# The Phenomenon of Negotiating Early Literacy Instruction: A Kindergarten Teacher's Narrative

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by

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Reading Education

## ABSTRACT

In this post-intentional phenomenological study, I explored how one kindergarten teacher negotiated different knowledge-based claims around early literacy. Educational researchers have long attempted to model how teachers' knowledge develops over the course of their careers (e.g., Alexander & Fives, 2000; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Those existing models depicted knowledge development as a technical, sequential progression as teachers accumulate greater amounts and better forms of knowledge. I questioned these rational descriptions of teacher growth through iterative, responsive close readings of multiple sources of data. Data included classroom observations, grade-level team meeting observations, interviews, written reflections, and documents. Results were presented in the form of 13 extended narrative vignettes paired with relevant conceptual interpretation. Jane's narrative illustrated the complexity of the teaching profession – a teacher develops a professional judgment, or a practical wisdom, by making instructional decisions in multiple contexts influenced by others, values, and power (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Implications are not a set of recommendations or observable behaviors but rather a set of reflective questions intended to encourage a deeper, value-driven consideration of what it means to be teacher.



*Keywords:* phenomenology, teacher development, literacy

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APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation, The Phenomenon of Negotiating Early Literacy Instruction: A Kindergarten Teacher's Narrative, has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the Curry School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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# DEDICATION

For Jane, without whom this dissertation would not exist.

For my parents, my first and best teachers.

For my brothers, my first students.

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# CHAPTER I
# INTRODUCTION

*Reading is just amazing. And that's a terrible word to describe it because it's not even close. But it's incredible. Pretty magical. It's the closest thing we've got to magic.*[1]

Jane, a kindergarten teacher, describes the act of reading as magical. She knows the monumental insights required to recode print into meaningful language. In her classroom, she has a front row seat to witnessing and being part of this magic. For her students beginning to read, abstract squiggles become letters that become words written on a page. Those words on a page map onto spoken language and have meaning. By learning to read, a whole new world opens to her students – a world of discovering topics that spark curiosity, traveling to faraway places and meeting new people, and becoming part of a community of other literate individuals.

Of course, reading is not *actually* magic. Jane knows it is not magic but still maintains that it is as close to magic as one can possibly get.[2] Reading is close to magic because reading is not natural for humans. Abstract symbols, or letters, must be systematically associated with sounds, assembled into something resembling spoken language, and then understood meaningfully. Moreover, humans are not innately programmed to read. To become a skillful reader, one must be taught to make a series of important discoveries about spoken and written language over the first several years of life (Adams, 1990; Liberman & Mattingly, 1985).

Being part of the process of helping children make those discoveries is also magical because teaching children to read is complex. Teachers make countless decisions

[1] Teacher Interview – Life History, Part 1, 10.16.16, pp. 125-126
[2] Teacher Interview, Life History, Part 1, 10.16.15, pp. 125-126

as they attempt to coordinate practice for students in a way that facilitates synchronous development of the many aspects of literacy (Joint Task Force on Assessment of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, 2010). Teachers simultaneously encourage students, who have a range of social and emotional needs, to view themselves as readers and writers. Moreover, teachers learn how to negotiate different claims about how best to approach early literacy instruction – many of which have the potential to fragment literacy development into isolated skills rather than deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing aspects of language and literacy.

My dissertation is about Jane's experience as she decides "what should I do" when confronted by a myriad of claims such as university-based knowledge, school-based applied knowledge, and her own growing practical and experiential knowledge. In this introduction, I first describe early literacy development to provide the theoretical and conceptual knowledge that underlies Jane's approach to early literacy instruction. Then, I offer ways that early literacy instruction becomes muddled or even tension-filled. These ways preview similar challenges Jane faces over the course of two years as she decides how to approach early literacy instruction in her classroom. Finally, I set the stage for the following dissertation chapters with a brief look into Jane's kindergarten classroom.

## Early Literacy Development

From birth, children begin to recognize sounds and make sounds of their own to communicate. Recognition of sounds turns into understanding common words and responding to simple directions. Crying, coos, and babbling develop into words and then short phrases. Children's understanding and use of spoken language becomes increasingly complex as they age and engage in rich language-based interactions with

others. These rich interactions expose children to an extensive range of words and language structures that become part of children's own vocabularies and speech patterns that contribute to later success with written language (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Children also learn the language of books, which differs from spoken language. When they listen to books read aloud, they hear the unique phrases typically only found in books like "once upon a time" or "says Charlotte." Children repeat these phrases independently while pretend reading their favorite books. While pretend reading, they act like readers – holding a book, saying words, turning pages, saying more words, and conveying some sort of meaningful message. However, children derive meaning from the pictures, not the print, as their eyes move around the page without the rule-governed directionality necessary for reading. Without being clued in otherwise, they may remain unaware of the written language, the printed words on the page, and its role in reading (Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, & Hunt, 2009).

One of the first discoveries about language and print occurs when children start to become aware of print (Clay, 1966, 1977; Rhyner, Haebig, & West, 2009). This print awareness occurs when children are encouraged to attend to print in different environmental contexts. Children often begin by noticing signs or logos and "reading" them (Ehri, 1975; Mason, 1980). For example, children may see the name on the cereal box out for breakfast and call out "Cheerios!" If the letters in "Cheerios" were changed but the overall design was maintained, they may likely still say, "Cheerios!" Even though it appears children are reading words, they are relying on visual recognition aided by the design of the word or context. But reading is not a simple exercise in visual recognition.

Therefore, when the support of the word's design or the context in which the word is usually encountered is removed, children typically no longer recognize the word. Nonetheless, children's attention to the print on the cereal box and association with the word "Cheerios" marks an important discovery. Print is connected to spoken language.

In addition to noticing print in the form of signs or logos, children notice print other places too, like in books. They learn books have pictures *and* print. The print, not the pictures, is what is read and what has meaning. They mimic how books have been read to them and pretend read their favorite books over and over. Now rather than bouncing around the page from illustration to illustration, they may sweep their finger under print as they recite memorized text or make up a plausible story. Children have made another big first step by attending to print in books and connecting it to spoken language.

Children's attention to print is also reflected in their earliest attempts to use written language. They scribble across a piece of paper or make a series of letter-like forms lined up in a row. Skillful writers may pass over these marks on a page as part of the children's drawings or even dismiss the marks as messy mistakes, but a closer look shows that the marks are separated intentionally from drawings and resemble letters. A conversation with children reveals they intended their scribbles or letter-like forms as writing. Children may state, "This is a letter for my mommy," or they may ask, "What does this say?" Children's earliest attempts at writing and reading are significant. They recognize that print is meaningful and can be read by themselves and others.

To further understand the connection between spoken language and print, children must not only know that print is meaningful but they also must learn its form. Print is

composed of smaller units of written language, specifically words and letters. Being able to navigate these smaller units within print allows children to make the precise match between spoken and written language required to read. Skillful readers take for granted the concept of a printed word, or the understanding that print is composed of distinct words clearly separated by white spaces. Without hesitating, skillful readers know the phrase “all was well” is composed of three distinct words. In speech, the same distinct words in the phrase “all was well” are imperceptible. The phrase is said in a single breath, without pauses between each word, thus making the match between spoken words and printed ones, no simple task.

Children who are still developing a concept of word pretend read or recite memorized text. However, they can easily become befuddled. They expect there to be words if they feel there is something to say in their pretend story or to recite in their memorized text. Because they understand print has to do with spoken language and meaning, they sense that there should be more words even if they reach the end of a line or page and still have more to say. They become confused because they have seemingly “run out” of words. They may even ask, “Where did the words go?” (Flanigan, 2006, p. 37). Children cannot simply be told to point to each word or shown separate words. Instead, children develop a concept of word through the coordination of other early literacy skills, including knowing letters in the alphabet and connecting them with sounds, especially the sounds at the beginning of spoken words.

Letter recognition usually starts with letters most familiar to children, like the first letter of their name (Treiman & Broderick, 1998). The first letter of their name is not only familiar but also deeply personal. The letter of their first name is so personal that children

tend to think this letter belongs to them. Children whose names begin with "T" proclaim, "That's *my* 'T,'" when they see their name and when they see the letter "T" in other words. Some become genuinely shocked, even dismayed, when they encounter "their letter" in a word other than their name and are gently told that word is not their name (Bissex, 1985). Children's interest in their name and "their letters" can be channeled into learning about other letters. They learn to identify other letters by distinguishing visual features of letters and the slight nuances across letters, which have both uppercase and lowercase forms. An uppercase "F" must have a longer vertical line with two shorter horizontal lines extending from the top and middle of the vertical line. Whereas, an uppercase "E" must have every line like an "F" *and* another shorter horizontal line extending from the end of the vertical line. Children also learn each visually distinct letter form has a unique name.

Naming letters may make intuitive sense to children. They have already learned to name other things in their lives, but to learn to read, naming letters is not enough. Children must also learn to associate letter forms with speech sounds. The uppercase letter form "B" is connected to the lowercase letter form "b," named "bee" and represents /b/, the sound at the beginning of the word *bus.* These letter-sound associations are easier to learn for some letters than others. For example, some letters like "b" are acrophonic, meaning the beginning of the letter's name cues its sound. Other letters end with a cue to their sound, like "s." A few letters prove more challenging, like the letter "H," which contains no cue to its sound; it is composed of two other sounds, /a/ and /ch/.

Children's initial learning about letters and sounds may be nothing more than paired-associate learning. However, children require much deeper knowledge about how

letters and sounds work to be able to read. Children need an increasingly refined awareness of spoken language and must learn to attend to smaller units of sound within in spoken words, which may not be necessary for understanding speech but are essential for understanding written language. Before they can attend to the smallest unit – an individual speech sound, they become aware of other aspects of speech and larger units of speech sounds. Words can rhyme or can begin with the same sound. Connected speech can be divided into words, and words can be divided into syllables. Their awareness becomes most refined when they can attend to individual sounds in words, recognizing that the word *bat* is actually three speech sounds - /b/, /a/, and /t/.

Rich interactions with spoken language lay the foundation for this awareness. The more words a child hears, the more they have to attend to subtle differences among them. Children start to attend to these nuances in spoken language when they play with language, singing a song or a nursery rhyme, stressing words in those songs or rhymes that sound alike, or saying silly words that all start with the same sound. While these may seem simply like fun activities, children are actually attending to smaller units of language and manipulating smaller units of language. This attention and manipulation is essential to reading and writing in an alphabetic language like English because it allows children to become aware of individual sounds within spoken language and then map them onto letters.

As children learn more letter names, associate them with sounds, become aware of individual sounds in spoken words, and practice "reading" memorized or highly predictable text, they start to apply that letter name and sound knowledge in matching speech to print. Now they begin to point accurately to written words as they recite them,

to recognize words in other places, and to accurately represent at least some speech sounds within words with letters in their writing. This is illustrative of another monumental discovery known as the alphabetic principle – printed words represent spoken words, which are composed of speech sounds systematically represented by letters (Liberman, Shankweiler, & Liberman, 1989; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Children do not wait until they acquire the alphabetic principle to read and write like a skillful reader and writer. They do not suddenly start to recognize words or spell accurately (Chall, 1967). Instead, children constantly attempt to read and write. Their attempts reflect their discoveries about reading and writing, which actually *become* reading and writing (Ehri & Wilce, 1983; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Their earliest reading is pretended or memorized, and their earliest writing is scribbled. As they discover they must attend to print and what composes print, they gesture towards print, often sweeping their fingers below the words. They write strings of random sequences of symbols, inclusive of letters and even numbers. When they start to pay attention to individual sounds in words and learn more letter names and associated sounds, they begin to point to individual words, often cueing off part of the word. Their spelling also becomes increasingly accurate, and they no longer use random symbols but use their own *invented spelling* to phonetically represent some sounds with letters (Henderson & Templeton, 1986; Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994).

With practice, children's knowledge of letters and sounds becomes increasingly complete; they attend to all the letters in a word and distinguish them across visually similar words. Attention to entire words and distinction across similar words allows children effectively to glue words in their minds for later accurate retrieval when reading

(Ehri & Wilce, 1985). Word recognition seemingly explodes, and they appear more like a skillful reader. Now children begin to consolidate their complete letter name and sound knowledge, recognizing not just individual letters but longer spelling patterns and other parts within words (Ehri, 1995). Recognition of patterns and parts facilitates not just accurate but more automatic recognition of printed words along with retrieval of pronunciation and meaning, which in turn allows for comprehension of deeper meaning. Reading becomes so automatic that a skillful reader can't help but read print shown to them, even when directed to suppress it (Schwanenflugal, Meisinger, Wisenbaker, Kuhn, Strauss, & Morris, 2006).[3]

But learning to read and write is more than moving along the continuum of literacy development just described. Becoming literate is also situated within a set of different social practices. Children discover what it means to be a reader and a writer and how they view themselves as readers and writers through the kinds of literacy-related activities in which they engage (Gee, 2001). At school, teachers provide their students countless opportunities to grow as readers and writers. Those opportunities differ for students across classrooms, schools, and divisions. Students learning to write whose teacher provides them with opportunities to experiment with written forms will likely see writing as something they can do to communicate their unique ideas. On the other hand, students whose teacher encourages students to copy prewritten sentences will likely see

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[3] Schwanenflugal and colleagues cite the experimental Stroop task as evidence for proficient readers' automatic word recognition. During a Stroop task, a proficient reader must name a picture or color while attempting to ignore distracting print. For example, the word *red* may be displayed in green font, and the reader must name "green." However, the automatic reader is slower in naming when the distractor is present compared with naming without a distractor. This interference of print indicates the automatic nature of reading for proficient readers.

writing as something far less meaningful and creative. For those who struggle to copy, they will see writing as something not meant for them. Teachers contribute profoundly to how those opportunities add up over time, painting a picture for their students of what reading and writing is and whether they see themselves as readers and writers (Clay, 1991; Gee, 2001).

At first glance, literacy instruction for early readers may seem straightforward. Perhaps all teachers do is add to the first experiences children have had with literacy at home (Mason, 1980). At school, teachers then lay a foundation for the connection between spoken and written language through more rich experiences with words and concepts. Teachers' literacy instruction proceeds like a set of steps: (1) Draw attention to environmental print like signs and logos (Ehri, 1995; Mason, 1980); (2) Read aloud to children, and give them opportunities to play with language through songs, rhymes, and silly games (Adams, 1990; Justice et al., 2009); (3) Encourage them to recite memorized text and pretend read (Flanigan, 2006); (4) Teach them the names and sounds of letters, and provide practice that allows them see these letters in printed words and write words using these letters (Adams, 1990; Clay, 1991); (5) Ask them about those words so that they connect letters in the words to speech sounds (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2016; Ehri & Wilce, 1985); (6) Continue to engage them in experiences rich with new vocabulary and new concepts (Tracey & Morrow, 2015). However, instruction for early readers and writers is not as straightforward as one may assume. How teachers approach instruction in their classrooms is influenced by their understanding of how literacy develops, their own experiences with literacy instruction as a student and as a teacher, the instructional practices of their peers, their own internal pressure to "get it

right," and other pressures from their institution and community. As teachers seek to enact early literacy instruction, their decisions and choices may become muddled, even tension-filled, as they decide what is instructionally "right" for their students. Whereas one teacher may believe that allowing students to write in invented spelling is be the best approach to early writing, others in the same school may believe strongly in the discipline, simplicity and clarity of using worksheets for students to "fill in the blank" correctly. In such a case, the conviction of the teacher who believes in allowing students to write in invented spellings may become muddled by her peers' beliefs and practices. In other cases, teachers may even experience outright conflict or tension as beliefs, practices and expectations collide. For example, a school or school division may set arbitrary benchmarks relating to the number of sight words a kindergartner should be able to read by the end of the year, or the difficulty of a book a kindergartner should be able to "read." Teachers with a given knowledge set about how literacy develops may find themselves in conflict with such arbitrary goals. In the next section, I discuss different ways the magic of early literacy may become muddled or even tension-filled.

## Ways Early Literacy Instruction Becomes Muddled or Tension-Filled

Deciding how to approach instruction requires deep *knowledge* of both content and instruction (Shulman, 1986). Teachers often start building that knowledge in university-based teacher preparation programs. In program coursework, they learn theories and concepts related to content and instruction. University-based teacher preparation programs typically include a range of practicum experiences that are designed to support the application of theories and concepts in actual classrooms with

real students. Teachers in preparation programs may observe experienced teachers instruct their classrooms, teach individual lessons of their own, and finally student teach.

As teachers-in-preparation venture into actual schools and interact with practicing teachers and real students, they may recognize *knowledge* is not a single, unified entity. The theoretical knowledge embedded in their coursework differs from the practical wisdom of experienced teachers encountered in schools. *Theoretical knowledge* is universal guidelines produced rationally and scientifically and meant to be prescribed across contexts. For example, a teacher-in-preparation might take a course in reading development and learn about developmental spelling theory – how children's spelling progresses from scribbles, to random symbols, to incomplete representations of sounds supported by letter names, to increasingly phonetic representations of words (Bear et al., 2016; Henderson & Templeton, 1986).

However, theoretical knowledge needs to be translated into action or practice. Teachers must act constantly in their classrooms, thus developing their practice. One way to conceptualize practice is as practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2001). *Practical wisdom* is contextualized and value-driven experiences meant to inform how teachers intuitively decide what instructional approach is "right" and how content "should be taught." A teacher-in-preparation may see an experienced teacher lean over a student writing and ask "What sounds do you hear in that word?" Then, for another student, the experienced teacher may lean over and ask, "Do you hear any other sounds in that word?" While the experienced teacher knows that writing is a powerful way for early readers to learn about letters and sounds, the subtlety in the experienced teacher's two questions will likely have to be explained to the teacher in preparation. Regardless of how the child may currently

be spelling, or representing sounds, the experienced teacher's nuanced prompts acknowledge what students are doing with their spelling already and encourage them to do even more.

Teachers-in-preparation may also recognize their encounters with another kind of practical knowledge, not wisdom-based, but technical in nature. This *technical knowledge* is practical because it is still a context-dependent application of knowledge. But unlike practical wisdom, technical knowledge is rationally driven by an instrumental end goal, or concrete outcome, rather than a sense of what is "right." Often technical knowledge and its instrumental end goal is influenced and legitimized by the larger educational context where teachers are expected to use only scientifically-based or outcomes-driven instructional approaches so that the most students reach numerical benchmarks on standardized tests. For example, teachers may be required to use a particular program labeled as "scientific-" or "evidence-based" regardless of consideration of the particular context or teachers' experience. Or, a teacher-in-preparation may see other experienced teachers solely focusing on outcomes as they discuss which of their students is falling below a benchmark requiring students to phonetically spell three-letter words containing a consonant-vowel-consonant pattern (e.g., *cat*). The experienced teachers may decide to give these students never-ending lists of words to practice and memorize until they start spelling these three-letter words correctly. Teachers-in-preparation may learn to prioritize outcomes possibly at the expense of instructional practice and seek technical knowledge, or a set of techniques, purported to ensure students reach those outcomes.

Thus, preparing to become a teacher is not an initial cumulative gathering of *knowledge* related to content and instruction. Teachers-in-preparation encounter and recognize how different kinds of knowledge align to some degree, but they may also recognize differences across kinds of knowledge, which may become muddled and even tension-filled. For example, teachers-in-preparation often learn about developmental spelling theory in their college or university coursework, but they may see instruction in experienced teachers' classrooms that appears consistent or inconsistent with this theory. They may see experienced teachers who encourage students to write using phonetic or invented spelling and may extend their theoretical knowledge into practice. However, they may see experienced teachers who encourage their students to spell a set of words accurately and copy words for writing, which seems to contradict developmental spelling theory. Teachers-in-preparation might start to question, "Which is right?"

How muddled and tension-filled the experiences of teachers-in-preparation become in part depends on the nature of their university-based preparation program. Theoretical knowledge in some programs is derived from highly controlled settings and corresponds to scientifically-based or evidence-based instructional practices. Theoretical knowledge in other programs is based on expert teachers' classroom practice and observations of students' work as related to developmentally-appropriate practice, or instruction that builds on students' current performance and acknowledges and respects them as young learners (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Neuman, 2006). Programs also vary across the extent of practicum experiences and how those experiences are integrated into coursework. Teachers-in-preparation have a range of opportunities to discuss similarities and differences they notice between their theory-driven coursework and

practice-driven work in classrooms. During these discussions, different value may be placed on theoretical knowledge versus practical wisdom of teachers.

In addition to encountering differences across kinds of knowledge, teachers-in-preparation find it necessary to negotiate the tensions caused by possible inconsistencies among them. This negotiation may occur entirely internally with themselves as they see-saw back and forth among different "truths" but their negotiation might also occur externally as they engage in the give and take of conversation with others. They may join in discussions with other teachers or university professors in their attempt to resolve inconsistencies, or they may withdraw into a muddled state of confusion where emotions dictate how they decide how to instruct in their classrooms. Ultimately, teachers-in-preparation will act on their own in their own classrooms overcoming any challenge or obstacle posed by theoretical, practical, or technical differences.

Teachers' burgeoning practical wisdom grows further when they leave their preparation programs and become first-year teachers, solely responsible for a classroom. Though not always easy or possible, they draw upon and build their own practical wisdom as they seek to negotiate apparent conflicts and inconsistency and do what they sense is "right" in their own classrooms. Although early career teachers may feel they do not know enough yet, their job is the same as any other experienced teacher. Unlike experienced teachers, first-year teachers might have a mentor teacher, or a more experienced teacher at the school, or even a division-level coach. A mentor teacher or division-level coach is intended as a support, but they may also further muddle or add tension depending on how they support, encourage, or tell first-year teachers to approach instruction. Regardless, first-year teachers must act – a classroom full of their students

depends on them. They must decide, “What should I do?” and then consider, “Is what I am doing desirable?” They see and hear answers to these questions around them in what other teachers are doing or perhaps in what they are told to do. The answers they see and hear influence teachers as they answer those questions for themselves in their own classrooms by what they decide to do.

What teachers see and hear may be more than possible answers; instead, teachers’ instructional approaches and discussions around instruction may actually reflect deep-seated norms and associated instructional techniques (Oakes, 1992). These norms and associated techniques move beyond influence on teachers’ answers and may even dictate teachers’ answers to “What should I do?” and “Is what I am doing desirable?” Depending on the particular context of grade-level team, school, and division, teachers may be able to uncover and question these norms and related instructional techniques.

The need for teachers to decide what to do in their classrooms happens immediately upon meeting their students and assessing their literacy development. What teachers see in their initial assessments might appear consistent with developmental theories they learned about in their university-based preparation programs. What they see might also seem quite different. For some of their students, reading will happen with seemingly little instruction and effort, whereas for others, reading will be the most challenging of feats (Stanovich, 1986). Humans are not programmed to read, but some children do indeed seem “born” reading. Teachers could interpret these differences in their students very differently. They may seek to understand more deeply how children develop or how development may accelerate or stall for certain children. Or, they may question the notion of a developmental progression. Extreme variation in children’s

developmental literacy trajectories may undermine their confidence in conceptualizing reading acquisition as a developmental progression from pretend or memorized reading to conventional or skillful reading. Or, maybe children's literacy development is not questioned per se but instead simply subsumed by school-based instrumental end-goals such as all students must meet a benchmark (often a numerical score) by the end of the school year. Rather than acknowledge what students can presently do in terms of reading and writing, pressure to meet benchmarks may send the message that all students are expected to learn at the same pace. Both students and teachers experience the pressures of performance measured by benchmarks. To ensure their students perform, teachers tailor instruction to mirror expectations for the next grade or an eventual standardized test instead of what students currently can do in terms of reading and writing.

Whether teachers' instruction is informed by their assessments of students' literacy development, subsumed by school-based benchmarks, or characterized by something in-between, teachers also must immediately decide how to manage their classrooms. Some may refer to this decision as "managing," while others refer to it as structuring, organizing, leading, or guiding. Regardless of what it is called, teachers need some sort of way to facilitate their instruction and student learning. So, what way is best?

There is a range of different answers and options. In a kindergarten classroom, teachers often manage practice with all students, practice with small groups of students, and independent practice. This independent practice may include a range of activities, sometimes called "choices" or "centers." The activities can include some combination of independent reading, listening to reading, writing, and working with words. Others also incorporate additional "play-based" centers, which can integrate literacy practice (to

varying degrees) in activities such as puppet or dramatic play, dress-up, or blocks (McGee & Morrow, 2005). Early career teachers might already prefer a particular way to manage their classrooms. They learn about different ways to manage a classroom in their preparation programs, see additional ways during their practicum experiences, and then again as they teach in a school. They may choose a way based on what they learned or saw, but they may also choose a way that seems right based on some other reason. Perhaps they are drawn to a way because it is respectful of five- and six-year-old students as or because it allows students to have choice and independence. Nevertheless, it is not always just up to teacher to pick up an option. Teachers are influenced by what they see and hear other teachers around them doing. Sometimes other more experienced teachers or administrators will even tell them how to manage their classrooms.

Once teachers settle on their management, they also must decide what to put into that management. It is the work children do within the management related to reading and writing, not the management itself, that enables children to progress as readers and writers. But just as there are different ways to manage a classroom, there are different approaches to instructional practices related to reading and writing. Teachers might approach instruction for all their students in similar ways and engage all of their students in the same sort of practice, perhaps even using a scripted program to deliver instruction. Other teachers may attend more closely to differences among individual children's literacy development and address those differences with varied forms of instruction, practice and tailored prompts designed to get students to make progress. Teachers may focus on skills and devote the bulk of instructional time to this skill-focused practice. This practice can occur with worksheets in isolation. Other teachers may attempt to

integrate these skills and even situate them in authentic experiences with reading and writing tasks. Teachers may devote various amounts of time for other experiences with reading and writing, such as read alouds of quality children's literature or connections to science and social studies content, all within their classroom management system.

To varying degrees, teachers may already know about these different approaches from their preparation program and what they observe or hear others doing. They can also be told what to do. They may feel pressures stemming from benchmark assessments and incorporate certain practices into their instruction solely designed to have students meet those benchmarks. Such practices may help teachers achieve instrumental end goals, such as meeting benchmarks. For example, a teacher could spend a substantial amount of time showing students flashcards of high-frequency words in isolation so that they can reach a certain numerical score, or benchmark, of high-frequency words recognized on a list of high-frequency words for kindergartners. However, those practices may also distance teachers from what they may sense is "right," such as engaging children in meaningful reading and writing and sending them the message that they belong to a community of other literate individuals (Gee, 2001). In the latter case, teachers might assemble all the texts students already "know by heart" into a personal reader, so even though certain students are not yet conventionally reading, they can act like readers and "read" a collection of familiar texts. Instead of isolated practice, the students recite these memorized texts while pointing to individual words in synchrony with their recitation, find and match words in the texts, and start a growing collection of words they "know" from the texts they have learned to "read" (Bear, Caserta-Henry, & Venner, 2008).

Graduate work in literacy education can add to teachers' tension in practice. To some, graduate coursework might seem like a neat accumulation of knowledge. With that additional knowledge, teachers continue to improve their classroom instruction and move further along the continuum from a novice to expert teacher. However, teachers reencounter theoretical knowledge by returning to a university-based graduate program. They recognize differences across the theoretical knowledge characteristic of university-based programs and the practical knowledge encountered at schools in the form of technical or outcomes-oriented knowledge and the practical wisdom of other teachers and, and now, their own practical wisdom. The extent of these differences may depend on the nature of the university program, a teacher's particular school-context, and what kind of knowledge is valued in both setting. Nevertheless, teachers must negotiate theoretical and technical knowledge and continue to develop practical wisdom to assign their own values and decide what is "right" for their students in their classrooms (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Graduate coursework and additional experiences in the classroom may cause teachers to return to and question the very management and instructional approaches they initially selected for their classrooms. For example, a teacher may learn how integrated children's reading and writing development are and consequently decide to change her instructional approach to reflect this integration rather than separate reading and writing instruction and practice. In response, she may change the content of her small group instruction. Rather than just reading practice, she may now attempt to engage students in spelling or spelling-like practice with letters or letter patterns in words and connect that work to the words students actually encounter in their reading practice. Having made this change, she may now discover that her classroom management is no longer conducive to

this more integrated instructional approach. As a result, she may feel muddled or confused as she tries to make her management schedule fit with her new instructional approach and tries to find resources that allow her to connect reading and writing. Throughout this evolution, the teacher may still be seeing and hearing what other teachers are doing. Her new instructional approaches *and* her managerial organization may have gravitated to become more similar to or different from these other teachers. She may wonder if the other teachers and administrators will respond to her changes favorably. Furthermore, if her new approaches differ than the other teachers, she may wonder if her students will experience the same level of success that the students in the other teachers' classes will experience.

Negotiating the muddled, even tension-filled, waters of early reading and writing instruction can be described as a phenomenon. Others have examined aspects of this phenomenon. Some have offered models of how teachers progress over the course of their careers (e.g., Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Korthagen, 2004; Shulman, 1986). Some of these models even focus on literacy instruction and describe how important literacy content knowledge is and how teaching expertise becomes increasingly analytical and reflective (Alexander & Fives, 2000; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Models of teacher progression suggest sequenced and logical growth as teachers move from novice to expert, and these models often focus on the actions of individual teachers who rationally decide how to approach instruction in their classrooms. Other models suggest there are more general challenges teachers face when approaching and refining their instruction. Such challenges may include teachers' management within the classroom, students' engagement with individual lessons, or school- or division-level initiatives.

These challenges may influence how teachers approach instruction, and potentially interrupt their development of pedagogical content expertise (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Kennedy, 2005). In sum, many existing models of teacher progression depict professional growth as a linear trajectory as teachers refine their knowledge through cycles of reflection and overcome potential challenges like lack of student engagement or unsupportive environments.

In this dissertation, I do not set out to see how Jane, a purposefully selected teacher, fits into existing models of teacher progression or to describe a revised model. Instead, I claim that teachers' growth is not a neatly modeled, inevitable movement through more refined levels of knowledge. I argue that knowledge is not value-neutral, and that teachers, being human, are not completely rational beings. Instead, I contend that teachers consider what is "right" about different instructional and managerial approaches to teaching their particular students, and they make decisions about how to teach based on their considerations of "right."

Moreover, teachers exist in multiple contexts; they are influenced by and work in classrooms, in schools, and in school divisions where they see and hear about multiple "right" ways to teach children to read and write. Sometimes teachers pursue a Master's degree, thus introducing another context where they see and hear additional ways to approach literacy instruction. By focusing on one teacher's experience over a two-year period as she progresses in her knowledge and considers what is "right" for her students, we can more deeply understand how the phenomenon manifests itself. In other words, this dissertation focused on *what is it like* to grow in one's knowledge of how to teach

children to read and write and how to approach literacy instruction in the classroom – all while negotiating the muddled and tension-filled waters of early literacy instruction.

**Jane's Experience of the Phenomenon**

So far, I have described the phenomenon in generalities. However, to understand the muddled and tension-filled waters of teaching young children to read and write, I must move beyond generalities. How teachers decide what instruction is "right" for their students is deeply personal but also situated in particular contexts where teachers see and hear different perspectives on the "right" way of teaching early readers and writers (Bakhtin, 1934/2004; Flyvbjerg, 2001; van Manen, 2016). Therefore, the phenomenon of *what is it like* to grow in one's knowledge of how to teach children to read and write and how to approach literacy instruction in the classroom while simultaneously negotiating the murky waters of early literacy instruction may manifest itself in unique ways as different teachers experience it.

Many teachers choose to leave the profession (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). For other teachers who stay, they face challenges as they encounter multiple approaches to early literacy instruction – all described as "right" – from other teachers, from administrators, from division-level specialists, and from professors and other students in graduate programs. Every day teachers must teach a class of students, so they also must try to decide what is the "right" way. It is important to understand how teachers, especially early career teachers, experience this phenomenon so that we can attempt to influence their experience of the phenomenon in positive ways. Specifically, a phenomenological study about *what is it like* to grow in one's knowledge of how to teach children to read and write and how to manage literacy instruction in the

classroom while simultaneously navigating external influences, may inform teacher educators and school-based mentor teachers about the kind of supports we might offer early career teachers as they are developing their own burgeoning practical wisdom.

The rest of my dissertation is the narrative of Jane, one early career kindergarten teacher and her experience negotiating the muddled and tension-filled waters of teaching children to read and write. Jane began her first full year of teaching began in 2014 when she was hired at the same school where she did her student teaching. I join her story during the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, her second and third years of teaching, after she moves to a different school in a different division. In the remainder of this chapter, I provide a brief look at Jane's experience. In chapter two, I further describe Jane, her decisions to become a teacher, and the multiple contexts in which she worked. In chapters three through eight, I offer a series of six vignettes, which occurred throughout the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years. These six vignettes were intentionally selected as illustrative examples of how Jane experienced the phenomenon of negotiating the muddled and tension-filled waters of early literacy instruction. Finally, I include a detailed description of my methodological approach, data collection, analysis, and researcher reflexivity in a Methodological Appendix.

## A Brief Look at Jane's Experience

Like many other teachers, Jane began each school year getting to know her students, which included getting to know her students as readers and writers. Can they name letters? Can they associate letters with sounds? Can they point to words while reciting a short, memorized text and recognize words from that text? Do they know how books work (e.g., you read them from left to right; you read words, not pictures, etc.)?

How do they talk about their own understandings while listening to a book read aloud? How do they demonstrate their knowledge about reading in their spelling and writing attempts? The questions Jane asked and how she answered them were informed by her growing understanding of literacy development and school- and division-level benchmarks for performance. Jane answered these questions for all of her students. Consider what she answered for five of them:

> Nicole has yet to realize readers must attend to print as opposed to pictures in order to read, and she recognizes very few, if any, letters and sounds. Riley has had more experiences with books than Nicole and generally knows how they work, but she still starts the school year knowing very few letters and sounds. A few weeks into the school year, she is quickly learning letter names and associating them with sounds, but she is not yet applying this growing knowledge to help her recognize words in short, memorized text. Cameron starts the school year able to recognize many letters and sounds. He can even use this knowledge to point accurately to words in short, memorized text as he recites it. Brandon starts the school year able to name all 26 letters and sounds and identify some familiar words. He has moved beyond recognizing words in memorized texts but can apply his complete knowledge of letters and sounds to figuring out unfamiliar words in short books. Tia joins the class a couple months into the school year. She speaks Spanish and very little English. Jane attempts to discover what Tia knows about reading and writing. While Jane realizes Tia recognizes the letter *X* and *O*, Jane remains unsure what else Tia knows about reading and writing.[4]

When Jane thought about her students, she recognized that Riley knew some letter names and sounds and recognized their purpose in books, but Riley was not yet applying her burgeoning alphabet knowledge to point to words accurately while reciting text or to represent words with sounds while writing. On the other hand, Brandon knew every letter names and sound and used this knowledge to recognize words and figure out less familiar ones. Besides recognizing where each child is in early literacy development Jane also

[4] Teacher Interview, 10.24.16, pp. 155--158; Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, pp. 253

tried to decide what her students were ready to learn next to continue their growth along the continuum of literacy development. Jane understood that Riley needed to grow her knowledge of letter names and sounds and apply that growing knowledge to accurately point to words in memorized or predictable texts, while Brandon needed to continue applying his letter-sound knowledge to read and write increasingly longer and more challenging texts, in turn solidifying the number of words he recognizes automatically and meaningfully. For Riley and Brandon, Jane decided she should support Riley working with letters and sounds and in familiar and memorized texts and writing, prompting her to attend to and listen for speech sounds she can then match to letter names. Jane knows Brandon needs her support in reading and writing a range of texts, prompting him to apply taught strategies to figure out less familiar words and to derive their meaning.

To teach the five students described above and all of her other students to read and write, Jane made countless and various instructional decisions in her classroom. These decisions related to how she managed literacy instruction in her classroom and what kind of literacy practice in which she engaged her students. Consider the number and type of decisions Jane made in an approximately 10-minute period of small group instructional time in her classroom:

> Jane gathers a small group of students at her kidney-shaped table. Based on what she already knows about these students' literacy development, she selects a short book for them to read with her support. She wants them to use their knowledge of letters and sounds to attempt to figure out words that they do not initially recognize. After students finish the book, she comments on Cameron's, a student often in need of behavioral reminders, attention to each of the words. Also wanting acknowledgement from his teacher, Jamey announces, "I'm really good at looked," making sure everyone in the group knows he recognized a potentially

> challenging word in the book. She smiles back at Jamey. While this was happening, another student from a different group, Cora, lingers behind the teacher. At first Jane continues with her group; Cora lingers near the teacher often. Jane directs the small group of students to try reading the book again, and then without missing a beat, she stretches her arm behind her and around Cora. Sometimes Cora just wants to see what the other group of students are doing. Other times she wants to try the book the other students are reading with the teacher, so the teacher slides her an extra copy, and Cora heads off to read on her own, usually stretched out on her stomach across the window seat. Today, though, Cora just needed a quick moment with her teacher. Jane asks if she is okay and hugs her, all while still sitting in her chair and watching the other students read. Satisfied with the hug, Cora heads off to her independent work.[5]

Jane's response to Cameron, Jamey, and Cora was only one of countless decision-making instances in her classroom. In the above instance, Jane decided to structure the classroom literacy environment as set of teacher-led small groups with certain students while other students worked independently on a range of other literacy-related activities. To decide who to teach in each small group and what aspect of early literacy to teach, Jane interpreted both formal and informal assessments. She then decided what materials to use in the group and how to prompt their learning. In the moment, she decided how to respond to students based on what each student was doing. She responded in ways intended to support her students' literacy development but also to provide general encouragement. Finally, Jane wrapped up each small group promptly to ensure a schedule where each student has time in a teacher-led small group. Jane made at least nine observable decisions in this instance, but decisions were also made in countless other instances over the course of the school day, week, and year.

[5] Classroom Observation, 01.17.17, p. 216

At first glance, instructional decisions may appear to be made solely by Jane in *her own* classroom based on what *she* knows about her students and her perception of their literacy development. But she also ventured outside the walls of her classroom to grade-level team meetings, school-wide meetings, and conversations with other teachers and staff. Here her approach to instruction became muddled, at times tension-filled, as she encountered others' approaches to best to teach early readers and writers. Consider what she encountered regarding how best to teach her students to recognize words and how she began to negotiate those messages to teach in her classroom:

> Periodically throughout the school year, kindergarten teachers are required to assess their students' recognition of high-frequency words (e.g., was, the, can) from a division-wide list of words. By the end of the school year, kindergartners are expected to recognize at least 25 words from this list. If students meet this benchmark of 25 words, they are considered on-track for first grade.[6] If they do not, they are considered an instructional "emergency." Each kindergarten teacher must share students' progress with each other at grade-level meetings, naming the number of students from her classroom who are failing to meet the benchmark. They also enter students' assessment scores on a shared spreadsheet created by the principal and seen by the administrators, intervention teachers, and other kindergarten teachers.[7] The sharing of scores during meetings and on spreadsheets are designed to ensure that all students make progress and reach the benchmark; however, the focus on this benchmark may have other adverse consequences. The sharing of scores may not explicitly compare teachers but implicitly implies – through a single numerical score – that certain teachers are not as good as other teachers. Thus, the kindergarten teachers feel pressure to ensure all their students meet this [high-frequency] word recognition benchmark.
>
> Jane felt this pressure during the grade-level team meetings. Her palms start to sweat, her stress and anxiety levels would rise, and sometimes she even doubts her ability as a teacher. She wants to ensure her students were learning, but she also did not want to appear that she was not as good as the other more experienced kindergarten teachers. She did not want to be the only kindergarten teacher with multiple students failing to meet the benchmark. So, at first, Jane

[6] Grade-Level Team Observation, 04.25.17

[7] Grade-Level Team Observation, 10.23.15, p. 20; Principal Interview, 11.18.15, pp. 44-47; Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, p. 249

decides to follow the other kindergarten teachers' instructional recommendation and approach and rely on flashcard practice to support her students' word recognition.[8]

In her classroom though, Jane feels something is not right. She spends an excessive amount of time making flashcards with students, practicing the flashcards with students, and assessing whether students remembered the words on the flashcards. Time with flashcards replaces other meaningful practice, namely, time spent reading in connected text (e.g., familiar books or memorized rhymes) and writing. She also places an inordinate amount of focus on certain students failing to meet the benchmark.[9] Based on what she saw happening in her classroom, she asks herself, "Was the flashcard instruction even working?" Some of her students experience exponential growth in the number of words they could recognize even with seemingly little time. Other students receiving the exact same flashcard practice but for even longer periods of time are not remembering words from day-to-day or week-to-week. As Jane further questions the effectiveness of same kind of practice with every student, she also begins to learn more about children's development of word recognition in her first graduate-level literacy course at the university.[10] There, she reads research on how children learn to read words and learns about other expert teachers' instructional approaches. Her growing understanding of how word recognition develops poses another wrinkle in her questioning of the flashcard approach. She wonders if her students having difficulty remembering words even know what a word was—as opposed to a letter, syllable or phrase. She starts questioning the appropriateness of using flashcards with students who may not know what a word is and/or do not even recognize enough letters to remember that word.[11] Towards the end of the 2015-2016 school year, Jane tries to move away from heavy reliance on flashcard practice and further resolves to change her approach to word learning the next school year.

The above brief look at Jane's experience highlighted recurring events in Jane's narrative. It was not the only time she negotiated the muddled and often tension-filled waters of early literacy instruction, specially how children learn to recognize words. It was also not the only aspect of early literacy instruction she had to negotiate. For Jane,

[8] Classroom Observation, 03.21.16

[9] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, p. 63

[10] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, pp. 66, 68

[11] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, p. 68; Teacher Interview, 05.02.16, p. 76

her negotiation played out two main ways – one with other teachers. She discussed these aspects of early literacy instruction with the other kindergarten teachers, often asked them questions to clarify her understanding, and valued their years of experience. She tried out their suggested instructional approaches in her classroom. Her negotiation also played out a second way – within her own thoughts, insights, and feelings in her classroom, in her school, and in her graduate coursework.

Jane's experience was dynamic and complex; her negotiation of the muddle and tension-filled waters of early literacy instruction changed over the course of two years and across situations. She was not moving neatly or logically through a model of teacher progression. But rather, she constantly sought what is "right" for her students and felt both encouraged and disheartened as she grappled with what others considered "right," all of which composed her following narrative.

# CHAPTER II
# ORIENTATION

A teacher's instructional approach – as revealed in her own classroom or in another educational context like a grade-level team meeting – reflects the teacher's complex history and contextualized experiences. Therefore, a teacher's instruction is not a collection of theoretical knowledge and associated techniques but a deeply personal pedagogy, or awareness of how one's own background influences an approach to teaching children (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; van Manen, 2016). Similar to a personal pedagogy, a teacher's history and experiences also inform a professional judgment, or practical wisdom – a value-driven deliberation of multiple sources of knowledge, including one's own, to make instructional decisions (Flyvbjerg, 2001). To understand a teacher's personal pedagogy and practical wisdom one must consider his or her background and contextualized experiences.

In the following sections, I introduce Jane, an early career kindergarten teacher. I also situate Jane in the multiple contexts where she encounters multiple messages about how best to teach children to read and write. I describe aspects of each context, including changes I noted between the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, the two years I spent observing and interviewing Jane. Within each context, I also introduce other key individuals with whom Jane engages and interprets messages about how best to teach children to read and write.

Jane spent the most time in her own classroom where she taught 17 kindergartners about reading and writing throughout the school day with the help of her teaching assistant. She specifically reserved close to two hours a day for her language arts block.

Her classroom was embedded in a larger school context, which was embedded in a larger division context. In these larger contexts, Jane interacted with other teachers, administrators, instructional coaches, and other staff. Sometimes these interactions took place during informal conversations; other times these interactions occurred during more formal meetings, usually with the other kindergarten teachers and an administrator. Alongside and often overlapping with the classroom, school, and division contexts was the context of Jane's graduate program in which she enrolled for a Master's degree in reading education during the winter of her second year of teaching.

## Jane

Jane is a complex individual, who brings a unique personal history to her role as kindergarten teacher. Her personal history became intertwined with contextualized experiences and her instructional approach as she continued to progress as a teacher (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; van Manen, 2016). Teachers make sense of what occurs in their classrooms and in education writ large; therefore, their histories – their experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes – shape their professional practice (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

Any observer who watched Jane teach in her classroom might assume she had a long history of feeling called to teach from as early as she can remember. In her classroom, with the utmost care, she positively acknowledged Cameron's careful attention to individual words as he reads, while at the same time supporting his need for behavioral redirection. While noticing Cameron's accomplishment, she also acknowledged Jamey, who did not want to miss out on receiving attention from the teacher and wanted recognition for his strategic figuring out of a longer word in his

reading. As she affirmed Cameron and Jamey, she seamlessly provided emotional encouragement and additional opportunities to read to Cora. Despite the seeming ease with which Jane coaxed and encouraged her students toward literacy, a long-time feeling of being called to teach is not in Jane's history.

Jane's journey into the teaching profession was anything but a foregone conclusion. Playing school, babysitting, and being part of a "teacher family" formed Jane's earliest impressions of what teaching was, and it wasn't favorable. Teaching was telling others what to do, dealing with children's "slobbery noses," and disliking one's job. Jane acted somewhat sheepish when talking about her earliest impressions of teachers and teaching. She shrugged, and her tone conveyed a sense of *how did I ever think such thoughts.* She explained she decided that "[Teaching was] never a job I thought I considered to be a job you have. [Teaching is] a back-up job. Teaching is the fallback that you do when you don't know what you want to do. It's a low barrier to entry. It's not a hard thing to do, so I always thought it would be an easy thing. I know this sounds sad, but I didn't think about teaching as a real respectable profession."[12] Her experiences with the teachers in her family further solidified her negative impression of teaching. Not only was teaching not a respectable profession but "teachers complain."[13]

When Jane started college, she was interested in public relations and decided to major in journalism. However, not far into her journalism studies, she began to question her decision. "I was on a track to do something important where you wear a suit every day, and important, in quotations, where you go and do big things like business. I felt that

[12] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 110
[13] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 110

was the only choice you had if you wanted to do important things. Then when I felt [when] I was sort of there, I was like, 'This feels stupid. Does everyone feel this way? I didn't mind doing stories, but I didn't feel like it was completely important. I felt silly. I guess I was just struggling to find the really important reasons why I was there. I went through this major crisis."[14]

In the midst of her self-identified "crisis," Jane turned to the very thing she had tried to avoid – teaching. At first her turning was simply out of necessity. She needed a certain number of course credits at a certain level, and she found an education course that fit those requirements. Then, perhaps her turning was simply the realization of her childhood opinion that teaching was a fallback plan. And at this time, she was in need of a fallback. Journalism was no longer feeling right to her, so, to her, teaching could be her next best option, especially because she believed it had a low barrier to entry, so the switch could be made easily.

Not willing to commit completely to the switch, Jane tried to continue her pursuit of journalism with a focus on education issues. She created an education reporting class and believed she could take her future career in this direction. While it felt exciting to talk about the so-called "racy issues in education,"[15] she soon realized she had found a different kind of importance and meaning. Jane loved the foundations of education class she stumbled into for the credit. In her own words, she "got consumed with the education system and started to think about education and teaching in the context of our society." Now instead of viewing teaching as bossing children around, dealing with slobbery

[14] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, pp. 110, 113
[15] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 111

noses, and disliking one's job, she viewed teachers as "a small piece in this gigantic puzzle that *changes the world*."[16] She was slowly changing her mind about the teaching profession.

Then, Jane started working in schools, and she loved the classroom. Now, as Jane described her path to becoming a teacher, it was easy to forget she was a person who fought against the notion of becoming a teacher her entire life. Her voice sped up, and she started to smile. Her sheepish tone changed to a passionate one, and she explained, "I realized that I didn't want to write about things. I wanted to be in the trenches and doing things. I really felt like I wanted to be in a classroom and doing things. That only continued when I started taking classes and realized how fascinating it is that there's actually a strategy and there's a reason why you teach the way you teach. You're not babysitting. You're doing amazing and incredible things." She attempts to convey her passion for her now life's work, "It's fascinating. I still think most people don't understand it."[17]

Jane continued, "Learning about development and how much intelligent thinking actually goes into lesson planning. I think that's what made me so interested in it. Like, I always liked kids. I mean, who doesn't like children? But being in schools is important to me, but I feel like I got more excited about it – the actual teaching bit – when I started to learn how there's a right and a wrong way to do it. There's lots of right ways, but there's

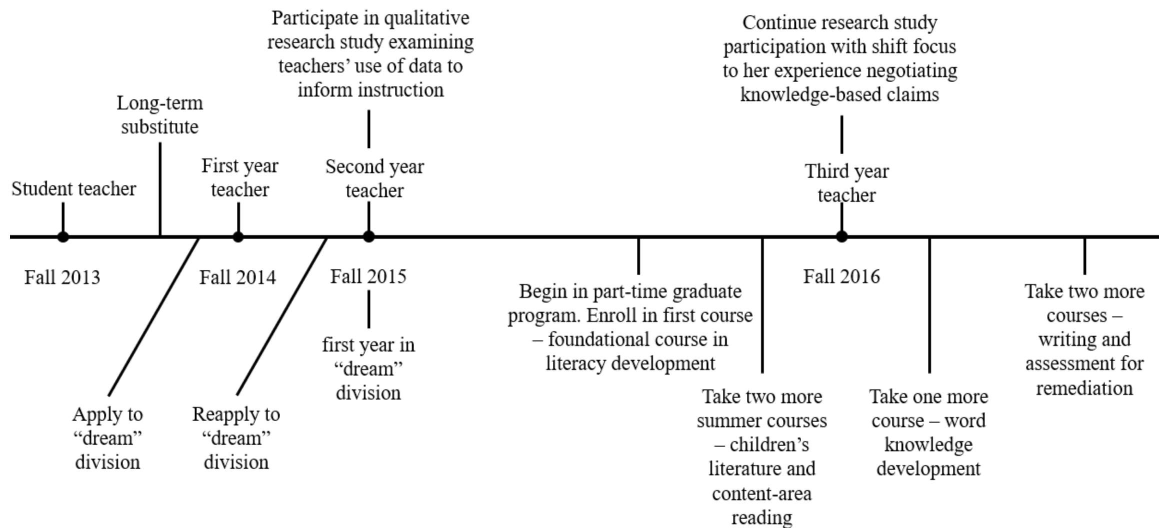
[16] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 111
[17] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 111

some reasoning behind it, and then it was more fun to go in and you could apply those things and see what was happening."[18]

Jane's understanding of what it meant to be a teacher and how to teach children to read and write continued to evolve when she spent more time in an elementary school near her college as a student teacher. As a student teacher, she started building a student-centered approach to teaching, compared to a teacher-centered one, and a view of teaching as always continual learning and growth. This approach and view was likely the product of both Jane's own educational experiences as a student and conclusions drawn from her observations of more veteran teachers while Jane student taught. Jane's student teaching marked the beginning of her professional career as a teacher, as depicted in Figure 1.

[18] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 114

Figure 1
*Timeline of Jane's Professional Career*




At the school where Jane student taught, she observed teachers doing the same instruction with all of their students, despite those students' differing needs. She witnessed "popcorn" reading, where students had to listen to their classmates read a page in anticipation of their own turn to read, instead of students spending extended time reading on their own and avoiding the stress of reading aloud to peers while trying to puzzle through words. Jane concluded that the teachers simply were doing the best they could with what they knew and had been doing.

Things changed for Jane when she collaborated with her mentor teacher, the teacher in whose classroom she student taught. Her mentor teacher allowed Jane the space to change how reading and spelling were taught in small groups, and Jane explained that her mentor teacher was excited about the changes. Jane knew her mentor teacher would not continue the small groups exactly the way Jane taught them, but Jane

did notice that the mentor teacher did not return to how she taught before Jane. The mentor teacher's instruction was influenced by Jane.[19]

In addition to having space to change reading and writing small group instruction as a student teacher in her mentor teacher's classroom, Jane felt drawn to a first-grade teacher at the school, Sarah. She could tell there was something different about Sarah, and Jane decided she needed to learn as much as she could from Sarah. To Jane, Sarah was "one amazing teacher in a sea of those types of teachers [who continued doing what they always did with little consideration to try something different in search of a better way to approach instruction]. Sarah spoke to her students differently. Her projects were different. She was doing poetry in first grade, which the other teachers were doing as well. But not like Sarah. [Her students] were *poets*. They had parties and picnics where parents would come and read. Beautiful things were happening in her classroom." Within the context of student teaching in an elementary school where she had role models, Jane began to shape how she thought literacy could be taught.[20]

After her student teaching concluded, Jane stayed at the same school as a long-term substitute in a kindergarten classroom for the rest of the school year. Jane continued to get to know Sarah and to learn about her teaching experience. Sarah described where she had previously taught including the "amazing" superintendent and the "wonderful" things that [are happening in the division and classrooms]. Jane concluded that this other school division was a place where "people care, and they talk about education."

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[19] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 119
[20] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 119

For someone who used to be so uncertain about teaching, Jane's mind was made up. Suddenly, her career path unfolded before her. "That's the place. That's where I need to be. If Sarah came from there, I want to be there. When I'm learning to be a teacher, absolutely, I want to be there. And, while I'm there, I want to get my Master's [degree]."[21]

After finishing her undergraduate work, Jane applied to a "billion" schools in the school district Sarah came from and met with each principal. She tried to do whatever it took to secure a position. She joked that when she met the principals, she led with, "Hi, I'm that annoying girl who called you every single day." After planning on never becoming a teacher, Jane committed wholeheartedly and developed a long-term plan for her continued growth even before she has a full-time position. The first step was to get a job in a particular school district, one she had learned about from Sarah. Despite receiving several interviews, Jane was not hired in Sarah's former division, so she stayed at the school where she student taught when her long-term substitute position turned into a full-time position.

However, the following spring Jane tried again. Given her previous experience trying to get hired in Sarah's former division, she tempered her expectations of landing an actual job offer. When she interviewed with a principal in April, she told herself, "I'm not going to get hired here. It's April. They're just looking." But this time it ended differently. She got hired.[22]

[21] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, pp. 119-120
[22] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 120

Jane's plan was now in full swing. As she started teaching the following school year in the division that she felt contributed to the development of Sarah, she still found herself asking, "What would Sarah do?" Perhaps Jane's question about Sarah reflected the value Jane places in a veteran teacher's experience. Sarah made the theoretical knowledge Jane learned in her undergraduate coursework come to life in her classroom where students were doing "amazing things" and in a way that Jane regarded as "beautiful." Jane wanted the same for students of her own. Perhaps it also reflected Jane's need to find another like-minded teacher from whom she could continue to learn and after whose classroom she could model aspects of her own. She reached out to the teachers at her new school, but no one seems to be quite like Sarah.

Jane continued to follow her original plan – get a job in Sarah's former school division and then begin a graduate program. After half a year in her new teaching position in Sarah's former school division, Jane enrolled part-time in a Master's degree program in reading education. She chose to focus on reading because it was interesting to her and most relevant to kindergarten. Even though she does not consider herself a voracious reader, she values literacy and prioritizes its instruction in her classroom. With more experiences in her classroom and with each Master's course she took, she focused on improving an aspect of her literacy instruction.

Jane stated her focus on literacy is different than what division-leaders suggest teachers should prioritize. She concluded division-leaders want her to be "new-age teacher" doing project after project, but she concludes that projects are only good, if they enable her to teach her students to read. She explained she plans some projects but then filled the day reading and writing on whatever the project's topic was. She acknowledged

she might be wrong about what she prioritized and said that "maybe later on, I'll be like, 'Oh my gosh, why didn't I… why wasn't I doing it.' But, to me, I feel like it's the next new thing.'"[23] She cited that division-level leaders also stated that teachers should do what is best for students, and Jane decided that learning how to read is what is best for her students. She wanted to teach in such a way that allows all her students, regardless of where they may be in their development, to see themselves as readers and writers.[24] Sometimes she said she needed to reground herself in her commitments, "I feel like sometimes I need to go back to that even. Like, 'Why am I here? Because I'm trying to make curious, intelligent people – not robots that can sit in a chair all day."[25]

Jane recognized education's tendency to swing back-and-forth, and Jane did not want to swing in the wind of change, especially at the beginning of her teaching career. She wanted to avoid the "next new thing" handed down by someone else at the school- or division-level. She explained that her choice to enroll in a graduate program in reading reflected her perception that literacy would be less likely to be susceptible to the "next new thing." Her choice of a program in reading, as opposed to another area, seemed a practical one; she anticipated learning how to teach children to read, something that would always be part of a teaching role. As a teacher, she wants to be able to make decisions about what she thinks is "best" or "right" for her students. That power is what makes teaching so special for her. "I think what got me through teaching was when I realized that it was hard. Then I was like, 'Oh wait, this is cool.' This is actually a hard

[23] Teacher Interview, 10.16.16, pp. 116-117
[24] Teacher Interview, 09.28.16, p. 107
[25] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 115

thing that you have to do.' I don't think that everybody else feels that way, but once I had that realization, it totally changed everything for me, but mostly it was feeling like this is something I could work on every day. You could you work on it every single day and never be the best. It mattered; it was important."[26] Her part-time graduate work was one important way Jane worked on her teaching every day.

## Jane's Contexts

### Classroom

Jane's classroom sat in the middle of the kindergarten hallway. To Jane's left was the lead kindergarten teacher's classroom. The lead teacher directed weekly meetings for her fellow kindergarten teachers and an administrator. Her classroom was immaculately organized. Jane considered the lead teacher her friend and often turned to her for advice in her classroom. To Jane's right was the most veteran kindergarten teacher's classroom. According to Jane, the most veteran kindergarten teacher was likely the best teacher on the team. The most veteran teacher incorporated more creative projects into her teaching, something Jane wanted to do as well. A strip of corkboard ran the length of the hallway, and each teacher hung student work from the section of strip nearest her classroom. Student work outside four of five kindergarten teachers' classrooms typically consisted of students providing a single word to complete a teacher-provided, typed sentence. Student work outside Jane's classroom differed from the others. It is clearly the product of students having more freedom during writing time. Their writing reflected students' growing understanding of letter-sound connections in words.[27] Cora wrote, "I wAnt

[26] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 115
[27] Classroom Observations, 03.21.16, 01.26.17

SLADN wIth My FRAS AND I PLAD snoboll Fut.”[28] Another student, Mary wrote, “I GT ho toZ.”[29]

Right inside the door of Jane’s spacious classroom was a wooden bookcase that displays books with their covers facing forward. Jane used this bookcase to house books related by theme or an author. Bats took over the book case in October; January belonged to Ezra Jack Keats. Three large windows spanned the entire wall opposite the classroom door. A window seat was built into the middle window. Colorful, kindergarten-sized pillows perched on the window seat ledge just asking to be knocked to the floor. Near the window seat sat another piece of wooden furniture with six inset bins filled with more books.

A large carpet, decorated with an alphabet border, completely covered the front part of the room. A larger wooden chair placed on one edge of the carpet faced the length of the carpet. Jane sat in this wooden chair as students gathered on the carpet for a variety of purposes such as morning meeting, read aloud, sharing their writing, and math lessons. While Jane may have started by sitting in the chair, she often hopped up to write something on the white board or get materials for the lesson. Her students remained in constant motion too; they wiggled, they spun, and they alternated sitting flat on the carpet to perched on their knees. The only time Jane seemed to remain in the chair for a noticeable stretch of time was during a read aloud. Her students were equally mesmerized and remained glued to their “story spots” during this time as well.

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[28] I went sledding with my friends and played snowball fight.
[29] I got new toys.

An easel sat to the left of the chair. On the easel, Jane wrote a daily morning message – a way to greet students, preview the day, and simultaneously review aspects about print that students are learning. Later in the school year, she occasionally turned over the morning message writing responsibility to a student. One day in February, the morning message read:

GOOD MrNiG
FRADS! TOODAY
iS tHRSDAY.
HOW Will you
BE KIND?[30]

The wall opposite the windows was wall filled with cubbies. Backpacks and either sweatshirts or coats, depending on the weather, spilled out onto the floor. Atop the student cubbies sat a set of cabinets. The teacher posted a word wall on the cabinets. She starts with year with student names in the word wall and adds several high frequency words (e.g., *the*, *you*, *me*) as the year progressed. The cubbies ended at the student bathroom. On the bathroom door handle hung a laminated sign made out of an 8 ½ by 11-inch piece of computer paper. A student had colored one side of the paper with green crayon and written "GOW" and the other side of the paper with red crayon and written "STOP."[31]

Four rectangular tables surrounded by plastic chairs, in which only a five-year-old fits comfortably, filled the middle of the room. Students used these rectangular tables for independent work during the language arts block. They worked on their spelling by sorting words printed on slips of paper based on a particular aspect, or feature of the

[30] Classroom Observation, 02.23.17, p. 1
[31] Classroom Observation, 01.31.17, p. 1

word, reflective of their spelling development (Bear et. al, 2016). This was not spelling in a more traditional sense of every student having the same list of words to practice and memorize. Instead, their spelling was developmental; some students sorted pictures as they listened for beginning sounds. Other students sorted three-letter words based on medial vowel sound (e.g., mat, pet, hot). Students also reread shorter, more predictable books and pretended to read as they flip through longer trade books.

During writing lessons, Jane bounced from table to table, student to student. She crouched next to a student and asked, "What are you working on?"[32] Two large kidney-shaped tables flanked the other rectangular tables. Jane sat at one kidney table guiding her students in a small group reading or developmental spelling lesson; her teaching assistant sat at the other guiding her students in practicing letter formation or playing a game with words reflective of students' spelling development. Their location gave both Jane and her teaching assistant a good view of the students spread throughout the classroom working independently. As Jane and the teaching assistant leaned forward to support the students working at their tables, they also offered gentle reminders to students throughout the classroom.

**The Language Arts Block.** At 9:45, already two hours into the school day, Jane and her students began their language arts block. Jane gathered her students on the carpet. In the 2015-2016 school year, Jane started the language arts block preparing students to begin a series of activities related to literacy. Students came in from recess and sat down on the carpet either to hear whether they would join Jane or the teaching assistant or

[32] Classroom Observations, 10.18.16, p. 141; 11.17.16, p. 179; 03.21.17, p. 5; 04.18.17, p. 5

whether they would choose an independent activity. She diligently recorded their choices on a spreadsheet on her clipboard. The following 2016-2017 school year, Jane decided to start the language arts block with a read aloud. Students still came in from recess and sat down in their “story spots,” but then they listened to Jane read a picture book.

During both school years, the majority of the language arts block consisted of a series of rotations through a teacher-led small group, a teaching assistant-led small group, and independent activities. In the teacher-led group, Jane guided a group of three to six students through a short text. At the beginning of the school year, this text was a four-line rhyme or poem that students had memorized and then practiced pointing to the words as they recited the text. Through Jane’s prompts, the students’ pointing became increasingly accurate as they used their growing alphabet knowledge to cue off beginning letter and sound. They could navigate the especially tricky multi-syllable words and self-correct their pointing based on the letter-sound, or graphophonetic, cues (Flanigan, 2006; Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003). Students’ attention to graphophonetic cues allowed students to begin figuring out less familiar words based on letter-sound knowledge rather than rely on memorization or predictability. More complete letter-sound knowledge and the use of that knowledge to recognize words also allowed students to begin to recognize words with increasing automaticity in other texts (Ehri & Wilce, 1985). Therefore, as the year progressed, many students moved into other texts – ones that cannot be memorized and that were no longer predictable.

Jane debated constantly what students should work on with the teaching assistant. During the 2015-2016 school year, Jane had the teaching assistant support students’ developmental spelling, but then in 2016-2017, Jane decided that spelling should be

integrated more closely with the reading occurring in her small group. Jane switched to have her teaching assistant supporting students with their letter formation. Later in the year Jane returned most spelling work to the teaching assistant's group as she felt rushed in her own group and concluded students are not spending enough time reading in text with her.[33] Jane continued to lead the introduction of a new set of words, but additional practice throughout the rest of the week occurred with the teaching assistant. Even though Jane redelegated spelling instruction to her teaching assistant, she remained committed to a developmental approach, that is, students explored particular features of words based on which features (e.g., beginning sound, medial vowel) students included in spelling assessments and their writing (Bear et al., 2016).

When students were not working with Jane or the teaching assistant, they worked independently. Independent choices included reading to themselves, writing, and word work or spelling. Students working independently spread out throughout the classroom. Some students settled into cozy window seats or pillows on the floor with a basket of books. Other students perched in plastic chairs around the rectangular tables and hunched over composition notebooks. Many of these students scribbled and drew in their composition notebooks – their earliest attempts at communicating with writing. Other students effortfully formed letters that sprawled across the page, mostly copying letters they recognized around the room. A few students only wrote a couple of letters; however, a closer look revealed that these students were using letters to represent sounds in words, a monumental achievement in early literacy development. Students used dry erase boards

[33] Teacher Written Reflection, 12.02.16, p. 201

to write letters or words. Later, during one of her graduate courses in word knowledge development, Jane revised this use of white boards to developmental spelling practice where students sorted words based on particular features contained in the words.

Jane intentionally decided to organize her language arts block with a series of rotations through small groups and independent activities. According to Jane, the series of rotations and independent activities had numerous instructional benefits, which included allowing for flexible grouping of students so that she could meet different students' needs. Even though all students did the same independent activities, they worked in different ways based on how they were currently reading and writing. For example, Jane noticed some students only drew pictures during writing time while others wrote words or letters. The rotations and independent activities had non-academic benefits as well. The independent activities became familiar to students, and they took increasing ownership of their reading and writing. They were doing the actual work that readers and writers do – reading and writing. Jane also stated that the fact that she did not have to make an inordinate amount of worksheet copies was added benefit.[34]

When Jane first tried out this organization of the language arts block, she acknowledged she still needed to learn more about how to implement and organize it in her classroom.[35] She also stated that she became "obsessed" with figuring out the organization.[36] She saw the organization working though – her students built their

[34] Teacher Interview, 11.18.15
[35] Classroom Observation, 10.19.15, p. 2; Teacher Interview, 11.18.15, pp. 37-38
[36] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 118

independence and felt ownership of their learning as they chose their own independent activities. She saw her that students were "excited" for reading.[37]

Jane saw evidence that the rotations and independent activities were working in her classroom and used the same organization for her language arts block the following school year. As she learned more about students' literacy development from her graduate coursework, she decided she needed to incorporate more intentional and developmental spelling practice into students' independent activities. At first, in the fall, she hesitated to add spelling practice to their independent activities because doing so would reduce students' free choice by requiring them to work with their spelling words as one of their independent activities. However, she wanted to ensure that students were working with words deliberately chosen for them based on her assessment of their literacy development. Later in the school year, her worries changed to whether her students would be prepared for first grade. Jane saw the first-grade teachers making worksheet after worksheet in the copy room, which connected the kindergarten hallway to the first-grade hallway.[38] Jane's classroom was largely a worksheet-free space, but she incorporated a couple worksheets on story structure after seeing what the first-grade teachers were making in the copy room. For the most part though, Jane's students continued to read and reread from their book baskets and free-write in their writing folders.[39]

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[37] Teacher Interview, 11.18.15, p. 38
[38] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, p. 2
[39] Classroom Observation, 04.18.17, p. 3

Jane decided *how* to group students and *what* aspect of literacy to work on with each group based on a division-wide assessment and her own assessment of how students could read and write. Some of her students, whose scores on the division-wide assessment fell below established benchmarks, were identified as in-need of additional literacy instruction to prevent potential reading difficulty. According to established schoolwide policy, those students must receive additional small group reading instruction from a reading intervention teacher as dictated by division- and state-wide rules. So, Jane decided *how* to group her students and *what* to work on with particular students, but she could not decide *when* to meet with groups of students because Jane had to ensure that the intervention teacher's schedule worked with her classroom schedule. It took multiple attempts and changes to her own classroom schedule, but Jane finally figured out a way to ensure she could teach her students in her own classroom around the intervention schedule.[40]

During both the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, Jane carved out time where she and her students focused solely on writing. This time, which occurred after small group and independent rotations and a break for lunch, evolved over the course of two years. Initially, Jane followed a school-provided program, where she would read a book and encourage students to write in response to a prompt related to the book's content. Eventually later in the school year, Jane tweaked her pace in the program because she determined it moved too slowly for her students. She did not want them (or her) to lose interest.

[40] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, pp. 13-16

During the following school year, Jane incorporated more free-writing into her writing instruction. She wanted her students writing all the time, regardless of what they chose to write. Sometimes Jane encouraged her students to write in response to a read aloud, not just content, but she drew students' attention to particular details in the picture books, such as artistic techniques the illustrator used or the author's word choice. Students modeled their own writing after these details noticed in the picture books. Sophia drew elaborate double-page spreads, completely covering the space reserved on primary paper for illustrations with crayon. Sophia and Will created an interactive illustration with written labels, complete with a "push" button and fold-out page.[41] Jane always circulated among students hearing about their ideas and gently prompting them to write more and hone their developmental spelling by listening for sounds. She taught them, much like she learned from her own journalism training, that their writing was never done. She allowed them to work on their creations during writing time and return to it again and again during subsequent days or during independent choice activity.

**Students.** Over the course of both the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years, Jane had between 16 and 18 students, each of whom had different strengths and needs. Both years, a new student, who spoke little to no English, joined Jane's class in October. During the 2015-2016 school year, she had two students whose primary language was Spanish, but in the 2016-2017 school year, she had five. She also had three students who received speech and language services.

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[41] Classroom Observation, 06.06.16, p. 1

Both years, students who did not meet division-wide benchmarks became a key topic of conversation during grade-level team meetings. In the fall of the 2015-2016 school year, similar to the other four kindergarten teachers, she had a couple of students who started school year performing below suggested literacy benchmarks. However, in the fall of the following school year, the four other kindergarten teachers had no more than one student performing below the benchmark while Jane had seven.

Though students' performance relative to division-wide benchmarks was often the only way students were discussed during grade-level team meetings, Jane tried to remind herself that her students are *five* and in kindergarten. They entered kindergarten not knowing letters and scribbling for writing, but a couple months into the school year, Jane described progress she observed with students not captured by the initial assessment scores. However, as she described students' progress, she also seemingly teared up, perhaps reflective of the difference between her class and the other kindergarten teachers and her worry over whether they will continue making progress.[42]

Jane did not become a teacher because she loved children, but she loved *her* students.[43] She smiled at their sweet five- and six-year-old comments and facial expressions captured in photographs.[44] She gushed over their progress as she examined their writing samples and expressed a wish to loop with her students to first grade and continue making progress without the transition of a new school year, a new teacher, and new students.[45] As Jane brought her current class out to the playground, her former

[42] Teacher Interview, 10.24.16, p. 158
[43] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 114
[44] Classroom Observation, 12.13.16, p. 208
[45] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, p. 1

students from the 2015-2016 school year ran up to her on the blacktop and snuck a hug before following their current first-grade class back inside the building. When faced with a particularly agonizing decision over how to approach literacy instruction in her classroom or how to support a student, Jane lost sleep.

**The Teaching Assistant.** Over the course of two years, Jane worked with three different teaching assistants – all three at least 10 years older than she. The teaching assistant served as another adult in the classroom guiding students throughout the day, but Jane also delegated parts of her literacy instruction to the teaching assistant. Like the other kindergarten teachers, Jane delegated developmental spelling instruction to the teaching assistant during small group rotations. Jane considered this delegation necessary to have enough time for both reading and spelling instruction during the small group rotations. However, part way through the school year, her teaching assistant left and she got a new teaching assistant, and Jane began to reconsider the delegation of spelling instruction to her. Jane worried that her new teaching assistant was not as adept at teaching spelling as her first teaching assistant.

At the start of the following school year, Jane shifted her perspective on separating reading and spelling instruction. Because of the connection between reading and spelling she learned about in one of her Master's courses, she decided to try to teach them in a more integrated way. The first step to that integration would be to teach them both in her small group. Her teaching assistant became responsible for letter formation practice instead. The decision to integrate reading and spelling instruction in her small group was important to Jane based on her new perspective on literacy development; however, the decision also proved challenging in her classroom. She often felt rushed,

even stressed, during her small group instruction. She returned to her decision to teach both reading and spelling in her small group. This time in consultation with her teaching assistant, she decided to redelegate spelling instruction. Her teaching assistant was responsible for spelling instruction during small group for the remainder of the school year.[46]

**Division**

The division where Jane taught is one of the larger school divisions in the state with almost 14,000 students. Fifty-one percent of these students are male. Eleven percent of the students are described as African American, 13% are Hispanic, and 65% are White. Thirty percent of students receive free or reduced lunch; 12% of students have an Individualized Education Program (IEP); 10% are identified as Gifted.

Jane's principal describes his school as unusual compared to the other elementary schools in the division. During division-wide principal meetings, principals from similar schools are grouped to talk about their schools' challenges and approaches to those challenges. Jane's principal explains that his school does not quite fit in either group – it is not a Title I school like the schools in one group but it has a significantly larger percentage of students receiving free-or-reduced lunch than the schools in the non-Title I group.[47]

The superintendent touts the division as highly innovative and a leader in creating 21st century classrooms where students are allowed a lot of choice and develop as life-long learners. These innovative practices did not always seem to be part of Jane's

[46] Written Reflection, 12.02.16, p. 201
[47] Grade-Level Team Meeting, 02.28.17, p. 1

classroom experience. Compared to the division, Jane focused much more on literacy content and instruction and expressed concern that the innovative practices seemed authentic and "fun" but also failed to address how students actually learn to read.[48]

### School

Jane taught at a suburban elementary school in the district, serving approximately 400 kindergarten through fifth grade students and located in the suburbs of a small mid-Atlantic city. Fifty percent of students in her school are male. Twenty two percent of the students are described as African American, 7% are Hispanic, and 70% are White. Fifteen percent of students receive free or reduced lunch; 15% of students have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). In the winter of 2017, the principal described the shifting demographics at the school; 38 new students had enrolled since the beginning of the school year, 32 of whom were considered "at-risk," pushing the school closer to 30% "at-risk." He described the school as "being in an uncomfortable" spot of needing additional support but not yet qualifying for it.[49]

The school is a web of seemingly countless hallways branching out from the school's center which holds the office and library. To get to the two kindergarten hallways and Jane's classroom, one walks past the office and library and makes a quick left. There are two kindergarten hallways. The first kindergarten hallway stretches the length of three classrooms on one side and two workrooms and a resource room on the other side, which connect to the first-grade hallway. Jane's classroom is the middle of these three classrooms. The first kindergarten hallway ends in another hallway stretching

[48] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 116
[49] Grade-Level Team Meeting, 02.28.17, p. 1

perpendicularly to the playground on one side and the back of the school on the other. This hallway contains a mix of kindergarten classrooms to the left and first grade classrooms to the right.

Jane's class ventured past the first-grade hallway to get to the gym, and they continued even further past the second-grade classrooms to get to the cafeteria. They rarely went to the other side of the school with the upper elementary classrooms. However, Jane and another third-grade teacher grouped their classes for special read alouds and buddy reading, so they occasionally traveled down the third grade hall.

Like Jane and her class, most of the school seemed to remain in their parts of the building and their respective grade-level instructional planning. However, during the 2016-2017 school year, the administrators led a school-wide examination of literacy practices to improve instruction and student performance. This school-wide examination first involved teachers from across the grade-levels deciding the components of a balanced literacy diet – fluency, comprehension, writing, and word study. Then, teachers from each grade-level chose one of the components of their balanced diet on which to focus and created an instructional strategy and list of "look fors," or instructional methods to try in the classroom. The kindergarten team chose fluency and planned to continue using high-frequency flashcards as their main "look-for."[50] Other school-wide initiatives included division-wide ones like creation stations, project-based learning, design-based thinking, and multi-age classrooms. Jane was not directly involved in any of these initiatives.

[50] Teacher Co-Reflection Interview, 11.17.16, p. 183

**Meetings.** During grade-level team meetings, kindergarten teachers and an administrator discussed a range of topics from field trip logistics to 100$^{th}$ day of school celebration plans to a brief sharing of an instructional activity. Often these meetings were devoted to discussing students' performance on division-wide assessments, determining whether students have met division-wide benchmarks for performance on those assessments, and figuring out an intervention schedule so that students performing below benchmark receive the appropriate amount of mandated intervention. The kindergarten teachers and school administrators actively considered the implications of long-standing state early intervention initiatives during weekly grade level team meetings held in the lead teacher's classroom. At these grade-level team meetings, administrators and teachers also considered various division-level policies such as assessment and curriculum resources.

Jane actively participated during the meetings. She recognized her position as an early career teacher compared with the four more veteran kindergarten teachers, so her active participation was often in the form of listening to the other teachers. However, she also asked questions to clarify interpretations of students' performance on division-wide assessments or verify the intervention schedule. Later during the 2016-2017 school year, she began to pose specific questions about assessment and intervention and raised larger questions about teachers' approaches to literacy instruction.

The principal or assistant principal often joined the kindergarten teachers in these meetings. Both the principal and assistant principal have stated a commitment to teachers' professional autonomy. The principal cited his refusal to mandate any particular program or instructional approach, and the assistant principal embedded her commitment

in her role as a silent participant during kindergarten meetings.[51] However, given their administrative positions, they were in charge and could easily shape the direction of what is discussed during these meetings.

The principal stated he is responsible for the school, meaning both the teachers and the students. Because of this responsibility, he designed a set of structures, including protocols for how teachers discuss their students in their grade-level meetings and how they will record assessment data on spreadsheets. Teachers used these protocols and spreadsheets to track students' performance in comparison to benchmarks. The administers and other intervention teachers accessed these structures easily, simply opening up the shared Google spreadsheet.[52] The kindergarten teachers used the principal-created protocol and spreadsheets as a guide during their meetings. Rather than talk in a student-centered way about what they noticed about their students supported by a variety of evidence like their classroom work, teachers tended to describe students in terms of numbers recorded in the spreadsheet.

While the principal shaped the teachers' meetings through the teachers' adherence to the structures he designed, both the principal and assistant principal participated in meetings. Before one fall meeting, the assistant principal described her role as one of a silent observer. However, she quickly inserted herself into the conversation after the kindergarten teachers named students who performed below expected benchmark levels on their fall literacy assessment. After naming students, the teachers began to consider adjustments to their schedule for additional instructional support but the assistant

[51] Principal Interview, 05.13.16, p. 85; Grade-Level Team Observation, 10.23.15, p. 15
[52] Principal Interview, 11.18.15

principal chimed in, “We’re not making any changes.” The assistant principal and lead teacher went back and forth a few times as the other kindergarten teachers watched and listened. At the direction of the assistant principal, the kindergarten teachers needed to wait until the new intervention teacher was hired before any changes could be made to their schedule.[53]

**Informal Conversations.** In addition to weekly kindergarten meetings, Jane interacted with other teachers at her school in informal conversations. She relied on the lead teacher, whom Jane considered a friend and whose classroom neighbored Jane’s, for teaching advice. Other kindergarten teachers occasionally came into Jane’s classroom during their shared planning time. Sometimes they asked to borrow extra supplies, drop-off other materials, or check-in about upcoming meetings or reports due. In addition to the kindergarten teachers, Jane also talked to other teachers, especially two younger teachers on the third-grade team. They talked to each other about what happened in their classrooms and how other staff members, like the school psychologist, influenced how particular students received additional support.

**Fellow Teachers.** Jane mostly interacted with other teachers on the kindergarten team. She regularly acknowledged her relative inexperience compared to the other kindergarten teachers’ years of teaching and cited this relative inexperience as a reason for her quietness during grade-level team meetings. Even if Jane wanted to talk more during meetings, she may have had a difficult time sharing a lot. Three of the other kindergarten teachers talked a lot and talked quickly; they often interjected to express

[53] Grade-Level Team Meeting, 10.23.15, p. 15

their opinions or ask a question. The fast-paced back-and-forth was hard for me, an outsider at the school, to follow as they tended to talk in incomplete thoughts and leave topics unresolved. However, Jane expressed that she experienced difficulty following their conversations, too.[54]

Jane described the other kindergarten teachers' personalities as strong. They tended to take a stance and were unwilling to budge. Before she joined the team, she learned that two of the teachers were always at-odds with each other. During meetings, she still caught glimpses of those two teachers' "bad blood" when they "butted heads." As a result, their mostly "functional" team dynamic lapsed into cliquey-ness as a third teacher picked a side and the fourth teacher inserted herself to be stubborn.[55] She expressed a wish that they were more "creative," and more willing to take time as a team to reexamine aspects of their instruction. Her impression of the other kindergarten teachers was that 'they've done it, and that's how we're going to keep doing it.'[56] Among the strong personalities, Jane might not have spoken up during meetings and might have faced a challenge if she really wanted to express her own thoughts. Nevertheless, Jane said she feels respected by her fellow kindergarten teachers.

While Jane mostly interacted with her fellow kindergarten teachers, she engaged at times with other teachers. She coordinated with the intervention teachers to ensure a few of her students receive additional reading instruction. She seemed to defer to the reading intervention teachers' instructional judgments as Jane shared she did not know

[54] Teacher Interview, 11.17.16, p. 191
[55] Teacher Interview, 11.17.16, p. 193
[56] Teacher Interview, 11.17.16, p. 195

what happened during intervention. Jane's deference was partly related to time; she had little time to check-in with intervention teachers. The intervention teachers got students from Jane's classroom while Jane was in the middle of her own small group reading lessons. Intervention teachers could not attend kindergarten grade level team meetings even when the kindergarten teachers discussed the intervention schedule because the intervention teachers worked with students in other grade levels at this time. Jane's deference was also involved an expressed recognition of the intervention teachers' expertise. During the spring of 2016, Jane stated that the intervention teachers' specialized knowledge allowed them to interpret assessment scores and make instructional decisions that Jane explained she could not make as a classroom teacher without that specialized knowledge.[57] While time continued to prevent Jane from conferring with the intervention teachers in the 2016-2017 school year, she no longer expressed the same reservations about her own specialized knowledge, which made sense given the increasing number of graduate courses she had taken.

Periodically throughout the year, Jane also interacted with other teachers on the school staff. Most of the time, these interactions were uneventful; the teachers followed a protocol or agenda led by the principal. Teachers shared information about their students and their instructional practices. Occasionally, these interactions revealed more insight into Jane's experience at her school, where she described a divide between more experienced teachers and younger, newly hired teachers.

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[57] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, p. 64

At one staff meeting, Jane and another veteran upper-grade teacher, who was close to retirement, paired to discuss what was happening in their respective classrooms by following a problem-solving protocol forwarded by the principal. Jane decided to share how a certain student in her classroom posed daily behavioral challenges. Eager for possible solutions, Jane said she became quickly disappointed as she felt the veteran teacher took over the situation, suggesting Jane needed more training immediately. The veteran teacher even called the principal over to push her plan. Jane explained that the veteran teacher "treated me like I was a baby, like I could not advocate for myself, like I was helpless, like I just needed everybody to take me under their wing. I was like, 'This is not my first rodeo.' This is my third rodeo. It was a really weird feeling because even though I don't share with my kindergarten team, I still feel respected by my team. Then, that opened my eyes to the idea that no, everybody else still thinks I'm struggling and floundering in the classroom."[58]

Frustrated by not being able to express her disappointment to the veteran teacher close to retirement, Jane seized an opportunity to do so at the end of the meeting. The principal concluded the meeting by encouraging each teacher to offer suggestions on a sticky note. Jane released her feelings and wrote, "Young teachers need to remember that experienced teachers are not all burned out, and experienced teachers need to remember that younger teachers are not empty vessels needing to be filled." After expressing her disappointment privately, Jane realized she had made a mistake when the principal had the teachers walk around and look at each other's sticky notes. Her post-it note,

[58] Teacher Interview, 1.28.17, p. 8

thankfully anonymous, caused a ripple throughout the staff. Jane felt awful and guilty, and later she smoothed the ripple over by talking to both the principal and veteran teacher.

**Principal and other staff.** Jane's principal was a former middle school teacher, but he embraced the nature of elementary school. In the brief moments he spent in his office, he left the window blinds to his interior windows open, which gave him a close-up view of not the weather outside, but of countless students walking down the hallway. To many elementary school students, a principal is somewhat of a celebrity, so many of these students attempted to get his attention through the glass with a grin and a wave. He returned each acknowledgment with a smile and wave of his own.[59]

In addition to being a local celebrity, a principal wears many other hats, and Jane's principal was no exception. In an interview, he named some of his hats – instructional leader, parent liaison, building manager, accountant, and personnel manager.[60] To wear all those hats and do his complex job well, Jane's principal stated that he must hire good teachers and give them professional autonomy. He said that his hiring decisions were especially important in kindergarten and for literacy. In his words,

> We're talking about kindergarten teachers and literacy, and there's nothing more important. We've been saying to them, 'We believe in you. We trust you. We think you're really good. We trust your judgment.' Jane is a really good teacher. We hired her… I have no idea what Jane's Tuesday morning literacy block is gonna look like when I hire her. Jane in particular is good at what she's doing because we've seen it. I think she's working. I think she's dedicated. All that gives [us] confidence to put [her] in a classroom and let [her] loose with literacy.[61]

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[59] Principal Interview, 11.18.15
[60] Principal Interview, 5.13.16, pp. 89-90
[61] Principal Interview, 11.18.15, p. 41

In an interview, Jane's principal said to me, "We believe in you. We trust you. We think you're really good. We trust your judgment," and "Jane is a really good teacher," By saying this, Jane's principal attempted to convey a sense of professional autonomy to the teachers in his building. His attempts were working, at least in part. Jane stated she felt that she has professional autonomy.[62]

The principal's stated commitment to believing in his teachers and supporting their professional autonomy may have reflected his overall approach to leadership. The impeccably organized bookcases in his office were filled with books on leadership. He drew on the tenets of these books when explaining his own approach to being a principal and quickly located and pulled books out of his bookcases to expand on his ideas. Three of his apparent current favorites include: *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*; *Too Big to Know: Rethinking Knowledge Now That the Facts Aren't the Facts; Experts are Everywhere, and the Smartest Person in the Room is Room Itself*; and *The Checklist Manifesto*. He uses lessons learned from reading these books to guide his efforts as a principal. For example, he created checklists and protocols designed to facilitate collaboration and discussion among teachers.

However, the principal's self-proclaimed willingness to "let [Jane] loose with literacy" may not have related just to his leadership approach but also to his own background. Even though he described himself as an instructional leader, as a former middle school teacher, he readily admitted he was no expert in early literacy instruction and stated he did not "need to be the top dog in the room."[63] For him, not being "top dog"

[62] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 128
[63] Principal Interview, 5.13.16, pp. 89-90

meant not having all the answers. He stated that he "[doesn't] have to know all the answers. And we've talked really honestly about the fact that I shouldn't know all the answers. My job is too complex to know everything. And I won't ever know everything." He also explained that he "think[s] it's probably more important as a leader to show you that I recognize I don't know everything and to compensate for that but maybe even more importantly to draw on the expertise we have in the building. And we set up a culture around talking and trying to collaborate."[64]

Part of this culture of talking and collaboration means Jane's principal was always on the move as he sought to be an accessible presence throughout the school building. He observed teachers in their classrooms, engaged in reflective conversations with teachers after those observations, checked in with teachers and students in the cafeteria, hung out in the hallway answering emails, and attended grade-level team meetings. Sometimes he remained quiet during others; other times he interjected, offering lengthy explanations for particular school-wide decisions or structures, like allocation of tutoring resources or teaching positions. He seemed to want to be transparent with teachers about what happened throughout the school, and he also offered support, like when he explained he could allocate money in the budget to pay the kindergarten teachers to revamp their mathematics curriculum when they expressed an interest in including more authentic engagement with mathematical concepts. While the principal seemed to lend his support and school financial resources, the kindergarten teachers never continued with this expressed plan to adjust their mathematics curriculum.

[64] Principal Interview, 5.13.16, pp. 89-90

Even though Jane's principal stated he did not have to be "top dog" and acknowledged he was still learning about literacy instruction in an elementary school, he was the boss, which he explained came with great responsibility. He summarized this responsibility, "Because to an extent, certainly everything that goes on with kids in the building, we're in charge of. And everything that goes on with teachers, we're in charge of."[65] When he explained responsibility for the school, he says "we're" to include the assistant principal, his other administrator. But, he knew there was a hierarchy, where he sits at the top. He explains, "There's certainly a hierarchy. I get that. I understand that conversations change when I walk in the room or I don't. I get all that. I'm aware of all that… I can come into a room and say, 'These are the five things we're doing.' And I can get compliance. Again, I mean I can – I've done it on some things that we had to do like duty schedules and master schedules and stuff like that. I can always win a conversation just by saying this is the way it's gonna be. You don't get buy-in and you don't get energy off that. Some things you have to do it. But they end up being basic structures."[66]

The school, at least its scores, were the principal's responsibility. Students' performance best represented teachers' performance, which best represented principals' performance – at least according to some educators' reasoning. The principal met with his superintendent at the end of each year for his evaluation. After this meeting, the principal explained to me that assessment scores were "definitely a part" of his evaluation.[67] He also tried to make it clear that assessment scores were only one of many

[65] Principal Interview, 05.13.16, p. 86
[66] Principal Interview, 05.13.16, pp. 88-89
[67] Principal Interview, 05.13.16, p. 93

other components that relate to the many hats he wears as an administrator. However, the principal equivocated. "And honestly, I don't wanna make – I'm certainly not making it about [high stakes state test]. But at the end of the day, [our high stakes state test scores and accreditation] do matter. But our [high stakes state test scores] and our [state literacy diagnostic screener scores], they were not great" [68]

Jane's principal expressed a wish that his focus did not have to be on test scores. Even though he promoted other non-test related initiatives like project-based learning and design-based thinking, he also acknowledged that he must focus on scores. This focus became embedded in his vision that all students would perform, which seemed defined by their test performance relative to benchmarks and monitored by structures. Jane dutifully filled out the principal-created spreadsheets and participated in the meeting protocols where she must state how many of her students met, failed to meet, or exceeded division-wide benchmarks. Jane also met with her principal after he observed in her classroom. She explained that he always invited her to share her reflections on her lessons and that he usually talked a lot in response. Jane described his lengthy responses as not ego-driven but also stated she wanted more specific feedback.

**Instructional coaches.** During the 2015-2016 school year, Jane's first year in the school division, Jane occasionally met with a division-level instructional coach who checked in with her about her classroom. These instructional coaches supported teachers across different schools in the division; they were not the intervention teachers, who provided additional support for students not meeting benchmarks at Jane's school. During

[68] Principal Interview, 5.13.16, p. 85

this year, Jane cited this coach as an influence in her classroom, namely her decisions around her language arts block structure and classroom management. However, after Jane started her graduate program, the instructional coach's influence seemed to wane as Jane began to cite her coursework as an important influence on her instructional decision-making. In the 2016-2017, three of the division-wide instructional coaches attend one of the kindergarten grade-level team meetings and shared a sheet of paper detailing the different ways the coaches can support teachers. After the meeting, Jane set the paper aside. She explained to me that if teachers wanted the coaches' support in their classrooms, they were supposed to reach out to the coaches. Jane also expressed worry that her focus on literacy instruction seemed to differ from the more general priorities of the instructional coaches, so Jane did not reach out to the coaches.

**Master's Program**

In January of her second year of teaching, Jane enrolled part-time in a Master's program in reading. She initially enrolled in the Master's program for a seemingly straightforward reason – she wanted to learn more as a teacher. But her experience teaching while taking Master's courses was not that straightforward. Over time she experienced instances where the theoretical knowledge from her graduate program context seemed consistent, or at least complementary, to the practical knowledge (either technical or practical wisdom) encountered in her school or grade-level contexts and her own classroom seemed consistent, or at least complementary, Other times the different types of knowledge seemed contradictory. For example, after completing a course on children's literature, Jane incorporated more read alouds into her instruction and used quality children's picture books as mentor texts. By drawing attention to aspects of these

picture books, she encouraged her students to notice and experiment with authors' and illustrators' techniques. Jane expressed a desire to discuss instructional practice with picture books with the other kindergarten teachers; however, they never seemed to have (or make) time for this type of in-depth literacy content-related discussion.

The Master's program in which Jane enrolled presented a unique context for how she encountered and negotiated different kinds of knowledge. In her graduate courses, Jane reencountered university-based theoretical knowledge, or universal scientific knowledge. Theoretical knowledge differs from other types of practical knowledge – namely from rational, outcome-driven technical knowledge and value-driven practical wisdom – which is context-bound. Moreover, theoretical knowledge may also relegate the practical wisdom of teachers, which is based not on theory but on the flexible drawing on multiple sources of knowledge, including a teacher's own, to make value-drive decisions for particular students. Jane's reencountering of university-based theoretical knowledge creates a chance for conflict as Jane may see the university-based theoretical knowledge as relevant in her classroom with students (Morris, 1999, 2003).

However, the potential for conflict between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge differs based on the particular university and the graduate program. The potential for conflict may be less for Jane given the nature of her program, which emphasizes a conservatory-clinical approach, which involves practicum experiences, reflective engagement, and feedback. In addition to practical experiences, real observations and experiences with children who are learning to read and write provide a foundation for the graduate program's theoretical core, grounded in a developmental approach. Moreover, the experiences exemplary teachers have had with children inform

how best to teach reading and writing in ways that need constant attunement to children and their demonstrated strengths and needs. Importantly, the graduate program's developmental approach aligned with and reinforced Jane's own commitment to developmental instruction, or instruction that encourages students to build on their current literacy understandings *and* seems respectful of five- and six-year-old children.

**Courses.** As a part-time Master's student, Jane took one or two courses per semester. She started with a foundations of literacy course in her first semester. Next, during the summer before her third year of teaching, she took two courses, children's literature and content area reading, respectively. During her third year of teaching, she took a fall course in word knowledge development and spring courses in assessment and remediation and writing.

For the time being, some classes seemed to resonate more with Jane than others. In mid-December of her third-year of teaching, Jane wrapped up the end of the semester. She just turned in her final exam for her fourth Master's class, a course in word knowledge development. She took a moment to reflect with me on the course's influence on her instruction thus far. She pulled the course's textbook out of her tote bag, which she borrowed in like new condition from her professor. It had clearly been well-used. Notes filled certain pages, and others were creased. A big water stain spanned the bottom of the book – evidence that Jane had brought the book with her many places. "I can't give it back now," she smiled, perhaps even a little teary, and referenced the water stain but also its impact on her teaching. She held the book to her chest, as if wrapped in a hug, "This book changed my classroom." Her professor allowed her to keep the book, so textbook in tow, Jane shared her plans to travel down the east coast over the course of her winter

break. She also described her big plans to try out her growing knowledge of literacy development on her family.[69] Later that school year Jane returned the favor to her professor when she provided the professor with practical insight from her kindergarten classroom as the professor revised another book about early literacy.

While Jane cited her textbook as a book that changed her classroom, she named influences from other classes as well. After her children's literature class, she initially doubted whether five- and six-year-olds could notice complex aspects of picture books. A few months and a few picture book author studies later, she listened to her kindergarten students describing their double-page spreads or their crayon-rubbing techniques. Jane's students also described what they were writing and how their writing mimicked the style of some of their favorite picture book authors. Almost a full two semesters later, Jane planned to follow-up with her children's literature professor to discuss selection of books. Jane also said she wants to dig back into the writing course the summer following her third-year teaching to rethink parts of her writing instruction. Jane was eager for feedback, even to the point of continuing discussion with a professor after the course ended. The most useful feedback, according to Jane, occurred in courses where she received the most feedback *and* found that feedback relevant to her current instructional work.

In next six chapters, I present a series of chronological vignettes from Jane's classroom, grade-level team meetings, and perspectives shared during interviews. Through these vignettes, I offer a closer examination of the phenomenon of how a

[69] Classroom Observation, 12.13.16, p. 208

teacher negotiates the different knowledge-based claims about early literacy instruction. At times Jane’s negotiation and progression as a teacher seems to follow a neat narrative arc; she gains more literacy content knowledge, approaches reading and writing instruction differently, and achieves better literacy outcomes with her students. However, as the vignettes illustrate, teaching is messy and Jane’s progression anything but inevitable.

# CHAPTER III
# FALL 2015

Jane occasionally reminds me that the 2015-2016 school year is not her "first rodeo."[70] Last year she completed the rite of passage that is first-year teaching at the same school where she student-taught as part of her university-based preparation program (White, 1989). Now, as a second-year teacher, she begins again in a different elementary school in another division. With one year of teaching experience, she is still an early career teacher. Early career-ness brings a unique set of challenges as new teachers continue to adjust to the demands of teaching (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Early career teachers attempt to address discrepancies between their preparation programs and current teaching practices and foster relationships with colleagues and families – all within their unique school context (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Faced with these demands, early career teachers may abandon their previous learning from preparation programs and simply try to survive by mimicking the instructional techniques of the teachers at their school (Anagnostopoulos, Smith, & Basmadjian, 2007; Lampert & Ball, 1999).

Abandonment of previous learning and mimicking techniques of other teachers paints a bleak picture of teachers' early careers. Perhaps a more inspiring view also exists – one where early career teachers thoughtfully consider instructional practice with more experienced teachers. After all, the theoretical learning characteristic of many university-based preparation programs must also be translated into practical knowledge in schools with actual children. No matter how many practicum experiences pre-service teachers

[70] Teacher Co-Reflection Interview, 11.17.16, p. 184; Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, p. 268

have, the contextualized experience as a classroom teacher and consideration of practice serves to further their professional growth. Rather than simply adopting instructional techniques, early career teachers begin forge their own practical wisdom alongside more experienced teachers (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Contrasted with techniques, or application of knowledge aimed at an objective or outcome, practical wisdom is knowledge of how to act in particular situations through deliberation over values (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

However, thoughtful and collaborative consideration of instructional practice takes time. So, what happens when there is no time or a perceived lack of time to consider practice? With no time, so much regarding instructional practice may remain unsaid or unexamined. A sense of "this is what we do here" or "this is how we teach here" exists, and deep-seated norms about instruction and related techniques often situated in politics and norms perpetuate (Oakes, 1992). These norms and techniques are so accepted and understood by experienced teachers as so ubiquitous or commonsensical that they no longer have to be discussed. Thus, it falls to early career teachers to figure out those norms and techniques and acculturate or appear incompetent and even become isolated.

Where is early career Jane? Is she simply trying to survive by adopting the techniques of the other more experienced kindergarten teachers? Or, is she deeply considering instructional practice alongside the other kindergarten teachers? Or, some combination of the two? And, how is the wisdom obtained from pre-service preparation negotiated in this process? In the following two vignettes, we explore these questions as we join Jane – first in her classroom and then in a grade-level team meeting.

## In the Classroom

Clipboard in hand, Jane stands in front of her 17 students who sit on the carpet facing her. They know exactly what is about to happen but wait for her cue to start. Once she has everyone's attention, she cheerfully announces, "Listen carefully for your name and where to go. Our groups have changed!" First, she names one group of students who are to join her at her kidney table in the front of the room and another group of students who is to meet the teaching assistant at her kidney table in the back of the room. Next, Jane tells the remaining students that they will make a choice of what to do and reminds them that their choices are "innnn-deee-pen-dennnnt." Her students join in, sing-song-ily stretching out the word independent. Quickly, she calls out the name of each of the remaining students. After hearing their name, students indicate their choice by calling out, "Read to self!," "Word work!," or "Work on writing!" As the last student calls out her choice, the room bursts into motion as the 17 students pop up from their carpet spots and move throughout the classroom.[71]

Even though her students, for the most part, settle into their spots, Jane remains in constant motion, orchestrating a carefully designed set of routines, which continues for the next hour and ten minutes. After recording the last student's choice on her clipboard, she sets the clipboard down and moves from the carpet to her kidney table. She glances around the classroom to ensure students supposed to be working independently are doing just that.

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[71] Classroom Observation, 10.19.15, p. 2

Some students recline in cozy window seats or on pillows with a basket of books. Other students perch in plastic chairs, just the right size for a five-year-old, and hunch over composition notebooks. Many of these students scribble and draw in their notebooks – their earliest attempts at communicating with writing. Other students effortfully form letters that sprawl across the page, mostly copying letters they recognize around the room. A few students only write a couple of letters; however, a closer look reveals a monumental moment in their early literacy development. These students are using letters to represent sounds in words, like *B* for *BAT*.

Confident that her students are hard at work, Jane sits down at her table, pulls out a stack of picture cards from a shelf near her table, and tells the group of four students at her table that they will be working on rhyming today. For the next several minutes, Jane and students work together to match cards of rhyming pairs. This task seems easy for a couple of the students – Chris pairs *wizard* and *blizzard* and explains they rhyme because they both have *izzard*. The other two students have more difficulty – Aly tries to pair *stop* and *lock*. Jane attempts to draw Aly's attention to the different ending sounds by emphasizing the ending parts of the words, "St*OP* and l*OCK*. Close but they don't rhyme."

Jane provides Aly an opportunity to try again, "Find another word that has -*OP*." Aly names a couple other words corresponding to the cards spread out on the table but does not recognize the rhyming pair. Other students start to chime in with other non-rhyming pairs. Before she completely loses the attention of the group, Jane stops the calling out, scoops up the rhyming cards, and passes out a short poem printed on a sheet of paper to each of the four students. However, time is running out for this group of four

students, and thirteen others need their small group time with the teacher. So, Jane tells her students "[we] only have time to talk about the poem." A couple comments later, Jane rings a chime, and the room is bursts into motion again as students start cleaning up and circuitously make their way back to the carpet.[72]

Minutes later new groups of students are settled into Jane's and teaching assistant's tables. The other students have made their independent choices, again recorded diligently by Jane on her clipboard. At first glance, it appears that Jane starts this second group the same way as the previous one. However, either consciously or unconsciously, she makes a slight adjustment. For the previous group, she had started with a general directive about "working on rhyming," and then she modeled pairing two of the cards that rhymed. Now to start the second group, Jane mimics the same kind of in-the-moment instruction she provided to Aly, from the previous group, who needed additional support to find rhyming pairs.

As Jane takes out the same picture cards she used with the previous group, she tells the new group of five students, "Now we're going to think about the end of the word." She places two cards in front of her on the table so all students can see and says, "n*EST*... v*EST*." She places emphasis on the *EST* part of the word as she says *nest* and *vest* aloud. She pauses, allowing students time to process, and then asks, "What's the same about those words?"

[72] Classroom Observation, 10.19.15, p. 3

One student responds that they sound the same. Jane both affirms and follows-up, "They do sound kind of similar. But what's the same about the word? Beginning or the end?"

Perhaps confusing across skills children develop as they learn to read, one student explains that the words sound the same at the beginning. Jane patiently listens to the student's explanation but then states that the words actually sound the same at the end. To clear up any confusion for the other four students possibly caused by the student's explanation, she decides to model with another pair. She selects two more cards and tells students, "This is a funny one! Bl*IZZARD*. W*IZARD.* They both have *IZZARD*."

Without missing a beat, Jane gives students an opportunity to try rhyming on their own. She selects another card – *bat*. She sneaks one last instructional moment in and places the rhyming pair card – *cat* – on the table next to the *bat* card. Students chorally call out, "Cat!" '*Bat* and *cat* rhyme,' states the teacher. "Can you think of any other words that rhyme with *cat* and *bat*?"

"Gat!" says one student.

Jane responds, "That is a nonsense word, but they do rhyme!"

Other students share "nat" and "gat" again. Jane tries to prompt another student, who has not yet shared, to come up with a rhyming word by stretching out /r/. A different student calls out, "Rabbit!" Confusion ensues, and it is impossible to tell whether anyone actually says, "rat." Jane moves on and encourages students to generate words that rhyme with "fan."[73]

[73] Classroom Observation, 10.19.15, p. 4

After students generate a few rhyming words, Jane moves on again. She passes out a small book for the letter *Dd* to each student and tells them to “take a picture walk.” Students name the pictures in the book as they turn the pages. “Dog!” “Dinosaur!” Jane watches students and comments, “Great observations,.” Next, Jane passes each student a highlighter, and they highlight all *Dd*s they can find in the book. After they highlight the last *Dd*, they turn back to the front cover and read the book altogether. “*D*, *d*, dog, dog. *D*, *d*, dinosaur, dinosaur.”

Jane stops the students’ reading and asks, “How did I know that big word was dinosaur?”

“You know the letter sounds,” answers one student.

“Yes, I have had a lot of practice reading, so I know my letters and sounds,” Jane responds.

The students shift around in their chairs and look down at the book rather than at Jane, who is still talking. She explains that she also looked at the picture of dinosaur in the book, and it helped her know the word.[74]

As soon as the students read the last page of the book together with Jane, she rings a chime. The room bursts into motion yet again as students clean up and come back to the carpet.[75]

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[74] Classroom Observation, 10.19.15, p. 5
[75] Classroom Observation, 10.19.15, p. 5

Jane's approach to her literacy block structure is not arbitrary but adapted from a popular set of resources, known as *The Daily Five*.[76] She did not find this resource on her own; another kindergarten teacher used it, and Jane took a weekly division-offered professional learning course throughout the fall. Her adaptation of *The Daily Five* involves rotations through teacher-led small groups and independent activities chosen by students. During her teacher-led small groups, Jane targets specific aspects of literacy development in small groups based on assessed student strengths and needs. When working independently, students choose whether to read to themselves, work with words, or write. Jane describes her approach to the literacy block in her classroom as not quite the same as the other kindergarten teachers because of this aspect of student choice built into her literacy block structure. According to Jane, choice fosters independence and excitement for reading in her young students, which she states are equally as important as skills.[77]

While there may be some differences across the kindergarten teachers' literacy block structures, Jane and other kindergarten teachers' classroom structures similarly revolve around grouping students based on common division-level assessments of students' literacy development. At first glance, the similarities across the kindergarten teachers' classrooms may seem like shared techniques or practice. However, a closer examination may suggest that the similarities are also reflective of widespread and deeply accepted norms, or the assumptions about what is "normal" and what constitutes appropriate actions (Oakes, 1992). These norms are present within Jane's grade-level

[76] See Boushey & Moser (2009) and Boushey & Moser (2014) for more information on *The Daily Five*
[77] Teacher Interview, 11.18.15, pp. 37-38

with her fellow kindergarten teachers but also situated in school, division, and larger educational contexts.

For early literacy instruction, grouping students based on common division-level assessments relate to three possible widespread and deeply held norms. One norm is that the capacities and needs of students, even as early as kindergarten, differ. National conversations about “readiness,” which began in the 1980s, persist today as parents, teachers, and politicians strive to ensure children are “ready” to succeed in school. A second norm is that teachers are accountable for addressing those differences by assessing students’ capacities and needs. Teachers administer assessments and report data designed to provide information about students’ literacy development or indicate students’ level of readiness. A third norm, that emphasizes efficiency and leads to technique, is that teachers can further address students’ capacities and needs by grouping students and providing instruction designed to target each group’s assessed needs.

Norms lend themselves to specific techniques, or school structures or instructional approaches (Oakes, 1992). Those techniques may also further reinforce norms. For early literacy, appropriate structures and approaches involve grouping students based on perceived similarities, needs, or even deficits. Then, teachers employ some structure of rotating small groups where the teacher meets separately with the different small groups of students to provide different, or differentiated, instruction across the small groups of students. The instruction across groups could differ in terms of curricular content, pace, and quantity. Often for early literacy, students work with different levels of text. Grouping, rotations, and different instruction across groups of students are all techniques used by Jane and her fellow kindergarten teachers.

In addition to examining norms and techniques, Oakes states that examining the political dimension of early literacy instruction is essential. According to Oakes, the political dimension of an instructional practice involves an assignment of public labels that carry different expectations, statuses, and consequences for future educational or occupational attainment. For example, the public label such as “advanced” and “struggling” reader carry different expectations, statuses, and consequences for students. Individuals and groups with different labels compete for the advantages that may prove beneficial in larger society such as additional resources, opportunities, and credentials. The political dimension of an instructional practice also involves issues related to race and socio-economic status as well as micro-political power related to status of new and experienced teachers, the authority of administrators and district-level reading specialist, and discourses of accountability. Oakes provides the example of an uneven demographic distribution across advanced and remedial classes. The political dimension, as described by Oakes, is less apparent in Jane’s classroom; however, the assignment of public labels (e.g., “advanced,” “struggling”) and potential consequences associated with early literacy instruction become more evident in grade-level team meetings.

**In the Grade-Level Team Meeting**

The kindergarten teachers gather around the kidney table in the lead teacher’s classroom. The lead teacher, who sits in the teacher spot at the table and faces the other kindergarten teachers of varied tenure and assistant principal, starts the meeting promptly at 11:15. Jane sits with the other kindergarten teachers, sandwiched between the most experienced kindergarten teacher and another experienced teacher who freely states her opinion. After a rapid back-and-forth across the lead teacher, other teachers, and the

assistant principal, they all shift their attention to the topic of their more advanced readers. It is a subtle shift – one I only catch because Jane had warned me it would occur.[78]

The shift begins with two of the other kindergarten teachers discussing two of their most advanced readers. According to the two teachers, their advanced readers simply seem to know a lot of words. One of these readers knows fewer than the other reader, but the teachers decide that he will "pick it up quickly." The amount of words this one reader knows will increase with exposure and allow him to keep up and catch up with the other more advanced readers. Because he will "pick it up quickly," the teachers decide this student will join the group of more advanced readers.

While the other two teachers talk, Jane waits her turn and remains quiet until the lead teacher checks with her. Jane appears to realize that while her "advanced" `student is not like the other students in her class, he is also not like the other more advanced readers in the other teachers' classrooms. When it is her turn, Jane states she is not sure her student belongs with the group of more advanced readers. Unlike with the other teacher's student, there is no discussion of how many words Jane's student knows or whether Jane's student will "pick it up quickly."[79]

The teacher to Jane's right asks Jane, "Do you have any idea where he's reading?"[80]

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[78] Grade Level Team Meeting Observation, 10.23.15, p. 17
[79] Grade Level Team Meeting Observation, 10.23.15, p. 17
[80] Grade Level Team Meeting Observation, 10.23.15, p. 18

Jane responds, “Seven,” referring to a level on a reading assessment used by all kindergarten teachers. The “seven” is well below the “seventeen” level of some of the other students in the group of advanced readers.[81]

With the numerical scores, the discussion around Jane’s student quickly concludes. The other kindergarten teachers never explicitly tell Jane that her student will not join a group of advanced students in another classroom during reading time. However, it is understood that Jane’s student will remain in her classroom for his entire literacy instruction. Jane accepts the decision unhesitatingly, but before the teachers move on, Jane seems compelled to prove her competence as a teacher. None of the other teachers ask whether Jane can manage in her classroom, but Jane tells her fellow and more experienced kindergarten teachers that she can meet the needs of her more advanced reader without additional support, “I think we can manage.”[82]

By telling the more experienced teachers she can “manage,” Jane implies that she is a good enough teacher to recognize her advanced reader is not as advanced as their advanced readers *and* a good enough teacher to continue supporting him on her own. So, rather than discuss different instructional approaches each teacher considers helpful for meeting the needs of the more advanced readers in their classrooms, the teachers move on. As subtly as the teachers shifted to discussing their more advanced readers, they abruptly end their discussion and move on to the next topic. The lead teacher has other topics to cover during the meeting. She reminds the other teachers about scheduling a

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[81] Grade Level Team Meeting Observation, 10.23.15, p. 18

[82] Grade Level Team Meeting Observation, 10.23.15, p. 18

time for whole class enrichment, planning for an upcoming teacher workday, and signing up for class pictures.[83]

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Jane and the other kindergarten teachers leave a lot unspoken in this grade-level team meeting, which is an example of what Foucault (1980) calls a "discursive moment" where power is exercised in discourse through what is not said or implicit. Through the quick discussion about students' performance in which Jane seemingly cannot participate like the other more experienced teachers, power is exercised in terms of labeling Jane as inexperienced and her knowledge as less legitimate than the experienced teacher's knowledge.

By leaving so much unsaid, the teachers may further perpetuate the norms and techniques associated with early literacy instruction (Oakes, 1992). One norm associated with early literacy instruction is that the capacities and needs of students differ. Jane and the other kindergarten teachers implicitly acknowledge their students vary in terms of their capacities and needs by devoting at least part of their grade-level team meeting to discussing students reading at higher levels. Teachers often discuss student performance, namely in the form of assessment scores, during these meetings. They also discuss their responses to student performance, suggesting teachers are accountable for student performance, which is the second norm related to early literacy instruction.

The kindergarten teachers' discussion of how to support their more advanced readers is illustrative of the third norm of early literacy instruction – grouping and

[83] Classroom Observations, 10.19.15, 11.6.15; PLC Observation, 10.23.15, pp. 17-18

providing different instruction to each group. Without saying grouping is the only appropriate technique, the kindergarten teachers only discuss grouping of students. They also imply there is some sort of rule or identifiable cut-off for grouping and provision of different instruction, but the exact nature of that different instruction is never discussed. One teacher's student gets to join the group because he will "pick it up quickly," but Jane's student does not get to join the group. The teachers assign labels to students primarily on their assessed reading level and then use the labels to adjust the levels of materials to provide different instruction. These labels tend to be the focus of discussion rather than other aspects of students' development like their interest in reading or similarities across students who are all five- and six-years-old. Jane's "seven" student clearly differs from other students working in highly predictable or memorized texts in her classroom but likely falls behind the other teachers' "seventeen" and "pick it up quickly" students. In addition to grouping based on reading level labels, teachers can address differences in reading level by only exposing each group to their assigned particular level of text.

Aspects of norms and techniques are not necessarily wrong or negative. In Jane's classroom, some students begin kindergarten still learning the letters of the alphabet while others can apply their knowledge of letters and sounds to read short, familiar text. These differences are often related to access and opportunity rather than inherent differences in students' intelligence. Sometimes Jane and the other kindergarten teachers remind me and each other that the early experiences students have with books and language vary across home and preschool environments, the preschools attended by their students differ in quality, and particular students did not attend preschool. Jane and the

other kindergarten teachers seek to understand what their young students already know about literacy so they can facilitate students' reading and writing growth.

Furthermore, one instructional way to support literacy development involves provision of different types of text, including text where the level of difficulty is controlled. Even individuals who speak out against strict leveling of students acknowledge beginning readers benefit from leveled texts (Hoffman, 2017; Shanahan, 2013). But, without consideration and questioning, norms and politics can persist and perpetuate less than desirable techniques (Oakes, 1992). In the case of the grade-level team meeting, grouping may become the predominant technique used to support students, and less attention is paid to the actual instruction taking place. It may also become easy to lose sight of what is shared among kindergarten students, who are all five- and six-year-old children learning to see themselves as literate individuals part of a larger literate community. In the case of this grade-level team meeting, students are grouped by their current reading performance and potentially assigned labels as more advanced readers. As some students become defined by the apparent ease at which they learn to read, other children may become defined by their struggles and labeled as "non-readers." Again, these labels have expectations and consequences; even kindergartners sense when they are not "measuring up."

In addition to a lack of consideration of and questions about in the grade-level team meeting, the other more experienced kindergarten teachers miss an opportunity to support Jane as an early career teacher by not continuing the conversation. Instead, it seems implied that Jane should know how to instructionally support all of the students in her classroom. Of course, Jane could ask and extend the conversation herself. But, the

grade-level team meetings involve quick transitions between topics.[84] Teachers make quick decisions or pose quick questions to administrators or division-level leaders if the teachers are uncertain about a decision. Even when the teachers do discuss instruction – it is a quick "share," a passing around of a worksheet or a mentioning of an activity.[85] It certainly seems Jane might rock the boat if she were to keep asking questions. Extending the conversation beyond quick decisions or questions requires a level of vulnerability about which Jane admits she feels insecure.[86] Jane asked for more help from the other kindergarten teachers outside of grade-level team meetings, but she was always conscious of asking too much and revealing she was not qualified.[87] Any new, innovative practices Jane may possess from her preservice undergraduate program or her previous school are not part of the conversation occurring in the grade-level team meeting. If Jane possesses any new, innovative practices, which may be particularly relevant to the issues discussed at the meeting, these practices are not even considered by Jane as she simply tries to "survive."[88]

So, it is understandable that Jane forgoes asking a follow-up questions about instruction or designing instruction to meet the range of strengths and needs in her kindergarten class while also remaining sensitive to the fact that *all* her students are five- and six-years-old. Instead, Jane positions herself as knowledgeable, like the other more experienced kindergarten teachers. She evaluates her "advanced" student as not a good fit

[84] Grade Level Team Meeting Observation, 10.23.15, pp. 15-20
[85] Grade Level Team Meeting Observations, 10.23.15, p. 18; 03.25.16, p. 70
[86] Email, 01.10.18
[87] Conversation, 02.12.18
[88] Conversation, 02.12.18

with the other more "advanced" students before the other teachers can tell her that her student does not fit. Moreover, she claims she can "manage" in her classroom. She is left to figure literacy instruction out in her own classroom and in more informal conversations with certain teachers. This is what she does. Jane refines her instructional language arts structure and tries out different instructional tasks and activities within that structure.[89] She tries to differentiate instruction, not just based on reading level, but also based on the level of support she offers her students in the form of different prompts as she did in her fall rhyming instruction.[90] Jane prompts some students to pair rhyming words from a given set of words. For other students, she asks them to generate rhyming words when given a word.

While Jane mostly attempts to figure it out in her own classroom, she sometimes seeks answers in informal conversations with other teachers. In one of these conversations, another teacher gives Jane the advice to be gentle on herself, which Jane refers to as the best advice she could have gotten at that moment in her career.[91] She does not have the same luck with her questions related to instruction as deeper consideration of instructional practices is at best fleeting during grade-level team meetings. Maybe other teachers' instructional approaches are so intuitive that they can no longer articulate them. Or, perhaps the other teachers have the same specific instructional questions Jane does.

In the fall of 2015, Jane admitted she hardly considered the theoretical knowledge from her undergraduate preparation program. Instead, Jane described her experience as

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[89] Classroom Observations, 10.19.15, pp. 1-9; 11.23.15, pp. 10-14
[90] Classroom Observation, 10.19.15, pp. 3-8
[91] Teacher Interview, 10.16.16, p. 118; Conversation, 02.12.18

trying to figure out how the other experienced teachers on her grade-level team approached literacy instruction in their own classrooms. She relied on these veteran teachers' practical knowledge and adopted similar techniques to theirs in her own classroom. As the school year progressed, Jane continued to seek out the other kindergarten teachers' practical knowledge and use their techniques. However, as Jane's own practical knowledge grew, she began to question her use of the other teachers' techniques.

# CHAPTER IV
# WINTER 2016

Nearly 30 years after Meisels (1987, 1989) issued a warning regarding the "uses and abuses" of testing in early childhood education, Jane faces the looming and growing pressures associated with end-of-year testing (p. 4). Teachers across Jane's school meet with each other as the halfway point of the school year approaches.[92] During these mid-year meetings, the teachers discuss student performance by following guidelines set forth by their principal. Through discussion, teachers are supposed to determine instructional changes or other techniques that will improve student performance.[93] According to the principal, discussion of student performance and related instructional changes are the steps needed to ensure his vision for the school that "all students do well."[94]

For Jane and the other teachers at her school, the balance appears to tip precariously towards outcomes over instruction during mid-year meeting discussions. Rather than remaining an intentionally considered part of the discussion, instruction simply becomes a means to the all-important, all-consuming end of test scores. Even the principal explains that he does not want to make everything about standardized test performance and accreditation, but he admits that he must as they "do matter."[95] Thus, Jane encounters the consequences that Meisels (1989) described. The outcomes, or results of tests, become more significant than the tests' original purpose, and the outcomes define students and their capabilities. Tests "narrow" classroom instruction as

[92] School-Wide Meeting Observation, 02.11.16, pp. 52-54
[93] Principal Email, 02.09.16, p. 51
[94] Principal Interview, 11.18.15, p. 43
[95] Principal Interview, 5.13.16, p. 85

what is taught reflects what is tested and how. Other non-measurable aspects of literacy development become subsumed by the often-isolated skills practice. Instructional decision-making shifts away from the teacher and her in-moment-actions so important to teaching. Instead, decision-making resides in approaches deemed necessary to “pass” the test.

Like Meisels (1987, 1989) decades earlier, others paint a disheartening picture of the current state of education in the United States (Ravitch, 2013; Yoon, 2015). However, it is important to note that these more recent critics also suggest instruction does not have to be subsumed by the looming pressures of testing. While critics call for a range of changes including policy-related ones, teachers can attempt to question how testing pressures are impacting their instruction, which is exactly what Jane does. In questioning school-wide practices, Jane also questions her own classroom practices and she begins to ask if how she teaches is “right.”

The next two sections illustrate issues related to testing and instruction. First, I describe teachers in their mid-year school-wide push to ensure students receive additional support before end-of-year tests, and then I observe Jane in her own classroom-level push.

## In the School

In February, around the half-way point of the school year, Jane attends a school-wide “mid-year review” meeting. The principal designs this meeting to facilitate discussion about student performance relative to division-wide benchmarks and to consider instructional changes. At the start of this meeting, the principal reminds the teaching staff of the meeting’s purpose – teachers should work together to consider how

they will adjust their instruction to reach every student so that all students reach benchmarks by the end of the school year.[96] After the principal's reminder, teachers split up into smaller groups to discuss student performance and instructional priorities. Each small group contains a teacher from across the different grade levels. The teachers take turns presenting the "current state" of the student performance in their respective grade level. To do so, they share numerical assessment scores broken down by demographic group and identify the number of students below, on, and above division-level benchmarks. After each teacher presents the "current state" of her respective grade-level, the other teachers ask questions and offer possible suggestions, which focus mainly on schedules and perceived discrepancies across assessments.

Around the time of the "mid-year review" meeting, Jane recognizes the growing school-wide attention being paid to the looming end-of-year state standardized tests. To provide the push for students taking the standardized test, teachers from across the grade levels are enlisted to provide additional tutoring. Jane joins the "all hands-on deck" approach and tutors a third grader. She finds out that the school-wide approach is a sort of "educational triage" where the only third graders receiving the additional tutoring are the "bubble kids," or students deemed as having a chance to pass the standardized test (Booher-Jennings, 2005). Other third graders, who teachers determine have no chance at passing the test, continue to receive their regular school-day intervention but do not receive any additional tutoring. Jane tells me that initially she thought the third-grade tutoring plan made sense, but then she decides it is "terrible" that some students do not

[96] Meeting Observation, 02.11.16, p. 52

have the opportunity for additional tutoring.[97] By describing the decisions around who receives tutoring as "terrible," Jane questions the fairness of providing particular students with more than others. Like approaches to early literacy instruction, there is political dimension to provision of additional support. This allocation of resources, or additional support, determines who has and has not – who wins and who does not. The students deemed more likely to succeed "win" and receive additional tutoring while other students do not.

Jane takes a breath and seems to feel bad about her harsh judgment of the other teachers' decisions regarding who has access to additional tutoring. She tells me, "I am, in this classroom, doing the exact same thing." She is clearly conflicted as she explains how she is meeting twice a day with students furthest from the benchmark and only twice a week with students already at benchmark. Then, as she explains, she backtracks, "I'm not doing the same thing, I guess, because I'm [still] meeting the students who are performing the lowest on the division-wide assessments, who probably are not going to reach the benchmark at the end of the year."[98] With the school-wide and her classroom approaches in mind, she seems to grapple with the "right" decisions around providing different kinds of support for students.

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In an attempt to support his teachers in the incredibly complex endeavor that is literacy instruction, Jane's principal creates formal structures for teachers to meet and discuss student performance. These formal structures include mid-year meetings and

[97] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, p. 63
[98] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, p. 63

protocols used to share student performance. They are important for professional growth and improved practice but also shape how teachers consider students and instructional practice (Coburn, 2005). The principal intends these structures as a means for facilitating in-depth consideration of instructional practice. Ideally, teachers would strike a balance between more technical, outcome-driven structures, with the practical, process-driven deliberations around instruction (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Teachers and administrators do need some sort of structure guiding decisions around aspects of instruction, like the distribution of resources or the provision of instructional interventions. However, teachers also need time to consider and deliberate actual instructional practice, including time to ask process-driven, not outcome-driven, questions such as how instruction is happening in the classroom, what aspects of instruction seem "right," and who gains and who loses through the current allocation of instructional resources.

However, with an efficient, even laser-like focus on outcomes in the form of test scores and techniques aimed at improving test scores, little to no time is left to consider teachers' instructional practice. There is also little time to recognize how a laser-like focus on outcomes is potentially detrimental to classroom literacy instruction. Meisels (1989) even went so far to say that "testing programs, ideally servant of educational programs, [become] masters of the educational process (p. 17)." He warned of three main areas of testing misuse, even in kindergarten. These three areas included perception of the test's importance, narrowing classroom instruction, and transfer of decision-making away from teachers.

Division-leaders, administrators, and teachers use an assessment for many purposes, which is especially worrisome because an assessment may not have data to

support how it is used (Meisels, 1989). For example, some assessments purport to identify students who are "ready" to experience success in kindergarten; however, the assessment results have no relationship with the students' kindergarten experience as reported by their teachers. Other assessments are designed to measure students' current performance on a particular set of skills, not predict future performance. However, many of these assessments are being used to predict future performance. Relatedly, Meisels also cautions against use of assessments designed to measure current performance for instructional planning as the assessment may not reflect the curriculum or provide a direction for future instruction. The misguided use of an assessment possibly creates high-stakes around the assessment and a heightened perception of its importance. Because the test is considered so important, teachers feel pressure to design instruction around the particular skills or formats on which their students will be tested. The pressures are more acutely felt if the test results are made public.

I observed the heightened importance of assessment and its impact on instruction during the mid-year meetings at Jane's school. Intriguingly, Meisels's caution that assessments do not have data to support how they are used does not apply to the main assessment used by the kindergarten teachers, which is a literacy screening and diagnostic assessment. This main assessment has a dual purpose – identify students who need early intervention and provide specific diagnostic information to inform appropriate instruction in literacy. It is reliable, valid, predictive of future literacy performance, and aligned to state standards and local curriculum. However, the assessment's intended purposes of supporting early intervention and informing instruction become blurred, and consequences similar to the ones described by Meisels occur. For Jane, conversations

about student performance are based on number of students who are meeting assessment benchmarks. Less time is spent on the assessment's second purpose related to instruction. Teachers make quick instructional suggestions or ask for more time to practice tested skills for particular students. There is little to no discussion about literacy development or deeper consideration of instructional practice. The end result is that what was intended to be a low-stakes and instructionally informative screening and diagnostic assessment becomes attached to high-stakes consequences such as assigning labels and allocating resources.

In addition to a heightened perception of the assessment's importance and narrowing impact on classroom teaching, Meisels warns that high-stakes testing also shifts decision-making away from teachers. Teachers use guidelines around the tests to make instructional decisions rather than rely on the in-the-moment adjustments and reflective moves that are at the heart of teaching. With the best of intentions, the principal at Jane's schools provides detailed protocols for teachers to follow during these mid-year meetings. These protocols are detailed and focused on test score improvement. They appear to direct teachers away from meaningful conversation about instruction and towards quick activities to use in their classrooms. Perhaps teachers do not sense a need to discuss their instructional practice because they are satisfied with their current approaches. I find it hard to tell if teachers are satisfied with their instructional practice. Likely some are satisfied and some are not, but, for those who are not satisfied and seek to discuss different approaches, there is little or no time for this deliberation or discussion.

The state standardized tests start in third grade, so Jane's kindergartners seemingly are unaffected. However, the need to perform well permeates the school, and the push to ensure as many students pass the third-grade test is in full swing. Like Meisels (1987, 1989) cautioned and Jane experiences, kindergarten is not immune to the pressures and consequences of high-stakes testing. The pressures from other high-stakes standardized testing "trickle down" from upper grades, and kindergarten assessments are often repurposed accordingly (Cunningham, 1988; Gallant, 2009; Meisels, 1987). Even though there is no high-stakes state standardized test in kindergarten, Jane and her fellow kindergarten teachers use a battery of different assessments including their main state-level screening and diagnostic assessment and additional division-level ones. Similar to the school-wide focus on the narrow outcome of state standardized passing rates, the kindergarten teachers and Jane focus on one of these division-level assessments and its narrow measurable outcome – number of high-frequency words identified from a division-wide prescribed list. Informed by the school-wide attention on "bubble" students, Jane changes her small group rotations so that she has additional time to practice high-frequency word flashcards with students falling below the benchmark. This focus on high-frequency words becomes a central part of Jane's literacy instruction in the winter and into early spring.

## In the Classroom

As winter melts into early spring, Jane gathers a group of four students at her kidney table. Each student brings a set of index cards held together by a small metal ring to the table. These index cards are teacher-made high-frequency word flashcards. The students drop their rings of flashcards onto the table in front of them and wait for Jane to

begin. Jane passes out a small book to each student and prompts them to begin rereading this book on their own. While the students are rereading, she interrupts them one at a time to listen to them read through their flashcards. Jane marks the back of the card with tally when the student reads the word correctly and tells them the word when the student cannot read the word, often also drawing attention to letters in the word. When one student misreads the word "one," she explains, "This word looks like *on*, but it has an *e* on the end, so it's *one*."

Jane's next two groups proceed the same way as her first group. Each student comes to the table with a set of high-frequency word flashcards. As students reread a previously practiced book, Jane listens to each student read the words. Jane also guides students through reading and new book and spelling words with a particular spelling pattern during each small group, but the majority of students' time with her is spent checking recognition of flashcard words.[99]

Jane spends a lot of time thinking through how to facilitate flashcard-based word recognition practice. Before implementing the rings of flashcards with her students, she selects a set of high-frequency words she will use by combining two lists of high-frequency words from two different assessments she is required to give periodically throughout the school year. She decides that students will each have their own individual set of words written on index cards and stored within their reach on the side of a bookcase in the middle of the classroom. When she first implements the flashcard practice, she starts small group every day by going through all the words on a student's

[99] Classroom Observation, 03.21.16, pp. 57-62

ring with him or her. To keep track of the words that students know, she tallies how many times they correctly identify words. She rips the word off their ring when the student identifies the word four times. On Fridays, she adds five to ten new words to ensure she continues moving through the list of words.

Despite the amount of time Jane spends figuring out how to facilitate flashcard practice and devotes to practicing the flashcards with her students, something about the word recognition practice with flashcards still does not seem right to Jane. After her students leave the classroom for lunchtime, she explains to me that she notices stark differences in the ease with which her students remember words from the flashcards. Some of her students "are getting them easily by just flipping through the cards. They practice writing them on white boards and then use them in their own writing." Other students experience more difficulty remembering the words and using them in their reading and writing. For the students who are not remembering the words as easily, she decides that they need more tactile practice with the words and meets with them another time during the day to write the words in sand and form them with playdough.

Jane's mention of additional word recognition practice with some of her students reminds her of another change to her literacy instruction she wants to make based on what she is learning from her first graduate school course. She states that she wants to engage her students in practice that encourages them to apply their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences to figure out unfamiliar words. According to Jane, application of letter-sound knowledge occurs alongside practice building automatic word recognition, which she refers to as "sight word work." However, as soon as she says "sight word work," she hesitates. Her hesitation reflects differences Jane recognizes between how she

learns about how word recognition development in her graduate course and how she sees and hears teachers at her school approach word recognition instruction.

Right now, Jane cannot clearly articulate the differences but she attempts to explain them to me, “Even though sight words are supposedly…” She hesitates again, perhaps in-part out of confusion and in-part out of being torn. She does not explain her thinking in the present moment. However, the questions seem to flood her mind: How do I use the term *sight words*? Are *sight words* only high-frequency words like we discuss at grade-level team meetings? Or, are *sight words* any word my students identify automatically or at first sight like I read about for my graduate course? How do children best learn sight words? Through mostly isolated practice with lots of flashcard practice? Through more integrated practice where students see words in text and then analyze them in isolation? Through only situated practice in text? Finally, when do children start to remember words?

Rather than continuing to explain what she is thinking about word recognition instruction from her coursework, Jane turns to the pressures she faces at school. She concludes she must continue with the flashcard-based word recognition in isolation approach regardless of her answers to the above questions. She states, “I don’t feel like I have a choice in [how I approach word recognition instruction] because that’s something that we’re assessed on.” Students become defined as readers by the number of high-frequency words they can identify from a division-wide list. Jane is doing it but she has strong feelings against it and how it is being used to define her students as readers – both for their classroom practice and on their report card. “I don’t care about [high-frequency words]. It has made me a little frustrated because I feel like [my students] are reading at a

kindergarten level and what is appropriate for a kindergartner, in my humble opinion, which matters very little. So, I'm a bit frustrated that is what I have to mark on their report card even though I don't agree with it, but that's what we're going to have to use."[100]

Even though Jane concedes she does not have a choice, she also says that she wants to make changes. Instead of isolated flashcard-based practice, she states she agrees with the approach she learns about in her graduate course – the words should be "more ones that just come because we see them in text, not like I'm rote memorizing words." Then, she returns to what she sees and hears at her school and explains that even though she agrees with a more text-based, non-rote memorization approach, she can't do it because she doesn't "think that would swing" at her school.[101]

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As a narrow focus on state standardized passing rates pervades the school, Jane's instruction becomes increasingly focused on high-frequency word identification – an easily measurable skill on which students are tested throughout the school year. Jane and her kindergartners do not sense the pressure of a state standardized test. However, Jane does express a similar pressure to ensure her students meet benchmarks so that she does not have to reveal publicly in a meeting and on a spreadsheet that she has more students falling below benchmark relative to the other kindergarten teachers. At first, Jane draws heavily on technical knowledge, a technique for word recognition instruction aimed at test results. While there is a division-level benchmark for word identification, teachers

[100] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, p. 63
[101] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, pp. 67-68

appear to encourage students to accumulate an ever-growing number of these words with little consideration to their instructional practice. There is no denying that high-frequency words are important as 300 common words represent 65% of words found in text (Fry & Kress, 2006). Therefore, learning to identify high-frequency words accurately and automatically can help early readers access text, facilitate practice, and assist them to grow as readers. Growth turns into a reinforcing cycle; children read more and read increasingly complex texts, thus furthering their growth (Stanovich, 1986).

However, it is also important to note that high-frequency word identification is an outcome, not an instructional practice. For Jane, the balance between outcomes and practice tips heavily in favor of outcomes. Instruction is outcome-driven – just get the students to identify as many words as possible by whatever means necessary and do not worry about what the instructional practice ends up being. High-frequency word identification instruction becomes separated from working with words in texts and from other aspects of early literacy development like applying the alphabetic principle in early writing. Thus, the focus on high-frequency word identification reduces literacy to a flashcard-based, decontextualized practice of memorizing words in isolation. Sometimes it is even reminiscent of the old "look and say" approach of the 1950's where students were expected to visually memorize words without connection to their phonological representation in spelling. However, visual memorization is not how children's word recognition develops (Ehri & Wilce, 1985). To the contrary, evidence points to the importance of wedding pronunciations to meanings through the spelling of words, a process often referred to as *graphophonic analysis* (Ehri, & Wilce, 1980).

Without time to deliberate as a school or as a grade-level team, Jane attempts to consider her classroom instructional practice. In doing so, the technical knowledge of outcome-driven high-frequency flashcards conflicts with her experience with her students and her growing practical wisdom, or knowledge based on multiple sources including a sense of what is right and what she sees in her actual students. For some of her students, the flashcards appear to be working. They are recognizing an increasing number of high-frequency words. However, for other students, they are not yet recalling the words or recognizing them in other contexts. Jane senses a misuse of assessments and their influence on her instruction, but she appears to be most concerned with the impact on her students (Meisels, 1987, 1989; Yoon, 2015). She reminds me, and likely herself, that her students are five- and six-year-olds developing identities as young readers, writers, and members of a literacy community (Gee, 2001). Jane's consideration of her word recognition instruction and use of high-frequency word flashcards becomes further muddled, even tension-filled, as she learns theory related to how word recognition develops in her first graduate course. She questions whether the flashcard-based approach to word recognition is the best approach and whether it is appropriate for all of her students. For now, Jane's approach seems unlikely to change in the spring as the end-of-year assessments draw even closer. Her consideration of her instructional practice comes in starts and stops and concludes with her perceived lack of decision-making. She explains that she could not stray from the flashcard technique in favor of a different

approach aimed at more meaningful growth because she knew her students would be tested on the high-frequency words.[102]

In the winter of 2016, the technical knowledge aimed at reaching specific assessment benchmarks permeated Jane's school. To Jane, upper elementary teachers seemed to provide additional instructional support unfairly to particular students based on whether students were likely to pass the end-of-grade standardized test. While Jane questioned techniques aimed at narrow test-related outcomes, she tempered her judgment as she questioned her own focus on outcomes, namely high-frequency word identification, in her own classroom. However, as winter melted in spring, Jane drew on the theoretical knowledge encountered in in first graduate course, continued to ask herself questions about her practice, and looked forward – possibly for another way to approach high-frequency word recognition instruction.

[102] Conversation, 02.12.18

# CHAPTER V
# SPRING 2016

In the spring, the looming pressure of state standardized tests and other end-of-year assessments creep even closer. One day in late March, I observe Jane and the kindergarten teachers return to their intervention schedule in an effort to ensure as many students as possible meet division-wide benchmarks.[103] However, the end of the school year is not solely defined by accountability pressures and final intervention efforts. The end of the school year also marks a time to reflect and to improve practice. Later that spring, I listen to Jane as she looks back on her actions during this school year, considers the consequences of her actions, and states changes she plans for the following school year.[104] As Jane reflects on her school year for me, I am reminded of what drew her to the teaching profession in the first place – the potential for constant growth.[105]

As Jane engages with the other kindergarten teachers and reflects on her own, she stands knee-deep in what Schön (1987) refers to as the "swampy lowland" of professional practice where "messy, confusing problems" abound (p. 3). These ill-formed problems often involve a unique or uncertain situation, a value conflict, or some combination of the three that must be addressed by practitioners. In late March, Jane and the kindergarten teachers attempt to decide which students will continue to receive intervention in the face of limited resources, namely the number of students and the amount of time the interventionist can instruct. Where Jane stands, the issues around intervention cannot easily be resolved by a rational application of research-based theory

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[103] Grade-Level Team Meeting Observation, 03.25.16, pp. 70-72
[104] Teacher Interview, 05.02.16, pp. 73-78
[105] Teacher Life History Interview, 10.16.16, p. 114

or technique, despite what some might say. However, before I dishearteningly sink into the swamp of insurmountable problems and their inadequate solutions, I see that it is not all dismal. Teachers constantly act, not just by the application of theory or technique, but also through reflective practice (Schön, 1987). Sometimes their reflection occurs *in* action as they adjust their practice in the moment when encountering an unexpected problem. Other times their reflection occurs *on* action as they think back on past actions and even on reflection-in-action.

The following two vignettes – one from a grade-level team meeting and one from a conversation with Jane in her classroom – illustrate Jane's experiences in the swampy lowland where teachers encounter messy problems that defy rational solution and where teachers engage in reflective practice.

**In the Grade-Level Team Meeting**

An early spring grade-level team meeting proceeds like the others that occurred previously in the school year. The five kindergarten teachers position themselves in their regular spots around the lead teacher's kidney table in the back corner of her classroom. The topic of intervention arises. Like before, the kindergarten teachers seem to talk *around* intervention, not *about* intervention. They focus on the minute technical details of rules regarding who receives intervention. I remain unconvinced that they teachers know exactly what occurs during intervention with the reading interventionist.

In some ways, not knowing what happens in intervention seems understandable. Jane remains in constant motion throughout her literacy block. There is no time to stop for Jane to talk to the the interventionist when she comes by the classroom to get the students for intervention. It is also hard to find common time elsewhere during the school

day. Not knowing also perhaps relates to trust. The interventionist is supposed to be a specialist, an expert when it comes to supporting students experiencing difficulty learning to read. Jane defers to her and to her expertise.[106] However, maybe not knowing also involves viewing student learning as a shared responsibility where the teacher and interventionist approach instruction the best way they respectively know for the students' benefit. There is comfort, perhaps even safety, in that shared responsibility by softening the potential blow of accountability. If a student does not perform as measured by a single benchmark, a teacher can reassure herself she was not solely to blame, even an interventionist could not "fix" the student. At the end of the day, it also appears Jane did not have a choice. If students "fail" the literacy assessment at the beginning of the year, they must receive intervention – whatever that entails – for the entire school year.

During the grade-level team meeting, Jane brings up the topic of intervention. She asks if the students who "failed" the state-wide literacy screening and diagnostic assessment at the beginning of year have to stay in intervention for the entire school. Like before, the kindergarten teachers perseverate on the minute technical rules of who receives intervention, namely if students who begin the year in intervention must receive intervention for the entire year. Despite much back and forth between the four other kindergarten teachers, Jane's question remains unresolved.[107]

Jane finds herself in an uncertain situation, so she tries again. She explains that some of her students currently in intervention are outperforming other students in her classroom not in intervention. Logically, Jane expresses that she wants to switch the

[106] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, p. 64
[107] Grade-Level Team Meeting Observation, 03.25.16, p. 71

students already receiving intervention with ones who seem to need it more. This explanation elicits a different response as one teacher states that one of her students no longer needs intervention. This teacher simply explains that her student is reading at a "level five." Her student did not fail the state-wide assessment at the beginning of the year, so apparently stopping intervention poses no issue. I expect at least one of Jane's students to receive this newly vacated intervention spot. However, before Jane says anything, another teacher quickly claims the spot for one of her students, seemingly without any discussion as to why that student should receive the spot.[108]

A couple comments later, the lead teacher concludes the intervention portion of the meeting. It appears Jane's students may still have a chance at getting an intervention spot as the lead teacher states she will email people at the division-level to clarify changes allowed to the intervention schedule established in the fall. She asks the teachers to provide her with the reading level and number of high frequency words identified for each of the students in question, which the teachers immediately recall. As the teachers prepare to move on to the next topics, one teacher reminds Jane and the others that if their students are added to intervention, they will receive 15 minutes – 10 minutes after transitioning to the reading interventionist's classroom – of daily intervention time.[109]

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Here Jane and the other kindergarten teachers stand together in Schön's (1987) swampy lowland of practice. Jane's question of whether she can switch students who

[108] Grade-Level Team Meeting Observation, 03.25.16, p. 70
[109] Grade-Level Team Meeting Observation, 03.25.16, p. 71

receive intervention poses an unexpected or ill-formed problem for the other kindergarten teachers. Rather than discuss the possible ways to adjust the intervention schedule in response to their students who are seemingly are learning at different paces in their classrooms, the teachers appear to prioritize their compliance with the state-wide rules governing how students receive intervention services. However, the teachers are uncertain about the exact rules. Despite Jane's question and some back-and-forth across the other four kindergarten teachers, there is no definitive answer. For now, they follow what they think are the rules, that is, they make no change to the intervention schedule, at least for students who "failed" assessment at the beginning of the school year. No change to the schedule leaves no space for additional students to be added to intervention, despite the fact that some student receiving intervention apparently no longer need it.

Their response is surprising to me, at least at first. Jane's request seems common sensical – students having more difficulty with particular aspects of early literacy, as indicated by at least one assessment, should receive additional help. I expect the teachers to make quick changes to the intervention schedule and transition to other topics, like they often do in their grade-level team meetings. However, the teachers perseverate on the technical rules associated with intervention policy. Some changes, namely the ones for which Jane asks, will not made until the state-wide rules are checked at the division-level. The teachers' attention to these rules surprises me as the principal told me how teachers look into different approaches, implying that his teachers should not have to feel constrained by rules.[110]

[110] Principal Interview, 11.18.15, p. 49

These rules often originate on the “high, hard ground overlooking [the] swamp” (Schön, 1987, p. 3). On this hard, high ground, individuals attempt to solve problems by applying research-based theories and technique. In the kindergarten teachers’ case of the intervention, the solutions are clear on the high ground. Early intervention works; therefore, teachers should systematically screen students in early grades to identify students who appear to be having trouble learning to read. Then, early intervention can be provided to prevent the students from experiencing potentially lasting reading difficulty. The state in which Jane teaches has a long-standing history of early intervention, including measures for how teachers are required to provide intervention to students performing below benchmarks on a literacy diagnostic screening measure. Jane refers to these requirements as the [name of the assessment] “law.”

However, the seemingly clear solution of early intervention provision does not always work in the daily practice of schools. Perhaps, on one hand, teachers follow the intervention requirements, thus ensuring some students receive additional support as they learn to read and write. But, ensuring support is not necessarily what happens. On the other hand and for Jane in this grade-level team meeting, teachers cannot respond to changes or emerging problems because their hands are seemingly tied. They sense they must follow rules, but they focus on one particular perceived rule around who receives intervention rather than other aspects of the state-wide policy related to the amount of intervention and the integration between classroom instruction and intervention. The solutions from the high ground fall short or become consumed by surface-level logistics of scheduling and allocating resources.

Jane's unexpected question regarding changes to the intervention schedule provides all the kindergarten teachers with an opportunity for reflection-in-action where they respond in-the-moment to make a decision they consider to be "right" (Schön, 1987). Instead, the kindergarten teachers become caught up in surface-level logistics, or the specific technical rules dictating who will receive intervention and how they will receive it. They discuss back-and-forth as they try to remind themselves of the rules, resort to turning to division-level leaders – who have not worked with the students, and appear to vie for open intervention spots as the interventionists can only work with so many kindergarten students. With all the attention paid to the intervention schedule, one may reasonably assume that the intervention time is a central part of the literacy instruction in kindergarten. However, all the back and forth ends up being about 10 minutes a day with the interventionist, and what happens with the interventionist appears to be unknown to the teachers.

The kindergarten teachers become so focused on the technical aspects of following the perceived rule to ensure that particular students receive intervention for the entire year. By becoming so focused on the perceived rule around *who must* receive intervention, the convenient and efficient provision of intervention subsumes the more value-driven intention of intervention. The state-level policy is designed to ensure students who may be at-risk for later reading difficulty receive an additional 30 minutes of daily instruction tailored to students' diagnosed needs and integrated with classroom instruction. The value of substantive, tailored, and integrated instruction to prevent later reading difficulty gives way to managing a convenient and efficient intervention schedule. Teachers cannot use their professional judgment to adjust which students

receive intervention. Ironically, because of their attention to one perceived rule, other rules are not considered – students are supposed to receive 30 minutes of additional instruction, not 10 minutes. Intervention instruction is meant to be integrated with classroom instruction; however, Jane has no idea what happens during intervention.

Jane's experience in the grade-level team meeting seems particularly formative because she will eventually return to this exact issue of who gets to receive intervention. Less than a year from now during the following school year, Jane will again be told one of her students cannot receive intervention. Her future response will differ remarkably than the one described above.[111]

So, why does Jane respond differently when confronted with the problem of intervention in the following school year? Does Jane actively reflect on the meeting on resolve after this early spring grade level meeting to approach intervention for her students differently in the future? Or, does Jane decide after this meeting to advocate more passionately for her students moving forward? The likely answer to those questions is no. When the other kindergarten teacher claims an intervention spot for her student even though Jane already indicated she wanted a spot for her student, Jane gives no indication that she minds or even notices. Furthermore, Jane defers to the lead teacher and her plan to email individuals at the division-level whether the kindergarten team (and Jane) are allowed to make changes to their intervention schedule. Perhaps conforming to the norms of intervention provision or acknowledging her position as the least experienced teacher, Jane accepts she does not get to change who receives intervention.

[111] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17

However, Jane responds differently in her own classroom where making changes is clearly on her mind in the spring of the school year.

## In the Classroom

Jane's classroom becomes uncharacteristically quiet and still as her students file out the doorway on the way to the gym. After watching them leave, she sits down at her kidney table. Minutes earlier, she sat in the same spot and taught a small group of her students. Now she looks at me, not her students. In the hurried moments that Jane has to eat her own lunch before her students return, Jane starts to reflect on her experience over the course of the school year.[112]

At first, Jane is hard on herself. She describes her experiences in grade-level team meetings over the course of the year. During those grade-level team meetings, the kindergarten teachers often shared their students' progress as readers and writers. Progress was often narrowly defined as a letter or number that corresponded to a reading level. Letters later in the alphabet and higher numbers meant better or more advanced readers, at least according to the kindergarten teachers during their meetings. For Jane, the meetings presented an opportunity, albeit an implicit one, to compare herself with the other kindergarten teachers.

Jane usually remains quiet during the meetings. But now, in the safety of her own classroom, she talks to me. She tells me that during the meetings, she realized her students were not performing like the other kindergarten teachers' students. The letters assigned to her students to describe them as readers were closer to the beginning of the

[112] Teacher Interview, 05.02.16

alphabet. The numbers also assigned to her students are smaller. In her mind, she refers to her students as "bottom of the barrel." Unwilling to accept this label for her students and perhaps unwilling to accept a similar label for her teaching, she reassesses her students.[113]

After reassessing her students, Jane explains that her students actually read at higher levels. Her students were not "bottom of the barrel" but similar to the other kindergartners. Instead, she mistakenly used older data with too low letters and numbers for too long to inform her instruction. She concludes that her students "learned anyway. They figured it out themselves, despite me [trying to figure out the best ways to support their learning]. But, I think they could be doing so much more." Her reassessment changes the narrative around her students, but it does not do the same for her self-narrative as a teacher.[114]

Perhaps sparked by what Jane shares about her assessment of her students in comparison to the other kindergarten teachers' students, or perhaps sparked by another one of my questions, Jane begins to share what she wants to improve for next year. She wants to "start a bit more intensively sooner." However, Jane's list of improvements continues beyond starting sooner. Just like she rushes to fit in a variety of practice for her students during the literacy block, she names a variety of ways to improve her instructional practice. The ways range from instructional aspects specific to literacy development to integration across literacy and science to better communication with students' families. At least for now, Jane seems to have an extensive list of priorities for

[113] Teacher Interview, 05.02.16, p. 73
[114] Teacher Interview, 05.02.16, p. 73-74

improvement. For the time being, it remains unclear to me, and perhaps to Jane as well, how exactly she plans to approach these improvements.[115]

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As Jane lists a range of improvements she wants to make for next school year, it is important to remember Jane is an early career teacher. She is in her second year of teaching and still being initiated into the "traditions of practice" (Dewey, 1916/1944; Schön, 1987). Often initiation happens through collaboration with other more experienced teachers. Also, as an early career teacher, Jane is full of fresh ideas, which possibly has the potential of injecting new life into the practice of more experienced teachers. This renewal of ideas for more experienced teachers is of equal importance as initiation into the practice for early career teachers (Schön, 1987). There is great potential in the 45-minute weekly grade-level team meetings for Jane and the more experienced kindergarten teachers to consider their practice. By considering instructional practice, teachers reflect-on-action, or look back on action taken and consider improvements (Schön, 1987). In addition to reflection-in-action, just as they do in their classrooms when a student does something unexpected, teachers can also reflect-in-action. Reflection-in-action occurs when teachers respond in-the-moment to unexpected actions, which may be indistinguishable from simply acting (Schön, 1987). This reflection-in-action becomes new knowing-in-action, which becomes knowledge to be drawn upon in future situations.

The potential of the meetings is often lost as meetings tend to revolve around technical aspects of rules and policies rather than reflection on practice. But there may be

[115] Teacher Interview, 05.02.16, pp. 73-78

an even darker side to these meetings, at least for Jane, who refers to them as the "ultimate shame meeting."[116] Periodically throughout the school year at the grade-level team meetings, kindergarten teachers share how their students are performing as defined by a single letter or number representing students' reading levels or number of high frequency words identified without any additional context. By sharing, Jane becomes acutely aware and embarrassed that she and her students are not performing at the same level as the other teachers and their students. Perhaps her comparison is simply attributable to human nature, or maybe it is implicitly, but almost punitively, built into the structure of meetings. Whatever the reason, Jane is hard on herself, stating, at least to me, that her students managed to learn from her in spite of her.

Jane's evaluation of own performance as a teacher is more than wanting to do well for her students. Her evaluation shapes how she defines her students and how she defines herself, which seems incredibly harsh. When she hears her students are reading levels below the other kindergarten teachers' students, she refers to her students as "bottom of the barrel." This label is not indicative of how Jane feels about her students and tries to support their learning; the label is more reflective of her own feelings directly following a meeting where she compared herself to the other kindergarten teachers. She worries that her students could "be doing so much more" if she could only support them better. Fortunately, her evaluation is softened by Jane's reassessment of her students and her personal relationships with the other kindergarten teachers, the lead kindergarten teacher in particular. Perhaps, it is also softened by the other teachers' expectations of her

[116] Conversation, 02.12.18

as an early career teacher. Nonetheless, *this* is how Jane is being initiated into the "traditions of practice."

Jane's evaluation of her own performance is softened further by time for deliberation, albeit on her own. By the end of her conversation with me in May she moves past her comparison to the other kindergarten teachers and seems heartened by her recognition that she can grow and improve her practice. In May, during this conversation, Jane attempts to engage in reflective practice. It is reflection-on-action as she looks back at her practice over the course of the school year (Schön, 1987). For now, Jane's reflection takes shape as a laundry list of separate aspects she wants to change in her teaching during the following school year. What else does Jane need to make her desired improvements a reality? Is making all those improvements even feasible? Time will tell in the following school year.

Outcome-driven technical knowledge aimed at reaching particular benchmarks continued to shape Jane's experience in the spring of 2016. Drawing on the theoretical knowledge encountered in her first graduate course in foundational literacy and her own practical wisdom, Jane started to question aspects of her instructional approach. For example, she questioned the appropriateness and usefulness of a narrow focus on high-frequency word identification and flashcard-driven instruction. Despite these questions, Jane concluded she could not change her instructional approach as students were assessed on how many words they identified. However, Jane planned to take two more additional graduate courses in the summer and another course in the fall semester. Perhaps the theoretical knowledge encountered in those three graduate courses combined with Jane's

growing practical wisdom may support a different approach to literacy instruction in the following 2016-2017 school year.

# CHAPTER VI
# FALL 2016

Jane begins the 2016-2017 school year excited for her "wonderful" class and the progress she already notices in her new group of students.[117] Seemingly refreshed by summer break and energized by her graduate coursework, she builds on her reflections from the previous school year.[118] Jane trades in last spring's laundry list of changes she wants to make in her classroom like start more intensive instruction earlier and communicate better with partners, and at the start of the new school year, she prioritizes one particular aspect of her classroom – word recognition instruction.

At first, Jane's prioritization of word recognition instruction may seem surprising. Last year, Jane stated that she "does not have a choice" whether to use the repetitive flashcard approach and concluded that a different kind word recognition practice "would not swing" at her school. At the beginning of this year, the other kindergarten teachers still appear to rely on the repetitive flashcard-based approach. The kindergarten teachers are also still required to administer the same division-level high frequency word identification assessment as last year. The lack of change at school suggests that Jane will continue with the flashcard-based practice as well. However, in September, I observe that she is much more willing to try a different approach and in her instruction. At first, she keeps quiet about the changes in her own classroom, but later in the fall, she approaches her fellow kindergarten teachers about changing an assessment they use.

[117] Teacher Email, 09.01.16; Classroom Observation, 09.22.16, pp. 94-97
[118] Teacher Interview, 03.21.16, pp. 63, 67-68

I illustrate Jane's commitment to changing her word recognition instruction in the sections below. Importantly, her commitment to change is not an easy one but rather one that must be repeatedly made. In September, Jane tries what she considers a more developmental approach to literacy instruction in her classroom where she situates practice in short, but meaningful, texts. However, as the fall months pass, Jane interacts with her fellow but more experienced kindergarten teachers, and Jane questions her more developmental approach when she hears how the other kindergarten teachers continue to prioritize a more isolated flashcard approach. In the first vignette, we return to Jane's classroom at the beginning of the school year. I describe aspects of her classroom and offer explanations for Jane's more developmental and situated approach to instruction. Then, in the second vignette, I recall a meeting in which Jane expects to explore new assessment materials with the other kindergarten teachers, but the meeting proceeds unexpectedly when teachers spend the beginning of the meeting discussing a potential new student and question whether they should even use this new assessment.

**In the Classroom**

To the novice eye, Jane's classroom resembles last year's. Little tables and chairs, flanked by the two kidney tables reserved for small group instruction, take up the middle of the room. The walls are decorated with bright commercially made posters interspersed with student- and teacher-made ones. Jane gathers her students on the front carpet at the start of each literacy block.

At 9:55, Jane and her students are already two hours into the school day. Seventeen kindergartners settle into spots on the carpet facing the teacher. Jane sits upright on the edge of her rocking chair. Even though the students remain seated, they are

far from still. Several students scooch along the carpet in one direction. Then seemingly change their minds and slide back the other way. Even more students quietly chatter back and forth. Jane, who knows what to expect at the beginning of the school year, issues quiet reminders. She gently, but matter-of-factly, tells students individually and collectively to stay in their space or listen. Seemingly satisfied with the mostly quiet and still students, she begins.

However, this year, Jane starts the literacy block with a read aloud rather than send students directly into small group rotations. Today, like future times Jane reads aloud to her students, the students remain restless on the carpet. They whisper to each other or position their body as close to a peer as possible without touching, seemingly hoping for some sort of acknowledgment either from their peer or Jane. However, as soon as Jane begins reading aloud, a palpable change sweeps over her students. The read aloud time is the quietest I have ever heard in Jane's classroom; it is even quieter than so-called "quiet time" that usually comes later in the day. Jane's voice rises and falls in a way that perfectly reflects the narrative action or overall mood of the story. Students eagerly lean forward to hear what happens and offer their opinions.[119] Jane admits she does not have a "deep rooted love for reading," that is, she did not grow loving reading and still does not often make time to read for pleasure. However, as she teaches her young students to read, she sees magic in reading and also explains that a good picture book can bring her to tears. She acknowledges that "read aloud is a time when [her] students can get lost in literature too."[120] Through a read aloud, Jane shows her students how books work and

[119] Classroom Observations, 09.22.16, p. 94; 11.15.16, p. 170; 11.17.17, p. 178
[120] Written Reflection, 01.18, p. 209

models fluent, expressive reading. By sharing books with entertaining storylines, interesting topics and vocabulary, and even powerful messages, Jane encourages students to participate in what reading is – making-meaning.

After the read aloud ends and a cue is proffered from Jane, students disperse throughout the room to begin working either with the teacher, with the teaching assistant, or on their own. Like last year, their work continues for the next hour or so rotating through different kinds of literacy practice. A closer look at instruction during Jane's small group reveals more changes. Students spend a lot more time working with a short text rather than isolated literacy-related activities. Today the text is a memorized poem about teddy bears. The poem is full of words that start with *t* and *b*, the two letters many of her students focus on learning this week. The text is also connected thematically to the read aloud topic. These connections are intentional, and Jane notices their impact on her students and their learning.

Jane explains her impressions of her literacy instruction at the beginning of the year, "I felt like our routines were not beautiful, but everything tied in so beautifully. We did our big read aloud where we talked all week about *Corduroy*. By the end of the week, we had read the Teddy Bear poem a bunch of times. They didn't get their own [copy of the] text until Wednesday and some groups Thursday. By Friday, even my ESL kids, were like, 'I read! I read it!' I wanted to cry because last year it was a frustration thing. [But this year,] they found the *t's and 'bs* easily. Like no big deal. All week they were sorting the *t and b* sounds, so they can easily find [them]. Then, they read their books to the [teddy bear] dolls that they made. It felt like it was kindergarten. It all made sense to me. I didn't feel like my brain was jumping all around between unrelated activities, and I

could see their progression." She concludes, "I just feel like I want to repeat this a million times."[121]

Another change Jane explains to me is her new approach to word recognition. Over the course of the final few months of the previous school year, Jane grappled with how to approach word recognition instruction. Last year she heavily relied on isolated flashcard practice. This was what she thought the other kindergarten teachers did in their classrooms and what the other teachers and administrators recommended to her. However, after trying the isolated flashcard approach in her classroom, she decided something was not right with this approach. Last year, even though Jane wanted to change her approach, she stated that she could not change her approach due to the emphasis placed on the high frequency word assessment by the other teachers and administrators.

At the start of the 2016-2017 school year, Jane changes her mind. This change seems most related to the new knowledge encountered in her current graduate course on word knowledge development. However, this new theoretical knowledge reinforces what Jane noticed in her students and their learning last year. The flashcard-based approach took a lot of time and produced mixed results. Some students' word recognition grew remarkably while others' recognition continued to stagnate. Regardless of what she perceives as other teachers' flashcard-based approach, she decides to change her own word recognition instruction. Jane makes her decision about word recognition instruction

[121] Teacher Interview – Initial Conversation, 9/24/16, p. 99

and proclaims it boldly to me (within the safety of her own classroom) but not to other teachers or administrators. Then, she quietly tries her new approach in her classroom.[122]

As Jane tries to implement a new approach, she draws upon her new learning from her first graduate course on the broad foundations of reading and her current graduate course on word knowledge development. Rather than isolated practice with words taken from a list of high frequency words and written on flashcards, Jane tries to select words from texts students read and to engage them in more contextualized practice. She talks about the meaning and sounds of the words with her students. They find them in the text and notice the letters that made up the word. Jane includes high frequency words (e.g., the, of, see) but also includes other, often more concrete and meaningful, words (e.g., apple, baby, walk).

Jane implements her decision in her classroom at the beginning of the year. Even as she instructs in the way that made sense – or felt right – to her, she continues to think about her instructional approach to word recognition. She finds it challenging to fit in all the different kinds of practice she thinks is important like alphabet knowledge, extended time for reading (or memorized reading) in text, and word study, or the examination of particular features in words to support students' developmental spelling, *and* the connection between reading in text and word study. She is also uncertain how to manage the different words students were "discovering" in text with her guidance. At her school, Jane is unsure who to turn to about the changes she makes and the resulting challenges she faces. She does not know any other teacher not relying on flashcards to teach high-

[122] Teacher Interview, 09.24.16, p. 98

frequency words. She perceives that no other teacher approaches literacy instruction in the way she is trying in her own classroom. Jane tells me that discussing different approaches to instruction is not the purpose of grade-level team meetings, which are even shorter this year than the previous year. Like last year, these meetings are reserved for discussion of logistics (e.g., field trip, special celebrations) and students' performance on division-wide assessments. [123]

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Jane's classroom and approach to early literacy instruction is similar to last year in some ways. She uses the same classroom organizational structure of rotations through small groups and independent choice activities. While the organizational structure may appear the same, Jane has made noticeable changes. She added a regular read aloud of a picture book to the start of the language arts block. According to Jane, this time for read alouds allows students to "get lost in literature" and encourages them to think about how authors craft picture books.[124] She proudly shows me how her students experiment with the same kind of craft in their own writing. She also laments the lack of time she and the other kindergarten teachers have to devote to the read aloud aspect Jane considers so essential to early literacy development.[125]

Also in comparison to the previous school year, Jane focuses her literacy instruction around a theme and an accessible, often memorized, text. These thematic connections are seemingly superficial. The readings share a topic – for example, bears,

[123] Teacher Interview, 09.28.16, p. 108
[124] Written Reflection, 01.18, p. 209
[125] Written Reflection, 01.18, p. 209

and particular letters are included in exploration activities of the individual letters and situated within the accessible text. As a result, the connections are more impactful. They may be relying mostly on memory to recite the accessible and familiar text, but they gain experience with letters in isolation and in context. Jane encourages them to attend to these letters as cues to identify words. Her students sense that they are reading and Jane senses they are laying the foundation for later, more conventional reading, where spellings activate words pronunciations and meanings (Adams, 2013; Ehri & Wilce, 1980).

A month into the new 2016-2017 school year, Jane sensed that her new approach to instruction was beneficial for her students, especially her ESL students. Her students expressed excitement at their perceived success with reading, proclaiming, "I read! I read it!"[126] Her new approach made sense to Jane as well. Therefore, her students' responses and her own response lent support for her decision to shift away from highly repetitive flashcard technique with high frequency words and towards what Jane considered a more contextualized and developmental approach. Even though Jane's decision to change her approach to word recognition instruction was a quiet one, it was one she planned to continue.

While Jane recognizes the effects of her changes to instruction with her students and within herself, an important question lingers. How did she make this change, especially when Jane still perceives that the other kindergarten teachers still use repetitive flashcard technique with their students? It seems unlikely that her change relates to

[126] Teacher Interview – Initial Conversation, 9/24/16, p. 99

another kindergarten teacher's change or a school-wide change. The norms of what particular techniques look like according to the more experienced kindergarten teachers remain the same as last year. Those norms may be viewed as a sort of *authoritative discourse*, or a type of established discourse that requires unaccepting acceptance and commitment similar to religious dogma, scientific theory, or a tradition (Bakhtin, 1934/2004). It includes information, directions, rules, and/or models. Because of its nature as authoritative, this discourse is imposed on others with no chance for questioning. In Jane's case, she initially accepted and conformed to particular early literacy techniques, namely the highly repetitive flashcard work, she perceived as used by the more experienced kindergarten teachers. Initially, the flashcard-based approach was not questioned because Jane perceived it as the technique used by others but also in part because no other alternative existed at the time for her.

If Jane's change does not relate to changes with the other teachers around her or changes at her school, perhaps the question about the origin of her change needs to be rephrased. So, how did Jane make this change when she seemed so confused and torn in the previous school year? Another look at when Jane starts to question the norms of word recognition instruction provides insight.

In the previous year, Jane explicitly questioned the routine of repetitive flashcard practice when she encountered new theoretical knowledge from her graduate coursework. Her first foundational course at initially confused Jane; she felt torn over whether she should continue her flashcard-based approach given what she was learning about word recognition development. Importantly, this new theoretical knowledge acquired in

graduate school resonated with Jane because of her current experience in her classroom and her larger philosophy related to instruction.

Jane expressed that she wants to foster a curiosity in her students through authentic experiences rather than create robots that sit in chairs all day. She also acknowledged that her students were five- and six-years-old and wants instructional practice to address their current development *and* to respect them as young learners. Flashcards seemed unnecessary for some of her students who seemed to easily learn a rapidly growing number of words and unsuccessful for others who experienced continued difficulty recalling words on flashcards and recognizing them in other contexts. Her first graduate course and the new theoretical knowledge encountered there raised the possibility of a different approach – one that is more developmentally situated in text as the teacher guides students to attend to particular words from the text and analyze graphophonetic properties of those words. However, Jane still needed to explore a new approach, and doubts regarding whether she could actually use a different approach lingered.

The possibility of a different approach becomes more of a reality at the beginning of the 16-17 school year as Jane takes a graduate course specifically on word knowledge development. The focus of the word knowledge course allowed Jane to further explore her questions related to word recognition development and instructional practices. The theoretical knowledge encountered in this second course continued to resonate with Jane's classroom experiences and her philosophy. In other words, Jane was in search of another approach, even if she did not explicitly know or state it. She may have even had implicit notions related to her stated desire to foster curiosity and discovery in her

students. Those implicit notions may have subtly informed what the different approach might be like, and her graduate course fit those notions. Jane would later stress that this course on word knowledge development changed her classroom.[127]

Now in her second year at this school, Jane does have an alternative – the theoretical knowledge of her graduate coursework. However, like the authoritative discourse of the norms of early literacy at her school, the theoretical knowledge Jane encounters in her graduate coursework is also not her own. It is still a sort of authoritative discourse grounded in theoretical or scientific knowledge rather than the accepted traditions or norms of instruction. Nevertheless, the authoritative discourse grounded in university-based or theoretical knowledge may be equally as authoritative to, or perhaps even more authoritative than, the norms of Jane's more experienced teachers. The theoretical and scientific language along with status associated with professional jargon lends an authoritative legitimacy to the information, directions, rules, and models learned about in Jane's graduate coursework. Jane contemplates both the theoretical knowledge from her graduate courses, the practical knowledge of teachers, including her own, and the space between the two kinds of knowledge.

Jane seems to replace one authoritative discourse with another as she assumes the discourse of her graduate coursework. She admits she "makes rules" for herself based on her graduate coursework. In other words, Jane sets strict standards for her classroom practice based on what she learns, namely avoiding isolated high-frequency word practice. Jane is not completely interpreting the coursework yet. Perhaps the theoretical

[127] Classroom Observation, 12.13.16, p. 208

knowledge is so established that is should not be interpreted. Even Jane wonders if she "drank the juice" or simply "regurgitat[es]" what a professor says.[128] With this university-based knowledge in mind, Jane has at least some ideas of how to shift her approach to instruction and she starts to change aspects of her word recognition instruction in her classroom. If she questions, she questions herself – asking if she is "grasping the wrong thing" from her coursework.[129]

Is Jane's adoption of another authoritative discourse enough? What else needs to happen for Jane? Bakhtin might argue that Jane needs to question authoritative discourses and develop another sort of discourse known as *internally persuasive discourse*. An internally persuasive discourse is a discourse both borrowed from others but constructed by oneself in relation to others and other discourses. It is not legitimized by an external authority but by engaging and negotiating with alternative points of view. Through this engagement and negotiation, an internally persuasive discourse is dynamic as individuals affirm aspects of other discourses and organize them in relation with each other. Unlike authoritative discourse, which includes information, directions, rules, and models that are expected to be unquestioningly accepted, an internally persuasive discourse is constructed. Constructed discourse and values shape what individuals think for themselves through the engagement and negotiation with the other discourses they encounter. Individuals then draw on their own internally persuasive discourse and values to inform behavior (Bakhtin, 1934/2004).

[128] Teacher Interview, 11.17.16, p. 196, Teacher Interview, 10.16.16, p. 111
[129] Teacher Interview, 11.17.16, p. 199

Acknowledging and affirming one's internally persuasive discourse is challenging; it is forged, not simply accepted. Moreover, internally persuasive discourse is often not acknowledged or legitimized by others (Bakhtin, 1934/2004). Despite these challenges, engagement with other viewpoints and further experience can contribute to the forging of an internally persuasive discourse. Jane grapples with the norms of early literacy instruction encountered at her school, the experience of the other kindergarten teachers, and the university-based knowledge she encounters in her graduate coursework. She expresses that the grade-level team meetings would be more helpful if the teachers could talk about student work and instruction. Jane acknowledges there is likely more to other kindergarten teachers and their own classroom practice than the flashcard-based approach to word recognition instruction since questioned by Jane.[130] Discussions related to word recognition instruction at school and in her graduate courses along with her experiences teaching kindergarten allow Jane to forge her own internally persuasive discourse or put another way, a practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

At first, Jane seems to attempt to create her own internally persuasive by turning inward to her considerations of her own practice. She focuses on her classroom instruction and avoids talking about different approaches with the other kindergarten teachers. However, as the school year moves into November, she opens up and tries engaging with the other kindergarten teachers. One important attempt with the other teachers involves their use of a new assessment.

## In the Grade-Level Team Meeting

[130] Teacher Interview, 09.28.16, p. 108

A month after telling me that she is quietly trying a new approach to word recognition instruction, Jane excitedly tells me she spoke to the other kindergarten teachers about using a different assessment with their students. Jane and the other kindergarten teachers give a kindergarten-level assessment three times during the school year. However, for some of their students, this kindergarten-level assessment no longer provides instructionally-useful information because the students can do everything required on the assessment. Once the kindergarten-level assessment no longer provides useful information, they use another assessment to determine reading level. Currently, the kindergarten-level assessment and the reading level assessment are different, thus seemingly disconnected with each other.

Jane decides there is another option after learning about assessments in one of her graduate courses. Jane sees the other assessment option as a logical extension of the kindergarten-level assessment. She decides others must also see it as a logical extension because it is what the first grader teachers use. In addition, Jane views the other assessment option as more conducive to seeing connections across aspects of students' early literacy development rather than solely a report of reading level. To Jane's surprise and excitement, the other kindergarten teachers agree to make this change with her. She can hardly contain this excitement as she tells me she plans to use what she sees as a more instructionally useful assessment. She invites me to the next kindergarten grade-level team meeting where she expects to discuss implementing the assessment change.

About 10 minutes into the 30 minutes allotted for the kindergarten grade-level team meeting where they plan to explore the new assessment, Jane suggests, "Okay, the [name of the assessment]." She speaks at a volume just loud enough to be heard over the

back and forth between the other teachers. At this point in the meeting, Jane realizes their time to explore the new assessment together is dwindling, and her excitement over receiving the new assessment kits has started to fade. Her suggestion – which carries hints of both a matter-of-fact statement and a hopeful plea – goes unheeded. The other four kindergarten teachers continue discussing the class placement of a new student and expressing frustration that they are just finding out about this new student the day before she starts.

Now 15 minutes into the meeting, the teachers finally turn their full attention to the matter of assessment and figuring out how to use their new resource. Jane asks how they are to start giving the assessment. At this point in the meeting, all five teachers appear frustrated. The mood of four of the teachers suggest a lingering frustration at the lack of communication regarding the new student. Jane is frustrated at the perceived waste of valuable collaborative time to discuss the new assessment. She hides her frustration and listens intently to one of the teachers, who has previous experience with the assessment, starts to explain how to administer the assessment.

Through the explanation, the lead teacher interrupts to ask a question. Her question opens the floodgates, and the teachers pepper the one teacher who has experience with questions. Unlike these three teachers, Jane remains quiet, looking on like watching a tennis match as she directs her attention from teacher to teacher. The questions about specific technicalities (e.g., the different assessment tasks, which materials to use, when to time students reading to measure fluency) of administering the assessment come so quickly that I cannot keep up. Neither can Jane.

Despite 15 minutes of "wasted time," Jane finds the assessment administration explanation from the teacher who had previous experience with it helpful. In fact, before the meeting, Jane had already attempted to administer one of the passages from the assessment with four of her students. However, she since realized that the way she administered the assessment did not provide her with accurate information regarding her students' reading performance because she omitted the required picture walk prior to asking the student to read the assessment book. The meeting is an opportunity to discuss the procedures of administering the assessments to prevent any future mistakes in administration. The other teachers seem to feel differently.

Seemingly tired of the finer points of assessment administration, the lead teacher attempts to simplify the conversation and asks which book the teachers should use for the end-of-year benchmark. She wants to decide which book corresponds to the reading level that students are expected to read by the end of kindergarten. The floodgates open again. The four other teachers rapidly go back-and-forth about division-level expectations, recent changes to those expectations, and the different ways to describe those expectations. For Jane, the layers of confusion deepen as the four teachers talk back-and-forth quickly, use different terms interchangeably, and use an outdated, but only a couple months old, division-wide chart incorrectly depicts correlations across guided reading levels and pre-primer levels, which are two different ways to describe reading levels.

On the division-wide chart, each of the three pre-primer levels (A, B, C) incorrectly map onto a single guided reading level (C). However, a pre-primer A maps onto a guided reading level C, pre-primer B onto a guided reading level D, and pre-primer C onto a guided reading level E. The kindergarten teachers decide to "split the

middle" on the incorrect correlation chart and select the middle guided reading level C (or incorrectly labeled pre-primer B) to select their end-of-year benchmark book. In doing so, the kindergarten teachers set their benchmark for their students as the previous division-wide benchmark, which is a level higher than the current division-level benchmark. The division-level benchmark for end-of-year reading level in kindergarten has recently changed to a guided reading level C (or pre-primer A) from a guided reading level D (pre-primer B).

In a matter of minutes, the floodgates burst. The specific assessment administration questions and discussion of benchmark book determination seem to open the door for bigger questions – questions regarding whether teachers actually want to use the new assessment and questions revealing possible disagreement between teachers. The teachers seem to settle on which level and which corresponding book they will use as their end-of-year benchmark. Then, a moment later, after a couple of comments about the new assessment "making extra work" and seeming like "a heck of a lot of work," one teacher shares her opinion that they should just stick with the old assessment. Another teacher jumps in and shares that she brought her binder with a whole other set of benchmark books as she was under the impression that it was these benchmark books the teachers had decided to use.

Jane's confusion lingers; she is unsure about how to answer the specific, procedural questions related to assessment administration and is unable to follow the mapping of different levels. She came into the meeting expecting to gain a better understanding of how to use the assessment to make instructional decisions – not leave even more confused. Unlike the other teachers who adamantly state their opinions, she is

still silent. Internally though, she is "piping mad."[131] In her mind, Jane believes using the new assessment is the "right thing to do." However, she is extremely aware of her positioning as third year teacher – by far a novice compared to the other teachers on her team. Internally, her excitement melts away as frustration builds, becomes layered with confusion, and even turns to anger. However, she is unsure how to articulate her own thoughts in defense of the decision to switch assessments. In this discursive moment where power is exerted through normative and political discourse and silencing, Jane does not express her reasons for wanting to switch assessments. Her roller coaster of emotions leaves her feeling crushed.

After the meeting concludes, Jane returns to her classroom and closes the door. 'That was not how I expected *that* to go,' she explains to me in a lowered, but firm tone, gesturing with her hands outstretched as she walks toward her kidney table on the other side of the room. As she sets her newly acquired assessment binder down on her kidney table, she expresses her frustration at the meeting not being what she expected. 'I was under the impression that we had already *decided* to use the different assessment, and this meeting was to talk about the procedures of the assessment to make sure that everyone knew what to do to administer and interpret the assessment. I'm just surprised at their reaction.'

Not ready to abandon her commitment to the adoption of the different assessment, Jane opens her assessment binder. She tries to at least clear up some of the confusion related to the technical administration of the assessment. She orders the little brightly

[131] Teacher CoReflection Interview, 11.17.16, p. 192

colored benchmark books, glances inside each book, and starts to familiarize herself with the differences across the books. What makes the books different suggest how she will support her students and their continued growth as readers and spellers. Lastly, she locates in the binder the readings for when students move beyond the little benchmark books. Jane appears satisfied with her review of the different materials, and she returns the larger issue of the other teachers' seeming rejection of the assessment. Even though the door remains closed and we stand on the opposite side of the room, Jane drops her voice lower and explains she "cannot understand [the other teachers who just seem to] want to keep doing the same old things, especially if it's bad." She exclaims, "Why would we keep using something bad?" In disbelief, she continues, "This is why we ordered [the new literacy assessment]… This is what 2nd and 3rd grade use – it's good and it's consistent."[132]

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In this meeting, the two authoritative discourses in Jane's world – the viewpoints, norms, and practice of the more experienced kindergarten teachers and the theory and university-based knowledge of her graduate program – collide. There is opportunity for Jane if she can engage in dialogic, or give and take, relations. Jane and the other kindergarten teachers could discuss the different viewpoints, norms, and practice during these grade-level team meetings. By remaining open and engaging, Jane and the other kindergarten teachers might seek and negotiate what Bakhtin refers to as *expanded meaning*, which contributes to one's internally persuasive dialogue. While this liberation

[132] PLC Observation, 11.01.16, p. 164

from another's discourse and creation of one's own discourse may seem challenging or ambitious, it can happen. Though not framed using authoritative discourse, other researchers have documented teachers' construction or negotiation of practice (e.g., Coburn, 2001; Zoch, 2015).

However, the creation of one's own internally persuasive discourse is not inevitable. It depends on how individuals can *signify* their practice and theories (Bakhtin, 1934/2004). To signify, individuals must be open to other viewpoints and discuss their practice and their underlying theories. This signifying does not occur during the November grade-level team meeting. Perhaps the space the kindergarten teachers have to signify meanings during these meetings is too narrow or too broad. For example, time is too narrow. Jane and the other kindergarten teachers only have 30 minutes to meet. The teachers are still talking about changes with assessment as one teacher must leave to pick up her students. The discussion around practice is too broad as teachers speak generally about their practices, avoiding the particulars of instruction. Perhaps the teachers speak broadly because they are content with their current instructional approaches. Or, perhaps the teachers are unsure of alternatives. The authoritative discourse of their current norms of practice may even restrict the opportunity for discussion or consideration of an alternative.

Without using Bakhtin's terms, Jane acknowledges she is still working on her internally persuasive dialogue. She admits feeling "very much" like an early career teacher.[133] Last year she accepted and implemented what she perceived the other

[133] Teacher Interview, 11.17.16, p. 184

kindergarten teachers were doing in their classrooms. In the fall of 2016, she accepts the theoretical knowledge and ideas for application in practice and repeats what her professor says as she explains her instructional approach to others. Now, Jane appears to replace the authoritative discourse of more experienced teachers with a different authoritative discourse, one of her graduate coursework. For Jane, this replacement seems to be acceptable because the authoritative discourse of a university setting is equally legitimate to or even superior than the discourse of her fellow teachers. In addition to legitimacy, the authoritative discourse of Jane's graduate program also resonated with Jane's larger, value-driven philosophical approach to teaching, which Jane begun to construct before becoming a teacher, let along enrolling in a graduate program. Jane views her role as a teacher as fostering curiosity and discovery, especially in authentic learning situations. Her graduate coursework fits with this as she learns about the importance of providing early writing experiences and building connections across reading and writing instruction.

However, the theoretical knowledge encountered in her graduate program is still a sort of authoritative discourse for Jane in the fall of 2016. She can ask some questions in her courses and of her professors but cannot ask other questions. Jane explains that she reflects in her courses on her classroom practices but that she does not always view the course as a co-reflective space.  Similar to Jane's quietness in grade-level team meetings to ensure she does not reveal perceived incompetence to the other kindergarten teachers, Jane is reluctant to talk *too much* about her current classroom practices in her graduate

courses, in case she reveals she is using “poor practices.”[134] For now, Jane has less opportunity to seek an expanded meaning and create an internally persuasive dialogue. It is challenging for Jane to engage the two worlds of her school and her graduate program with each other, even when given the opportunity like the November grade-level team meeting depicted in the above vignette.

Jane’s graduate coursework seems to only go so far. Her university learning is not her context – her school and her classroom. So, how can it develop without the dialogue about practice? Most of the time Jane attempts to dialogue within herself. However, turning inward all the time to dialog seems slower and more frustrating. It creates a heightened sense of ambiguity and lack of confidence within Jane. At times, especially during and after the November meeting, I sense that I am an outlet for Jane, where she can at least express her thoughts. She makes sense of ideas that exist, tries to approach instruction, and develop her teaching practice. As she mostly turns inward to herself and at times expresses her thoughts to me, Jane negotiates – or engages in a give and take of ideas that seem to relate, contradict, and complement each other (Bakhtin, 1934/2004). Jane cannot always turn inward; she must act, engaging in pragmatism and adaptation. As the school year continues, Jane must engage with the other kindergarten teachers, where the instructional approaches of the other kindergarten teachers, the university-based knowledge from her graduate coursework, and her own growing internally persuasive discourse collide. With Jane’s development of her own expertise, she deliberates on value-driven question – *what is the right way to approach literacy instruction for my*

[134] Conversation, 02.12.18

*students?* To answer this question, Jane struggles with the more technical, or outcome-driven, knowledge, normative contexts, and political contexts as she negotiates when to draw upon these different types of knowledge. However, through this struggle, Jane continues to forge her own value rationality and practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

At the end of the 2015-2016 school year, Jane explained to me that she had to continue her application of technical knowledge, or the use of a high-frequency word flashcard technique to ensure her students met benchmarks for word identification. Now in the beginning of a school year, buoyed by the theoretical knowledge encountered in her first four graduate courses, Jane shifted her instructional approach in the fall of 2016. She tried to situate literacy practice in text, connect across reading and writing, select developmentally-appropriate forms of practice, and provide more free-writing opportunities. Jane's commitment to change became reinforced by her growing practical wisdom, or what she noticed in her classroom. Jane saw tangible progress in her students, and her students recognized their own growth as well. Despite this reinforcement of her new instructional approach, Jane's commitment to change would be put to the test in the upcoming months.

# CHAPTER VII
# WINTER 2016-2017

Jane rides a roller coaster of emotions over the course of three months in the middle of the 2016-2017 school year. At first, Jane questions her classroom instruction, especially her approach to word recognition instruction. She tells me she cannot voice her concerns with the normative and technical or outcome-drive knowledge embodied in the repetitive flashcard-based practice. She also cannot share her practical attempts at a different approach with the other kindergarten teachers. I listen as Jane concludes that she expresses disheartening uncertainty over how to approach instruction in her classroom. Rather than being able to engage with the other kindergarten teachers, Jane turns inward. She closes the doors to her classroom and continues with what she considers to be a more developmental and contextualized approach to word recognition instruction.

However, a shift occurs after winter break. Other kindergarten teachers invite Jane to share her own instructional approach in her classroom. Importantly, the discussion initiated by Jane results in a larger value-driven, rather than outcome-driven, deliberation about students' early literacy experiences as opposed to a mere listing and/or adoption of the set of instructional techniques Jane uses in her classroom. Though conflict still exists between the outcome-driven, widely accepted flashcard-based approach to word recognition and a different more developmental approach, the kindergarten teachers appear willing to discuss those differences, consider the impact on their students, and approach instruction with that impact in mind, rather than simply on narrow outcomes.

While I am not present at either of these meetings, I sense the impact that the discussion with other teachers has had on Jane as she recalls these experiences during conversations with me. In previous conversations with Jane, I have heard her excitement when she talks about the "magic" of reading. Now I see that Jane is becoming further emboldened as she turns outward and speaks up during grade-level team meetings and defends her instructional decisions to members on the school leadership team. Jane appears guided by a sense of what early literacy experiences can be like for her students. Even what is "right."

In the sections to follow, I recount three instances shared by Jane over the course of two conversations with me. First, Jane describes a meeting with other kindergarten teachers as part of a school-wide initiative to improve literacy instruction. Then, Jane tells me about a later meeting with the kindergarten teachers where they discussed changes to early literacy instruction initiated by Jane. Finally, Jane explains how she advocated for one of her students to receive intervention despite obstacles created by individuals on the school leadership team.

### With the Other Kindergarten Teachers

In the middle of November, I meet Jane after the school day and an after-school meeting end. At the start of the conversation, I am interested in her experience during a recent grade-level team meeting with the kindergarten teachers. However, Jane had different recent meeting on her mind, and that meeting is where we start. She quickly summarizes the purpose of the meeting for me. The meeting was part of a school-wide initiative to improve literacy instruction where each grade-level team of teachers had to choose a specific aspect of literacy instruction on which to focus. Somewhat surprisingly

to Jane, the kindergarten teachers decided to focus on fluency. Without any discussion of what fluency means for their five- and six-year-old students, emergent and early readers, or how fluency develops, the kindergarten teachers jumped right to instruction. Their instructional approach was decided even more quickly; it was the kindergarten teachers' mainstay – daily, highly repetitive practice with high-frequency words on flashcards.

What prompted the kindergarten teachers to return to their mainstay approach of repetitive flashcard practice? Perhaps the other kindergarten teachers have tried other approaches in the past but decided flashcards are the best approach to word recognition. Maybe the flashcard practice simply worked – maybe flashcard drills resulted in the most words recognized by the most number of students. Or, maybe teachers sensed the looming pressure of the division-wide high-frequency word assessment. On this assessment, students must identify a list of high-frequency words, so maybe flashcard practice seemed to be the most efficient way to get students to meet benchmarks of words recognized in isolation.

For Jane, all of a sudden, she seemed faced with a decision she had already made. At the beginning of the school year, Jane decided to move away from the repetitive flashcard approach to word recognition instruction in favor of what she perceives as a more contextualized and developmentally-responsive one. However, now, she tells me that in this November meeting, she cannot openly question the other kindergarten teachers' focus on fluency or suggest a different instructional approach.

Moreover, Jane tells me how she started to question her decision to move away from the repetitive flashcard approach. The certainty with which she discussed her contextualized approach at the beginning of the school year disappears, and she explains

to me that she feels like she did during her first and second years of teaching. She questions, “Oh, shoot. What am I even doing now? Maybe I should [start doing what the other teachers are doing]?” The tension builds. “Then, I feel like that’s what I did last year when I just came in and saw what other people were doing. I started immediately doing what they were doing, thinking that I was not doing the right thing. Now I feel like I’ve reversed some of that, but now I don’t know – I’m getting back to the same spot – [where I think] – ‘Oh, my gosh, I’m not doing anything right.’”[135]

Jane’s thoughts come tumbling out in bits and pieces, punctuated with the disheartening conclusion that she does not know. “I feel [what the other teachers are doing is not developmentally appropriate for the students].” As she continues, she attempts to reconcile how she feels with what she sees as evidence of students’ learning with the other teachers. Students in the other teachers’ classrooms know all their letters and corresponding sounds, but Jane still has a few students who have not learned all their letters and sounds. Jane worries if she misunderstood or misinterpreted the learning from her graduate course, which underlies the changes to her word recognition instruction. She wonders, “Did [my] professor say something, and then I heard something different. I keep second-guessing, and I make these rules for myself, and then I don’t… I don’t know.”[136]

The other veteran teachers’ commitment to a flashcard-centric approach, the looming high-frequency word assessment, and the subsequent reporting and sharing of students’ scores on the assessment makes it tempting to abandon her different, more

[135] Teacher CoReflection Interview, 11.17.16, p. 183
[136] Teacher CoReflection Interview, 11.17.16, p. 184

contextualized approach. Jane does not want to be the one teacher sitting at that table with a significantly higher number of students not able to recognize the benchmark number of words. She does not want to put herself in a position where she had to explain her approach, especially when it is already hard for her to articulate.

Eventually during our conversation, Jane returns to her initial reasons for changing her approach from a flashcard-centric to contextualized one. After all, there was a reason why she committed to this different contextualized approach at the end of the previous school year and the beginning of the current one. Last year Jane tried the flashcard approach, but something about the approach was not right. All of the sudden, her literacy instruction became aimed toward a solitary goal – the number of words recognized from a list of words high-frequency words.  The number of words or a related reading level is not what Jane wants to be the end goal of her literacy instruction. The flashcard approach did not seem to work either. It was time "wasted," she firmly states.[137] Last year, certainly some students in her classroom learned more words from the flashcards, but she states she thinks these students would have learned no matter what. Other students – at whom the flashcards are primarily directed – continued to have trouble recognizing words on the flashcards and in their reading in text.

Despite her doubts and tension, Jane closes her classroom door and decides to continue her different more contextualized approach. Her conclusion is not an easy one. She goes against her team. She cannot share her decision or work through what her decision looks like in practice with another teacher at her school. Jane tries to make clear

[137] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 128

to me that she is not trying to be difficult just to be difficult. “It’s hard. It’s a hard, fine line, and it’s very easy to sound like you’re just not a team player. I think a lot of burnt out teachers are typically like, ‘Nope, not doing that. I’m gonna do what I’ve done for 45 years.’ And you’re like, ‘Okay, great [sarcastically].’ But I don’t feel like that.”[138] For her and her students, she states something bigger is at stake.

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For Jane, what is at stake for her students is their educational experiences. While Jane never mentions Dewey by name, her approach to literacy instruction appears deeply intertwined with the Deweyan concept of *experience*. According to Dewey (1938), education happens through experiences. Experiences are some sort of interaction occurring between an individual and objects and other people in the individual’s environment. Experiences are “moving forces,” either directing an individual towards future growth or shutting an individual off from opportunities for new growth (Dewey, 1938, p. 31). Educative experiences are those experiences that encourage continued growth for the individual, whereas mis-educative experiences interfere with continued growth and development and even create negative or detrimental attitudes or habits. A teacher’s role is to determine how experiences influence the direction of growth for her students.

As Jane grapples with how to approach literacy instruction in her classroom after a meeting with her fellow – but more experienced – kindergarten teachers, it becomes clear that Jane views the kind of flashcard-based experiences her students as mis-

[138] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 117

educative. She draws on her new theoretical learning about how children develop word recognition and her experience with the flashcard-based approach last school year. She recognizes underlying tension between the theoretical knowledge about word recognition development and technical knowledge, or efficient technique aimed at an outcome, underlying the flashcards. In the face of tension, Jane still must do something in her classroom to support students' word recognition development. For now, she concludes that the flashcard approach is still "wasted time" and recommits to her different approach – one she considers more developmental and situated in connected text. Perhaps embedded in her continued movement away from repetitive flashcard approach is a worry over the future impact on students and their view of themselves as capable and curious readers and writers.

Jane reviews some of the reasons she does not want to return to a flashcard-centric approach to word recognition instruction. It seems like flashcards force students to memorize words as wholes, long before some even know what a word is in connected text. It seems disconnected to other aspects of literacy development and instruction. Most importantly, she worries that the flashcard-based approach reduces word recognition and larger literacy instruction to a rote memorization task. Jane perceives that flashcard-based word recognition instruction involves a strict memorization procedure for high-frequency words in the form of seemingly endless practice with more high-frequency words on countless flashcards. When one set of words is learned, there is always another set. Once the kindergartners settle into the routine of school, the words on flashcards become part of their regular instructional routine. In contrast, Jane sees children's earliest break-throughs in learning to read and write as the magical culmination of multiple skills such

as letter recognition, letter sounds, beginning sound awareness, and concept of word in text, and she wants her students to feel the same way about words and reading.

There is tension among Jane's perception of how other kindergarten teachers approach word recognition instruction, her reflection on her approach last school year, the new theoretical perspectives from her current graduate course, and her own ideas about what experiences should be like for her students. For now, Jane's ideas about what experience should be like for her students guide her decision-making, which are bolstered by her new theoretical learning. So, rather than revert to the repetitive flashcard practice she tried last year, she continues the other approach in her own classroom where students practice identifying words in context from short, predictable or memorized texts and then analyzing the properties of those words when prompted by Jane. Her approach, and thus her own practical wisdom, is reinforced after an observation from the principal who says nothing about the apparent differences in her instruction.[139] More importantly, for Jane, her approach is also reinforced when some of her students' parents comment that they have seen progress in their children.[140]

Nevertheless, Jane keeps her different approach quiet. She continues trying to figure out how to put this new theory of word recognition development into practice in her own classroom, which proves challenging to do on one's own. She generalizes ideas about her new, more developmental and situated in connected text approach to word recognition instruction, but support and collaboration about implications for practice would be helpful. Jane's internal tension becomes palpable in the classroom. The end of

[139] Classroom Observation, 12.13.16, p. 208
[140] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, p. 242

four successive small groups leave Jane "exhausted and with a case of whiplash." She wants success defined as facilitating "the organic learning process" rather than "finish[ing] before lunch."[141] The new theoretical knowledge encountered in her graduate courses bolsters Jane's new situated, developmental approach to instruction; however, the practical details of actually teaching in responsive ways in the particular context of her own classroom with her students remains a work in progress.

**With the Other Kindergarten Teachers, Again**

A couple months later in January, I meet Jane again outside of school hours to talk about a recent meeting with the other kindergarten teachers at school. This time is different. Jane makes the differences apparent in the way she talks to me about the meeting. Jane is a naturally fast talker, but as she recalls this meeting for me, her pace speeds up with excitement, and her tone conveys a sense of possibility.

Jane starts by telling me that the kindergarten teachers met to prepare for their upcoming mid-year review. During the meeting, the kindergarten teachers considered changes that they plan to make to improve outcomes for "struggling" students. Jane's class has the most "struggling" students, the most students receiving English as a Second Language services, and a couple of students receiving speech and language services. Jane alters the "struggling" label, at least for me. She tells me, "I wanted to be like, 'struggling, yes, but also making a ton of growth!'"[142]

Before the meeting, Jane tells me she is prepared for teachers to talk about discrete activities like writing letters on students' hands or repetitive flashcard practice,

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[141] Teacher Written Reflection – Small Group, 01.15.17, p. 210
[142] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, p. 242

not intentional, responsive, and overarching changes to instruction. However, during the meeting, Jane says she had the opportunity to share what she was doing in her classroom that she thought contributed to students' growth. She explains that she tried to speak from her experience and decided to share her approach to free-writing.

At the beginning of the year and for particular students, she acknowledged "free-writing" was drawing and making marks on whatever kind of paper. "It was just creating, drawing, and holding an instrument." It was not simply using the prompts from a school-wide writing program where kindergartners were encouraged to fill in a blank. She restates what she told the other teachers, "Free-writing has made an enormous difference for my kids, especially the ones that didn't like writing."

Jane's excitement builds as she tells me her explanation of free-writing in her classroom, sparked a larger discussion about play-based learning. When she first brought up "play-based learning," she had to describe what she meant to the other kindergarten teachers. She tells me she acknowledged that she thinks it is important but how she does not know how to specifically implement it in a classroom. She provided the other kindergarten teachers an example of how she defined "play-based learning" – a kitchen station that incorporates writing through creation of menus, grocery lists, or receipts. The other teachers responded by offering sight words taped to blocks. Jane suggested an alternative – using the blocks to build and then creating maps and labeling where different places are on the map and writing instructions or making signs.

Rather than discrete activities to get students to a certain numerical score, Jane says the discussion around free-writing and play-based learning are overarching things that may make a difference in kindergarten teachers' approaches to instruction. Jane

connects a developmental and play-based approach to trying to meet students where they are instead of pushing them to a number. As she explains the approach to me, she makes a sheepish expression and tells me she said this in front of the principal. She was uncomfortable as she said it, but he came in when she was talking. She says she could not simply stop mid-sentence, so she continued her explanation.

Jane summarizes her explanation for me. According to Jane, some of the kindergartners can do something to perform for an assessment, but she questioned whether the students actually know what it means or why they are doing it. It can seem like the kindergartners have only memorized a performance for the test. Then, she restates for me what she told the kindergarten teachers, "[We should] meet kids where they are instead of pushing them to do something that they really don't get." She says, in a tone of disbelief, that the teachers wrote what she suggested. Jane adds, "I'm just very excited about that going in our mid-year review. That was really cool!" Her statement seems like Jane thinks she sees the other kindergarten teachers considering how their instruction can be more responsive to their students. It also seems like Jane sees the other kindergarten teachers considering an approach to instruction proposed by her, perhaps for the first time.

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Jane's response following the January meeting where the teachers discussed larger changes to their instructional approach differs remarkably from her response after the November meeting when Jane left confused about her approach to word recognition instruction. Despite the difference in her response, I return to Dewey. In advocating for a new theory of education – one based on experience and the potential of experiences to

foster continued learning, Dewey (1938) cautioned that it was not enough to simply replace an old idea or theory with a new one. Instead, theorists and educators must unpack the new theory in terms of actual practice. Otherwise the problems with the old theory would simply be replaced by problems of a new hastily adopted new theory. To prevent the replacement of old problems with new ones, theorists and educators must tease out the problems, explain why the new theory generally addresses those problems, and then ask *how* the new theory addresses those problems through practice. In other words, there is space – or unanswered questions – between the universal principles behind a new theory and actual practice. Filling in that space is not as simple as technical knowledge, or specific techniques and methods aimed at outcomes. Answering those questions requires time and value-drive consideration of actual practice and whether the new theory and associated practice addresses problems with the old, likely normative, way.

While not a theory, Jane proposes a new approach, which is seemingly accepted by her fellow kindergarten teachers when the lead teacher incorporates it into their mid-year review. Jane characterizes this new approach as a version of play-based or developmentally-appropriate practice. According to Jane, the impact of the new approach on students could be great. As a result, Jane states students would feel successful, subsequently view reading and writing as something they can do, and also feel empowered to continue learning. Jane states that students could explore reading and writing in a variety of situated experiences like creating a grocery list or menu. Teachers could also celebrate and build upon students' current understandings of reading and writing. For example, Jane may celebrate a student's scribbles as an attempt to write and

convey meaning. She may also draw the student's attention to familiar letters in books and other print to encourage the student to move away from scribbling and towards using letters.

Even though Jane provides some examples, she admits she is less certain about the particulars of how to implement the new approach. She shares with me that she even told the other kindergarten teachers that she wants to try more "play-based" experiences but does not know exactly what that means or looks like. Though not stated explicitly, Jane implies that the teachers can collaboratively define this new approach and enact particular practices. By including mention of a new "play-based" or "developmental" approach in the kindergarten team mid-year review, Jane experiences a sense of optimism, unlike previous grade-level team meetings. For now, she expects that collaboration with the other kindergarten teachers will occur.

Jane's optimism is understandable. Unlike her usual quiet engagement, the other kindergarten teachers invite Jane to participate actively. She senses a worth in her contribution, her own practical wisdom, perhaps for the first time. Jane also notices a rare chance to reflect genuinely on practice. In the past, Jane has reminded me that she does not want to turn into an easily-swayed or difficult teacher – one who goes along with the "next best thing" or one who stubbornly rejects change in order to continue with old practice. From Jane's summary of this meeting, I sense Jane recognizes an opportunity to consider of a new point of view.

In the following months, Jane and her fellow kindergarten teachers face a challenge as a they consider new approaches to their literacy instruction. Like Dewey (1938) cautioned, change is not simply replacing an old idea with a new one. A new

instructional approach requires time. Dewey likened change to a "slow and arduous" process full of obstacles. There may be conflict between existing practical knowledge – the established, normative techniques aimed at meeting division-wide benchmarks – and teachers' own practical knowledge. Also, there may be gaps in knowledge as Jane suggests when she admits to being less clear about the particulars of more developmental, or play-based, ways to approach early literacy instruction.

So, what does this collaborative redefining of kindergarten instructional practice look like moving forward for Jane and her fellow kindergarten teachers? How will they consider the particulars of instructional practice as they attempt to implement new ideas and approaches? The answers remain unclear. So, although Jane recognizes an opportunity for deliberate consideration of kindergarten instructional practice, she also encounters obstacles that interfere with changes to practice and encourage use of the established practices Jane had hoped to reconsider and change.

### With the School Leadership Team

As Jane describes how the other kindergarten teachers invited her to share, perhaps for the first time, at the January grade-level team meeting, I recognize that her sharing has affirmed and emboldened Jane. Her excitement is palpable. But then she tells me there is more. She begins to recount how she advocated for one of her students to receive intervention. Jane launches directly into her account of what happened, but I also draw parallels to last spring when Jane wanted to change the intervention schedule for the perceived benefit of some of her students. However, these changes appeared to be not allowed during a grade-level team meeting. Nearly a year later, Jane describes a different ending.

Jane starts her retelling with some background. Back in November, Jane received a new student to her classroom shortly after administering fall literacy assessments. This new student spoke little to no English, so the members of the school leadership team, which includes two reading interventionists and the school psychologist, told Jane she did not have to administer the fall literacy assessment because the new student, Tia, needs time to adjust. Tia could start reading intervention after winter break, which would allow her the time to adjust. At the time, Jane followed the school leadership team plan, waited, and worked with Tia in her classroom.

Then, after winter break, Jane expected Tia to start receiving additional intervention services. Jane tells me she administered the mid-year literacy assessment. While Tia developed as a reader without additional intervention, Jane states she thinks Tia would benefit greatly from the additional support. She shared the mid-year assessment data with the school leadership team and expected her to start receiving intervention services. Feeling like she did everything the members of the leadership team told her to do in November, Jane explains she was shocked that they said Tia would not receive additional intervention. Jane attributes the team members' decision to limited resources or having too many students in intervention.

Jane, unable to accept the logic behind the decision, tells me she followed-up with leadership team. She proposed a solution – Tia can take the place of Ana, another one of her students already receiving intervention services but who is now meeting end-of-year benchmarks and is more advanced than any other students in her class receiving services. Jane says she was initially told yes by one person on the intervention team, but then she was told no, that Tia still needed more time to adjust and that student switches was not

how intervention groups worked. Jane seems to channel the emotions she may have felt when engaging in conversations with the school leadership team members. Her pace speeds up and her tone contains a hint of fed-up-ness. Jane tells me that she is aware of how groups worked but thought that the teachers had previously made certain exceptions and did not see why this could not be one of those exceptions.[143]

Then, after Jane asks the reading interventionists some additional questions, Jane tells me she discovered that one particular member of the intervention team, the school psychologist, was pushing for Tia to have more time to adjust. Even just relaying the events seems to upset Jane visibly as she explains this person has never met or observed the student. She tells me that the school psychologist does not know anything about Tia. Moreover, the leadership team includes no classroom teachers and classroom teachers are not invited to leadership meetings to discuss how to provide intervention.

Even though classroom teachers do not attend leadership team meetings, Jane says she went to the leadership team during their meeting and tried to make her case in person. She received the same answer, which she tells me made her furious. Jane quotes to me what she recalls the school psychologist told her, "The research says with an ESOL student… With an ESOL student, the research says that the more hands that are on a child doesn't really make them do better. They really just need time to adjust. That more hands aren't beneficial to them." Then, Jane tells me, "This is what really fired me up." So, Jane says she asked the team members, "We have four other ESOL students, so why are we bothering to serve them?"

[143] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, pp. 13-14

As Jane recounts her experience with the leadership team members, I realize I have never seen Jane so animated while telling me about an instance at school. She explains she has never been mad like this instance. She acknowledges that she vents to other teachers and to me but not to other teachers with whom she does not have a personal relationship.

I do not witness Jane's conversation with the leadership team members, but what she recounts to me is fiery. She restates what she told them, "I said that they were just going to let this student flounder because you think that she needs to adjust. She's adjusted. She could make end-of-year benchmarks. Don't bring up research. Why are you serving other ESOL students? Because you're legally mandated to by [name of state-wide screening and diagnostic literacy assessment] law? You have to serve these kids. If she had been here two months earlier, she would have to get services too. So, the research only matters for her because we don't have to serve her? So now we're thinking that she doesn't need a hand?"

Jane continues, "We're letting red tape be a problem. We decided not to follow the rules for other kids at the beginning of the year, so we are already not in compliance. Earlier I was mad because we weren't following the rules. But suddenly it's an issue for a student who is on grade-level moving out of [intervention] for a child that desperately needs help. This is not best for kids. That's ridiculous." She keeps going, "[Tia's] parents don't know that this service is available to her. I feel like I'm the only person that can help her. I had already talked to my kindergarten team about it. The plan to switch students made sense to them." Then, Jane tells me that she announced that she was going to talk to the administrators. She announced it to them because she did not want them to

feel like she was going behind their backs. She concludes, “I know that I am right. And you cannot tell me differently.”

Now Jane describes how she went to the assistant principal. Before explaining the situation with Tia, Jane implored the assistant principal to feel like a classroom teacher and remember what it was like to know your students and what they need. Then, Jane acknowledged the constraints of an intervention schedule, but she showed the assistant principal her two students’ assessment reports and explained the switch of students she thought should happen. The assistant principal shocked Jane by agreeing with her. Jane says that she even asked her assistant principal, “Really?” They brainstormed ideas where Jane would give the student no longer receiving intervention additional time in her classroom and Tia would join intervention.

Later one the of reading interventionists, a member of leadership team, thanked Jane for advocating for her students, because the interventionist said she had to remain quiet because it was her first year at the school. Jane explains the interventionist said she did not have clout or space, which surprised Jane as the interventionist was on the leadership team, was a reading specialist, and older than Jane. As Jane recalls advocating for Tia, I see a change in Jane. She acknowledges that change, too, and states she never would have done something like this before.

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Over the course of the school year, Jane deliberates on the kinds of experiences she creates for her students in a variety of ways. In her classroom and graduate coursework, she considers how word recognition develops and its impact on students’ view of themselves as readers. She learns about and proposes other approaches to literacy

instruction for five- and six-year-olds. Now, for Tia, Jane considers another sort of experience – what kind of additional support should a student receive and when should that additional support start. Here Jane tries to consider a longer view, or the extended impact or consequences of educational experiences, for Tia. Perhaps intervention supports Tia's early literacy learning by offering a boost, setting her up for accessing text, and continuing growth beyond her kindergarten experience. However, Jane's view is not unquestioningly unaccepted. Dewey (1938) called looking ahead and linking education with actual experience "a more serious and a harder business" (pp. 91-92). In other words, Dewey suggests that looking ahead, or taking a longer view of the students' future and considering what to do now as a teacher to set the student up for success later on is challenging.

Jane's opinion differs from the opinion of the members of the leadership team. Perhaps they also try to consider the longer view for Tia – a view that simply differs from Jane's. According to Jane, one particular member of the leadership team draws on "research" and advocates for additional time to allow Tia to adjust to a new environment in an unfamiliar language. However, to Jane, more time to adjust does not seem like a consideration of the longer view. Instead, it seems like the members of the school leadership team are constrained by limits of scheduling and rules around intervention – what Jane refers to as "red tape."[144] Adding another student would increase the overall size of the intervention groups which are supposed to be small. Switching students is not

[144] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, p. 14

allowable as students who perform below established benchmarks in the fall are required to remain in intervention for the entire school year.

Considering possibilities outside of the conventional decisions or requirements for how students receive intervention and responding differently proves challenging for Jane. Last year, she unquestioningly accepted that no changes could be made to the intervention schedule. This year, she refuses to accept an unchanging intervention schedule. Though she does not phrase it in terms of technical knowledge versus her own practical wisdom, Jane senses conflict between her practical experiences with Tia – her intuitive sense that a small amount of additional support will shape Tia's access to text and support her future growth, likely without this additional support – and the normative, technical knowledge surrounding the apparent norm of an efficient intervention schedule.

Jane senses her conclusions are important and refuses to accept someone else's decision for Tia. The other educators with power, those on the school leadership team, do not know Tia the way Jane does. They have not even observed Tia, despite one of them being asked by Jane. As Tia's classroom teacher, Jane remains in the best position to take a longer view for students' learning and make decisions regarding her student's experiences. Her role as a teacher is to determine in what kinds of experiences her students engage. So, Jane's decisions about Tia, which are reflective of other decisions she makes for her students and their instruction, are about ensuring her students' experiences educative, not mis-educative.

Jane's willingness to share her differing opinions, or her own practical wisdom, with the school leadership team and discuss alternative options with the assistant principal reflect a deliberation even larger than that of her students' experiences. Through

instances like her interactions with the members of the school leadership team, Jane considers not just her students' experiences but what is "right" or "good" for the children entrusted to her instructional care. Growing as a teacher is not simply about amassing a set of scientific-based techniques or achieving a particular level of learning outcomes or competencies. For Jane, she deliberates over relational and ethical matters deeply embedded in different instructional approaches and decisions (Flyvbjerg, 2001; van Manen, 2016).

In the winter of the 2016-2017 school year, Jane's growing practical wisdom seemed to embolden her as she faced continuing conflict across different knowledge-based claims. Jane described her new approach to literacy instruction as more developmentally-appropriate and situated in actual text. However, her new approach seemed to be threatened by the pressures related to the more outcome-driven technical knowledge aimed at high-frequency word identification and overall reading level. Initially, Jane kept quiet about her different approach. However, after winter break, Jane shared her experiential knowledge, or practical wisdom, with the other kindergarten teachers. The theoretical knowledge encountered in her graduate program shaped her new approach to instruction in her classroom. When Jane discussed changes with other kindergarten teachers, she acknowledged to the other kindergarten teachers and to me that she spoke only from her own experience in her classroom. Moreover, Jane continued to draw on her unique experience as her students' classroom teacher to advocate for what she considered to be the right approach to intervention for one of her students.

# CHAPTER VIII
# SPRING 2017

When Jane begins reading aloud to her students from a picture book, a noticeable, almost immediate shift happens in the classroom. Active five- and six-year-olds settle into place and become silent, enraptured by how Jane makes her voice rise and fall to capture a character or an action-filled event in the book. When the intervention teacher comes to pick up her students at the end of the read aloud, Justin, who often needs additional coaxing to participate, backs out of the classroom to hear a couple more pages. He relaxes as Jane reassures him that she will save the rest of the story for when he returns.[145] Jane recognizes that her students "get lost in literature."[146] At the end of the school year, another student, Riley, rereads a book from an earlier read aloud every day for over a month, giggling like it is the first time she heard it. Sometimes the shift associated with read aloud time does not happen. Jane has to redirect Cameron who battles for her attention. After the redirection, Jane takes some deep breaths with her students to reset before returning to the book.

Jane's experiences with Cameron, Riley, and her other students at the end of the 2016-2017 school year are important to examine more closely. These experiences illustrate van Manen's (1991, 2016) more sensitive way of conceptualizing pedagogy. van Manen's *pedagogy* is more about what it *involves* and less about what it *is*. Rather than being a science or set of instructional techniques, *pedagogy* involves a relational ethic. Thus, a set of instructional techniques gives way to questions guiding how to

[145] Classroom Observation, 01.17.17, p. 213
[146] Written Reflection – Read Alouds, 01.17

engage with children – What is “good or right”? And, what is “life enhancing, just, and supportive”? (pp. 19-20). This relational ethic and the answers to these questions are elusive. However, the enigmatic nature of *pedagogy* becomes more apparent when practically examined through actual teaching experiences, such as the ones Jane had with Cameron, Riley, and her other students.

In the next two sections, both from Jane’s classroom, van Manen’s (1991, 2016) more nuanced definition of pedagogy takes shape for Jane through her experiences with particular students. First, I describe Jane’s experiences with one particular student, Cameron, who posed many challenges for Jane over the course of the school and especially in the spring. Then, I offer additional classroom instances with Cameron but also Jane’s reflections on her students’ growth as readers and writers.

## In the Classroom

Cameron may be the perfect student if he could be Jane’s only student. But in a class of 17, he appears to be in a constant battle for Jane’s undivided attention. At least once a lesson, Cameron makes some sort of effort to redirect Jane’s attention from the lesson to him. Like every student in her class, Jane sees great potential in Cameron. “He can do it!” she exclaims to me when Cameron is not around.[147] Then, when he is around, she tries every trick she knows to get him to engage.

Earlier in the year, Jane’s efforts at redirection and engagement seem simpler. On Thursday morning, the week before Thanksgiving break, Jane meets with Cameron in a small group. Cameron sits down in his chair facing the teacher like the four other students

[147] Classroom Observation, 03.21.17, p. 4

in the group. Jane spreads out a set of cards for the group of five students to examine for spelling practice. Jane also wants the practice to be contextualized. Instead of showing cards in hopes students memorize the word or sort it mindlessly according to some phonics feature in the word, she quickly adds a comment related to the word's meaning after students figure out each word. This contextualization also opens up the practice to students' comments. Cameron takes advantage.

Jane pulls out a set of flipbooks for students to practice reading words with similar phonics patterns to their spelling words. The second set of words all end with -ump. She shows students the first word – lump. The small group of five students call out, "Lump!" She flips to the next word – bump – but this time she angles the word toward one student who chirps, "Bump!" Jane flips to the next word and angles the word toward the next student, "Hump!"

Cameron chimes in, not as loud as the student whose turn it is to read the word, but loud enough to be heard clearly over the background noise of students working independently. "Hump," he repeats. "What do you call a camel with three humps?" Jane ignores Cameron's question as she tries to preserve the flow of the word reading practice. Surprisingly, no student acknowledges him either.

The lack of acknowledgement does not deter Cameron. He pauses for comedic timing, "Pregnant." A wide grin spreads across his face, and he giggles to himself. Still no response from anyone, so he tries again, "What do you call a cow with no legs?" Another pause for comedic timing – Cameron is still telling jokes to no one. "Ground

beef," he cracks himself, and only himself, up. Jane already shows two additional words.[148]

The school year continues, and Cameron's attempts at attention become less innocent. One day as Jane wraps up instruction with one small group, Cameron announces that he can already read. This announcement is not the sweet, excitement of a six-year-old who is discovering how to access the world of books. It almost seems a calculated dig made by Cameron to point out he does not need Jane or her help. Cameron also wants to make his ability to read clear to his classmates and gets into a one-sided argument with Matthew, who sits a few table spaces away, about whether or not either of them could read. Cameron was loudly adamant that he could read and that Matthew could not.[149] Jane quickly tries to redirect both boys to other topics. However, I know she worries about Matthew's fragile identity as a reader, even sharing with me a couple months prior that she read an article over Winter Break about young boys and reading. She sees her role as a teacher including one of protecting Matthew and other readers like him experiencing difficulty.[150]

As winter melts into spring, Cameron's behavior only escalates – so much so that Jane requests another adult to be in the classroom when she or her teaching assistant is not working with Cameron.[151] A few days of rain at the end of March result in a few days straight of indoor recess. Jane selects a series of kid-appropriate videos for students to be

[148] Classroom Observation, 12.13.16, p. 205
[149] Classroom Observation, 01.17.17, p. 216
[150] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, follow-up notes
[151] Classroom Observation, 03.21.17, p. 4

as active as they can be while inside. As one video comes to an end, Jane moves to her computer to select one final video. “It’s gonna be Kidz Bop,” Cameron shouts over the rest of the students. His tone suggests he has to be right, he knows is will be right, and he wants other students to know he is right. It dares other students to try to disagree or contradict him. Jane clicks and a series of Kidz Bop videos appear on the screen. Cameron notices this immediately and proclaims victory to the rest of the class, “SEE. I TOLD YOU.” Despite his volume, no one acknowledges Cameron, so he repeats his victory a couple times.[152]

After indoor recess, Jane attempts to read a book to the class. Students gather on the carpet in their usual spots. Cameron spots an inflatable globe on top of the filing cabinet and decides he wants it. As Jane prepares to start the story, Cameron moves his chair over the filing cabinet, stands on his chair, and reaches the globe. The adult, who is in the classroom to support the teacher as a one-on-one for Cameron, does nothing. He brings his chair and the globe back to the carpet. He sits in his chair and occasionally tosses the globe up in the air. Still the one-on-one does nothing. Jane, who settles the rest of the class for the story, notices Cameron. She asks him for the globe a couple times before he eventually gives it to her. He wants attention of any kind from the teacher.

The one-on-one continues to do nothing. Cameron remains in his chair but continues to talk about the globe. He gets louder and louder. The one-on-one watches. Despite the other students starting to make noise because of the distraction, Jane quietly issues a warning to Cameron. She finally attempts to start the story, “It looks like collage

[152] Classroom Observation, 03.24.17, p. 2

artwork," she shares, directing students' attention to the unique cover design. Cameron starts moving his chair around on the carpet further distracting the other students. Jane again has to pause, and the one-on-one support does nothing. Jane tells Cameron to go for a walk with the one-on-one. He makes no movement to leave. "That would be most helpful," Jane directs the statement towards the one-on-one, as if imploring her to step-in, so Jane can return to the read aloud. "No," Cameron answers back. Jane calmly offers a choice, "I can call [assistant principal] or you may go for a walk." "Fine, meanie," Cameron calls. He storms out of the classroom; the one-on-one lags behind.

Jane turns her attention back to her other students. She directs students to hold their arms out in front of them. "Thumbs up. Thumbs down." She continues and tells students what to do with their arms and how to breathe, "Cross over. Take a breath. Bend over at your waist. Turn head. Turn to the other side. Reach up to the sky. Up, up. Bring your arms down." The calming breaths and movements seem to be for both her students and for her.[153]

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## The Nature of Pedagogy

Pedagogy may be defined as a science, or a set of techniques for the teaching of children. While techniques or instructional methods are certainly part of pedagogy, van Manen (1991) returned to an older definition of pedagogy and argued that pedagogy is much more than this technical way of conceptualizing pedagogy. Simply put, van Manen defined pedagogy as the "fascination with the growth of the other," (p. 13). van Manen's

[153] Classroom Observation, 03.24.17, pp. 2-3

pedagogy required three essential conditions – love and care, hope and trust, and responsibility. Teachers cannot simply will themselves to embody these conditions, and sometimes they may not be present on particularly trying or frustrating days. However, even if these conditions are not always present, the very nature of pedagogy involves the striving for these three conditions.

**Love and Care**

Teachers' pedagogical love and care for their students is grounded in children's potential for growth. From the first introduction to their students, the potential of a teacher is inextricably tied to her capacity to see potential in her students. Through many subtle moments, teachers observe their young students starting to become increasingly independent and reliant selves. Pedagogical love and care was relevant in Jane's teaching as she expressed adamantly that she was not a teacher because she abstractly loved the idea of children. She did say she loved *her* students. She expressed this pedagogical love for her students when her former students ran up to her during recess, but she mostly expressed this love and care through her unwavering attempts to encourage their growth as readers and writers, even if they seemed resistant like Cameron.

Despite Cameron's attempts to distract or derail and his efforts to prove himself right, Jane unwaveringly attempted to support his literacy development. After a behavior redirection, she took care to note another behavior that supported his reading. She asked for help in part to minimize distractions for her and her other students but also in part to ensure Cameron continues engaging with the content himself. In these moments with Cameron, Jane was not sure what to do – no theoretical knowledge or technique could tell her what to do to support Cameron.

### Hope and Trust

van Manen's (1991) second condition of pedagogy, hope and trust, is less about doing and more about being present for the child. Being present means continuing to recognize students' potential and demonstrating – through words and actions – an unwavering willingness to not give up on students. A teacher's hope and trust are important because of the sense of possibility embodied by the teacher *and* cultivated in students. For Jane, it was not always easy to embody a sense of possibility for Cameron. When he was absent or out of the classroom, both Jane and the teaching assistant noted how the classroom *felt* different.[154] Without a constant battle for and demand on her attention, Jane seemed to relax and to be more present for her other 16 students. However, when Cameron was in class, Jane's attempts demonstrated a commitment to Cameron and his reading and writing. These attempts were small – an explicit verbal noticing of him puzzling through an unfamiliar word and an inviting of a comment during a read aloud.[155] Despite Jane's efforts, her attempts with Cameron often seemed to fall short. He disengaged from work and the classroom community, but like van Manen requires for this condition, Jane continued to strive.

### Responsibility

The third condition for van Manen's reconceptualization of pedagogy is a moral responsibility for students' wellbeing and development. This responsibility places teachers in a position of uneven influence over their students. However, unevenness is not authoritarian in nature but predicated on the teachers' pedagogical love and care for

[154] Classroom Observation, 04.20.17, p. 6
[155] Classroom Observation, 04.18.17, pp. 1, 3

the child. Teachers, thus, act based on responsibility, remaining critically self-reflective of their actions with respect to their students and the students' interests.

At the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year, I listened to Jane explain how she eventually decided to become a teacher. She described a fascination with the "intelligent" decision-making required of teaching and a belief in the importance of public education to larger society.[156] Based on her description, I asked if she felt a sense of responsibility to her students. Her answer surprised me; she explained that she did not connect teaching and responsibility.[157] However, her actions suggested a moral sense of responsibility for her students and their educational experience. Over the course of the year, she tried to protect Matthew's identity as a reader, to reassure Matthew's parents that they supported his growth, and to advocate for additional support for Tia. At the end of the year, Jane showed me student assessments and work. When she got to Cameron's, her tone shifted, and she dishearteningly expressed that she had not been able to support Cameron and encourage his growth as a reader.[158]

## The Nature of Tact

Related to van Manen's (1991) conceptualization of pedagogy is a notion of *tact*. van Manen (1991) described tact as a sharp sense of knowing how to act towards others to preserve a good relationship with them. However, tact is more than a simple preservation of good relations; van Manen explained tact as appropriate actions displayed *instantaneously*. Tact's improvisational nature is essential for teachers who constantly act

[156] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, p. 111
[157] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 1, 10.16.16, pp. 127-128
[158] Classroom Observation, 06.06.17, p. 2

and respond to students in unexpected or challenging situations. Tactful teachers are able to set aside their own actions, feelings, and motivations and seek to understand and interpret the actions, feelings, and motivations of their students. By "putting themselves in someone else's shoes," tact also embodies a moral intuition, or a sense of the right response.

Importantly, *tact* differs from *tactic*. Though visually similar, the origins of tact and tactic are unrelated. *Tactic*'s roots are in early Greek military science – strategies, objectives, and directives. Teachers' tactics may include weekly schedules, lesson objectives and plans, and even methods or techniques. These aspects are important to teaching, but they leave out the *teacher*. Tact, on the other hand, is fully embodied by the teacher. *Tact* is derived from Latin words meaning *touch* and *effect*. The related *tactful* means *fully in touch*. Tactful teachers may be described as thoughtful, perceptive, considerate, or prudent. Jane sought to understand Cameron's background. In seeking to understand, Jane recognized possible reasons for Cameron's reactions to her and to other students in the classroom. Jane also considered her other students and their perceived reactions to the current classroom dynamic, like Matthew's view of reading or like Nicole's return to a behavior chart that she had no longer needed.[159]

According to van Manen (1991), tact is less a form of knowledge and more a way of acting. However, van Manen is not the only one to write about a deep moral sense which guides teachers' intuitive actions. Flyvbjerg's (2001) practical wisdom is similar to van Manen's description of tactful and prudent teachers. In Flyvbjerg's attempt to

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[159] Classroom Observation, 03.24.17, p. 2

describe this multi-layered practical wisdom, he connects practical wisdom to action. Unlike van Manen, Flyvbjerg's conceptualized practical wisdom is another form of knowledge – the knowledge of how to act in in actual moments. This knowledge in-action based on the particulars of the moment requires a combination of knowledge of facts *and* values.

Regardless of whether teachers' intuition of how to teach children is conceptualized as knowledge, teaching involves a value-driven sense of how to draw on multiple sources of knowledge and to act. Jane deliberated over the best way to approach teaching Cameron. No amount of theoretical knowledge or particular technique (or tactic) provided Jane with answers. Often Cameron required an in-the-moment, improvisational response when he made distracting comments or yelled at other students seemingly trying to intimidate them about his reading compared to theirs.

## In the Classroom

In the spring, the stresses of a school year and Cameron's escalating behavior start to take a toll on Jane. She says she feels a noticeable change in the classroom when he misses a day of school.[160] She worries about the impact of Cameron's behavior on her other students and recognizes that impact on particular students. For example, after the read aloud one day, one student, Nicole, skipped back to her seat and added a penny to her behavior chart. When Nicole first asked for a penny a few days earlier, Jane initially fails to realize what Nicole wanted. Jane later said it took a moment for her to recognize that Nicole wanted to return to using her behavior chart even though it had not been seen

[160] Classroom Observation, 04.20.17, p. 6

since the beginning of the school year. With the disruptions in the classroom caused by Cameron, Jane inferred that Nicole must have felt she needed the old comfort of her behavior chart.[161]

Jane also tells me she cannot focus on literacy instruction the way that she wants. She contrasts the number of changes she made in the first half of the year with what she has been able to accomplish in the second half. Cameron's behavior not only takes time away from time spent on literacy instruction, but it also drains Jane of the cognitive energy she can spend on literacy instruction. Finally, Jane expresses frustration how the instructional support from Cameron's one-on-one contradicts her own instructional attempts to build Cameron's spelling and independence intentionally and developmentally.[162]

One spring morning during the literacy block, Cameron sits at his desk, which is removed from the tables where the other students sit. His desk is covered with work materials and somehow, he snuck a dinosaur toy back to his seat despite instructions to put it in his backpack.

Next to Cameron's desk, Jane sits at her small group table. The three students at her table are supposed to be writing about their best friend, but one of the students, Justin, refuses to write. Jane tries to help Justin decide who he wants to write about. She starts by suggesting he could choose a student in the classroom. He refuses. Next, she asks if he has any other friends he would want to write about. He mentions a name but still refuses to write. Jane interrupts her efforts at getting Justin to write about *anyone* to redirect

[161] Classroom Observation, 03.24.17, p. 2
[162] Classroom Observation, 03.21.17, p. 5

Cameron at his seat, even though his one-on-one support sits with him. She turns her attention back to Justin and suggests either his dad or his brother. Justin does not want to write about his brother, and his dad is too big. After a few more suggestions, Justin finally decides to write about a classmate and starts with his illustration. But he still needs encouragement to get started. “It’s hard to make Sophia,” he whines.[163]

While Jane continues to attempt to get Justin to write, Cameron’s one-on-one support convinces him to set the dinosaur toy aside and begin his work. Cameron is learning about words that start with two consonants. However, the one-on-one focuses on vowel sounds, attempting to get him to represent a long vowel sound with a final silent e – something Jane knows will come later in Cameron’s literacy development. Jane overhears, and for the moment, she decides not to say anything.[164] Later, she expresses frustration to me. She advocated to get the extra help for Cameron – both for him and for her other students. The one-on-one support is supposed to prevent Cameron from interrupting Jane’s work with other students, but she still feels she has to step in regularly. Moreover, she feels that the one-on-one, who does not even have a teaching background, is confusing literacy instruction for Cameron by trying to explain spelling patterns he has not learned. Jane exclaims that she finally got students to stop asking her to spell words for them, but the one-on-one does not encourage the same sort of independence from Cameron and spells the words for him.[165]

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[163] Classroom Observation, 03.21.17, p. 4
[164] Classroom Observation, 03.21.17, p. 5
[165] Classroom Observation, 03.21.17, p. 4

As Jane explains her current frustrations, relief floods her face as she knows the following week is only a four-day week and the next week is spring break. She tells me she is sleeping better, now, after finally removing her school email from her personal phone. She had felt she needed to check her email all the time and respond to parents immediately, but this contributed to her sleeplessness.[166]

Jane also reminds herself that good things are happening, too. Riley pulls a book titled *No, David!* out of her individual book bin during her independent work. In her high-pitched, squeaky voice, Riley starts to read as she follows along with her finger. A few short months ago, Riley only knew a few letters and their corresponding sounds, but now she accurately reads an entire book. Her facial expressions match the silliness of the book and her tone matches the repetitive scolding as David, the main character, gets into trouble over and over again.[167] A month later Riley is still reading *No, David!* daily. "It's just so funny," she rapidly sings in her high-pitched voice. She giggles and moves on to her next practice.[168]

On my final day in Jane's classroom, during the last week of school, Jane spreads out her students end-of-year assessments on a table. She talks to me about their assessment scores and whether they would meet the benchmarks. She names the students who would be considered "emergencies" by the first-grade team at the start of the following school year. Jane resisted the all-encompassing use of single assessment scores and assignment of labels based on those scores. It was still the language of school, and I

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[166] Classroom Observation, 03.24.17, p. 8

[167] Classroom Observation, 03.24.17, pp. 5-6

[168] Classroom Observation, 04.25.17, p. 2

saw that in how Jane started talking about students' growth. However, Jane also focuses on students' progress, not whether they simply met a benchmark. She believes that this growth happened through more authentic experiences with text, not through high-frequency flashcard drills. Jane seems both excited at their progress but also relieved that this more situated approach to word recognition worked.

In addition to the assessment of writing, Jane flips through students' free-writing folders and shows me examples of particularly creative pieces while also pointing out the developmental approach to how they spell words. She also tells me that she thinks her students know about books and know enough to state opinions on books. Earlier that morning Jane taught a quick lesson on the difference between fiction and nonfiction by grounding the lesson in encouraging students to pick books over the summer that interest them. The students pore over book order magazines of different children's books. Matthew recognizes books that are also in the library. "It's the Piggie and Gerald books!" exclaims Jamey, who gets out of his seat to show Reid. They tell each other that they can read these books and then call Jane over to show her what they have found. Finally, later that day during our final interview, Jane again expresses pride in her students' growth. She also asks me to recommend books for her to read over the summer and into the next year, always looking for how she can improve.[169]

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[169] Teacher Life History Interview – Part 3, 06.06.17

## Pedagogical Tact

van Manen's (1991, 2016) notions of pedagogy and tact merged in his conceptualization of *pedagogical tact*. Pedagogical tact is way of acting that embodies both a fascination for another's growth and an intuitive, morally-driven sense of how to act in-the-moment, even when one does not know what to do. Pedagogical tact is not a set of concrete behaviors or techniques to learn and apply. Moreover, because pedagogical tact is unlearnable as a set of behaviors, it is also complicated to observe. van Manen (1991) explained, "Pedagogical tact manifests itself primarily as a mindful orientation in our being and acting with children. This is much less a manifestation of certain observable behaviors than a way of actively standing in relationships" (p. 149). Despite the fundamentally unobservable nature of pedagogical tact, van Manen (1991) described some aspects of how pedagogical tact shows itself. These aspects include holding back, being open to the child's experience, attuning to subjectivity, influencing subtly, displaying situational confidence, and possessing a gift for improvisation.

*Holding back* involves not acting (van Manen, 1991). In other words, what a teacher does is important, but what the teacher does not do is equally, sometimes more, important. A simple *holding back* was to not interfere with Riley's book choice; Jane stayed out of the way when Riley read the same book every day for over a month. A more challenging *holding back* was to try to determine when to respond to Cameron and when not to respond. Jane occasionally reminds herself of what else is going on in Cameron's life and how that may influence his experience at school. In doing so, Jane attempts to remain open to Cameron, asking herself first what the school and classroom experience might be like for him.

Remaining open is not always easy. It requires another aspect of how tact may show itself – *attunement to subjectivity*, or treating students as individuals, not objects (van Manen, 1991). Jane took actions to ensure her students were not reduced test scores and associated labels based on performance relative to benchmarks. She focused on what students could do, often demonstrated by their work like free-writing rather than a single assessment. She expressed that she wanted to ensure her students could talk about books and name their favorite books. In the case of Jane and Cameron, Jane could have viewed (and treated) Cameron as a set of behaviors to be managed and a set of literacy skills to be numerically measured and mastered. Instead, Jane tried to remind herself that Cameron was *six*-years-old and had a life outside of school.

Teaching requires constant interaction between teachers and students. Sometimes the consequences of interactions are more overt while others are subtler. According to van Manen (1991) tact and contact are inextricably linked, both etymologically and practically. This contact, or being connected or "in-touch," contributes to another aspect of tact, or *subtle influence*. Jane selected particular picture books around themes likely to be engaging for her students and based on the quality of the story and illustrations. Her students' artistic experimentation was not an accident; they mirrored what Jane noticed in books and what she encouraged them to notice as well. With Cameron, Jane attempted to pair behavioral redirection with acknowledgement of his efforts at reading or his expressed ideas.

Finally, a teacher with pedagogical tact possesses a *situational confidence*, or trust in self, in changing and unpredictable situations. Pedagogical tact often includes a *gift for improvisation* and the ability to respond in the moment by deciding what to do, what to

say, and how to do and say it (van Manen, 1991). Jane was not always confident in how to respond to Cameron. She decided she needed support and asked for another adult's presence in the classroom, but Jane was not sure how to use this other adult. Given the nature of teaching, however, Jane had to respond in some way, with Cameron *and* her other students in mind. She improvised her decision to send Cameron out for a short walk and to subsequently breathe calmly with her other students.

As Jane attempted to remain sensitive and respond to her students as five- and six-year-olds, she also attempted to distinguish between what is good and what is not good for children. This required self-reflection around critical questions related to what was happening and what principles guided what was happening (Flyvbjerg, 2001; van Manen, 1991). Critical self-reflection was not always easy for Jane; she sensed conflict within her own actions. Jane did not always like how she acted (or reacted) in particular situations. Well after the school year ended, she even admitted to avoiding thinking about situations with Cameron well after the school year ended.[170] Jane was not perfect, but she was always willing to try the next instance, day, month, or school year (van Manen, 1991, 2016).

The 2016-2017 school year was another year in which Jane encountered more theoretical knowledge through three more graduate courses and she tried new methods and techniques. By spring of 2017, Jane's experience was less about an alignment or conflict between different knowledge-based claims about early literacy instruction. No amount of theoretical or technical knowledge provided answers of how to support

[170] Conversation, 02.12.18

Cameron when he demanded Jane’s undivided attention. Her experience illustrated that knowledge and techniques were simply not enough. Jane’s actions with Cameron on a Tuesday in March had to be different than the Friday in May. With another year of countless instances with Cameron and her other students, of self-reflection, and at times of co-reflection, Jane forged her growing practical wisdom, a way to deliberate over and draw on knowledge and techniques, including her own, in flexible, intuitive, and in-the-moment ways. Part of this practical wisdom seemed to be *pedagogy of tact* – how to respond in ethical and relational ways to all her students (van Manen, 2016).

# CHAPTER IX
# CODA

In December 2015, Jane shared with me that she recently enrolled part-time in a graduate program in reading education to improve her literacy instructional practice. As I observed and interviewed her over the remainder of the 2015-2016 school year, I noticed Jane beginning to question her instructional practice as she encountered different knowledge-based claims about early literacy – the theoretical and conceptual knowledge from university-based graduate coursework, the school-based professional practice knowledge, and her own practice-based knowledge and growing practical wisdom.

The interactions among different types of knowledge was nothing new. When Jane decided to become a teacher, she began to recognize discord between what she learned in her undergraduate preparation courses and what she observed in local schools. She also noticed differences among the experienced teachers in her student-teaching experience and differences between herself and those more experienced teachers as she started her own practice. However, the return to university coursework – this time as a part-time graduate student in her second year of teaching – seemed to heighten the potential for disagreement across these knowledge-based claims. The potential and actual conflict required Jane to negotiate the muddled, even-tension filled, waters of early literacy instruction where divergent claims about how to approach teaching, values, and power abound. So, how can we think about the phenomenon of how a teacher decides to teach in the context of divergent, likely competing, knowledge-based claims about early literacy instruction? Or, perhaps, because that phenomenon is inextricably context-bound, how can we think about Jane and her experience?

Was Jane a cocky, young teacher? Only a couple years removed from college, Jane certainly was young. She had far fewer years of experience compared to the other kindergarten teachers at her school. However, she appeared extremely aware of this inexperience, often remaining quiet during grade-level team meetings and seeking out teachers to ask questions but taking care to hide her insecurity and appear competent.

Despite her acute awareness of her early career status, Jane already possessed larger philosophical ideas about the purpose of education from her own educational experiences and undergraduate coursework. She wanted to encourage curious children who learned for authentic reasons, not robots who sat quietly in chairs all day. As a student teacher and first-year teacher, Jane formed judgments about other teachers' instruction. She deemed some teachers' techniques, like round-robin oral reading and class-wide spelling lists, as outdated. As a student teacher, she still sought collaboration as she talked through trying different practices with her mentor teacher. Jane admired the instructional approach of another teacher who accomplished "beautiful things" with her young students, even turning them into poets.

Even before finishing her first year of teaching, Jane planned to pursue a Master's degree. The Master's degree represented a way to prove to her peers outside of education that she is still "moving up" and not "*just* a teacher."[171] However, pursuing a Master's degree was not about her cockiness associated with academic status. Jane considered whether she should simply audit classes for the knowledge so that she could improve her practice.

[171] Teacher Life-History Interview, 10.16.16, p. 121

As Jane started taking graduate courses, she questioned particular instructional techniques, including those suggested by the other kindergarten teachers. She expressed concern that the flashcard drill was time-consuming and did not appear to work for some of her students. However, before voicing those questions to others, Jane tried out the techniques (e.g., high-frequency flashcards) recommended by other kindergarten teachers and her assistant principal. Only after further reflection on her attempt with high-frequency flashcards did Jane change her instructional approach.

Jane's shift away from high-frequency flashcards was one of a few other substantive changes in her classroom that occurred after beginning to take graduate courses, changes like the use of free-writing and read alouds. During a class on word knowledge development, Jane became interested in trying a new assessment in her classroom. She decided to try to get the other kindergarten teachers to agree to the assessment change. Jane's first attempt at instigating a grade-level change occurred more than year after she started teaching at the school. At first the other kindergarten teachers appeared ready to make the assessment change; however, during a meeting to examine the new assessment materials, the other teachers seemingly changed their minds. Jane was both surprised by the other teachers' change of mind and frustrated with their apparent unwillingness to try something different.

Jane waited a couple months to share ideas again after the failed attempt to change assessments. This time the other kindergarten teachers invited Jane to share how she approached instruction in her classroom, and Jane jumped at the chance to talk about what she considered to be more developmental practices in her classroom, namely free-writing and play-based learning. Even though the other kindergarten teachers invited Jane

to share, she remained cautious in how she approached sharing with the other, more experienced teachers. While Jane shared her ideas about free-writing and play-based learning, she admitted she needs to learn more about the specifics of play-based learning. She also tried to speak from her own experience rather than appearing like she was telling the other teachers what to do.

Around the same time Jane shared her ideas about developmental practice with the kindergarten teachers, Jane also took on the school-leadership team regarding the intervention for one of her students, Tia. When Jane disagreed with the school-leadership team members' decision, Jane went to the assistant principal and implored her to think like a classroom teacher. However, Jane did not simply disregard the members of the school leadership team. She first sought to understand their reasoning but then decided to question their refusal to provide Tia intervention. Jane, as Tia's classroom teacher, felt she knew Tia and her needs better than anyone else at the school.

Like Jane was cautious with her more experienced kindergarten teachers, she was also careful with her own thinking. Jane acted not from youth or cockiness but an expressed desire to question her practice in a value-driven way, and she continued to change – not stagnate or simply pull out a file. Explaining how one particular graduate course changed her instructional practice, she cautioned that to portray that course as the end-all-be-all solution would be "rude and disrespectful of experience… And years of experience matter. In five years, I might find what I'm doing now [out-of-practice]. Like, 'Oh, I thought that was great. *Now* I know this."[172]

[172] Teacher Interview, 01.28.17, p. 8

So, if Jane was not a cocky, young teacher, was she a victim? She turned to the other more experienced kindergarten teachers for advice and instructional techniques, but her questions were often left unanswered or unresolved. In the fall of her second-year teaching – her first at this school – Jane received no support from the other kindergarten teachers during a meeting where she shared how one of her students' independent reading surpassed her other students. Later that year Jane also asked for a seemingly sensible change in the intervention schedule to accommodate a student in need, but she ended up watching a debate about rules while another teacher took the only open intervention spot for one of her own students, not Jane's. Jane admitted to feeling insecure in these meetings.

Jane continued to be discursively shut down during meetings. In a meeting to examine a new assessment that Jane helped initiate, other teachers prevented the discussion of the assessment from the start and derailed the consideration of the new assessment in favor of continuing what they were already doing. As meetings were mainly reserved for discussion of student assessment performance, other ideas that Jane wanted to integrate into her own classroom practice, like situated approaches to word recognition instruction and read alouds, were simply not discussed. The lack of meaningful content- and instruction-related discussion seemingly left Jane alone in her classroom as she tried to figure out other ways to approach early literacy instruction. After two years of observing and talking with Jane, it became challenging at times to envision continued growth towards becoming an expert teacher. Perhaps Jane would understandably succumb to the crushing weight of structural limitations and lack of

support and feel hopeless enough to leave the profession. Many statistics suggest Jane's leaving is not unexpected (Sutcher et al., 2016).

However, by portraying Jane simply as a victim, she becomes a piece in a post-modern world. Her actions are not of her own free will but rather in response to external forces, only acting under the pretense of deliberation and choice. Barone (2007b) suggests that understanding teachers and their instruction is not as simple as a crushing postmodern sense of no agency and a heroic defeat of structural limitations. For him, a sort of affirmative postmodernism accounts for the influence of the challenges of the larger society like policy initiatives, programmatic or curriculum mandates, and other stakeholders. Affirmative postmodernism also allows for the capacity of teachers to recognize those limiting challenges and consider other possibilities for their teaching and their students.

Jane seemingly overcame being shut down by her fellow, more experienced kindergarten teachers. In the face of being powerless, Jane considered what was "right" for her young students and used her answer to that value-driven question to change instructional practice in her own classroom. Instead of more fragmented and isolated activities aimed at reaching the narrower benchmarks of high-frequency words and reading levels, she attempted to situate instruction in texts, offered opportunities for free-writing, and shared quality literature in the form of reading aloud picture books. She broke through her perceived static or meaningless practice and carved out some sense of autonomy in her classroom – seemingly on her own but buoyed by her graduate coursework and her own students. So, was Jane a teacher-hero to which other teachers should aspire?

Perhaps, at times, Jane even acted as a protector, acting with the utmost tact, for her students. When members on the leadership team refused Tia additional help, Jane fought for it. When Matthew became labeled a "struggling" reader or an "emergency" by the kindergarten teachers and thus defined by that label, his parents worried, even wondering what they did wrong. Jane redefined growth for Matthew and his parents by celebrating Matthew's growth through descriptions of what Matthew *could* do as a reader and writer, not how far he was performing below benchmarks. Over the course of the fall and winter, Matthew chose to write with more independence and increasingly better phonetic representations of words, which was also reflected in the growing number of letters and sounds he recognized.

However, Jane's portrayal as a teacher-hero implies Jane was perfect in some way. It suggests she overcame any challenge or limitation and successfully taught all her students to read and write and view themselves as readers and writers. Her students grew as readers and writers as illustrated by what they could read independently, by how Riley could not wait to read the same silly book once a day for a month straight, and by how Kevin and Jamey's expressed excitement to find books in a magazine that they not only recognized and loved but could read. However, Jane continued to worry about particular students and their growth. She worried about Matthew's continued success and Cameron's apparent stagnation. Furthermore, if Jane could be a teacher-hero, then more teachers should act like heroes, but it is unreasonable to expect every teacher to perform a possibly Herculean feat of recognizing the larger structural limitations, breaking through those limitations, and forging their own practical wisdom with little to no support.

Also, by making Jane a teacher-hero, the other teachers could be made into non-heroes, or even bullies or villains – something that they are not. They shared materials with each other, checked and answered emails on Saturdays, and worked tirelessly, often under changing expectations. Most importantly, Jane sought their advice. To them, maybe change represented a questioning of their ability to teach and a threat to their turf, which contributed to instances of conflict or stagnation. Jane's discussion of other instructional approaches with the more experienced kindergarten teachers took time, but Jane eventually shared her ideas. Without the structural limitations of time or procedures focused on narrow outcomes, perhaps the teachers would consider their instructional practice differently.

So, if she was not a cocky, young teacher, a victim, or a teacher-hero, then who is Jane as a teacher? To answer this question, I first return to my original research question – How does Jane negotiate the different knowledge-based claims about early literacy instruction? Now, after two and a half years with Jane, my original question needs to be broadened. The answer to who Jane is as a teacher is embedded in larger, but related, question – What does it mean to be a good teacher? Good teachers are described in many different ways. They know a lot about their content, and they know how to teach their content. They adapt their content to the needs of different students with whom they build positive relationships. However, good teachers are more than just a collection of knowledge, methods, techniques, and relationships (van Manen, 1991, 2016).

Good teachers *are* knowledgeable and skillful, but they are *also* thoughtful, reflective, and even visionary (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2011). Even when they are unsure of how to approach teaching, they thoughtfully seek to become aware of their

students as children and reflect on the impact of their teaching on students (van Manen, 1991, 2016). They possess an ever-growing professional judgment, or practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This practical wisdom, as implied by its name, is not simply more knowledge or more techniques. It is an intuitive, value-driven, enacted vision that guides a teacher's *meaningful* and *cohesive* approach to instruction for his or her *particular* students.

In an educational age of "evidence-based" practices, perhaps it seems odd to describe good teachers as wise or visionary and their practice as intuitive or value-driven (Gambrell et al., 2011). However, this description of good teachers harkens back to an older definition of pedagogy and view of what it means to be a teacher. This historical pedagogy has been contemporized by van Manen (2016), who explains that pedagogy relates to the deeply human, relational, and ethical nature of teaching, not just the narrower science or techniques aimed at producing programs or learning outcomes.

For Jane and her pedagogy, her students were not numbers of high frequency words identified or letters corresponding to reading levels that must be increased by any means necessary to meet a benchmark. They were not the labels of *reader*, *struggling*, or *emergency* assigned to them based on those numbers and letters. Her students were actual five- and six-year-old *children* who were already conceptualizing what reading and writing is and who they were as readers and writers. Even more particularly, her students were Matthew, who moved in a rough-and-tumble way around the classroom, who perched on his knees to get a better view of the book read aloud by Jane, and who made steady progress throughout the school year. Labeled an emergency by the kindergarten teachers, Jane worried about the fragility of Matthew's identity as a reader and the

concern expressed by parents who wondered what they did wrong. Jane's students were Tia, who joined her class in November knowing two letter names, who spoke little English, and who engaged with her peers more and more as the year progressed. The members of the school leadership team denied Tia additional literacy support because her status as an English Language Learner and the limited amount of space in intervention groups. Citing her role as Tia's classroom teacher, Jane advocated for additional literacy support for Tia.

However, being a good teacher is not as straightforward as first and foremost being sensitive and responsive to actual children and then teaching content better. Jane became a teacher because she was fascinated by the methods and techniques of teaching, not just because she loved children.[173] For her, there were reasons behind teaching – both in how children develop and how teachers best support that development. Perhaps, her fascination with the methods and techniques of literacy instruction reflect her background in journalism, which may also be tied to her incorporation of free-writing in her classroom. As a teacher, Jane sensitively considered her students as five-and six-year-old children *and* because she sought specific, meaningful literacy content-related growth for them as readers and writers. Therefore, just as a collection of knowledge, methods, and techniques is not enough to make a good teacher; recognition of the relational aspects of teaching is not enough either. Being sensitive towards and building relationships with students cannot teach them to read and write, especially if a student is experiencing difficulty learning to read and write for some reason.

[173] Teacher Life History Interview, 10.16.16, p. 111

Jane's sensitivity to her students contributed to her different approach to literacy in her classroom. This sensitivity became so wrapped up in Jane's approach to literacy content that it is impossible to separate them completely. She worried about the impact of high-frequency word flashcards on her students' conceptualizations of reading and identities as readers. She also expressed doubts regarding the flashcard approach's effectiveness supporting students' word recognition. The changes Jane made in her classroom also stemmed from new and literacy content-specific theoretical knowledge, methods, and techniques from her graduate coursework. She started to situate word recognition instruction in connected text, "harvested" words from these texts for additional study, and drew attention to the graphophonetic cues in words. After trying out this new situated approach, she deemed it more developmental and effective. This new conceptual understanding of literacy development and new methodological approach enabled her to see her students, especially as readers and writers, differently. For example, she saw their earliest attempts at writing, even if it was random letters, as *writing* to convey meaning, not as a deficit needing to be fixed. Like her earlier journalism background, Jane viewed writing as a creative, iterative process and wanted her students to view writing's possibilities as well.

Importantly, for Jane, the new theoretical knowledge, the new and associated techniques, and her attunement to her students as five- and six-year-old children was especially reinforcing and vision-creating because of the nature of her graduate program. Rather than a set of somewhat related or even unrelated theories, a cohesive theoretical core formed the foundation for Jane's graduate program. The theoretical knowledge was based on observations of children's reading and writing in more natural settings, and thus

developmental in nature. This commitment to acknowledge children's development undergirded the methods and techniques, that is, methods and techniques selected by teachers should address the developmental *strengths* of students and support their continued growth.

Moreover, within Jane's graduate program, teaching was viewed as a conservatory art; there is no universal or perfect technique or method that could meet the strengths and needs of individual students. Teaching as a conservatory art entails practicum experiences, reflective engagement, and feedback within a community of professionals, not in isolation. However, even in a program that portrayed teaching as a conservatory art, Jane still needed to develop her instructional practice through extended time with her actual students. Through actual practice and thoughtful reflection, Jane constructed a more nuanced and ever-evolving, practical wisdom – a thoughtful, value-driven deliberation drawing on multiple sources of knowledge to consider what is right for students and their instruction (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In some ways this growing practical wisdom served as a value-driven "compass" or vision she relied on to make decisions regarding her instructional approach for her young students. Enacting her new knowledge, methods, and techniques was challenging for Jane, especially considering the context of the grade-level team where she often did not have a space to talk through her ideas with her fellow kindergarten teachers.

If what it means to be a good teacher involves a professional judgment or practical wisdom, perhaps enabling good teachers involves fostering the apparent aspects of practical wisdom – sensitive relationships with students, knowledge of content, and both general and content-specific methods and techniques. These apparent aspects lay out

an ostensibly logical path for what it means to be a teacher and thus how to prepare a good preservice teacher or to develop a good in-service teacher. Show teachers how to build positive, caring relationships with their students. Give teachers proven, evidenced-based knowledge and associated methods and techniques. Provide controlled opportunities for practice. Create tools to "operationalize" these aspects and to evaluate teachers based on observable methods and techniques can be created to improve teaching and student outcomes. But, at what cost?

The danger in this logical, or rational, approach to improve teaching is that teaching appears easier than it really is and that instruction seems simpler than it actually is. In fact, by attempting to distill practical wisdom into its apparent aspects, those aspects cannot convey practical wisdom anymore. A teacher's practical wisdom is *holistic*; it cannot be boiled down or reduced to its component parts. In attempting to reduce a practical wisdom into sensitive relationships with students, knowledge of content, and both general and content-specific methods and techniques, a teacher becomes turned into a technician who simply seeks the best means, come what may, to reach established outcomes. Simplification will not work because it is an attempt to rationalize something that is not rational. A practical wisdom is *value*-rational, that is a practitioner's thoughtful deliberation while drawing on multiple sources of knowledge, including their own, not just to reach outcomes but also to answer value-driven questions about what is right for students (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Reducing practical wisdom into components, like sensitive relationships with students, knowledge of content, and both general and content-specific methods and techniques, fails to account for the value-driven nuance of practical wisdom *and* the

complexity of content instruction. Oversimplification may fragment what should be the integrated coordination of aspects of literacy and language development that builds toward reading and writing as it is situated in meaning. Aspects of early literacy – phonological awareness, phonics, concept of word, writing – all come together to enable students' grasping of the alphabetic principle, or the monumental understanding that words are made up of sounds systematically represented by letters. Even the aspects of early literacy that allow children to "crack the code" can be situated within and paired with the end goal of reading – meaning-making and the inherent social nature of reading and writing. Children learn they can read books to learn and to enjoy, write to communicate with others and remember, and use reading and writing to interact and share ideas with their peers who are also members of a literate community. The complexity of teaching is illustrated by this larger value-driven view of literacy instruction along with the intuitive, thoughtful, and in-the-moment, contextualized responsiveness of teachers to their students as students learn to read and write.

The overly simplified or rational depictions of what it means to be a teacher sanitize teaching of its messiness. Specifically, the messiness of literacy instruction involves understanding literacy development, the content of children's books, and the various methods for teaching all of the aspects of literacy, including alphabetic knowledge, phonics, concept of word, phonological awareness, comprehension, vocabulary, and writing. Moreover, that messiness interacts with the messiness of human beings – students, teachers, administrators, parents – engaged in these literacy-related activities. It is this messiness that contributes to Jane's passion and excitement for teaching.

In contrast, teachers may also be dehumanized by procedures established in the service of narrow numerical outcomes and further dehumanized by other structures intended to measure and ensure their attainment. The high rates of teacher attrition make sense given the pressure on a new teacher to get it "right" straight-away, rather than embracing a messier and longer view of a teaching career. Just as Jane recognized the humanity in her students and changed her approach to literacy instruction, she also recognized her own humanity. Jane's recognition of her own humanity as a teacher was twofold – being gentle on herself as she tried to improve her practice and recognizing that her practice would continue to grow with more experience. With more experience, Jane saw more students develop as readers and writers and considered how to respond in unique and unexpected situations.

At times over the course of two years, it may have seemed like Jane "learned" more knowledge or better methods and techniques, but Jane rejected the word "learn" as depicting her progression as a teacher as too "graceful."[174] Her attempts and daily practice reflected an entanglement of her knowledge, methods, techniques, and reflective, thoughtful attunement to children's needs. She sorted through the entanglement and even recognized the normative, technical, and political aspects of the Oakes (1992) framework in early literacy instruction. Jane questioned the accepted practices and associated techniques. She resisted labeling her students describing their performance relative to benchmarks rather than the five- and six-year-old children they are.

[174] Conversation, 02.12.18

However, I would add that Jane also drew on a moral aspect, not just normative, technical, and political ones. In doing so, Jane forged her practical wisdom, which served as a sort of guide through the muddled, even tension-filled, waters of early literacy instruction. Jane seemed less likely to become lost in ever-changing curricular, programmatic, assessment impositions from the grade-level team, school, division or state (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Gambrell et al., 2011). Moreover, even though she did not use the specific term, Jane expressed that her practical wisdom would continue to grow and evolve through actual practice and reflection over the course of her career.

In my dissertation, I do not set out to prescribe a set of recommendations of how to negotiate different knowledge-based claims about early literacy instruction or how to make that negotiation easier. I do not even offer a set of recommendations of how to build thoughtful, reflective teachers. My dissertation is also not a description to be dissected for observable behaviors displayed by one teacher to be encouraged in, or even demanded of, other teachers. Context matters; it cannot be assumed that the negotiation of different knowledge-based claims around literacy instruction will happen in a particular way for all teachers.

The experiences that Jane did have shaped her narrative. If any of those experiences or contexts had been different, her narrative likely would have been different. Perhaps her larger philosophical approach to fostering curiosity through authentic learning experiences would have been different. On another grade-level team or at another school, Jane may have found someone to discuss the different knowledge-based claims around early literacy. Through that discussion, Jane may have negotiated alignments and conflicts across her new theoretical knowledge and school- and division-

based technical knowledge and practical wisdom differently, perhaps faster or with less strife. Her own practical wisdom may have grown faster or with less conflict if she had someone else's practical wisdom on which to draw. If Jane had enrolled in another graduate program, the theoretical knowledge she encountered may have been less aligned with her expressed notions about the importance of recognizing students' development and creating authentic learning experiences. Or, if a different program had been more aligned with the technical, outcome-driven pressures to meet particular benchmarks such as Jane encountered at her school, perhaps she would have quit. As it was, when it comes to Jane's consideration of *how do I "do" literacy the way I think literacy should be done*, Jane was flying solo.

Jane and her narrative are at the heart of my dissertation, but I am in it, too. I am part of it because as the researcher, I co-constructed the phenomenon with Jane. This co-construction occurred during observations of how Jane acted and what I noted. It occurred during interviews by the prompts I chose to ask and Jane's responses. My presence was also part of the phenomenon. I spent two years in Jane's classroom observing and talking with her about her teaching. The nature of the data collection and analysis prompted Jane to reflect with someone, which she may not have done if not for her participation in my dissertation. Sometimes I sensed I became sort of a bridge between two of Jane's contexts. As a graduate student, I understood what it was like to take courses, but by being in her classroom, I also saw what it was like to approach instruction in her classroom, grade-level, school, and division contexts. Through my engagement with and my depiction of Jane's experience, I recognized how Jane's narrative as a teacher parallels and dovetails with my own as researcher. As I sought to

answer research questions about Jane's experience, one of my own emerged. If teaching is a uniquely human endeavor, shouldn't how we study teachers be just as human?

When I consider answers to the question of how to study teachers, I recall an interview with Jane in November 2016. In this one interview, Jane attempted to explain the discussions occurring within her grade-level team around the school-wide literacy improvement initiative, the knowledge she encounters in her graduate coursework, and the changes to her instruction occurring in her classroom. As I listened to Jane's explanations, which came in starts and stops punctuated by expressions of uncertainty, I also wondered what my response should be in-the-moment of the interview and how my approach to my dissertation could convey what Jane depicted in this interview – the complexity of instruction and the entanglement of teaching and human contexts.

After further consideration of the November 2016 interview with Jane, I think about how when I started graduate school, I was advised to choose between a focus on the socio-emotional interactive nature of teaching and the content of instruction. This advice and feedback made sense given the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the research on which I had the opportunity to work. Some researchers post-positively assume these things can be separated and researched in controlled ways. Other interpretive, critical, or phronetic researchers assume that research is context-bound and knowledge is co-constructed. As a potential researcher, the choice between a focus on the social-emotional side of teaching or a focus on content made sense as a choice could narrow my potential research direction.

However, practically, as a teacher, who had barely left the classroom, I was confused because the socio-emotional side of teaching and content were so intertwined in

my teaching experience. I wanted to build relationships with my students because they deserved a teacher who saw their worth and a teacher they could trust to teach them to read. My growing knowledge of literacy development and instruction enabled me to build that relationship. For me, my sensitivity to my students as *children* evolved simultaneously with my confidence and competence with literacy content knowledge. One did not come separately from the other or come before the other.

Instead of a prescription of recommendations or a description to be dissected, I consider my dissertation a narrative of what it means to be a teacher. I hope Jane's story of negotiation and growth in her practical wisdom starts a larger value-driven consideration and a continued conversation, which starts with me. As I conclude this dissertation, I find myself asking questions about my own literacy instruction and my own role with preservice teachers. How am I approaching content and thinking about students as children learning what it means to read and write and see themselves as readers and writers? What does it look like to support preservice teachers in approaching literacy content and thinking about students? How do I support preservice teachers' growth in knowledge and methods, but what implicit messages am I sending about strictly following a method or technique when teaching calls for thoughtful reflection and flexible responsiveness? How do I help preservice teachers feel successful as they start to become teachers but also empower them to take a longer view of a teaching career?

In presenting Jane's experience in narrative form as richly as I could, I hope multiple audiences who directly support teachers can consider Jane's experience and their own role in such a narrative. Flyvbjerg's questions may guide this consideration. Where are we going? Who gains, who loses, by which mechanisms of power? Is it desirable?

What should be done? In considering Jane’s experiences, perhaps similar questions to mine will arise, such as: How do I frame what it means to become an expert teacher? What does it take to develop and/or support a thoughtful teacher? When does thoughtfulness start to develop? How am I currently contributing to the development of thoughtful pre-service or in-service teachers? What else can I be doing? How else can I examine or understand what it means to be a teacher?

Jane’s experience provides an interesting and insightful look into the phenomenon of negotiating different knowledge-based claims. Future researchers could examine how this phenomenon takes shape for other teachers and in varied contexts (e.g., state, division, school, grade-level, amount of experience, enrollment in graduate program). For example, a cross-comparative case study approach may involve collecting shorter narratives from multiple teachers across contexts. These narratives could focus on particular instances or events that the teachers and researchers identify as formative in their instructional approach.

I hope other audiences, even individuals who may not have direct contact with teachers practicing (or about to practice) in classrooms, may also consider their roles. Academic and political – be it federal, state-wide, division-wide, or even school-wide – roles in education tend to stay at a more abstract level (van Manen, 2016). This abstractness of academics and policy is understandable; it is the nature of policy or initiatives. However, teachers are the ones who enact the more abstract theoretical knowledge and policies or initiatives in intensely human ways – with real children in their classrooms who were never concretely in the minds of others.

In the end, Jane's narrative offers another way to approach answering the question – What does it mean to be a good teacher? Being a good teacher is not a set of theories or rules to be "found" by any scientific means necessary. Like Flyvbjerg (2001) warned, the costs of that approach are great. Both children and teachers become dehumanized; students become their numerical scores, and their associated labels of *reader*, *struggling*, or even *emergency* become reified. This is not to say that theory, methods, or techniques are not important or do not play a role in teaching. When Jane encountered new theory and methods, she unlocked part of the "magic" of reading for herself and for her students. Combined with a thoughtful, value-driven deliberation about her instruction and a longer view of her career as a teacher, Jane asked herself where she was going with her instruction, whether it was desirable, who gained and lost, and how she should take further action. In constantly asking herself versions of these questions, she insisted on change for her students. I do not have all the answers to Flyvbjerg's final question – What should be done? However, I hope Jane's narrative encourages others to continue to deliberate on their own partial, ever-evolving answers.

# CHAPTER X
# METHDOLOGICAL APPENDIX

## Methodology and a Rationale for a Phronetic, Post-Phenomenological, and Narrative Qualitative Approach

Before I describe my post-intentional phenomenological research methodology, it is important to distinguish *methodology* from *methods*. *Methodology* is a broader concept that includes *methods* but also consists of the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions as well as the purpose of the research study, definition of research problem, logic behind the research question, types of data collected, and reasons for particular methods of data collection and analysis. *Methods* are the specific techniques for data collection and analysis. In the sections to come, I first describe my chosen research *methodology* – a phronetic one. Then, I describe my specific *methods* drawn from post-intentional phenomenology. Lastly, I consider issues related to validity, which I considered related to phronetic methodology, post-intentional methods, and narrative presentation.

### Phronetic Approach

Understanding and explaining the phenomenon of what it is like to negotiate the muddled, even tension-filled, waters of early literacy instruction requires a practice-based methodological approach. The negotiation of those waters becomes inextricably connected to practice, deeply personal for teachers, and context dependent. Teachers' negotiations and approaches to instruction are also rooted in a value-driven sense of "what is right." It requires an approach to knowledge that does not seek to generate context-independent knowledge or technical knowledge. Therefore, rather than use an

approach designed to test or generate theory, I chose a phronetic methodological approach (Flyvbjerg, 2001) that focuses on practice and accounts for individual cases, context, and values.

Individual cases – and their associated minutiae and practices – are "at the heart of phronetic research" (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Close examination of individual cases gives phenomena "immediate meaning." The close examination of individual cases is also situated within a larger context. Understanding and explaining individual cases must include consideration of context as phenomena is context dependent. In other words, phronetic researchers seek information about individuals' actions but also the relevant structural factors. Researchers attempt to explain the relation between individual actions and structures, that is how structures influence individuals' actions, how actions are constructed, and consequences of actions. Phronetic research's consideration of context also allows phenomena to be appreciated for their larger significance.

There are two ways to do research – one way decreases ambiguity and the other way increases ambiguity. Through its accounting for values in a society, a phronetic approach can raise the ambiguity and leave the researcher and reader with an unsettling feeling and a sense that another way, or another world, is possible. It acts not simply as a "mirror for society" but as its "nose, ears, and eyes," thus providing social commentary and suggesting a direction for social action. The following three questions summarize a phronetic approach's focus on values:

(1) Where are we going?

(2) Is this desirable?

(3) What should be done?

Phronetic research also elevates consideration of power as a key part of analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Consideration of power adds a fourth question to a phronetic approach: Who gains and who loses; by which mechanisms of power? A set of sub-questions related to the third phronetic question and fourth power-related question include: What possibilities are available to change existing power relations? And is it desirable to do so? Of what kinds of power relations are those asking these questions themselves a part?

## Research Strategy: Phenomenology and Narrative Construction

This study was the study of a phenomenon, or what is was like for Jane to negotiate the ambiguous, even contested, waters of early literacy instruction. In phenomenological studies, Vagle and Hofsess (2016) suggested that experimentation with form is an important consideration when deciding how to present the results. Because this study was bounded by the case of Jane and her experience, I decided to present the results in narrative form.

**Phenomenology as a philosophy.** To understand how I engaged in the study of this phenomenon, it is important to understand what a "phenomenon" means. Phenomena were first understood as philosophical concept. Therefore, exploring phenomenology's philosophical origins is essential to explaining why it's appropriate to frame my dissertation study.

At its core, phenomenology is the study of humans' lived experiences in the form of intentional relationships and the phenomena present in those relationships (Deleuze & Guitarri, 1994; Vagle, 2014). Humans are meaningfully connected with other worldly objects, or all other animate and inanimate things and ideas. These other objects may

include humans (e.g., teachers, children, family members), places (e.g., home, school, community), things (e.g., books, materials, sentimental artifacts), or even concepts or ideas (e.g., assumption about child development, approach to reading instruction). Therefore, the word object captures humans, places, things, concepts, and ideas. The intentional relationships are formed between humans and these other aspects of the world. It is in these relationships that phenomena, or whatever appears to or for the humans in the experience, are manifested (Vagle, 2014).

There have been several variations of phenomenology over time. In its earliest variation during the early 1900s, Husserlian phenomenology suggested the study of an intentional relationship from a human towards an object (van Manen, 2014). The relationship is one-way and exists as the human directs consciousness of the object (van Manen, 2014). Later, in the later 1920s, Heideggerian phenomenology moved away from consciousness, or knowing, of an object and suggests questioning of what it is to be in the world in various intentional relationships (van Manen, 2014). The human does not direct this relationship to objects but rather interacts reciprocally with objects; the relationship goes two-ways (van Manen, 2014). Building upon these earlier versions of phenomenology, Vagle (2009, 2014) proposed a post-intentional phenomenology, which extends earlier phenomenology and accounts for additional complexity by considering multiplicities in *who* and *what* might be related to the intentional relationships and manifestations of phenomenon. Post-intentional phenomenology also emphasizes the fluid and fleeting nature of relationships and thus phenomena (Deleuze & Guitarri, 1994; Vagle, 2014). Moreover, unlike earlier branches of phenomenology, post-intentional phenomenology also engages political philosophy, which allows the consideration of

larger contexts and their implications of power in which a teacher's lived experience is intertwined (Vagle, 2014).

Phenomenology as a philosophy evolved into a means for social science research, which embodies similar philosophical assumptions described above. However, phenomenological researchers apply the philosophy differently. That is, phenomenological researchers may engage many different types of methodological approaches.

To understand the phenomenological experience and answer the four phronetic questions, a phronetic researcher emphasizes "little things." For example, a focus on the seemingly mundane, day-to-day experiences of a teacher becomes an opportunity for the close examination of a teacher's development. Answers about teacher development may be found in the particular details and rich description. This requires the researcher to ask little questions, focus on description, and employ patience and knowledge of details, and depend on gathering of source material. The researcher also prioritizes examination of practice before discourse. At the start of the study, phronetic researchers describe observed practices as events. Later these events are connected with other data and explanations of the phenomenon.

Finally, phronetic researchers do not claim to offer complete answers to the four questions at the heart of phronetic research. Instead, they seek to develop partial answers that contribute to an ongoing dialogue. For this study, I seek to contribute to the social deliberation and commentary around the challenges teachers may face as they approach early literacy instruction, the decisions teachers make about what is "right" for their students, and how others support teachers in this endeavor.

**Narrative construction.** To approach a closer examination and a deeper understanding of Jane's experience, I drew on aspects of narrative construction. At the simplest level, narrative construction presented a commonsensical way to include thick, rich description about Jane, her ever-present contexts, and her experience of instances that happened in those contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through narrative construction, theory was used *in-service* of making sense of an actual, contextualized experience. In other words, Jane's experience guided the emic presenting of her cohesive narrative paired with interpretation rather than an etic fitting excerpts of data into an existing theoretical or conceptual framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Finally, the narrative form may carry profound implications for educational research, education, and the professional status of educators. Through narrative's accessibility, compelling-ness, and moral persuasiveness, educational researchers can shape the discourse around education by taking part in the story-telling often left to non-educator journalists (Barone, 1992).

## Post-Intentional Phenomenology

A phronetic methodological approach is intentionally vague regarding specific methods. Flyvbjerg, who outlines a phronetic methodology, explains that he offers guidelines rather than imperatives, and promotes a related case study methodology. He stresses the importance of the end result – a consideration of practice and a public deliberation of that practice – over the specific methods. Therefore, to guide the specifics of my own data collection and analysis, I turned to post-intentional phenomenology. It is important to note that post-intentional phenomenology can also be considered a methodology, not just a source of specific methods or techniques. Post-intentional

phenomenological methodology is similar to phronetic methodology in that phenomena are co-constructed within particular contexts. Vagle (2014) described these co-constructions as "manifestations," or instances where the phenomenon becomes better understood. Moreover, post-intentional phenomenology can suggest a direction for social action or be "put to use" alongside other theories to "[do] work on specific political and societal matters" (Vagle, 2014, p. 114). Despite the similarities, I chose phronetic methodology to guide my broader methodological approach to this study rather than the post-intentional methodology because of phronetic methodology's greater emphasis on practice, in this case the practice of literacy instruction, and the clarity of its four value-driven questions. However, because phronetic and post-intentional methodologies are similar, I decided to use Vagle's specific post-intentional phenomenological methods. His five general steps of post-intentional phenomenology include an identification of a phenomenon, a clear and flexible process for data collection, a post-reflexion plan, a systematic – but responsive – reading and writing through the data, and a crafting of a text that captures tentative manifestations of the phenomenon. These methods provided a more concrete starting point for this study. I describe these methods in greater detail below.

**Research Questions: Identification of a Phenomenon**

I first met Jane in the fall of the 2015-2016 school year. When we met, Jane was in her second year of teaching; however, she had just moved to a school in a different school division. I was a graduate research assistant on a research study examining how kindergarten teachers use data to inform their literacy instruction. That fall, through the research study, I initially got to know Jane and her approach to early literacy instruction

during three classroom observations, two grade-level team meetings, an interview with Jane, and an interview with her principal. At first nothing in particular stood out to me other than data related to the larger research study on teachers' use of data. However, later that winter, I sensed that Jane was starting to grapple with her growth as a teacher.

Some have offered models of teacher growth or progression (e.g., Alexander & Fives, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Snow et al., 2008). Many of those models depict teacher progression from some variation of novice to expert. However, this study is not about fitting Jane into one of those existing models or proposing another model of progression. It is about closely examining her experience and sharing her narrative.

Jane's position as a kindergarten teacher made the examination of her experience in this study especially interesting. Expanding access to high-quality preschool is a timely issue in education and evident in Jane's classroom. Jane's students began kindergarten with a range of early education experiences. This range of early experiences was reflected, at least in part, in her students' varying developmental and academic needs. The range of students' needs further complicated Jane's approach to literacy instruction. Jane faced increasing pressures to ensure students performed relative to narrow assessment benchmarks. Tensions arose when Jane considered how she could use developmentally-appropriate instructional methods but sensed she should deliver rushed instruction targeted at particular outcomes.

My first statement of phenomenon developed as I wrote the study's proposal. Stated simply, I sought to examine the negotiation in practice of multiple sources of knowledge regarding early literacy and its instruction. That first statement of the phenomenon was reflected in my initial central research question: How does negotiating

varied knowledge-based approaches to early literacy instruction, including theoretical, applied, and practical wisdom, take shape for an early career teacher in her kindergarten classroom as she takes courses in a Master's in Reading Education program that emphasizes a conservatory approach? The phenomenon was also reflected in my secondary research questions: (a) How does the teacher negotiate perspectives encountered in her Master's program in Reading Education that emphasizes a conservatory approach; (b) How does the teacher negotiate other teachers' and administrators' perspectives; (c) How does the teacher negotiate state-level policies and contexts regarding early literacy in related division- and school-level policies and contexts; (d) How does participating in the research process, including engagement with critical reflection, shape the teacher's negotiation of varied knowledge-based approaches to early literacy instruction?

The phenomenon continued to evolve over the course of data collection and analysis as I became increasingly focused on particular manifestations of the phenomenon. These manifestations centered around identifiable events, usually involving decisions made in relation to others, in which Jane was involved. Over time I noticed the recurring nature of some of these decisions, especially Jane's approach to word recognition instruction and the intervention schedule.

**Data Collection**

To examine the phenomenon of negotiating the uncertain, at-times conflicted, waters of early literacy instruction, I drew on multiple methods of data collection, including interviews, observations, written reflections, and document review. These multiple methods of data collection also occurred across contexts, including Jane's

classroom, meetings with the other kindergarten teachers and administrators, and division-level documents. Jane's experience of the phenomenon, therefore, was understood as not simply occurring in her classroom but negotiated within larger school and division contexts and with respect to her graduate coursework.

Data collection began during the 2015-2016 school year as part of the larger qualitative comparative case study research project related to how kindergarten teachers use data to inform their literacy instruction. IRB approval for this larger case study was obtained the summer before the school year. A total of 16 teachers and 4 principals participated in multiple observations of their literacy instruction and grade-level team meetings along with two or three interviews per participant over the course of the school year. Observational data included descriptions of how teachers and students engaged in literacy instruction and how teachers discuss students' literacy performance during grade-level team meetings. Interview data included teachers' and administrators' responses to questions regarding their descriptions of early literacy and ways to monitor students' literacy development. Data collection in the 2015-2016 school year with Jane included six observations of her literacy block, four observations of grade-level team meetings, three semi-structured interviews, two semi-structured interviews with Jane's principal, and document analysis.

Before the 2016-2017 school year started, I spent the summer analyzing data from the 2015-2016 school year and developing an initial plan for systematic data collection during the 2016-2017 school year. I submitted an IRB Modification Submission to continue data collection in addition to the larger case study and to account for the phenomenological approach of this study, which was approved in the summer before data

collection began in September and occurred every month until the end of the school year in June. I observed in Jane's classroom 21 times and in grade-level team meetings 8 times, and I interviewed Jane 8 times for a total of 27 classroom observations, 12 grade-level team meetings, and 11 interviews with Jane across the two school years. Jane also completed 9 written reflections. I built in time between periods of data collection for initial analysis of data so that subsequent data collection could be informed by initial analysis. I describe each method of data collection in greater detail below.

**Interviews**. Interviews are an essential form of data collection in phenomenological research as interviews represent the best way to understand a person's experience from their point of view (Seidman, 2014). I used three different kinds of interviews to elicit information related to Jane's experience. These interviews included semi-structured think alouds, co-reflections, and life-history interviews. As Jane's experience is multi-faceted and related to her personal history, the different kinds of interviews were designed to prompt Jane to share aspects of her experience in varied ways.

Jane and I engaged in three semi-structured think alouds during the 2015-2016 school year. In these semi-structured interviews, I asked open-ended questions about her conceptualization and approach to early literacy development and instruction. I also posed additional questions about other aspects of classroom instruction such as assessment and classroom organization. The open-endedness of the questions and more direct follow-up questions provided Jane the opportunity to describe her own practice, reasons for her approach, and influence of context (e.g., other kindergarten teachers, graduate coursework, division-wide grade-level expectations) on her practice. During the

first of these interviews, Jane explained her general conceptualization of early literacy development and approach to early literacy instruction. She built on these general ideas during the second and third interviews through explanations of what she was doing in her classroom. As Jane explained particular aspects of her classroom instruction, she made connections to first graduate course. Jane's questions arising from her graduate coursework and current instructional practice contributed to the idea for my dissertation.

To further understand her experience of the phenomenon during the 2016-2017 school year, I continued the use of semi-structured interviews. The first semi-structured interviews occurred in September when I started data collection. I asked open-ended questions intended to have Jane describe changes in her approach to literacy instruction for the new school year (e.g., Describe any changes to your classroom and instruction since last year; describe changes in terms of her coursework learning and any other influences on her decision-making.). Other semi-structured interviews occurred throughout the school year after a set of observations. These semi-structured interviews consisted of follow-up questions related to instances from observations. For example, I prompted Jane to read a section of my field notes write-up and respond to prompts (e.g., What were you thinking/feeling/experiencing at the start of the meeting as the conversation focused on the new student starting rather than use of the new assessment?). Based on Jane's responses during these interviews, I asked follow-up questions or allowed Jane to continue describing aspects of her instruction.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, I used co-reflection interviews throughout the school year. Co-reflection interviews were open-ended like semi-structured protocols, but they were more focused on a specific instance I noticed during

an observation. Some co-reflection interviews followed a stimulated recall protocol where I shared my write-up of that instance with Jane and indicated places in the write-up where I asked her to share her in-the-moment reaction (Gass & Mackey, 2000). Other co-reflection interviews occurred immediately following classroom observations. Rather than share a write-up, I described an instance I noticed during the observation and encouraged Jane to share her in-the-moment experience. Even though called "co-reflection" interviews, I was interested in her experience. During these interviews, I encouraged Jane to share her visceral reactions as she reconstructed the experience rather than a more refined reflection.

The final type of interview was a series of three life history interviews. The life history technique allowed Jane to bring meaning to past experiences through reconstructing them and accounted for the connection between teachers' lives and their professional practice (Goodson & Sikes; Seidman, 2014). By asking Jane to explain the influences, events, and relationships in her life and contexts/conditions within which she works, I sought to understand how past experiences shape her current teaching experiences with and approaches to early literacy.

I structured each of the life history interviews around three respective themes – history of events that led interviewee to teaching and pursuing graduate work, details of present experience teaching and taking Master's classes, and connection to larger educational context. Before conducting the first life history interview, I prepared Jane for the series of interviews by explaining the general nature of the interview sequence. Jane also constructed a timeline, with an emphasis on events relevant to becoming a teacher and enrolling in a Master's program and influencing ideas about literacy. She used this

timeline during the first life history interview to guide her recollections of these events so that valuable interview time was intentionally directed (Adriansen, 2012; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Based on her explanations of events during the first life history interview, I created a list of open-ended questions for the second life history interview intended to encourage her to elaborate on aspects of the events she had already identified and shared. While I started the first and second life history interviews with a semi-structured protocol, I also asked follow-up questions throughout both interviews.

I initially intended to complete the series of life history interviews within a four-week span in the fall of the 2016-2017 school year. However, after the first two life history interviews, I decided to prioritize interviews related to what I had started to observe in her classroom and use the third and final life history interview to conclude data collection. Before the third interview, I constructed a contextual timeline that included important policies and initiatives related to literacy instruction and paralleled Jane's timeline of events. During the interview, I prompted the teacher to review the parallel timelines, offer any possible explanations, and share reactions to the larger contextual events. Concluding data collection with the third life history interview allowed Jane to revisit her reasons for some of her instructional approaches during the school year and what her participation in the research study meant to her.

It is important to note the nature of the interviews. Given the centrality of experience to phenomenology, I encouraged Jane to *react* during interviews and conversations instead of attempting to package her answers in overly reflective or academic language. However, the act of discussing one's instructional practice and decisions contributes to reflection. While Jane would consider her practice and make

changes on her own, the interviews and conversations with me served as a specific time for reflection and required her to articulate her practice. Jane and I discussed my role as a researcher – not a coach, mentor, or feedback-giver; however, she explained that she viewed me as someone she trusts. She even referred to her participation in the research study as formative in her second and third years of teaching.[175]

**Observations**. Observations tend to be used less frequently in phenomenological researcher. However, van Manen (2014) cautions against the assumption that researchers can simply ask people about their experiences. Researchers must investigate phenomena in many ways to be able to describe the phenomena in rich ways, thus questioning the "self-given-ness," or what is assumed, about the phenomena (p. 61). In this study, observations became a useful source of data because I observed how Jane experiences negotiating the muddled and tension-filled waters of early literacy instruction in her classroom instruction and interactions with others during grade-level team meetings.

I acted as a nonparticipant observer – an outsider who did not take an active, participatory role in classroom activities. At times, my non-participating role seemed uncomfortable to me given the busy nature of a kindergarten classroom. However, I considered this role necessary as I could not attend to Jane's actions, interactions, and experience while actively engaging in classroom activities. Nonparticipant observation allowed me to focus on the simultaneously occurring classroom activities during literacy instruction. However, I did spontaneously participate (e.g., reading with a student who was distracted during independent work, talking with students about their writing, cutting

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[175] Teacher Interview, 06.07.17

out materials while talking with Jane during planning) in classroom activities if prompted by the teacher or students.

For each of my classroom and grade-level team meeting observations, I recorded description and initial interpretation as open-ended narrative field notes. Even though field notes were open-ended, I set a general purpose at the start of each observation and noted this at the beginning of each field note (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Purposes were set to follow-up on my initial analysis of previous observations or interview or to respond to what I observed in the first few minutes of an observation. Shortly after each observation, I wrote-up field notes and added description and initial interpretation.

Observations included notes related to physical classroom environment, individuals, and overall climate. In my observation field notes, I tried to balance general descriptions of classroom activities with specific instances. After the first few interviews, I tried to become increasingly focused on Jane rather than general instruction. The focus on Jane was important to be able to describe how she may be experiencing classroom instruction. During observations and in my reflexive journal, I realized that I needed to remind myself of an observation's purpose before, during, and after the observation. A lot happens in a kindergarten classroom, and through writing in my reflexive journal, I recognized my tendency to attempt to record as much as I could about what was happening in the classroom during the literacy block. For April-June 2017 observations, I wrote brief field notes only focused on differences I noted during observations.

I acknowledge that my observations are from my perspective as a researcher but are influenced by my background as a teacher and graduate student. This background allowed me to connect to Jane's experiences; however, I recognized that my background

could also led me to make assumptions about how Jane was experiencing the phenomenon based on my perceptions of similarities with my teaching experiences and my graduate coursework. Therefore, it was crucial that I take an explicit step to understand observed instances as experienced by the participating teacher (Emerson et al., 2011; Vagle, 2014). I followed-up based on my initial interpretations of observations. This follow-up occurred during both informal conversations with the teacher and co-reflection interviews on previous observations.

**Written reflections**. Over the course of the 2016-2017 school year, I collected nine written reflections from Jane as another way for her to share her experiences. Vagle (2014) refers to written reflections as "Lived Experience Descriptions," which can provide a window into how someone is experiencing a particular instance, thus providing insight into how s/he is experiencing the larger phenomenon. Interviews were the primary way Jane shared her experiences; however, as I created interview questions, I intended written reflections as a way for Jane to determine what instances related to her experience negotiating the muddled and tension-filled waters of early literacy instruction. At the beginning of the school year, I explained the purpose of written reflections, shared an open-ended process for her to consider while writing her reflections, and encouraged her to share these written reflections with me when she experienced an instance she deemed particularly relevant. However, the demands of full-time teaching and part-time graduate work necessitated more guidance from me. Instead of Jane initiating written reflections, I ended up providing topics to write about throughout the school year. Therefore, three written reflections were initiated by Jane and six were prompted by me.

**Document review**. I collected documents related to Jane's literacy instruction including lesson plans, other instruction planning documents, school-level spreadsheets, division-level resources (e.g., assessment policies, grade-level benchmarks), and student work. I used my observations and interviews to guide which documents I reviewed when Jane used or mentioned a document. Often, I mentioned these documents and described them in field notes rather than collecting a copy to maintain confidentiality. These documents provided further details emphasize the "little things" consistent with a phronetic approach to research.

**Discontinuity.** A discontinuity exists in the data collected on Jane's graduate program and coursework. No direct data in the form of interviews or observations were collected from Jane's part-time work in her graduate program. Rather than use directly collected data, I focused on Jane's experience in the program from her perspective. I balanced Jane's perspective with my own familiarity with the program. Specifically, I used this familiarity to ask follow-up questions when Jane shared experiences related to her graduate coursework.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in two rounds. I analyzed data from the 2015-2016 school year during the summer after 2015-2016 school year. Throughout 2016-2017 school year, I analyzed data as I collected it. As I analyzed data from the 2016-2017 school year, I returned to data from the 2015-2016 school year based on connections noted between Jane's experience across both school years.

Vagle (2014) suggests three main components of post-phenomenological data analysis – a post-reflexion plan, systematic and responsive reading and writing through

the data, and creation of a text that represents tentative manifestations of the data. I describe each of these components in greater detail below.

**Post-reflexion plan.** The researcher functioning as the instrument in interpretive research has implications for how I influence the phenomenon and interpret data. Central to the phenomenological approach is "post-reflexing," an active commitment to reflect on data, personal reactions to that data, and the influence of personal reaction on the meaning constructed from data (Vagle, 2014; Vagle, Hughes, & Durbin, 2009). I acknowledge that I cannot remove myself from the study; however, I attempted to be aware of my positioning and make intentional choices to engage more deeply with the phenomenon or to question my assumptions about the phenomenon to see the phenomenon differently. "Post-reflexing" was also embedded the steps of analysis. By analyzing each separate piece of data separately before subsequent readings across data, I attempted to interpret the phenomenon in its present state, thus distinguishing it from past interpretations and avoiding premature conclusions (Vagle et al., 2009). Questioning the data was also an important part of analysis and "post-reflexing" (Vagle et al., 2009). Therefore, how I have initially conceptualized my phenomenon of interest changed over the course of study.

Over the course of the study, I captured my "post-reflexing" in three ways: line-by-line analyses, reflexive journal, and adapted use of the "north-south technique," or a way to reexamine data and my reactions to it (Lather & Smithies, 1997; Vagle et al., 2009). Marginal notes in line-by-line analyses included personal reactions and questions. My reflexive journal included an initial post-reflexivity statement where I described my role as a researcher, assumptions, beliefs, perspectives, and background, especially with

respect to the phenomenon. I continued my reflexive journal as a place where I recorded my wonderings, questions, thoughts, and emotional reactions in the form of dated entries. I made entries after instances of data collection, when important methodological decisions were made, during data analysis, and with respect to feedback. This journal was separate from analytic memos and phenomenological texts; however, they were often related. Writing in the reflexive journal often sparked writing a memo or part of a phenomenological text and vice versa. For example, I wrote about my noticing of Jane's different instructional decisions in my reflexive journal and continued writing in an analysis memo related to teachers' power (or lack of power) to make choices in their classroom. Furthermore, I took care to reflex on my own perceived power to make decisions as a teacher and include my reflections in my memo. Later I returned to these writings to further write on the topic of a "hero" teacher.

I adapted the "north-south" technique as I moved into more final interpretive writing around written vignettes of instances occurring in Jane's classroom, grade-level meetings, or conversations with Jane. The purpose of this technique was as a check against my embeddedness in the data. First, I reread my written vignettes. Then, in a separate document, I recorded both my interpretation *and* reactions. Lastly, I also shared my vignettes with my advisor, read her initial interpretation, and reacted to her interpretation.

**Systematic and responsive reading and writing.** My reading of the data and writing about the data followed a general set of steps outlined by Vagle (2014). The steps included:

(1) Each piece of data (e.g., observation, interview, follow-up, written reflection) was read in its entirety. This took take place after completing the observation write-up, interview transcription, or written reflection. I did not take notes during this initial reading but simply reorient myself to the data. Sometimes I grouped pieces of data together if I determined that they were related to each other (e.g., a set of observations occurring within a couple weeks, an observation and related interview or written reflection).

(2) After the first holistic reading, I completed a series of close readings of each piece of data where I took careful margin notes, highlighted excerpts I considered particularly relevant to the phenomenon, and posed possible questions.

(3) Notes, excerpts, and initial questions from the first line-by-line reading will be reviewed to develop follow-up questions for the teacher. For the first round of analysis, the follow-up questions from each piece of data collected will be condensed into a set of questions that were used to inform the start of data collection data collection during the 2016-2017 school year, specifically the Initial Conversation interviews and September observations. During the remainder of the 2016-2017 school year, follow-up questions generated during line-by-line readings were developed and incorporated into the next piece of data collected. Sometimes follow-up questions simply informed the direction of my data collection (e.g., focus of an observation). Other times I directly asked Jane

specific follow-up questions after an observation or incorporated them into a series of interview prompts or semi-structured questions.

(4) After the first line-by-line reading, I read the data line-by-line a second time, focusing in the relevant excerpts. For the 2015-2016 school year analysis, I created a new document, which contained all the excerpts I considered particularly relevant to the phenomenon, my corresponding notes, and follow-up with the teacher. I reread this document while describing and interpreting the phenomenon in marginal notes. For the 2016-2017 school year analysis, I decided not to separate relevant excerpts into a separate document. This allowed me to consult context more easily.

(5) I reread relevant excerpts and my marginal notes from the second line-by-line reading to further articulate my analytic thoughts in memo-form. This was repeated for each piece or group of data collected.

(6) Subsequent readings of data occurred as I moved further into writing longer texts about the data. These rereadings and longer written texts were an essential part of the analysis process. Subsequent readings included analytic memos from the third line-by-line readings along with associated multiple pieces of data. The goal of these readings will be to produce what Vagle (2014) refers to as "tentative manifestations," or the meanings and relationships between meanings of the phenomenon of interest.

I adjusted the steps detailed above to remain responsive to data as Vagle (2014) suggests. Specifically, I grouped data together (e.g., September 2017 observations and Initial Conversation interview) to examine aspects of the phenomenon in relation to each

other. I also noticed similar instances in classroom observations and topics during conversations with Jane as I moved into the second half of the 2016-2017 school year. In response to these similarities, I slightly adjusted my data analysis plan. I continued to collect data in case Jane experienced an instance that appeared particularly extraordinary or impactful on her instructional approach. However, I did not complete all line-by-line readings if similarities were noted in the initial write-up and first line-by-line reading.

**Creation of a text representative of tentative manifestations.** The idea of *whole-part-whole* forms the foundation for post-phenomenological methods (Vagle, 2014). The *whole* of data collection was first analyzed in *parts*. However, these parts led to fragmented accounts of Jane's experience and further distanced me from her experience of the phenomenon. The creation of a final text representative of the tentative manifestations initially written about during the sixth step of data analysis was essential to the reconstruction of a *whole*, or Jane's experience of the phenomenon. Therefore, I spent the most analysis time in the sixth step of data analysis and the creation of the final text.

I continued to write about tentative manifestations and rewrite longer texts while completing data collection and after data collection concluded at the end of the school year. Through writing, I experimented with form, decided on narrative form as the means to present Jane's experience, and refined which instances became central to Jane's narrative. These instances provide insight into how the phenomenon "takes shape" for Jane in her particular contexts. Through my line-by-line readings and memos, I decided what instances "popped" as a particular "intensity" or "rupture" in the examination of the phenomenon (Vagle, 2016). Vagle explains the idea of "popping" necessarily a general

theme or closer to a "truth." What "pops" seems particularly relevant to the examination of all facets of a phenomenon and how it may manifest. To further understand the nature of Vagle's "popping," I turned to Dewey's (1938) idea of aesthetic experiences – an event that stands out amongst the general or daily flow of experience, possesses some semblance of structure and potential to influence future experiences, and elicits dynamic emotional qualities.

I also adapted Vagle's (2016) suggested approach of "plugging-in," or connecting different concepts to the phenomenon. "Plugging-in" allows me to move beyond treating the phenomenon as the increasingly proficient technical application of literacy knowledge teaching. It adds complexity to the analysis and results by interpreting instances in Jane's experience in relation to possibly unexpected concepts, theories, or literature. I engaged in an initial thought exercise where I engaged in posing other concepts in relation to the phenomenon in September 2016. I continued this "plugging-in" exercise through line-by-line readings, memos, and additional analysis memos provided a systematic process and space for me to consider possible ideas to use with respect to Jane's experiences.

**Validity**

This study rests on the phronetic assumption that studying teaching is inextricably bound to context because the importance of context in phronetic research, individual cases and practice is closely examination. Therefore, even though I title this section "validity," I offer a different conceptualization of the term. While I did gather data from multiple sources, spent extended time in field, and shared my work with others including Jane, the "quality" of the study should not be evaluated solely in the procedural

triangulation of these different sources converging on a single "finding" or "piece of knowledge."

The presentation of results is a series of chronologically organized vignettes paired with interpretation guided by the "plugging-in" of different concepts from theory or literature. My choice to present the results as a series of extended vignettes is grounded in narrative validity where my role, as the researcher, was to provide thick, rich description and construct a plausible, cohesive account. The multiple page vignettes written from observations, interviews, written reflections, and document review provide an extended description and closer examination of Jane's experience of the phenomenon, rather than a fractured account situated in a deductive framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Vagle, 2014). Narrative validity also requires the reader to construct validity based on my description and account (Barone, 1992; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the two following sections, I offer a more detailed explanation of how to consider "validity" or "quality" for this study from a phronetic approach and narrative presentation of results.

**Phronetic approach based on interpretation**. Phronetic claims of validity are grounded in the following: (1) Considering problems in society, not just the academy; (2) Getting close to reality, (3) Emphasizing little things; (4) Studying cases in context; (5) Dialoging with many voices; and (6) Sharing results back into the processes that I studied (Flyvbjerg, 2001). My original research question evolved out of something I noticed Jane starting to grapple with in the Fall 2015, my first year in Jane's classroom and her second-year of teaching. I spent the remainder of that school year and the following school year observing and interviewing Jane. While I never observed Jane in her graduate

school context, I was familiar with this context as a graduate student myself, and her graduate coursework was a frequent topic in our conversations.

Some may deem my attention to particular events or instances – some lasting less than five minutes – as inconsequential in a two-year narrative, this focus on particular events or instances was an emphasis on "little things of practice" (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Vagle, 2014). These "little things" also became more evident through thick description, the practice or recording details of action along with inferential meaning, which in turn allowed for further examination of something that is often taken for granted – how teachers develop through gaining more knowledge and more skills and techniques. I view this study as a co-construction created by me and Jane. However, my observations during grade-level team meetings, interviews with the principal, and additional conversations with those outside the data collection allowed me to consider other perspectives as I drafted the tentative interpretations. Finally, I have already shared the vignette chapters with Jane in hopes that she can further make sense of her early career and affirm her commitment to asking value-driven questions as she continues to make decisions about how to approach literacy instruction. For other future audiences who may read this study, I include other possible value-driven questions that could inspire consideration of what it means to be a teacher and where the teaching profession is currently headed.

**Results as Narrative**. The selection of which events to include is an essential question to answer as a narrative researcher. Through reading data line-by-line multiple times, making initial marginal notes, and writing memos, I determined which events (or instances) were particularly salient in Jane's experience. Vagle (2014, 2016) describes these events as "pops" or ruptures in the day-to-day or taken-for-granted-ness of the

phenomenon. As I began writing and rewriting around particular events, I also considered Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) three criteria for included events: (1) the event should broaden to something larger (e.g., value, context), (2) the event should burrow to particular emotional, moral, or aesthetic qualities, and (3) the event should have potential for changes in the present or future. I considered Connelly and Clandinin's and Vagle's (2014, 2016) criteria for even inclusion when going through the iterative writing process of turning field-notes into write-ups, summarizing data, memo-ing, and drafting tentative manifestations.

I also considered three other criteria for "goodness" related to narrative research. These included accessibility, compelling-ness or vicarious experience, and moral persuasiveness or narrative explanation (Barone, 1992; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To make Jane's narrative accessible, I sought to pair more academic writing related to research literature and theories with vignettes about Jane. These extended vignettes were also intended to allow readers to imagine scenes from Jane's classroom, meetings, or interviews, and thus, to experience vicariously what Jane may have experienced in that particular event or instance. I also had my brother, who works outside the education profession as an engineer and who describes himself as a student who thrives with more hands-on educative experiences that he often found outside of the school setting, read a few vignettes to sense how someone with a different perspective may respond to Jane's narrative. His insights suggest that even someone outside of education responded to Jane's story, sensed what particular moments may feel like, *and* reconsidered what he thought teaching actually is. Specifically, he expressed that he now realizes teaching is not following some given curriculum but rather difficult and even requiring a teacher to

stand up for something she believes. Lastly, I chose not to conclude the narrative with instances from Spring 2017 but also include the Coda chapter to offer a separate and final explanation and call for reexamination of what teaching means.

## Researcher as Instrument Statement

On my last day as a teacher, another teacher stopped me on the way back to my classroom to tell me good-bye and wish me luck in graduate school. As we parted ways, he looked back and told me "to be the voice for teachers." When I think about those words now, I remember that they resonated with me in that moment. I was struggling with my decision to leave my school, and even though I was leaving for graduate school, I still considered myself a teacher. I was not leaving the classroom because I no longer liked being in the classroom or enjoyed teaching students. I was not tired or burned-out. Ultimately, I decided that I had a lot of questions about whether what I was doing was "good" or "right" for my students. I felt guilty leaving my elementary school to find answers teaching at another elementary school. So, at the time, I thought those questions could also be answered by a full-time Master's program.

The phrase *being the voice for teachers* occasionally crossed my mind in my first year of graduate school. Despite those words initially resonating with me, I was unsure what being someone else's voice meant or how I could do it – or even if I should do it. I felt a general unsettling, which I mostly attributed to missing being in a school and working with students around literacy content instruction. Shortly after starting graduate school, I began volunteering as a reading tutor in a local elementary school.

However, in quieter moments of reflection on my graduate work, I realized my unease also stemmed from my uncertainty about what it looks like to conduct educational

research. To me, thinking as a teacher, education was students (who were children) and was further contextualized in schools. As a graduate student and novice researcher, it seemed like I should not talk about education in the same way I thought about it as a teacher. Furthermore, I felt uncomfortable talking about education, especially teachers and their practices, when I was no longer teaching and when I was acutely aware of the uniqueness of my own teaching context. I started teaching as part of an alternative licensure program and taught for six years – both as a general education second grade teacher and special education resource-inclusion teacher – in a small, rural town in North Carolina. Still seeking some sort of answers, I planned to continue my graduate work but shifted from educational psychology to a more content-focused program in reading education. Though still unsettled, my reading coursework and a course in qualitative methods helped me reflect on larger issues related to instruction and approaching research.

As I began this dissertation, *being the voice for teachers* was not a phrase consciously in my mind. Those particular words never came out in my reflexive journal, but I recognized the continued influence of my former colleague's parting words. I deliberated throughout data collection and analysis over how best to present Jane's experience of the phenomenon. I worried that aspects of analysis and presentation of results would fracture Jane's experience. I searched for other ways to present the results. Fortunately, Vagle (2014), who describes post-intentional phenomenological methods, encourages the experimentation with form in post-intentional studies. In addition to being a post-intentional phenomenology, my dissertation was bound by a single case, a person

– Jane. Because of this bounding, it felt like a story of her experience, and I also wanted to portray *her* story.

To present Jane's experience of the phenomenon, I was initially drawn to creative nonfiction. Perhaps this was a reflection of having read particular books in the creative nonfiction genre when I was teaching in North Carolina, such as Jonathon Kozol's (1991, 2007) *Savage Inequalities* and *Letters to a Young Teacher*. While these books did not provide explicit ways to improve my literacy instruction, they affirmed what I was feeling as a teacher and in doing so, provided a sense of peace. That peace, in-part, allowed me to find more concrete ways to improve my teaching practice. Kozol taught me it was alright to view teaching as an art, perhaps even a vocation. Maybe this is what I wanted my dissertation to be or to do for Jane and other teachers.

In addition to deliberation over form, I also struggled with how to approach discussion of literacy content with a teacher, especially one at the beginning of her career like Jane. My background as a teacher, as a current part-time interventionist, and as a graduate student in a reading education program have shaped my own approach to literacy instruction. My experiences with others in the reading program have also reminded me that the bulk of teaching experience and my current experience is as a specialist or interventionist – not a classroom teacher. I needed to remind myself of this background because Jane was a classroom teacher. For me, as a teacher who plans to devote the rest of my educational career to so-called "struggling" students, I know I tend to take a more explicit, or systematic approach to the teaching of certain aspects of literacy development (e.g., phonics, phonological awareness). However, I also firmly believe that students should be able to see themselves as readers and writers. They should

also have the opportunity to love reading and writing, as I did in elementary school (and still do). Not loving (or liking) reading and writing should be able to be a choice, not a product of experiencing difficulty or off-putting instruction. The opportunity to enjoy reading and writing comes best when students feel agency in their reading and writing instruction – through book choice, through authentic experiences with reading and writing, and in engaging materials.

When I noticed similarities in Jane's thinking to mine or I thought I understood her explanations of her own approach, I tried to ask follow-up questions, rather than assume I understood her perspective. I also realized that Jane and I came to the teaching profession, both reluctantly, but for different initial reasons. I could not imagine doing anything but working with children. Jane became fascinated with the methods, techniques, and reasons behind teaching and teachers' decisions.

I tried to be careful about what I shared with Jane with regard to my approach to or thoughts on literacy. I did not want Jane to feel like she had to "put on a show" for me based on what she thought I considered "good" literacy instruction. But, I also did not want Jane to feel like I was withholding. She was generous with her time, welcoming of me in her classroom, and forthcoming during our conversations. I worried that our relationship was extremely one-sided, where I gained a lot and she gained a little.

Related to my considerations of what I shared with Jane, I found witnessing Jane's struggle or doubts particularly challenging. It hurt to watch someone I spent two years with in her classroom doubt what she was doing and seemingly doubt herself. I was not under any pretenses that I had any answers that would perfectly resolve the challenges Jane faced. I never taught kindergarten as a classroom teacher, and Jane's

experience reminded me that there was no one right answer in teaching. However, I also could see that Jane wanted someone to talk to about literacy content and instruction. She expressed frustration how she found grade-level team meetings unhelpful. She also stated that the meetings could be different if the teachers could talk in more depth about their classroom practice, like students' writing or engaging books for read alouds. So, even though I did not want to send messages about what I thought Jane should do or create a sense that she should "perform" for me, I did talk more in-depth and more personally about literacy instruction at particular times.

Sometimes during conversations with me, Jane wondered aloud about a particular aspect of her classroom practice with respect to theoretical knowledge and an associated method she encountered in her graduate courses (e.g., print referencing and concepts of print). I offered my own interpretation or approach if I sensed that Jane had questions about the theoretical knowledge or method, especially if she seemed to worry if she had misinterpreted an aspect of the knowledge or method. I also offered my thoughts if she expressed larger doubts about herself as a teacher. For example, when Jane expressed surprise at a few students' performance on an assessment, I asked Jane how she administered the assessment. We realized that she left out the picture walk portion of the directions and thus omitted an essential and developmental scaffold for her students' word recognition.

However, other times, I remained quiet when Jane discussed literacy instruction, even if I knew Jane was working through a particular aspect of practice. One of Jane's most noticeable commitments to change involved a more situated approach to word recognition instruction. While I agreed with aspects of Jane's commitment to situated and

developmental word-recognition practice, I take a different approach in my own practice. On a continuum of word recognition with completely isolated on one side and completely situated on the other side, I fell much more in the middle, whereas Jane was much more towards completely situated. I did not talk about this different approach with Jane.

As I conclude my dissertation, I still wonder about what it means to *be the voice for teachers*, namely how do I continue writing about and writing with teachers. Consistent with the phronetic assumptions forming the foundation of my dissertation, I believe the vignettes and interpretation were co-constructed with Jane. I hope Jane and her voice emerged from the narrative in real and authentic ways. Jane was not a perfect teacher, but no teacher is perfect.

However, while co-constructed, my dissertation was not co-authored. As we parted ways, I did not ask my former fellow teacher what he meant by "be the voice for teachers." Just as Jane was not some sort of teacher-hero, I do not believe that my former fellow teacher intended me to become a teacher-hero either. There is no way any one person can speak for a group of unique individuals teaching in equally unique contexts with multi-faceted positives and challenges. I am not perfect; I do not have some profound gift for perceptiveness that allows for perfectly insightful work.

I do hope that I, at least partially, raised the level of ambiguity around what it means to be a teacher and approach literacy instruction, one way to approach research, especially the phronetic kind. An approach that seems especially important in an educational age of rationalization and mandates related to scientific- or evidence-based practices. Finally, I consider Jane my peer, and I believe teachers have little opportunity to share their stories. Perhaps I just wanted to give Jane that chance.

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