2001), with common goals and purposes in their profession. In this particular school, the only group who regularly focused their learning on literacy was the language arts department, which is common throughout public schools. I thought it would be important to describe the experiences of the group as well as the individuals with this topic of study because I hoped we would come to a common understanding of different ideas

about content-area literacy that we had not yet explored in our school professional development activities.

We read and discussed professional literature concerning content-area literacy, an important and relevant topic due to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, which requires literacy instruction in several content areas other than language arts. I wanted the topic of the PLC (content-area literacy) to be something to which all the participants could relate, and that would be relevant to their practice, which is an important aspect of effective professional development (Borko, 2004). A list of all the meetings and the literature we read can be found in appendix A.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study included five junior high school teachers. I assigned each participant, except for myself, a pseudonym. Each participant volunteered to be part of the PLC, and all of the participants except for Gwen, who was not teaching at this school at the time, attended the professional development activity described in the introduction. The participants included Melroy, a science teacher; Emma Jane, an orchestra teacher; Titania, a math teacher; Gwen, a special education teacher; and me (Mary), a language arts teacher.

As I have said, each participant brought a unique identity to the PLC, which will be further explained in the findings section. The participants ranged from beginning teachers to veteran teachers, and taught 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grades. All of the participants had different ideas of what to expect from the PLC. Melroy, who was the most outspoken about his opinions, thought we would be discussing how important it was for our students to read. Titania thought we were going to have a discussion group and work on lesson plans together. Gwen, thought the PLC

would consist of reading and discussing what we had read, and Emma Jane thought the PLC would be like a book club, where we read fictional literature and came together to discuss it.

### **Researcher's Stance**

Even though I was aware that I was the researcher for this study, I planned, from the beginning, to be a participant in the PLC as well. What I did not plan for, necessarily, was how fully immersed I became in participating in the group. After the first meeting I did not think about the fact that I was conducting a study. I became a full participant, interested in learning from my peers and from the literature. As a participant, I was able to see the participants' growth as we learned and discussed our learning together. I was also able to experience my own growth in my institutional identity by participating in this PLC which I discuss in the findings section.

I was already familiar with the literature we used in the PLC because I had selected the articles and book chapters we would read and discuss as part of the PLC. I knew the readings would present a wide range of information on content-area literacy. It was really in the group discussions with the other participants that I felt I grew the most as a teacher. Hearing other teachers' perspectives on a topic that had largely been confined to my content area (language arts) gave me a much better understanding of the difficulties other teachers face when presented with material that does not fit their institutional identities or styles of teaching. I have included my own experiences in the findings as well.

While I was a participant in the PLC, I also wanted to study the experiences of all the participants. I wanted to study their experiences with participating in a PLC such as this one, as opposed to other forms of professional development. I wanted to provide a picture of how this PLC functioned. It is not often that teachers can share their experiences in a professional development setting in great detail, so it was important for me to study those experiences.

## Methodology

Narrative inquiry was an appropriate research method to use in this study because I wanted to describe the experiences of teachers in this type of PLC, and tell the story of what happened as we met over several months. Narrative inquiry is defined as “the study of storied experience, ours and our participants’ composed within a particularity of personal, social, temporal, and place that is the project of narrative researchers” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 600). It is often through understanding others’ experiences that people connect to new ideas, and gain new understanding of themselves (Meier & Stremmel, 2010). Narrative inquiry was the best avenue to explore this topic of effective professional development through the experiences of the participants.

I considered the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as I examined the participants’ experiences in the PLC. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) included temporality, personal and social interactions, and place or landscape as the three aspects of narrative inquiry. The timing, or temporality, of the topic of the PLC was important. Content-area literacy was the context of our PLC, because it was to be introduced, if it had not already been, into all of the participants’ curricula in the coming school year. Personally and socially, the PLC was unlike the departmental PLCs each participant attended each week in that we read the literature for the PLC individually, but then came together socially to discuss what we had learned from the readings. Finally, I chose the school in which I teach as the place or landscape for the study in order for the participants to have a common understanding of the past professional development experiences, as well as a common understanding of the goals of the school.

## **Data Collection**

There were three primary sources of data for this study: (a) six PLC meeting audio recordings which I later transcribed, (b) a group interview during the final PLC meeting, and (c) individual participant interviews. These sources of data were appropriate for narrative inquiry because the conversations in both the meetings and the interviews allowed for participants to share their own stories. This allowed me to describe their stories in ways that revealed how their individual institutional identities and the group affinity identity were affected as a result of the PLC.

During the last PLC, I asked final questions that related to effective professional development, which was the only time I directed the conversation in a specific direction. I felt a group interview would be helpful in getting a sense of the entire group's story of their experience in the PLC because one goal of PLCs is to create a place where peers help each other make sense of teaching and all its aspects (Hord, 1997; Louis, 1994). The group interview allowed for individuals to answer for themselves, but also hear others' perspectives. The questions I asked for the group interview can be found in appendix B.

After we finished the PLC meetings, I interviewed each of the participants using the school's email chat feature in order to get a better perspective of each individual participant's experience in the PLC during those interviews, and the individual interview questions can be found in appendix B.

## **Data Analysis**

I first wanted to categorize the experiences of the participants into categories based on research-based characteristics of effective professional development. They include (1) changes in teacher beliefs and attitudes, (2) changes in practice, and (3) improvements in student learning

outcomes (Guskey, 1986, 2002). These were the categories I was focusing on in my original proposal for this study (appendix B). Using the PLC meeting transcriptions and interviews, I was able to find experiences and thoughts the participants shared that fit into each category.

Examples of the charts I created with the categories can be found in appendix A.

While these initial categories were helpful in determining some of the stories related to professional development, I wanted to take the analysis further to explore how those stories and experiences related to the participants' institutional and affinity identities (see appendix A). I kept track of what experiences were shared and when the participants shared them to see if their institutional and affinity identities shifted and changed throughout the PLC. In order to do that, I categorized their experiences into three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of temporality, personal and social interactions, and place or landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The ways in which the participants shared their experiences (narratives) helped me describe aspects of their identities in terms of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space.

For example, Melroy shared his experience concerning the professional development discussed in the introduction of this study. I categorized the pieces of his story into timeliness and relevance (temporality) for his content area at that time, what interactions had had with other teachers during that activity (personal and social), and how those things did or did not fit in the landscape of his classroom (place or landscape). I then found ways in which Melroy's narrative described his institutional identity and affinity identity. I then compared his experience with other participants' experiences in professional development activities to find common themes (see appendix A).

In categorizing the participants' experiences in this way, I was able to find three themes in the experiences of the participants. Those themes were (1) past experiences with ineffective



professional development, (2) inadequacy in their institutional identities, and (3) changes in thinking. The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) also helped illuminate these themes in the data. Participants related past experiences in which they were not yet ready to change their institutional identities due to poor timing or lack of time to incorporate new ideas (temporality). As they described their feelings of inadequacy, they seemed to rely on the group to help them make sense of those feelings (personal and social interactions) (Hord, 1998), and they described the ways in which they could or could not fit certain ideas into the landscape of their classrooms.

After I determined these themes using the participants' experiences, I shared my findings with all of the participants in the group to get their perspectives. Only one participant, Melroy, responded to the findings. He agreed that the themes I had created were accurate according to his experience in the group. He also said that I had captured the experiences of the participants very well. The other participants did not respond to the findings I shared with them.

### **Findings**

While there were only six PLC meetings, each lasting 45 minutes to one hour, the experiences the participants shared provided rich narratives tying their institutional and affinity identities to their experiences in the PLC and other professional development activities. Each of the participants recounted negative past professional development experiences with literacy and other topics. They each described how the experience of the PLC highlighted new challenges with confronting literacy in their classroom, and their feelings of inadequacy in doing so. Finally, all the participants experiences changes in their thinking concerning content-area literacy.

These three themes were incredibly important because they supported what happens in an effective professional development setting, according to researchers, which is that it changes

teachers beliefs, attitudes, practices, and goals for student learning (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). These changes can, ultimately, lead to lasting, positive changes in teachers' institutional identities, and when combined with allowing teachers to discuss their learning, allows teachers to grow together in a stronger affinity identity with the common goal of helping their students learn in the most effective ways (Gee, 2001; Servage, 2008).

### **Experiences with Ineffective Professional Development**

Each of the readings for the PLC introduced new ideas about content-area literacy for the participants. Most of the participants' past professional development activities had introduced new research, but not in ways that resonated with the participants. Through the discussions during the PLC, the participants expressed frustration at these past experiences because they didn't feel they came away from these experiences with anything useful to help their students learn.

There was some bonding among the group when participants described experiences with ineffective professional development because all of the teachers felt like their time had been wasted, something each participant had experienced at one time or another. Another frustration they expressed with professional development was the tendency to focus activities on standardized testing data. They also felt like professional development activities were often a waste of resources due to the unhelpful nature of the material presented.

Many had not had the opportunity to express these frustrations in a constructive way, such as the PLC for the study. In discussing the negative experiences with each other, the participants were able to articulate ways in which professional development could improve. These experiences also added to the affinity-identity of the group as their experiences with professional development mirrored those of others. They were able to co-construct knowledge

with each other in a way that allowed them to inquire into their own practices and beliefs, which would hopefully help them make positive changes or developments in their institutional identities. Researchers believe this opportunity for teachers to work through problems with their peers allows great advancements in teaching practice (Achinstein, 2002; M. Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990; Little, 1993).

**Ineffective Literacy Professional Development.** All of the participants had attended several professional development activities that forced them to make choices about how the information presented at the meetings would or would not impact their practice, as well as their institutional identities (Battey & Franke, 2008). Content-area literacy professional development in this school had regularly isolated teachers outside of language arts. Other teachers believed (a) they are not responsible for literacy instruction because they do not teach reading and writing, (b) they do not feel qualified to teach reading and writing, and (c) they cannot fit literacy into their curriculum, beliefs which are common among teachers outside of language arts (Ratekin, Simpson, Alvermann, & Dishner, 1985; Stewart & O'Brien, 1989). Titania and Melroy both experienced these beliefs about themselves due to ineffective content-area literacy professional development.

Titania, the math teacher in our PLC, had attended a professional development class concerning content-area literacy. Organizers of the class claimed the class would be beneficial for all content areas, but the concepts and practical ideas were geared toward language arts and would not fit effectively into a math classroom. Titania described her feelings as she sat in the classes:

“They’ve had classes at our school before that you could take after school about literacy. I’d sit there and they’d give me ideas, and I’d have to wrack my brain as to how I could apply this to math” (September 14, meeting #1).

This is a common feeling among teachers who want to attend professional development to find ways to improve their practice (Koster, Dengerink, Korthagen, & Lunenberg, 2008). Titania wasn’t resistant to the professional development, but she was resistant to the incorrect and inauthentic definitions of literacy for her content area.

Melroy expressed similar irritation in regards to content-area literacy professional development, feeling everything he had experienced had been a waste of his time. He described literacy as “one of those ‘other things’ we had to put up with until we could get back to work” (September 14, meeting #1). Until he volunteered for this PLC, he had closed himself off to content-area literacy professional development because it had been so unhelpful in the past. He agreed to be in this PLC because I introduced it as strictly a discussion group where they would not be required to implement changes to their curriculum. As we discussed what literacy actually was, we came to the conclusion that it was “constructive interactions with texts, both written and digital, in which good readers and writers continuously create meaning” (Conley, 2008, p. 84). Melroy could embrace this definition because he could find many ways of incorporating that definition into his institutional identity and the landscape of his classroom.

Both Titania and Melroy’s needs were not met in regards to content-area literacy because they were receiving inappropriate definitions and communications about literacy, a common occurrence in content-area literacy training (Siebert & Draper, 2008), not because they had poor attitudes toward the subject. The messages did not speak to their institutional identities, the

framework by which they constructed their practice, ideals, ethics, and development (Sachs, 2005a), not just their lesson plans.

**Professional Development Focused on Standardized Test Data.** Another complaint the participants had about past professional development was the tendency of those organizing the activity to focus on standardized tests scores. Emma Jane found these professional development activities especially unhelpful because, as an orchestra teacher, she had never given standardized tests. Math, language arts, and science, often referred to as “core classes” were the only classes in which standardized tests were given in the school. She felt ignored when professional development was focused on test scores. She described her concern: “Our district is very data driven, and with my subject being fine arts, our data is a lot harder to collect. It’s very subjective,” (January 5, meeting #6). Without any real focus on the needs of fine arts teachers’ professional development within the district, she felt the “core classes were taking over the electives” (January 5, meeting #6). At the time of this study, her institutional identity revolved around the task of helping her students become musicians, not around helping them pass tests. Researchers believe how teachers perceive their teaching tasks relates closely with how they identify themselves as educators (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Kelchtermans, 1993), and Emma Jane’s teaching tasks did not include test preparation.

Gwen also described her frustration with professional development that was focused on standardized tests. As a special education teacher, she felt standardized testing scores were an unfair assessment of her students’ progress. She described a meeting where she felt humiliated because the administration put the special education test scores on a projector and proceeded to ask the faculty how to “fix” these scores. She mentioned how other teachers, who also thought that was an inappropriate professional development activity, apologized for the display. During

the PLC meetings, Gwen's institutional identity was very closely tied to her relationship with her students, and not at all tied to test scores. She was defensive of her students and their abilities, and her interactions with her students helped build her institutional identity (Sikes, 1992). She felt the professional development activity insulted her students more than her teaching, and it did not meet the characteristics of an effective professional development activity.

**Inefficient and Expensive Professional Development.** I have also experienced many ineffective professional development activities, and my experiences are what led me to conduct this study. I noticed, as we met in the PLC, how easy it was to discuss my practice with my colleagues and how rarely we get the opportunity to do that in other professional development settings. I recalled a professional development meeting from the previous summer where the district spent over \$100,000 to have an "expert" come and speak to us during a two-day conference. I related to the group how angry it made me because I didn't feel any of the presentation was something I could apply in my classroom. The presenter spoke strictly about administrative issues. I recalled how our administrators prepared us for this conference by telling us how much money the district was spending to bring this expert here to speak to us. Public schools regularly spend millions of dollars each year on conferences such as this one, which lack continuity and intellectual complexity for the teachers who attend such activities (Ball & Cohen, 1999).

As I sat in the PLC for this study, I felt as though I would have gotten so much more out of those two days if I had been able to sit and discuss my practice with other teachers as we were doing in our PLC. The PLC had minimal cost attached, but had a great many benefits to me as I felt my knowledge of content-area literacy grew. My institutional identity was not impacted at all

by the summer conference, despite its high cost, but it was greatly impacted by learning from my colleagues in a small, inexpensive, and understated PLC.

These past experiences with professional development are just a few we discussed in the PLC, but we all agreed that each of these experiences might have gone much better if they had sought teachers' opinions and tried to fill the needs of teachers rather than trying to impose agendas on teachers. All of the participants seemed willing to continue to attend professional development, but they wanted it to be useful and relevant to their practice.

### **Perceptions of Teacher Inadequacy**

Another theme that appeared in the data was that the participants felt inadequate in many areas of teaching. Content-area literacy was often the area that caused the participants concern because, for most of them, content-area literacy was not a part of their undergraduate study, and professional development activities that focused on the subject had failed to speak to the participants' identities. While we did not necessarily resolve these feelings of inadequacy during the limited time of our meetings, the PLC did provide a place to express those fears and frustrations to a supportive group. Though the participants all taught different content areas, all participants could appreciate the feelings of inadequacy expressed.

It is important that the participants were able to come together in such a way because part of an effective PLC "bears the complexity of human connectedness, strengthened by joint purpose, and strained by conflicted feelings" (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 91). The PLC was more than just another meeting, but, instead, a place for the participants to come together, not only for a joint purpose (content-area literacy), but also to connect with one another. The regular PLCs conducted in the school have lacked that connectedness, and have not had room for conflicted feelings such as inadequacy. The participants rarely had the opportunity to discuss their feelings

of inadequacy in their departmental PLCs because, as stated earlier, the meetings' focuses have been things such as scheduling, resources available, or standardized testing, a common problem with PLCs (Harris & Jones, 2010).

As a special education teacher, Gwen had to be an “expert” in all subject areas because her students struggled with the most basic literacy skills. As we discussed experiences with different texts, she expressed the difficulty she had with helping students in subjects with which she was not familiar. She told the story of having to help students navigate a science textbook chapter. She said, “There was vocabulary and they’re (the students) asking, ‘What is this?’ I didn’t know. That was difficult” (October 27, meeting #3). It was not surprising that Gwen felt inadequate to help her students with this assignment because she was not an expert in science. Draper, et. al. (2010) described texts such as science texts as “specialized” (p. 2), meaning they require different literacy skills than those of a novel or other traditional text. Through no fault of her own, Gwen “lacked the knowledge and resources necessary to support students’ development of these specialized disciplinary texts” (Draper, et al. 2010).

Melroy expressed frustration because, through our discussion in the PLC, we realized that literacy underwrote everything the students needed to learn. Literacy, we discovered, was so ubiquitous in every content area that it made him feel like it was impossible to meet the students’ literacy needs along with their content needs. He explained, “I can’t go through the 50 kids out of my 270 to help them individually, and many kids don’t need literacy instruction. It’s impossible” (October 27, meeting #3). The professional development meeting described in the introduction did not provide Melroy with any means of answering this valid concern. While there were no easy answers to Melroy’s concern, which we all shared, we realized that past professional development activities hadn’t even really addressed this concern or given us the



knowledge we would need to make lasting and meaningful changes to literacy in our classroom. Effective professional development would have likely provided some understanding of how to make changes that would ease Melroy's concern (Garat, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Suk Yoon, 2009).

Emma Jane expressed gratitude for what she was learning in the PLC because music literacy was completely neglected in her undergraduate program. She said her literacy class in college "did absolutely nothing to relate to music, and it was actually really frustrating to us future music teachers" (Individual interview). Many content-area teachers outside language arts experience similar neglect in the area of content-area literacy (Draper, et al. 2010). Emma Jane recognized that literacy was an important part of music, but she couldn't make the connections in her teaching. Discussing literacy in terms of her content area in the PLC allowed her to recognize that weakness in her practice. She explained the music literacy just came naturally to her and she didn't know how she could relate those skills to her students. While she was still exploring how to better implement literacy instruction in her classroom, Emma Jane was able to come away from the PLC with ideas that were practical to her discipline and her institutional identity, something teachers are seeking from professional development (Fullan & Miles, 1992).

My feelings of inadequacy stemmed more from being seen as a "literacy expert" both for my students and the faculty of the school. During the meeting, we began to discuss how the language arts department had purchased text books from other content areas in order to teach students literacy skills. I felt worried that it was a waste of money because I knew I was not a science or math expert, and therefore could not effectively teach science and math literacy. I also expressed how uncomfortable I felt telling other teachers how to use literacy instruction in their classrooms where they are actually the experts. I expressed how I did not like telling other

teachers how to use the school-wide writing rubric in their classrooms, but I had not been given a choice. I felt like the rubric was simply put in place, not to actually improve student writing in all content areas, but as a way to impress the accreditation committee. I felt the rubric did not apply to the overall learning goals of most of the faculty and was not “anchored in reality” (Musanti & Pence, 2010, p. 73), as professional development goals should be.

### **Participants’ Changes in Thinking Concerning Content-Area Literacy**

Perhaps the most interesting and common experiences the participants related during the PLC and the interviews were moments and stories in which participants realized their thinking about content-area literacy and how literacy related to their content areas had changed. While this was not the goal of the PLC, participants could easily articulate the ways in which they changed their beliefs about literacy and how professional development, when focused on the right things, could be useful for their practice. All of the participants explained how they gained new knowledge and hoped to incorporate that knowledge more fully into their practice. Their identities began to shift and develop further to incorporate the knowledge they had gained. Because knowledge cannot be separated from identity (Battey & Franke, 2008), the participants began to reshape their identities to embrace what they had learned.

Also, although the participants did not articulate this in their experiences, these changes in thinking created a group that had a better understanding of content-area literacy. The affinity identity of the participants in the PLC stemmed mainly from shared experiences, but with the changes in thinking about content-area literacy that occurred, the affinity identity expanded to a group of individuals with shared knowledge. Gee (2001) explains that shared knowledge can lead to “a set of common endeavors or practices” (p. 105). While the participants would all teach their subjects differently, they would all likely consider, and possibly incorporate literacy

instruction into their practice, which could help the students develop a wider set of literacy skills (Draper et al. 2010). Each participant began the group believing different, and even conflicting, things about content-area literacy, and each still had differing opinions about how to implement literacy instruction into their classrooms. What bound the participants in a new affinity group was that all the participants left the group with a shared agreement about an expanded definition of content-area literacy, which could pave the way for changes in practice and student learning goals.

**Expanded Definitions of Literacy.** Before the PLC began, Melroy believed we would be discussing how important it was for students to read in class. As the PLC went on, he said his expectations and reality were very different and said, “We discussed what literacy was (understanding and communicating) and it changed my view on what literacy was” (Individual interview). This change in thinking was significant to his institutional identity because he often talked about students who struggled in his class as though they were not trying, and therefore he could not do much for those students as their teacher. His new knowledge of literacy made him realize that “sometimes it isn’t because the kids aren’t trying, or aren’t smart, but because they don’t have the necessary knowledge to grasp it” (Individual interview). It is important to note that Melroy’s change in thinking did not come about by discussing best practices, a common theme in PLCs (Servage, 2008), but came about because of inquiry into what content-area literacy was. Melroy’s new ideas and knowledge about the subject had the potential to transform his practice (Servage, 2008).

Emma Jane described how the PLC meetings made her more aware of the literacy needs of her students. Her original idea of literacy involved the very basic, and widely accepted, definition of reading and writing using basic literacy skills such as decoding, fluency,

comprehension, and vocabulary (Draper, Smith, Hall, & Siebert, 2005). The new awareness she gained of literacy's much broader definition allowed her to focus her attention on her students' literacy needs in orchestra, and she began to include more direct instruction in her lessons. She explained, "I think my beginners have been more successful in recognizing things than in past years," (Individual interview). "Things" refers to specific music components. She also expressed a desire to understand more about how literacy affects the way her students play their instruments. She embraced being a music literacy teacher as part of her institutional identity.

Titania felt that her definition of literacy in different content areas expanded from the readings and during the PLC meetings. She said she always struggled with previous definitions of literacy given in professional development meetings. Her new knowledge "gave her solid ground to stand on" (Individual interview) as she made changes to her curriculum in preparation for the new core curriculum. Titania had been actively searching for ways to improve literacy instruction in her classroom, but, until her experience in the PLC, had no evidence that the things she had learned in previous professional development activities would work in her classroom. Professional development activities should be able to show how the methods presented can work in different contexts and empower teachers, rather than teachers being forced to fit something that is inauthentic into their curriculum (Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

**Discoveries of New Approaches to Literacy in the Classroom.** Gwen, too, described how her thinking about literacy changed as a result of participating in the PLC. She explained how understanding a broader definition of "text" in regards to literacy gave her hope for her students. She said, "I realized my students can be successful, or deemed literate, in different areas...even if they are not good 'readers'" (Individual interview). Gwen hoped to incorporate this new knowledge into her classroom to help her students feel successful. The way she thought

she had to approach literacy in her classroom, which was to endlessly practice traditional reading and writing, changed drastically. This change in thinking was significant because how teachers approach literacy in their classrooms can be one of the most important factors in the success of secondary students in reading practice (Nourie & Lenski, 1998). Gwen, whose students struggled to feel successful in any subject, believed she could help them feel more successful with literacy.

While I began the PLC with the most formal education concerning content-area literacy, my thinking changed a great deal as I listened to the other participants' comments and insights into the literature we studied. Melroy often asked questions that challenged my view of what literacy instruction should look like in the classroom. For example, one of the chapters in the book contained a vignette about a science teacher who pointed out to his students what literacy activities they were doing. Melroy did not feel that telling students they were doing literacy activities in science would be helpful. He made a good case that it was too contrived and the students would not accept it in a science classroom. I thought about that for a long time, and at the next meeting, I realized I agreed with him. My institutional identity was impacted because I changed my thinking about how I should approach literacy instruction with my students. Servage (2008) explains that PLCs should include conflicts in thinking if they lead to effective and lasting changes.

While the scope and length of this PLC did not allow for the participants to work together in updating lesson units and classroom practices, each of the participants wanted to take their new ideas to the next level in their practice. While some, like Emma Jane, described ways in which they were already changing their practice due to their new knowledge, others were making plans to adapt their practices in the future. PLCs are not often a place where teachers have time

to inquire into problems and questions that could ultimately lead to lasting and meaningful changes in practice (Hellner, 2008; Hord, 1998), but this PLC allowed for such inquiry.

### **Discussion**

This section will discuss highlight how the participants' experiences can possibly influence professional learning communities in the future. This section will also provide sections for further research.

### **Reflections About the Benefits of the Professional Learning Community**

The participants' stories of ineffective professional development, feelings of inadequacy, and new approaches to literacy in the classroom demonstrated the possible success of having more interdisciplinary, voluntary PLCs concerning a relevant topic such as content-area literacy. The participants shared stories in ways that allowed them to find support with the other participants. The participants were also able to discuss the problems they have experienced with past professional development in productive ways, often discussing possible solutions to those problems.

**Finding Support through PLCs.** In sharing their experiences during the PLC, the participants were able to find support among other teachers and articulate ways in which professional development could be more effective. While the goal of this study was to describe their experiences, the experiences the participants shared with each other illuminated how professional development, when focused on teachers' own ideas, can impact teachers' identity and, ultimately, their practice.

Because this PLC was organized in a way that allowed the participants to talk openly about the things they had learned, there was very little awkward ness among the group after the first few minutes of the first meeting. As the participants shared their own experiences with

professional development and classroom situations related to content-area literacy, the group was able to support each other. Although the PLC did not come up with solutions for every problem, none of the participants felt like they couldn't say what they were thinking.

Each participant also felt safe venting their frustrations during the PLC. There was no judgment from the other participants, and most tried to offer encouragement, empathy, or even ideas to help ease some of those frustrations. It is not often in a professional development setting that teachers can simply talk to each other about their practice, but this PLC encouraged such talk, which extended beyond the actual PLC meetings. The participants reported discussing the readings and our PLC conversations during their lunch hour, and they would discuss what frustrated them about the readings or what they hoped we would discuss in the PLC meeting. Clearly, the participants felt they had built a supportive professional relationship as they participated in this PLC.

**Solving the Problems of Professional Development.** As stated previously, the participants discussed how past professional development had not met their needs as teachers. Melroy, in describing his frustration with literacy professional development, said,

“If literacy were presented to me as ‘communicate effectively’ instead of using this, this, and this strategy, then I’d be, like, ok, I need to take my science stuff and I need to make sure the kids know how to understand anything that’s presented as science” (October 27, meeting #3).

While Melroy was discussing literacy specifically, he was also solving one problem of ineffective professional development, which is that professional development often does not speak to teachers’ institutional identities, which, for Melroy and many secondary teachers, had always been guided by the content he taught. If organizers of professional development were to

understand that what is presented needs to connect to teachers' identities, it would be much more helpful.

Another important idea which these experiences illustrate is that the literature we read provided the participants a wide breadth of research, which allowed the participants to extract the ideas that connected with their identities rather than being forced into a particular box because of one small piece of research. Often the participants discussed "research" like it was their enemy, in part because they had rarely been presented with a complete picture. Perhaps because we read many different articles and chapters relating to content-area literacy, the participants were able to see a more holistic picture of what was meant by content-area literacy, and, more importantly, the breadth of information allowed them to find how the research that fit with their own ideas and practice.

The public perception of teachers is often that they need somebody else to come in and help them develop professionally, and the most common type of professional development activity is workshops and conferences where an "expert" comes and talks to teachers (Garat, et al., 2009), even though research has shown how little this type of professional development actually improves teachers' practices (Garat, et al., 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). While I organized and facilitated the PLC, I was by no means "in charge" of the discussions. There was no "other" more experienced person there telling the participants what to do or how to teach, and yet they were able to determine better ways of teaching through developing their own institutional identities, and form a stronger affinity identity, which could also strengthen the participants as educators.



## **Suggestions for further research**

The PLC was only meant to be a discussion group. There was not time over the course of our six meetings for the participants to apply what they had learned in previous discussions to lesson plans or other classroom practices, though all the participants said they would like to take this type of PLC to the next level where they could work with other teachers to improve literacy instruction in their lessons. With more time, it would be important to see how effective the PLC would be if it were taken to that level.

This suggests that, while the participants appreciated the discussion and gained a stronger understanding of content-area literacy, they would also benefit from practical application in their professional development activities, something researchers say is extremely important in a professional development activity(Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). Because of the rich discussions the participants had with each other, it would be interesting to see how those discussions translated into practical application.

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## Appendix A: Readings and Data Analysis Tables

Table 1

*Readings for PLC Meetings and Discussion Leaders*

| Meeting               | Literature  | Discussion Leader                     |
|-----------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1. September 14, 2011 | Why content-area literacy messages do not speak to mathematics teachers: A critical content analysis (Siebert & Draper, 2008) | Mary-Researcher/language arts teacher |
| 2. October 13, 2011   | Chapter 2 <i>(Re)Imagining Content-Area Literacy Instruction</i> (Draper, Broomhead, Petersen, et al., 2010)                  | Mary-Researcher/language arts teacher |
| 3. October 27, 2011   | Chapter 9: Science <i>(Re)Imagining Content-Area Literacy Instruction</i> (Draper, Broomhead, Petersen, et al., 2010)         | Melvin-Science teacher                |
| 4. November 3, 2011   | Chapter 3: Math <i>(Re)Imagining Content-Area Literacy Instruction</i> (Draper, Broomhead, Petersen, et al., 2010)            | Titania-Math teacher                  |
| 5. December 8, 2011   | What's more important—Literacy or content? (Draper, et al., 2005)   | Mary-Researcher/language arts teacher |
| 6. January 5, 2012    | Chapter 5: Music <i>(Re)Imagining Content-Area Literacy Instruction</i> (Draper, Broomhead, Petersen, et al., 2010)           | Emma Jane-Orchestra teacher           |



Table 2

*Data Analysis Charts*

| Beliefs/Values  | Goals for student outcomes   | Practices  | Past experience with PD   |
|---|--|--|---|
| <p>if it were understood that literacy is simply being able to understand what other people have done, and being able to understand what you have done then that's very basic to any discipline</p> | <p>In science, I have to have the kids write in order for them to communicate what they know. I can't do a "playing" test, and I can't have them do an equation, most of them because I teach everybody and I have kids who don't know what an equation is yet. So, in that, it works but I only apply, they write something almost every day, but I only apply SLAMS on big stuff because in science, if I want, a lot of the questions surround "What was the data?" I do not need them to write out the data in sentences because it's a lot of extra work and takes too long but for the larger assignments, spelling is important, grammar is important; On literacy are we talking mostly writing or mostly reading?</p> | <p>I try to teach the kids how to look at an experiment and get stuff out of it. That would be what I focus on. I haven't used the book for, like, three years because J.L. didn't use the book, and I looked at him and said "you're teaching it better than me" and books are a pain in the rear, so they've been large paper-weights underneath my desks for the last three years don't know how to teach them how to get it out of the book better than they already do other than saying the important stuff is bolded. Look for the bolded words, read the paragraph headings,</p> | <p>It seems like the article as written was less about convincing math teachers that they need to get into literacy, and more about convincing literacy people that math teachers are already doing it so leave them alone, or at least stop getting on their back for not doing it</p> |
| <p>why do I care if it's named literacy?</p>  | <p>That should be one of the main focuses we have for kids. If literacy were presented to me as "communicate effectively" instead of using this this and this as a strategy, then I'd be like, Ok, I need to take my science stuff, and I need to make sure the kids know how to understand anything that's presented as science. I'm trying to get them to think about science</p>  | <p>for me, this is terrible of me, but 504s, IEPs, I basically ignore them. The only thing I really do with them is I make sure the kids are sitting in the front, and I make sure they go and get their tests read to them. Other than that, I've just incorporated everything else. Anybody can use a calculator if they want. They can have as much time on the tests as they need, because I can't go through 50 kids out of my 270 and individually organize something for the other</p>  | <p>When it is presented in a faculty meeting, literacy is one of those "other things" we have to put up with until we can get back to work</p>  |

|                            | <b>Nature-Identity</b>  | <b>Institution-Identity</b>  | <b>Discourse-identity</b> | <b>Affinity-Identity</b>   |
|----------------------------|---|--|---------------------------|--|
| <b>Temporality</b>         | <p>I just get so nervous for those kids because unless you're in special ed, you move on. I look at all the eighth and ninth graders we have in pre-algebra who are struggling, but are trying, and I'm like, you poor things. (S)</p> <p>I used to be one of those teachers who would be like, why can't those teachers get on board with this, of course they need to know how to read and write! I used to be that person until I started learning more and talking to more content-area teachers, and then I'm like, oh I kind of feel like a jerk now. (M)</p> <p>I want them to go out knowing their opinions count and are allowed to have them without it being an object lesson. So I don't want literacy to be an object lesson. I would hope that this, for me, what this is when I look at reading a short story, I don't always consider the literacy supports. Sometimes I dive in and I realize they are lost. I just want to keep the literacy supports in my mind so that I can plan them. (M)</p> | <p>The group did not change my goals more than the new core has changed my goals. Rather, it confirmed that the goals we had already begun were valuable. (R)</p> <p>When it is presented at faculty meeting literacy is one of those "other things" we have to put up with until we can get back to work (B)</p> <p>What's a bit of literacy going to do? It's not going to help as many as it's going to bring everybody else down for taking time out (B)</p> <p>I need to work on tying it to something important to them. That's hard for me because I am thinking of all the things I have to get through in a year. (M)</p> <p>I think I mentioned this before on the language arts core, they've almost eliminated any literature. It's mostly informational texts. Awesome. I'm still using literature. I think that's important, and so, you can do that, but it's just I think it's harder to find answers to what you're needing when research says this but it doesn't get into practical things until much much later. You feel like PD is a waste because they haven't caught up. (M)</p> |                           | <p>I've played music for how long now? To me it's just natural obviously and my literacy class in college did absolutely nothing to relate to music and it was actually really frustrating to us future music teachers. So, I found the group thought provoking because something that has been a part of me for so long and they are obviously the things I teach but can't say I ever really thought of it as "literacy" but as we read the first article and chapters in the book, it was like "Oh right!" that makes sense (J)</p> <p>Not to bring up a sad thing, but when we found out my dad's cancer was back, they couldn't go in and biopsy because he was so sick. They discovered it from reading scans. That's how they figured it out. Normally they would need to biopsy. They knew enough about his cancer to know from scans. It was pretty interesting. I was glad they had that literacy. (M)</p> |
| <b>Changes in Thinking</b> | <b>Ineffective PD</b>   | <b>Feelings of inadequacy</b>  | <b>Rebellion</b>          |  |

|  |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <p>I had already started making changes because in preparation for the new math core, but the fact that those changes are also making my students more literate and I understand that is what I should be doing for literacy as well. I thought it was such good information to have that I had my student teacher read the section on math from the book <b>(R)</b></p> | <p>When it is presented at faculty meeting literacy is one of those “other things” we have to put up with until we can get back to work. If literacy were presented to me (in PD) as “communicate effectively” instead of using this, this, and this strategy, then I’d be like, Ok, I need to take my science stuff and make sure the kids know how to understand anything that’s presented as science. I’m trying to get them to think about science <b>(B)</b></p> <p>As soon as they flash test scores (in PD) I stop paying attention. I haven’t looked at test scores in years <b>(B)</b></p> | <p>I just get so nervous for those kids because unless you’re in special ed, you move on. I look at all the eighth and ninth graders we have in pre-algebra who are struggling, but are trying, and I’m like, you poor things. <b>(S)</b></p> | <p>What’s a bit of literacy going to do? It’s not going to help as many as it’s going to bring everybody else down for taking time out <b>(B)</b></p> <p>My experience is, with people that have more time than their job needs, they try to make themselves useful by coming up with stuff for other people to do <b>(B)</b></p> |
|--|---|---|---|

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### Group Interview Questions:

- What new information have you learned about literacy over the course of the PLC?
- How, if at all, do you think what we have studied and discussed will impact your planning and practice?
- What information from the readings and our discussions impacted you the most?

### Individual Interview Questions

- Describe what you were expecting from the PLC before we started.
- Describe to me the ways in which your teaching beliefs and attitudes were influenced over the course of the PLC.
- Tell me about any changes in your practice or planning that occurred as a result of the PLC.
- Tell me about how participating in the PLC affected your perceptions about content-area literacy.
- Describe to me how your goals for student learning were influenced over the course of the PLC.
- Tell me how the PLC influenced how you view your role as your students' teacher in your content area.
- Describe which meeting/meetings resonated most strongly with you.
- How did you feel reading and discussing chapters outside your content area?
- Tell me about any meetings that were unhelpful.
- Describe how you felt the week you were in charge of the discussion.

- How would you feel if more professional development activities were organized in this way?

## **APPENDIX A: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This study will focus on professional development in the form of a professional learning community. I will analyze data from the study using the lens of teacher identity. This section will focus on what research has to say about professional learning communities and teacher identity. Since content area literacy is a contextual aspect of the study, it will be discussed in depth in the methodology section. The subject of the study is professional development within an interdisciplinary professional learning community. While content area literacy is an important topic, for the purposes of this study, it is the vehicle by which the collaborative study group will function.

### **Professional Learning Communities**

Because the purpose of this study is to uncover the stories of individual teachers involved in a specific professional development activity, it is important to understand what the research says about this particular type of professional development, which can be labeled a professional learning community (PLC). Hord (1997) defines PLCs as “communities of continuous inquiry and improvement” (p. 10) with the goal of improving their practice and student achievement. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) expand the definition of PLCs as “Teachers working collaboratively together to reflect on practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes” (p. 4). Clearly the goal of PLCs is to make schools a place of learning not just for students, but for teachers as well (Hord, 1997; McLaughlin, 2006).

The public discourse on education in the United States revolves around making teachers more accountable for what happens in their classrooms. There is a close link between the quality of student learning and the quality of teachers in the classroom (Wood, 2007). Many school

districts across the country have implemented professional learning communities (PLCs) in their schools to theoretically help teachers continue to improve in their quality. In a secondary setting, this is most often carried out in the form of collaboration within a department to plan curriculum, and discuss learning assessments (Servage, 2008). PLCs are not limited to departmental meetings, however, and can be broadened to any professional group seeking to inform their beliefs and practice.

While the practice of PLCs is relatively new, the concept is not. Dewey (1970) discussed the importance of having teachers meet together to discuss and analyze their classroom practices based on student learning and achievement. Sergiovanni (1996) emphasized the importance of schools working as a community to develop common goals and values in order to create the best learning environment possible.

More recently, Hargreaves (1994) believes that schools should be a place where knowledge is constructed, not only among students, but among teachers as well. Instead of simply implementing practice after practice, teachers need to analyze, inquire, and discern what is helping students truly construct knowledge themselves and what is not (Schön, 1983). Furthermore, research suggests that when teachers participate in professional development that allows them to have social and emotional engagement about ideas and learning goals with colleagues, they feel supported in their construction of knowledge (Little, 1993). Established PLCs within a school can give teachers that social interaction on a regular basis if the PLCs are organized with the goal of constructing knowledge that will increase their quality as teachers.

As stated earlier, the goals of effective professional development include change three major areas: the classroom practices of teachers, teachers' attitudes and beliefs, and changing or improving the learning outcomes of students (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). PLCs are an

important way to meet these goals and, when practiced well, they create opportunities for teachers to socially interact with one another in a way that allows them to inquire into their own practices and beliefs and co-construct knowledge which will help them make necessary changes or advancements in their teaching (Achinstein, 2002; M. Clement & R. Vandenberghe, 2000; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990; Little, 1987, 1993)

Effective PLCs meet all of the goals of effective professional development and are more readily available than other forms of professional development such as in-service meetings, conferences, and institutes. Most schools hold PLCs on a regular basis, allowing teachers to constantly revisit their practice and beliefs to construct new knowledge that will improve teacher quality.

The research does not examine teachers' experiences with PLCs that are organized and directed by teachers rather than by administrations or department heads. Since secondary education PLCs are most often organized by subject areas, it is necessary to describe the experiences of teachers involved in voluntary, interdisciplinary PLCs. The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of teachers in such a PLC, and to determine how those experiences answer the research questions outlined in chapter one relating to effective professional development.

Because the goals of effective professional development seek to make lasting changes in teachers' practices and beliefs, those outward changes will likely lead to overall identity development for teachers. When discussing their profession, teachers often identify themselves based on various aspects of their job such as "I am a math teacher," or "I am the head of student council." Effective professional development seeks to help teachers identify with better



practices, attitudes, and beliefs, and thus become better practitioners because they identify with better ways of teaching and learning.

### **Teacher Identity**

Identity plays a strong role in the beliefs of teachers, and has a large impact on their practice. Gee (2001) outlines four aspects of identity. Though they are not individual aspects, all four work together in using identity as a lens to analyze teachers' stories. The first, *nature identity*, is considered a "state" or something that is part of a one's identity without he or she doing anything to make that happen, such as birth order in a family. Next is the *institution identity*, which identifies one's position in life, such as a job title, given to an individual by some authority. The third aspect of identity is the *discourse identity*, which refers to one's individual personality traits such as shyness, charisma, etc. These traits are assigned to individuals based on others' interaction with them. Finally, the last aspect of identity is the *affinity identity*, which is the way identity is formed in "affinity groups" or groups who share in similar practices as one another (Gee, 2001).

Scholars' definitions of identity vary widely, but it is common belief that teacher identity is dynamic and constantly shifting due to many contextual and personal factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Professional identity is the framework in which teachers construct their practice, ideals, ethics, and development (Sachs, 2005b). Because identity is such a difficult concept to define, many researchers focus on how identities are formed, rather than what identities are. This is important because this study will focus on teachers' stories about professional development and how this experience influenced them, which is not a definition of identity itself, but formation of new aspects of identity based on external and internal influences such as discourse with colleagues, personal reflection, etc.

There are many things that influence teachers' identities. First, teachers' identities are influenced and developed in large part by their interactions with their colleagues. This idea coincides with Gee's discourse and affinity identities. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) state, "A teacher's identity is shaped and reshaped in interaction with others in a professional context," (p. 178). Gee (2001) takes this idea of interaction a step further, claiming that others with whom teachers interact will assign an identity to them, viewing them as a certain type of person. Day and colleagues (2006) claim that teachers, in constructing their own identity, use the opinions of others as a major influence in the process. With the current trend toward collaboration in education, teachers will continue to interact more and more with other teachers, allowing for further development of their identities.

Second, teachers' identities are influenced by institutional factors, such as district and school policies and government legislation. There are certain policies and laws in place which identify teachers. Gee describes this process as making sure that certain behaviors and practices are recognized a certain way by the general public (2001). While the institution may impose facets of identity on teachers, teachers themselves decide to what level they are going to take upon themselves the institutional identity (Gee, 2001). The level to which teachers take on institutional identity can depend largely on how they identify their job responsibilities.

Third, teachers' identities are influenced by their own values. For instance, Clarke (2009) refers to the "subjective" influences (events, practices, contexts, etc) in which teachers have some choice and must decide how their identity will be shaped by these influences based on their personal beliefs. For instance, a teacher may identify themselves as an employee, paid to do a certain job, while others consider themselves professional educators with a responsibility to improve the profession, or they may look at themselves as servants, "called" to teach. No

position can really be imposed upon teachers, but teachers can choose to take on those identities based on public discourse, classroom situations, district and state policies, etc.

Finally, teachers' identities are influenced by the subjects and age groups they teach. Keltchermans (1993) uses the term "task perception" to describe the ways in which teachers describe what it is they teach. How teachers perceive their teaching tasks relates closely with how they identify themselves as educators (Day, et al., 2006). Teachers also identify themselves in terms of their relationship with their students. Whether the relationship is positive or negative, interactions between teachers and their students helps teachers build their professional identity (Sikes, 1992). Changes in both subject matter and student interaction can have a strong negative effect on teachers who have established their professional identities (Sikes, 1992).

Effective professional development potentially has a large impact on three of Gee's aspects of identity. Guskey (2002) claims that professional development is organized with a determination to change teachers' attitudes and beliefs, improve classroom practice, and improve student learning outcomes. Organizers of professional development hope to promote positive change, which could lead to changes in institutional, discourse, and affinity identities.

The ways in which teachers identify themselves in the context of their profession is a key consideration in the subject of content area literacy. Interaction with colleagues, institutional policies, individual teacher beliefs, and choice of discipline all work together in influencing teachers' identities, which are constantly changing. The dynamic nature of each of these influences can allow for a change in attitudes toward content area literacy instruction if these influences themselves embrace content area literacy instruction as an important part of each academic discipline.

The organization of this study, which is discussed in chapter 3, will focus on the research questions, which are:

- In what ways did participants perceive change in their practice over the course of the semester in which they participated in the collaborative study group?
- In what ways did the teachers in the collaborative study group perceive their beliefs and attitudes to change over the course of the collaborative study group?
- In what ways did the teachers perceive changes in their goals for student achievement over the course of the collaborative study group?

The participants' experiences involving each of these study questions are all essentially experiences concerning their identities as teachers since institutional and affect identities focus on practice, beliefs and attitudes, and goals for student achievement.

## APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions previously mentioned, I will conduct a narrative inquiry study. Clandinin and Murphy define narrative inquiry as “the study of storied experience, ours and our participants’ composed within the particularity of the personal, social, temporal, and place that is the project of the narrative researchers” (p. 600). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the use of narrative inquiry in terms of a *three-dimensional narrative inquiry space*, which includes *temporality* (past, present, and future), *personal and social* (interactions), and *place* (p. 50).

The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space is important to this study because the study take place over the course of several months, which gives participants the opportunity time (temporality) to reflect and create richer stories of their experience. One-time professional development activities do not give the participants time for reflection which would influence their beliefs and attitudes, their practice, and their goals for student achievement.

The study group will also be a series of interactions with one another, with literature, and with our own feelings about the experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These interactions will likely influence the stories the participants relate about their experiences because within the school and other professional development activities the teachers do not often have the opportunity to interact with teachers from other content areas. Without understanding the ideas teachers from other content areas contribute to subjects like content area literacy, teachers do not get to consider perspectives other than their own. Other perspectives will have an impact on the stories the participants will relate as they describe their experiences in the study group.

Finally, the place in which the study group occurs will likely have bearing on the participants’ stories because, unlike other district-organized professional development activities,

the study group will take place in the school in which the participants teach. Unlike other district-organized professional development activities, the place in which the study group occurs gives the participants the opportunity to immediately consider the ideas we discuss in the meetings in the context of their own classrooms. This will inevitably influence each participant's experience within the group, because the place in which narrative inquiry is conducted places certain boundaries on the inquiry itself (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because participants will feel a sense of ownership over the location of the study, those boundaries will relate to their beliefs about their teaching practice, an important aspect of effective professional development.

I will organize a professional development opportunity in the form of a collaborative study group. I will record the collaborative meetings and hold interviews with each of the participants after the study group meetings have ended. I want the participants to have time to reflect on their experiences with the study group in order to understand their perceptions at the end of the experience.

### **Researcher's Stance**

I will participate in the collaborative study group, but my role will mainly be that of a facilitator so that I can focus on being a researcher. I understand, however, that in the course of the meetings, it may be difficult to keep this focus as I will be working with colleagues who present ideas and experiences that will be provocative to me as a teacher within the same school. Because of this difficulty, my role as a facilitator may change to that of a full participant, and I will have to balance my experience with my role as the researcher. If this is the case, I will include data about my own experience participating in the collaborative study group.

Studying our own ideas about teaching can be intensely personal, and can create lasting changes to our own identities, practice, and the school as a whole, as those experiences are likely

to influence those with whom we work closely. As I will be participating in the collaborative study group, rather than being a silent observer, the experiences of the participants' will be storied alongside my own, although in my findings, I will focus on the participants' experiences.

## **Context**

We will hold the collaborative study group at a junior high in the intermountain west. This junior high houses about 1300 students and includes 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grades. The area surrounding the junior high is suburban, with a few businesses, but mainly middle-class and working-class families.

Within the school itself, the principal has organized many different professional development activities focusing on literacy. The response from content-area teachers within the school has been negative overall. Many content-area teachers have expressed the opinion that it is not "their job" to teach literacy, or that literacy is not a part of their core curriculum. It is clear to me that there is a missing link in the communication about this issue. The professional development activities surrounding content area literacy, such as trainings from English teachers, visiting speakers, and workshops have not appeared to help alleviate the negative feelings expressed by content-area teachers. The characteristics of effective professional development (changing teachers' attitudes and beliefs, changing teachers' classroom practice, and improving student learning outcomes) have not been met.

This is also the school where I teach, so I have a vested interest in the issue of literacy, as well as effective professional development. In addition, choosing the location where I teach will make attending the meetings more convenient for the participants. It is important to me that the study group does not feel like a burden to the participants because I want participants to be able to have an open mind concerning the learning experience of the collaborative study group. One

way I can make sure the participants do not feel extra burden is to eliminate extra travel, which would equate to extra time on the part of the participants. There is also a sense of community among the teachers within this school, so having the study group in the building will allow for the participants to feel more comfortable with one another.

**Collaborative Study Group.** As previously mentioned, I will conduct a collaborative study group after school. This will occur twice a month beginning in the August of 2011 and ending in January of 2012. I will organize the collaborative study group with the goal of meeting Guskey's (2002) three major characteristics of effective professional development discussed previously. The meetings will last 45 minutes to one hour. The participants will read professional materials such as articles about content area literacy, chapters from content area literacy education books, etc. We will also use technology to study the issue of content area literacy, exploring media available on the subject.

As the organizer of the collaborative study group, I will provide the framework for the meetings. For example, I will begin class discussions based on the professional material we have read or studied, or I will share a related experience I have had. The participants, however, will guide the direction of the discussion. Because I want to discover the story of this particular professional development experience, it is important that all the participants feel ownership in the group.

Much of the reading we will do in the study group will come from *(Re)Imagining Content area literacy Instruction* (Draper, Broomhead, Jensen, Nokes, & Siebert, 2010). Each participant will receive a copy of the book. Participants will be encouraged to take notes on the chapters and highlight provocative ideas. We will also read various research articles from professional publications concerning content area literacy.



**Content Area Literacy.** Because the content of the meetings will be content area literacy, it is important to understand what much of the literature says about the subject. As the researcher and a language arts teacher, it is important to me to understand how other teachers identify themselves and their roles as they relate to content area literacy. It is also important to understand why this is an important topic on which to focus for a professional development activity.

The focus of the collaborative study group in this study will be content area literacy. Livingston and Davis (1998) claim that how content area teachers approach literacy in their classroom can be one of the most important factors in the success of secondary students in reading practice. Draper et al. (2005) describe literacy as something that goes beyond “general literacy skills” (p. 1) such as decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. They explain that students must be “steeped in ideas” (p. 2), meaning interacting and making meaning out of the specific texts within the different content areas, and texts that are lacking in language arts classrooms, where literacy instruction has traditionally taken place at the secondary level. Language arts curricula focus largely on skills rather than ideas, thus depriving students of the instruction needed to delve into ideas of the different content areas.

In the past, literacy instruction has occurred mainly in elementary school, focusing on basic reading skills with the idea that those skills would expand and transfer to more difficult and advanced literacy practices. While certain basic skills such as decoding and basic comprehension, are necessary for all reading tasks, there is much more to literacy instruction than a general set of skills (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). The current job market requires advanced literacy skills for a wide range of both high and low paying jobs. With advancements in technology, colleges and universities also require a more advanced set of literacy skills from

students in order to participate in the curriculum (Carnevale, 1991). Basic reading skills disconnected from specific content are no longer adequate to help students be successful in either higher education or the job market.

Despite the realities that language arts teachers do not have the resources, time, or knowledge to give literacy instruction that would benefit all content areas, there is often resistance on the part of content area literacy teachers to include literacy instruction in their curriculum. Siebert and Draper attribute this resistance to “unhelpful beliefs” (p. 229). These beliefs include: (a) they are not responsible for literacy instruction because they do not teach reading and writing, (b) they do not feel qualified to teach reading and writing, and (c) they cannot fit literacy instruction into their curriculum (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995; Ratekin, et al., 1985; Stewart & O'Brien, 1989). Unfortunately these beliefs, though inaccurate, are somewhat justified among content area teachers due to inappropriate definitions and communication about literacy (Siebert & Draper, 2008).

Conley (2008) calls literacy strategies “cognitive strategies.” Perhaps this vocabulary might help content area teachers feel less intimidated by literacy instruction in their classrooms. Conley (2008) defines cognitive strategies as “constructive interactions with texts, both written and digital, in which good readers and writers continuously create meaning (p. 84). With that definition in mind, it is easy to understand how Language Arts teachers, those usually responsible for literacy instruction in schools, may not be able to expand their literacy instruction to include all the strategies necessary to make meaning in all the different content area texts. Conley (2008) further explains the cognitive strategies necessary to make meaning and construct knowledge include inquiry, summarizing, activating schema (prior knowledge), and combining

prior knowledge with new information. Literacy instructors focus on similar strategy development when engaging students with texts.

### **Participants**

I will seek teachers from different content areas, including math, science, orchestra, special education, and health to participate in this study. I will request volunteers to participate in the collaborative study group. Because literacy instruction has largely been seen as the responsibility of language arts teachers, and for the purposes of this study, I will define “content area” as subjects outside of language arts. In order to have an open dialogue within the study group, it is important that the participants do not feel like this is another “English department project,” which is a common feeling in this particular junior high school among content area teachers. The focus of the readings and activities in the group will be content area literacy.

I am a language arts teacher, and I will also participate in the study group in order to help participants begin conversations surrounding the professional literature and their own experiences. I will make it clear during the first meeting of the group that I am doing this study in order to understand their experiences throughout the course of the meetings, and I will not be pushing any language arts “agendas” in the meetings. I want the participants to take ownership of the study group in order to make their experience more authentic.

### **Data Collection**

The data from this study will come primarily from two sources, meeting recordings and individual interviews with each of the participants. However, because I will be a participant in the collaborative study group as well, I will write an autobiographical piece before we begin the study group to better understand my own position concerning content area literacy and professional development. I will also record a journal entry on paper after each collaborative

study group meeting. These two data sources may not be reported on in the findings, but will appear in the appendix. I will record the meetings over the course of the collaborative study group, and hold interviews at the end of the semester in which we meet.

**Autobiographical reflection.** Before the collaborative study group begins, I will write a short autobiographical piece about my experience with professional development and content area literacy within the context of this school. I want to have a better understanding of how I perceive my own identity and place within the school before we begin the meetings. This will better help me story the perceptions of the other participants' experiences.

**Researcher's journal.** After each study group meeting, I will journal my impressions, thoughts, feelings, etc. concerning what I felt happened during the meeting. Again, my perceptions of my experiences throughout the study group will have an impact on how I understand the stories of the participants, so keeping a journal will allow me to look back on particular meetings to which the participants may refer. They will also allow me to clarify details, feelings, and events the meetings as I perceived them to occur.

**Meeting recordings.** Data sources for the study will include recordings of the collaborative study group meetings, and individual interviews with participants. I will use the recordings of the meetings to discover the experience of the group, as well as individual reactions from the participants to materials and comments involved in the meetings' discussions. The purpose of this data will be for me to uncover the participants' stories concerning content area literacy. The recordings will likely include discussions about the readings for the meetings, possible lesson planning and classroom experiences concerning content area literacy, and participants' questions concerning content area literacy.

**Interviews.** Using interviews as a way of telling a professional story is common in education, but is also subject to many contextual factors such as the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, the place of the interview, time of day, etc. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Even with those limitations, however, the interviews will further help me understand and describe how the participants' viewed their experiences within the study group. This is important because my own perceptions of the experiences within the study group may need clarification or further explanation. The interviews will be only one form of data, and will not be the only focus of the study.

I will interview each participant at the end of the semester in which we hold the study group. I will use Google chat to interview participants. This will allow the participants more time to think through their answers and use more accurate language according to their thoughts. It may also relieve some nervousness that may come with a face-to-face interview, allowing participants to be relaxed and open throughout the interview process. I will create a semi-structured interview, using questions that relate to the three characteristics of effective professional development discussed previously. I will also use follow-up questions as needed. Some examples of possible interview questions include:

- In what ways were your teaching beliefs and attitudes influenced during the course of the study group?
- Describe any changes in classroom practice you experienced throughout the course of the study group.
- In what ways were your goals for student learning outcomes influenced over the course of the study group?

- How much ownership did you feel of the collaborative study group over the course of the meetings?

The questions align with standards of effective professional development. I will not ask questions concerning content area literacy because the meeting recordings will provide sufficient data to understand participants' experiences with that material.

### **Data Analysis**

**Three-dimensional narrative inquiry space.** The three aspects of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space I discussed earlier in the chapter are also central to the purposes of my study, and will play a large role in how I analyze the data. As I first begin analysis, I will use this three-dimensional space to identify stories within the data. The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space will not be pre-determined categories because I will not be using pre-determined categories, but the narrative inquiry space will allow me to identify the stories in the context of temporality, social interactions, and place.

As I transcribe data from our collaborative study group meetings and interviews, temporality will be an important aspect of the analysis. For instance, a story a participant may relate during the collaborative study group may change when I interview the participants individually because of the time between the meetings and the interviews. I will hold interviews after all of the study group meetings, which will give the teachers more time to reflect on the material and their experiences in a holistic manner, while their experiences within the meetings may reflect their feelings in the moment before reflection has occurred.

In my analysis of the data, I will also need to consider the social interactions between all of the participants. When meetings first start, there will likely be discomfort among the group because this is not a group of teachers who regularly meet together socially or professionally

since the participants all represent different departments within the school. As the meetings go on, the interactions will become more comfortable, which will allow for more open sharing of experiences, thoughts, and feelings about the content of the study group. My analysis of the early meetings will be different from those of the later meetings and interviews because it is very likely that the experiences and stories will become richer and more detailed as we grow more comfortable in our interactions, allowing for more connections to effective professional development practices and teacher identity.

Finally, the idea of space will also affect my analysis of the data. We will be meeting in our own school. We are not traveling to another site to participate in someone else's idea of professional development. Because the space is "ours," the experiences and stories related will likely be influenced by our school and classrooms rather than outside sources. I will analyze the data in terms of the space in which the participants are comfortable, and in terms of the school climate as it relates to the teachers' identities and beliefs.

I will transcribe the recordings from the meetings and interviews and use inductive analysis in order to identify categories and themes related to professional development and identity evident in the raw data (Thomas, 2004) and that relate to the individuals' stories about this professional development experience. After I have identified the themes, I will "re-story" the participants' experiences using the themes as a framework (Creswell, 2008) The interviews will allow me to learn the teachers' experience upon reflection and the meeting recordings will allow me to understand teachers' experiences in the moment of the meetings. I will also use direct quotes as exemplars to represent overarching themes in the data.

After I have identified the stories using the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, I will use identity as the lens through which I analyze the data to see what the stories reveal about

identity, teacher beliefs and practices, and perceptions of student learning goals. As identity plays a large part in how teachers story their lives, I will examine what aspects of the individuals' identities were most apparent and developed throughout the course of the collaborative study group. I will use Gee's four aspects of identity to relate the individuals' experiences. Again, these four aspects of identity will not be used as pre-determined categories. I will look for examples of identity issues in the recording transcriptions of the meetings and individual interviews. Identity language will likely be used as the ideas we are discussing within the study group will almost definitely create friction between what the participants' have perceived their identities to be before their participation in the group.

**Teacher Identity.** As I stated earlier, I will use identity as the lens through which I analyze the stories of the participants. Since the participants will represent several different subject areas, their identities as teachers will influence their experience in studying content area literacy. At the beginning of the study group, each of the participants will share how they would define their teacher identity and where they feel literacy fits into that identity. I will also ask questions during individual interviews in relation to their content area and their feelings about teaching literacy in their classroom.

As previously mentioned, one of the goals of effective professional development is to change teachers' attitudes and beliefs. Much of what guides those attitudes and beliefs are the identities teachers take upon themselves in their teaching. In the literature review, I discuss in detail the four ways to view identity, and each of those ways has an effect on teacher beliefs and attitudes. These ways to view identity will not be a priori categories for analyzing my research, but will help guide my analysis as I identify language as it relates to teacher identity in general.



Much of the literature we will read will focus on a shifting identity from teaching math or science to teaching literacy. It will be important to see how the literature represents the how teachers identify with being instructors of literacy, and how the participants react to that literature. In the individual interviews, I will also ask questions concerning if and how they have felt their identities shift as a result of the study group.

Because the study group is not being organized or conducted by an administrator, it is not likely there will be an institutional identity shift as a result of the study group. However, since affinity identity deals with the identity that comes from practice, I anticipate that the participants will reconsider their practice over the course of the study group. We will also be discussion literacy as it relates to other content areas, so I also anticipate participants will further develop their discourse identity due to being exposed to more literature on the topic.

**Characteristics of effective professional development.** Finally, using Guskey's three major characteristics of effective professional development outlined in chapter one, I will determine how the teachers' experiences and stories about the collaborative study group relate to those characteristics. Most of the data for the professional development experience will come through the individual interviews at the end of the collaborative study group. However, there will most likely be statements from the meeting recordings that will also relate to the professional development experiences as well as the experiences with content area literacy.

### **Limitations**

There are some important limitations to this study. Due to the participants' full schedules, our meetings will only last 45 minutes to one hour twice a month. While this will provide a good amount of data, it may not be enough to re-story the full depth of the participants' experience. It is also important to note that the data is not to be used prescriptively. My focus is to tell the story

of these teachers, and therefore is only to be used as a descriptive study. The data from the study is not to be used to identify causal relationships related to this type of professional development activity.

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