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# Bridging the Gap: When Mid-career Teachers Transition from Traditional to Multiage Contexts: Lessons from the Field

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Bridging the Gap: When Mid-career Teachers Transition from Traditional to Multiage Contexts:  
Lessons from the Field

by

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A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers' professional identity as they transitioned from traditional to multiage contexts. The following questions were answered: What do teachers perceive as their greatest challenges and opportunities in making the transition to a multiage classroom? Do these perceptions change over time? Do the teachers' beliefs and perceptions match their actions and practices? What supports were put in place for teachers making the transition from traditional contexts to multiage learning environments? Were these supports effective? Ten key findings clustered in three areas emerged from this study: multilevel classrooms were: 1) beneficial to the teacher when they had students for more than the traditional academic year; multilevel classrooms allowed for the development of independent thinkers and learners; 2) students in the multilevel classroom exhibited positive interactions, nurturance and spirit of cooperation, and 3) team teaching provided an opportunity to learn and share new skills, and provided both pedagogical and affective support for the educators involved. Challenges included: 1) meeting the needs of a more diverse group of learners; 2) piloting change in a culture and climate that was largely against the change and/or did not fully understand the change, and 3) the instance of negative peer role models within the multiage class composition. Foremost, the findings of this study indicated that the participants initially drew from their experience as graded teachers to make sense of the multilevel philosophy, in essence filtering multilevel philosophy through the lens of gradedness. In doing so each participant created a 'false understanding' of the multilevel philosophy. It was not until they began employing multilevel strategies within their classrooms and saw the resultant benefits of those strategies that they began to reflect, personally challenge,

deconstruct and finally begin to reconstruct their understanding of the multilevel philosophy, and in essence their professional identities.

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No one who achieves success does so without acknowledging the help of others.

Author Unknown

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This is dedicated to my boys...

For Rob,

It has been said that the dedication of a piece of writing is one of *the* most exquisite acts of love a writer can bestow, and that is precisely why this dedication is first and foremost, for you.

And to Max and Colin,

You never doubted my dreams, no matter how crazy those dreams may have seemed, or how often they may have interrupted your lives. My deepest wish for you both is that you too, have crazy dreams, and that you *act* upon them.

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## Epigraph

### *A Veteran Teacher's Story*

*Sarah has been teaching elementary school for 13 years. A year and a half ago her school became one of eight pilot sites in her district to implement multiage organization and instruction. When school started in the fall, she found herself in a classroom with 1st through 4th grade students. Sarah had received two half-day training sessions on whole language in preparation for implementing the new multiage program. Not surprisingly, Sarah said there was not much in the training for teaching in a multiage classroom. When she was interviewed shortly after school started, she spoke like a first-year teacher, full of anxiety and concern about her students. Teachers in Sarah's school were all assigned to self-contained classrooms. Sarah mentioned that teachers did not talk about their successes or problems, nor did they conduct staff meetings where multiage practices were discussed. Sarah, like her colleagues, was expected to implement the change alone.*

*Five months after that first interview, problems remained. Sarah felt she was getting a better handle on instruction, but wondered what the long-term impact might be on students and teachers. Several teachers had resigned. Sarah said she thought about resigning, but felt she could tough it out... (Miller, 1994, p. 3)*

## Chapter One: **Introduction**

### **1.1 Problem**

Of late, progressively declining enrollments coupled with an aging demographic within the province of Manitoba have created a greater occurrence of multilevel classrooms. In the Beautiful Plains School Division, my school division, the previous six years have seen the establishment of four new multilevel Hutterian schools and a growing number of ‘combined’ classrooms in our larger elementary schools. This trend however, is neither localized to our division, nor to the province of Manitoba, but rather, reflects a national and even global trend. “Information on the incidence of multigrade teaching is difficult to find and is often out-of date. However, the information that is available points to a relatively high incidence of multigrade teaching” (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007, p. 502). In Canada one in every seven classrooms contains children from more than one grade level (Gajadharsingh, 1981; Gayfer, 1991; Mulryan-Kyne, 2007) and approximately one out of every five Canadian students is enrolled in a multiage classroom. In Northern Ontario, our province’s most immediate neighbor to the east, it is reported that over 50% of the children in rural and remote communities attend multigrade classes, (Lataille-Demore, 2003). It is predicted, with some reliability, that the number of multiage classes in Canada will continue to increase in the future (Gajadharsingh, 1981; Gayfer, 1991; Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Increasingly, more teachers are faced with altering their long-held graded practices as schools down-size and combine grades to meet the changing fiscal and demographic constraints of their geographic regions. Where once these educators dealt with a solitary set of curricula and more homogenously grouped students (at least in terms of age), they are now confronted with multiple sets of curricula, a more diverse age group of learners, and the expectation that they meet the needs of this diverse group of learners, in a range of subject areas,

with multiple grade-specific outcomes – all in the same time frame previously available to them as single-grade educators (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Even voluntary change can be difficult, but forced change, the sort brought about by the fiscal pressures of declining enrollments, population mobility, and an aging demographic, can be more so. Swept, sometimes unwillingly and oftentimes unprepared, into the tides of change, how do these teachers cope, how do they make their multilevel classrooms successful learning environments for their students and for themselves?

“Implementing multiage instruction and organization represents a major shift in classroom norms” (Miller, 1994, p. 118). Multilevel teaching involves multiple, complex innovations and “many of the underlying assumptions of multilevel teaching conflict with deeply ingrained assumptions underlying traditional age-graded instructional methods” (Gaustad, 1995, ¶ 6). Miller (1994) contends that “unlearning powerfully held notions about how children learn” (¶ 2) is an essential part of implementing multilevel practices. And while Mulryan-Kyne (2007) argues that the professional skills and knowledge used to teach effectively in a multilevel context are precisely the same as those used in a traditional graded classroom, she allows that these “skills need heightened emphasis in the context of the preparation of teachers for multigrade teaching” (p. 503).

Unlearning strongly ingrained traditional beliefs and practices is challenging, even for the most open and responsive educators. Multilevel instructional and organizational methods stand in stark contrast to those employed in the traditional classroom context (Little 1995, 2001; Gaustad, 1995; Kinsey, 2001; Pridmore 2005). Kinsey (2001) suggests that rather than simply being an organizational model, multilevel classrooms include both the interactions amongst students as well as the specific ways teachers in multilevel classrooms guide these interactions.

Similarly, Katz, Evangelou, and Hartman (1990) found that it was, among others, the implementation of teaching strategies specific to the multilevel classroom that fostered successful learning experiences. Learning or re-learning these strategies can cause veteran mid-career educators to experience as much or even more anxiety than inductive teachers as they cope with the transition (Miller, 1994).

With 20% of Canadian youth receiving their education in multiage classrooms (Gajadharsingh, 1981; Gayfer 1991; Mulryan-Kyne, 2007), which is arguably a significant segment of the Canadian academic population, one might expect that these contexts, their organization, philosophy, programming, and the teacher preparation for this unique context would figure prominently in the literature. Quite the opposite is true (Gajadharsingh, 1981). “The literature on multigrade teaching is relatively sparse, some of it anecdotal in nature and/or of poor quality” (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007, p. 503). Gajadharsingh (1981) contends that while multilevel classrooms may account for a significant portion of Canadian classrooms, research has not kept pace with this trend nor the complex needs of these learning communities.

“The number of such classrooms has increased dramatically and it appears at this time, neither curriculum experts nor school personnel have adequately addressed the many complex problems inherent in teaching in these classrooms” (Gajadharsingh, 1981, p. 2). Indeed, the thorough examination of the literature I conducted dating back as far as the early 1980s and extending to the present produced few sources of literature directly related to preparing educators for teaching in a multiage classroom, and I could find none at all on preparing mid-career teachers for the transition from traditional age-graded to multiage contexts. In some cases, the notion of preparing teachers for the multilevel context was embedded as a related subtopic to such main topics as multicultural classrooms or rural schools (Massey & Crosby, 1983;

Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993) and therefore lacked detail and information. Some studies addressed the multilevel context in 3<sup>rd</sup> world and developing nations such as China, Africa, and India, among others (McEwan, 2008; Mulryan-Kyne, 2007; Pridmore, 2005) and therefore do not necessarily relate to the Canadian and/or North American context. Other studies were meta-analyses and/or literature reviews of previous studies (Hattie, 2002; Miller, 1991, Mulryan-Kyne, 2007), while others still focused solely on the preparation of pre-service teachers for teaching in a multilevel classroom (Martland & Teaching, 1993). In fact, while the often distinctive ways and means in which teachers handle the multiplicity of the “tasks and roles they are expected to perform is widely discussed in the literature - much of which draws attention to the sink or swim approach” (Flores, 2006, p. 2002), it is written almost entirely from the perspective of the pre-service or inductive teacher. There is little research on veteran educators reverting in effect, to the role of ‘novice’ teacher.

Until just recently, I coordinated our divisional Multilevel Team. At the time, this team consisted of 12 colleagues, each teaching in a multilevel classroom. This groups’ charter was (and still is) to improve outcomes for learners through the support and professional development of their teachers. To this end our group met several times per year for multilevel specific professional growth. I coordinated and facilitated these meetings, and arranged for professional development when necessary. Though initially unintended, it would come to pass that my key role would be mentoring teachers as they made the transition from traditional graded classrooms into the multilevel milieu.

It was from this role that my research interest arose. There were no professional growth models available to support teachers as they made that transition into the multilevel classroom. Each educator I mentored through the transition process experienced the change in a different

way, required different interventions and degrees of support, and each experienced a very unique timeline in terms of adjustment to their transition. Too often these teachers were completely unprepared for the transition they were about to make as there was little in either their training or experiences to prepare them for what lay ahead. Further, and perhaps most disturbing to me, was that nearly half of these educators did not continue on beyond a first or second year in their multilevel settings, opting instead to move onto single-grade positions as soon as they became available, which in itself seemed telling. It seemed for some, these multilevel classrooms were simply ‘stepping stones’ to coveted single-grade positions. That is why I feel that this proposed study is salient. Beyond my concerns of the resultant affect of the constant turnover of teachers in the lives of students, there is also the notion of retention of quality educators within these roles. For me, the question arose, why would these educators leave their multilevel positions? And the answer was the same, each time I asked it – it was hard, too hard. For me, educators should not need to find this experience so arduous - there must be a better way. For me, the first step on the path to discovering this ‘better way’ is to step into the lives of these teachers and to see and hear firsthand what it is they are experiencing. It is only when these experiences are clearly understood, that further steps can be taken to help mentor and support these teachers through the transition process.

## **1.2 Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers’ professional identity as they transition from traditional to multilevel contexts.

The research problem, as written above, states the overall goals of this research project, and guided it from conception to fruition. A research problem “is really a statement of what the ethnographer wants to know” (Fetterman, 1998, p.3). Research questions ultimately outline how the research goals are to be carried out. The research questions that further guided this research eventually unfolded as such:

- What do teachers perceive as their greatest challenges and opportunities in making the transition to a multilevel classroom? Do these perceptions change over time?
- Do the teachers’ beliefs and perceptions match their actions and practices?
- What supports were put in place for teachers making the transition from traditional contexts to multilevel learning environments? Were these supports effective?

### **1.3 Research Design Overview**

This study was conducted in the manner of ethnography, and the findings presented in the form of a case. This study focuses on the human processes in which educators engage that most directly relate to their transition from the single-grade to multiage context. This “attention to context and interrelationships in human lives is what makes ethnographic accounts different from accounts written from the perspective of other social sciences” (Wolcott, 1973, p. xi).

Historically, ethnography has been thought of as both a product of research and a research process (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 1999). The product of ethnography “is an interpretivist story, reconstruction, or narrative about a group of people” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 4). The aim of this study was to create just such a narrative of the development of the professional identities of three mid-career traditional educators as they made the transition to multiage educators/contexts by examining the ways in which they learned, developed, and evolved (or did not evolve) over the course of their first year of teaching in a multiage

educational context. This study took place over the course of seven months and employed several data gathering techniques. The primary data collection tool was a series of 15 classroom observations, but the study also employed a series of pre and post-observation participant interviews. Other supplementary data collection tools were participant journals and the gathering of pertinent artefacts. Data were analyzed utilizing an inductive approach to search for themes or patterns.

#### **1.4 Assumptions**

Continual reflection on the influence of educational contexts on children's academic and social development is considered an important characteristic of the education profession (Pratt, 1986). According to Pratt, contexts can have a considerable influence on both learning and teaching, and as such, directly impact the development of children's academic and social growth. Ethnography is deemed an appropriate research design when the contextual conditions are pertinent to the understanding of the phenomenon studied. In this study there is the underlying assumption that the multilevel context is inseparable from, and acts directly upon the educator, therefore the context is both influential and pertinent to understanding the phenomena, which is why ethnographic methods were employed. However, Hattie's research would suggest otherwise. Hattie (2002) argues that though this should be the case, it simply is not. Hattie asserts that class composition has little to no effect on student outcomes, largely because educators rarely alter their instructional methods in relation to the composition of their class. According to Hattie (2002), the debate over composition is a null one; instead of more discussion on context effect, the debate must turn to instruction in these classes, regardless of composition. In terms of student achievement, it is the nature and quality of instruction that matters, not the

class composition. Gamoran (1986) states this notion more succinctly, “Grouping does not produce achievement, instruction does” (p. 341).

If we believe Gamoran (1986), Mulryan-Kyne (2007), and Hattie’s (2002) research findings to be true, i.e. context has no effect on student outcomes, then it must be assumed that the onus for successful student outcomes and learning in the multilevel classroom falls squarely onto the educators’ shoulders. Forsten, Grant, and Richardson, (1999) support the notion that in order for the multilevel classroom to be successful, teachers must “first understand the philosophy, [and] have the will and the skill to implement the necessary changes. It must matter to the teacher before the teacher can make it matter to others” (p. xiii). Further, Leier (2006) contends that unless the teacher has done considerable research and reflection about multiage pedagogy, he or she may unintentionally make choices and employ strategies that are contradictory to the multiage philosophy. Although teachers in these classrooms have an opportunity to differentiate instruction, use peer tutoring and employ other innovative approaches and methods, they simply do not (Hattie, 2002). What is unclear is *why* they do not.

Despite an historical pattern of child-development within an age-varied social system, the transition to a multilevel philosophy continues to be a huge paradigm swing in teaching philosophy for those educators trained and educated in graded philosophy (Leier, 2006; Little 1995, 2001; Pridmore, 2005). Since mass-schooling emerged as a universal ideal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it has dominated the construction of academic and professional knowledge of teaching and learning worldwide (Kappler & Roelke, 2002). In the province of Manitoba, for example, curricular frameworks are developed for graded cohorts of learners, as are text books and professional learning opportunities. When immersed in such a culture of monogradedness, perhaps it is easy to understand why professionally, educators

strongly identify with this graded ‘way of knowing’. This may explain why teachers new to the multilevel learning context struggle when utilizing curricula, strategies and materials that have not been designed with their multilevel classrooms in mind (Leier, 2006; Little 1995, 2001; Pridmore, 2005). Often educated in and trained to teach within a graded system, it would be straightforward for said educators to assume that the graded school system is both natural and universal. Of importance, any new philosophy introduced to such educators would be filtered through their graded lens or ‘graded way of seeing’ which could seriously delimit any ‘new way of seeing’. Can a decades old mind-set such as this be changed, and if so, how? Why hasn’t the change occurred, or is change even necessary? Do teachers’ perceptions, knowledge, and theoretical beliefs really have the capacity to shape their transition to a multilevel classroom?

Huberman (1989) noted that teachers’ careers are demarcated by stages which he defines as evolutionary phases of working life. Each career stage is bounded by a diverse set of beliefs and practices. For the purpose of this study the mid-career teacher was defined as an educator with 10 to 25 years of teaching experience. Educators with 10 to 25 years of experience generally feel confident about their professional abilities and knowledge and settle into a comfortable and predictable pattern of teaching. Huberman (1989) calls this career stage Stabilization. *Career stage*, a term which in this study was calculated as years of classroom teaching experience, arguably tells little about the context or content of those years of experience in terms of an individual’s personal and professional lives. However, Huberman (1989) suggests that career stage is an indicator of development within classroom context, and as such, it is likely to have significant effect on teachers’ responses to change. Educators generally evidence differing attitudes toward change at each of the different stages of their careers, and mid-career educators – those with greater experiences – are often considered to be more resistant to change

(Guskey, 1989). Mid-career participants were chosen specifically for this reason – specifically because they are generally considered resistant to change. This was because one of the questions I wanted to address was if teachers struggle with the transition to multilevel classrooms simply because of a resistance to change, or is it, in fact, something else? Or was it they so strongly identified with being a ‘graded’ teacher that they could not identify with their new role?

“Becoming a teacher requires not only the development of a professional identity but the construction of professional knowledge and practice through continued professional learning” (McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006, p. 95). Another assumption that I initially held was that becoming a multilevel teacher also requires the development, or perhaps it is more accurate to state the redevelopment, of a professional identity. To loosely paraphrase Feiman-Nemser’s (2001) words, teachers new to the multilevel setting have two critical roles; they must teach and they must learn *how to teach* in a multilevel setting. This notion is akin to learning to fly a plane at the same time as one is attempting to build it. “Developing a professional identity is also important in establishing a teachers’ sense of self-efficacy” (McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006, p. 106). Teacher efficacy refers to the expectation of the educator that he or she has the capacity to positively affect student learning. Teacher efficacy is of interest in this proposed study because it is a predictor of willingness to attempt new teaching strategies (Ross, 1992), and therefore the assumption must be that it is arguably one of the most critical factors in the sustainability, success and achievement of a multilevel classroom. Not exclusive to the multilevel learning community alone, it can undoubtedly be argued that teacher efficacy influences the implementation of any educational programming. Certainly, research has demonstrated that teacher efficacy, or instructional quality, is the leading indicator of quality of pupil learning (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). In a 1990 study by the Office of Educational Research

and Improvement (OERI), 102 individual strategies were identified by teachers as being effective in multigrade classes. If effective multilevel teachers must develop appropriate strategies to provide their students with maximum learning opportunities, the acquisition of these strategies is highly dependent not only on the skill level of the classroom teacher, but on the training provided for that teacher (Aina, 2001).

Mulryan-Kyne (2007), who agrees that class composition has no effect on student outcomes and that it is instruction that matters, does argue that how educators interpret education policies, such as those guiding the creation of a multilevel learning community, strongly influences the education received by the students. Hattie (2002) argues further that the major cost of changing a class composition is that “there is the false assumption that something has been done that can benefit the students merely by a grouping composition effect” (p. 474).

These statements lead us to believe that administrators have an important role to play in the creation and maintenance of multilevel learning communities, and raise the question of just what these roles are. It is clear that there exists an underlying premise in educational change that the organization encourages continuous learning and improvement by teachers (Anderson, 1997). Gaustad (1994) argues that the administrative role in the multiage classroom extends beyond understanding the underlying principles of organization. To create and embrace a multilevel philosophy, consistency of administration and divisional support become key issues.

Administrative support for the implementation of multilevel classrooms is paramount for the successful implementation as well as the sustainability of that program. Such support includes the promotion of and participation in teacher learning and development, allowing for and ensuring sufficient time for both teaching and learning, and establishing a supportive environment for educators both within and outside of the classroom (Robinson, 2007; Waters,

Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Both Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003) and Robinson (2007) contend that administrators act as the primary change agent in their schools, and further contend that it is necessary for administrators to develop and communicate effectively a well-developed and clearly articulated vision for any change that challenges the status quo. Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003) and Robinson's (2007) research would then suggest that school divisions that respond to enrolment issues through the creation of multilevel classrooms as organizational 'quick-fixes' without considering these elements do so at their own peril. When a multilevel classroom is created solely in response to demographic issues such as low enrolment, it can be unclear whether any pedagogical foundations of multilevel classrooms are being addressed. Hattie (2002) suggests that teachers may believe that the restructuring of these classes may be the outcome of school reform, but that it is more likely that these classes are solely structural changes, and that teacher related effects remain unchanged. Hattie's (2002) research further illustrates the notion that the creation of multilevel classrooms as an answer to an immediate fiscal predicament may simply result in a short-sighted solution to a long-term problem. In the best case scenario, students may make fewer academic gains than their traditional age-graded peers (Veenman, 1995), but in a worst case scenario, multilevel learning communities can actually have a negative impact on student learning (Hattie, 2002).

### **1.5 Rationale and Significance**

The long and short of school improvement is that today and tomorrow both matter. More and more rushed reforms—however well intentioned—that produce multitudes of initiatives cascading down from the Minister's office, to the district superintendent and then to principals and their schools, will never get beyond the classroom door, and except

in the most basic and easily tested skill areas—to the teachers who ultimately control the destiny of children and their learning for today and tomorrow. (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 16)

While much literature has been dedicated to the study of pre-service and novice teacher induction (e.g., Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000; Lawson, 1992; McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006; Olebe, 2006) and for new principals' transition into administrative roles (e.g., Anderson, 2000; Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001; Playtko, 1991; Tredway, Brill, & Hernandez, 2007) and as a result widespread organizations such as Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program (BTSA) (Olebe, 2006) and Leadership Support Program (LSP) (Tredway, Brill & Hernandez, 2007) have been developed. However, these *induction* programs do not focus on the unique responsibilities and challenges faced by teachers as they transition into contextually diverse settings and little is written about how established, mid-career teachers can be inducted into a new organizational framework.

“Successful innovation and educational change presupposes that teachers will develop themselves professionally” (Slegers, Geisjel & van den Berg, 2002, p. 91). With approximately one in every five Canadian child being educated in a multilevel classroom and a dearth of literature available on the subject (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007), paired with Hattie’s assertion that children in these classrooms perform more poorly than do their graded peers, the need for a staff development model to support mid-career teacher’s transition from a traditional classroom to a multilevel context seems evident. But what is not clear is what such a model would look like, and what roles educational leaders and teachers would play in this model. Knowing how “teachers act in context—their expectations and their needs, their limitations and their constraints—becomes a key issue if meaningful learning opportunities are to be provided for

them” (Flores, 2006, p. 2023). The acute learning that occurs throughout the first year of the transition to the multilevel classroom clearly influences the ways in which an educator’s professional identity is transformed as their long-held traditional beliefs and graded practices and perspectives are confronted by the powerful influences of the multilevel context. This learning occurs neither alone, nor without powerful cultural influences; it is embedded within a much larger organizational landscape. This is especially true when reforms challenge existing teacher paradigms (Mulford, Silins, & Leithwood, 2004) and confront well-established school cultures. No matter how well planned, or how well implemented, many a reform has failed when faced with the powerful force of a well established school culture (Fullan, 2001; Mulford, Silins, & Leithwood, 2004). If effective and meaningful professional learning opportunities are to be created for educators, a clearly articulated approach requires educators, administrators and policymakers alike to engage in a collaborative dialogue to enhance the potential of successful educational innovation. This critical dialogue should rest of a solid foundation of quality research.

According to Elmore (2007) “our professional development practices, at their best, are not powerful enough to do all the work they are being asked to do by the accountability systems under which schools operate” (p. 31). Elmore (2007) further charges “Educators are accountable to policy makers for improvements in quality and performance. Policy makers apparently are not accountable to educators for providing institutional structures and resources necessary to produce those improvements” (p. 32). Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, and Hall (1987) suggest that one of the key reasons that educational innovations fail is because administrators and policymakers do not allow for sufficient time, training, and support of their teachers. For the educators lacking either the will or the skill to teach in this complex learning environment, or

lacking the support of a larger organizational framework, the impact on student learning could be devastating. Ultimately, multiple years within such negative learning environments, inundated with poor methodology, embedded within an unsupportive organizational framework *could* result in students lagging developmentally behind their graded peers (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). There needs to be much more than an organizational shift when transitioning to multilevel programming. Hattie's (2002) research suggests that arranging students of varying ages within the same piece of real estate does not necessarily guarantee a better education: in fact Hattie (2002) contends that quite the opposite is true, citing negative cognitive outcomes for the students in the multigrade classroom when compared to their same-age monograde peers. If this is true, it raises a legitimate concern for all those involved in multilevel classrooms: if teachers in these classrooms have the greatest impact on student outcomes, what can and should we, as school leaders do to develop them professionally?

When ideas are appropriated and exported to diverse educational settings, educators' subjectivities and new social contexts reframe them, sometimes radically, at multiple points in circuits of cultural productives. Educators with differing histories positioned in different ways politically and with respect to their professional identities, will integrate new discursive resources into their practice in a variety of ways; at the same time, the new discursive resources may change educators' professional identities. Tracing how critical discourses move from one site to another (Eisenhart, 2001), how they shift in this movement, and how they are translated into curricular and pedagogical practice with learners in

specific social and political contexts is important work for the future.

(Niesz, 2006, p. 343)

## **1.6 The Researcher**

I am a multilevel teacher. The term multilevel educator characterizes who I am as an educator – it embodies my educational philosophy. For me, multilevel instruction engenders that which most closely parallels real life. We live within family groups and within communities where people of varying ages exist, work, and play together. The multilevel classroom models societal structures. The multilevel classroom is a place where the lines between grades blur, and where the curriculum is *uncovered* rather than *covered*. Curriculum and teaching within a multiage classroom are such that students learn according to their developmental levels. “Some grade-specific content may occur because of state-mandated curricula or testing, but cross-grade teaching is the norm” (Hoffman, 2002, ¶ 1). Both the physical boundaries of walls and the labels of grades are removed. Children and staff work together as a community of learners. While students may progress independently along a continuum of learning, they are never alone – they progress with the support of others.

I, myself, am a student in a multiage learning community. If you had shadowed me through my journey these past few years during my graduate studies program, and were to glance into any one of my university classes, you would have seen students of varying ages, genders, races, and cultures all grouped together as a cohesive learning community. Had you listened vigilantly to any of our classroom discussions, you would have heard engaging and enlightening perspectives that only people of diverse ages and experiences can bring to a dialogue. In eavesdropping on our classroom discussions, you would have heard students conceptualizing, constructing, and clarifying their personal understanding of concepts, while listening to their

classmates do the same. If you had glanced about any classroom, you would have noticed and noted the many role models within those classroom walls, and you would have noticed and noted that I, too, was a role model for others. Within the walls of these seemingly innocuous rooms, you would have seen students being tutored and seen their tutors. Had you followed me through these years you would have seen a series of heterogeneous learning communities, those whose individual parts exceeded the sum of their collective whole. Moreover, if you had looked closely enough, you may have seen the loom upon which the threads of lives like mine were woven. Had you been along with me on this incredible journey, I would have hoped that you would have recognized, as did I, that my experience was quite simply the best that education has to offer. And like me, hopefully you too would realize that the best is all that we can accept for children, both yours and mine.

I believe that the unlearning of graded paradigms and changing of long-held beliefs, in due course, enables educators to embrace the multilevel classroom context. As teachers begin to employ developmentally appropriate strategies within their diverse learning communities they see the many benefits of the multilevel classroom begin to emerge, and that it these experiences that hold within them the power to shape the beliefs of educators. However, I know that this is not a change that occurs quickly or easily, as these experiences emerge within the classroom context over time. Certainly my perceptions and practices regarding multilevel contexts have changed dramatically since I first entered the profession, and those changes took a great deal of time and involved a great deal of critical self-reflection, support, and mentoring. For me, it is also essential to recognize that teachers do not develop their professional identities in isolation, but instead are influenced by the powerful forces that exist within educational contexts. Clearly, teachers do not work entirely in the world of the classroom. Indeed, these classrooms are located

within larger bureaucratic and political landscapes. Schools and the divisions or districts within which they operate are organizations, organizations whose policies, practices, climates and cultures can and do have an impact on the individuals that work within them.

In the end, it is my belief that a multilevel classroom is an organizational model that needs to be underpinned by a teacher's willingness and capacity to accept the multilevel philosophy. But willingness and capacity alone are not enough, these educators also need structures and supports from their administrators and central office staffs during their time of transition. Occasionally, educators have the luxury of time to embrace this philosophy. Often however, the proverbial cart is placed before the horse and educators find themselves swept quickly into the tides of change. In either case, shift happens, and as educators and educational leaders, it is not so much the change that is as critical, rather it is what we do with that change that matters.

In advance of further discussions regarding multilevel classrooms the need to establish a clear definition of the term multilevel becomes apparent. The sheer multiplicity of terms utilized when discussing mixed age groupings can be confusing and therefore problematic. *Multilevel, multiage, multigrade, split, combined, and nongraded* classrooms, the terms are diverse, and so too can be the philosophy and organization underpinning these educational contexts (*Independent Together*, 2003; Hoffman, 2003; Veenman, 1995). When inundated with the myriad of terms used interchangeably to describe these educational contexts, it becomes evident that educational shareholders should not become caught up in a debate over the semantics of the terminology of the multiage classroom, but rather that any debates worth engaging in are those necessary in outlining the conceptual underpinnings of the multilevel philosophy.

For the purpose of this study, the multilevel classroom is defined as an educational context where students of differing ages and of varying abilities are taught within one setting and

without apparent grade levels (*Independent Together*, 2003; Wood & Frid, 2005). Curriculum and teaching within a multilevel classroom are based on individual needs and students' developmental levels, rather than on a set of standardized and prescriptive graded criteria (Fosco, Schleser, & Andal, 2004; Hoffman, 2002; *Independent Together*, 2003; Wood & Frid, 2005). It is important to clarify that for the purpose of this research, classrooms that combined children of two or more grade levels, but where grade levels and graded curricula were still apparent were not by definition considered multilevel classrooms, and therefore not considered for this study. These classrooms were not considered as they are typically created as a result of demographic and/or fiscal necessity, are considered temporary, and do not necessarily embrace the multilevel philosophy of enhancing and exploiting the age differences of students for both cognitive and non-cognitive benefits (Fosco, Schleser, & Andal, 2004; *Independent Together*, 2003; Veenman, 1995). Children, often selected to these types of classrooms because of their academic excellence, become subjected to a Darwinian model of survival of the educational fittest.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

This particular study is expected to yield a variety of themes - themes from which a viable professional support, development, and growth model could eventually be developed. Such a model would surely assist future mid-career teachers, in making the transition from traditional to multiage contexts and would surely assist those leading the change effort. It is hoped that the results of this study provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of mid-career teachers as they transition to multilevel contexts and that these insights may support the development of future professional growth models designed to support this transition. Rather than change for the sake of change, with a focused direction, we are more apt to make the changes which schools, educators and children need. Therefore findings

from this study have implications for teacher education in general, and for leading for change in particular.

## Chapter Two: **Review of the Related Literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Chapter Two unfolds largely in three parts. In the first two sections, the literature review provides a broad understanding of two of the central assumptions on which this study was based. The first of these, as mentioned earlier in Chapter One, is the underlying assumption that the multilevel context is inseparable from, and acts directly upon the educator, and therefore the context is both influential and pertinent to understanding the transition process. Central to this study is the concept of change, and as multiaging is the vehicle I employed for studying change and its implications for educational leadership; it is important to give a brief overview of the multilevel literature. Major headings and subjects addressed in this first section include: 1) the history of the multiage classroom; 2) the incidence of multilevel classrooms, 3) multiage research; and 4) multilevel instructional strategies and practices. Multilevel instructional strategies and practices were included as they provided the basis for the criteria I used during the classroom observation phase of this study, and part of the data triangulation in the analysis of multiage pedagogy and philosophy

The second section addresses the assumption that the teacher acts as the primary agent of change. The literature in this area is important when considering implications in the transition to the multilevel learning environment. Central to this study is the concept of change, and as Hattie (2002) has argued, educators do not change their instructional practices when the composition of their class composition changes, and so for me, it begs the question why? Is it a form of resistance – either conscious or unconscious on the part of the educators? It is a lack of will, or perhaps skill? Or is it something else entirely? The transition of a traditional teacher to a

multilevel educator challenges the status quo of traditional education. When this change is implemented educators are likely to experience vulnerability as they find aspects of their cultural, social, professional, or psychological identity challenged (Ellsworth, 2000). Major headings and subjects addressed in this second section include: 1) the teacher as an agent of change; 2) the effect of change on the individual and 3) resistance to change.

Finally, the third section, addresses the literature on leading change. Finally, I conclude by arguing, based on the review of the literature, the need for the creation of a staff development model to support educators as they transition to multiage settings, and that if change is to occur, we all, administrators, educators, leaders, researchers, and policymakers, are implicated.

## **2.2 The Multilevel Milieu**

### ***2.2.1 The history of multigrade classrooms.***

Age segregation is actually a relatively recent phenomenon and one which, according to Pratt (1986), runs counter to the pattern of child rearing that has existed previously for thousands of years. According to Pratt (1986), it is the multiaged classroom that extends far back through history, much further, in fact, than the current homogeneous system of graded schools. Pratt (1986) and Longstreet and Shane (1993) cite evidence of multiage instruction in ancient Greece, where boys aged seven to eighteen trained together in both mental and physical pursuits. In medieval trade guilds, apprentices trained with their mentors until their skills were equal to that of their master (Little, 2006; Longstreet & Shane 1993). Little (2006) notes that each apprentice took as long as was needed to master these skills; and for some, an apprenticeship lasted much longer than it did for others. In 16<sup>th</sup> century monasteries, a sixteen year old and a six year old were likely to be seated beside one another in the same classroom

(Longstreet & Shane, 1993). American colonial schools and Canadian pioneer schools were also multiaged. Created largely through necessity, these schools were an important educational fixture of early organized education in the United States (Pratt, 1986,). The one-room schoolhouse was also an important fixture in pioneer times in Canada (Cochrane, 1981; Jones, 1976).

In Canada...

... most of the [one room] schools closed in the 1960s, but in every province there are still a few. They still serve, as they did at first, small scattered communities whose children would otherwise have to travel miles to get to school, if they could get there at all. (Cochrane, 1981, pp. 8-9)

In these one-room school buildings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a single teacher would employ “tutorial and individual instructional strategies to instruct a group of 10 to 30 pupils ranging in age from 6 to 14 years” (Pratt, 1986, p. 112).

For the United States, it was not until Horace Mann, then secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, visited Prussia in 1843 that the age-segregated milieu saw its birth in North America (Longstreet & Shane, 1993). Longstreet and Shane (1993) assert that upon his return to America, Mann proclaimed Prussian schools superior to American schools, and suggested that where numbers allowed, American schools should emulate the age-segregated system utilized by their Prussian counterparts (p. 10). Fueled by concerns about productivity and efficiency, the industrial model of production heavily influenced the education system, creating a system that largely paralleled the ‘assembly line’ manufacturing practices of that era (Kappler & Roellke, 2002; Little, 2006). In this system, much like the factory model of

production, learners were divided into rows of ascending levels of difficulty in terms of subject matter or ‘tasks’. Each row labored under the strict supervision of a ‘monitor’, they in turn under the strict supervision of the ‘master’ (Little, 2006). Within a single decade, Mann’s recommendations were widely accepted by school boards and administrators alike (Pratt, 1986, p. 112). Educators, finding it simpler to manage students through an age segregated organizational system, embraced this ideology, and the advent of the graded textbook solidified this view (Vincent, 1999). Legislation soon followed which not only standardized school entry age; but also established sequential grades and curricula (Pratt, 1986, p. 112). Within the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mass schooling, complete with strict age and grade contexts, became the norm (Kappler & Roellke, 2002).

The American context is worth at least some small mention as it had (and arguably still has) influence on the Canadian educational landscape. “Although Canadians have clung with smug self-satisfaction to many traditional beginnings of pioneer days, they have not been able to avoid the vigor of American educational research and experimentation” (Woods, 1936, p. 378).

In Canada, evidence of European and American influence on school context came in the form of Egerton Ryerson, named Upper Canada’s first superintendent of schools in 1844 (Cochrane, 1981). “The first thing Ryerson did after this appointment was to take a year to travel Europe and look at the school systems there” (Cochrane, 1981, p. 8). Upon his return from Europe, via the United States, he wrote a report in which he crafted a series of recommendations based on what he had seen in his travels. These recommendations would eventually “set the tone for public education in all of Canada” (Cochrane, 1981, p. 8) as they would form the basis of the first of the Schools Act in 1846 (Doucet, 2002).

In 1919, the Consolidated Schools Act further cemented the monograde system into the Canadian educational landscape.

A single consolidated school could provide rural students with many of the benefits previously enjoyed only by students in larger urban schools. These included things like graded classes, better equipment and a greater variety of subjects. (Public School Boards, 2009)

“The death of the one-room school in the United States and Canada was delayed by the Depression, World Wars, and the long struggle of rural communities to preserve it against the will of the urban educational bureaucracies” (Pratt, 1986, p. 112). Such events may have served to delay the eventual demise of the one-room schoolhouse, but they did not prevent it, and by the 1950s, the age-segregated classrooms were most typically the norm (Pratt, 1986).

### ***2.2.2 The resurgence of the multiage classroom.***

As newly constructed consolidated, and graded schools began to literally and figuratively dominate and shape the educational landscape of both the United States and Canada, critics of the graded system were quick to leap to the fore, pointing out that a rigid grade system did not allow for the uneven developmental patterns of children (Longstreet & Shane, 1993). Renowned educational psychologist John Dewey felt that children learned best and most naturally when they were placed in mixed-age groupings. He felt that these graded schools needed to be “liberated from their inflexible subject matter” (in Longstreet & Shane, 1993, p. 72). The debate over the effectiveness of the graded school system continued for the next few decades, but it was not until 1959 when Goodlad and Anderson wrote a book entitled *The Non-Graded School* that the challenge to age segregation in school became more prevalent (Longstreet & Shane, 1993; Pratt, 1986). Spurred by a discontent American society that faulted the school system for

everything from the launch of Sputnik to racial hostilities (Cuban, 2004), the multiage classroom was viewed as viable model for education and societal reform. Finally, in the 1960s, after nearly a half-century of virtually unchallenged dominance by the graded system, American schools once again saw the emergence of multiaged schools as a deliberate educational context.

Many of these early attempts at the resurrection of the multiage classroom failed however, largely due to an inadequate understanding and the ill-prepared implementation of multiage philosophy (Pratt, 1986). As Pratt (1986) contends, most of these classrooms became mere ‘casings’ which held students of varying ages, but whose graded structure and curricula were kept intact (p. 112). Pratt (1986) notes that once again, the multiage classroom faded into near obscurity, however further reports that it was resurrected several decades later, once again largely due to a discontent American society. In the 1980s and 1990s in states such as Kentucky, Oregon, and Mississippi (Stone, 2004), school restructuring using a multiage approach began anew, this time led with a solid implementation plan, and underpinned by an ever-increasing body of research. According to Cohen (1989), this time, interest was generated by a focus on the importance of the early years as a starting point for whole school reform initiatives. Intrigued by the possibilities and promise of the multiage classroom, researchers scrutinized these multiage setting with growing interest; thus, there was a growing body of research that explores the effects of the multiage classroom on students’ academic and social performance – research that largely faded away, as did the multiage classroom as an intentional educational context by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***2.2.3 The incidence of multigrade classrooms.***

Multigrade classrooms quite obviously, have not entirely faded off the educational landscape. They still exist, though for various reasons. Little's (2006) research has identified eleven circumstances for the creation of multigrade classes. They include:

(i) Schools in areas of low population density where schools are widely scattered and enrolments low. Schools may have only one or two teachers responsible for all grades.

(ii) Schools that comprise a cluster of classrooms spread across different locations, in which some classes are multigrade for the same reasons as (i), and some are monograde. Some teachers within the same 'school' will spend most of their time with multigrade classes; some with monograde classes.

(iii) Schools in areas where the population, students and/or teachers are declining, and where previously there was monograde teaching.

(iv) Schools in areas of population growth and school expansion, where enrolments in the expanding upper grades remain small and teachers number few.

(v) Schools in areas where parents send their children to more popular schools within reasonable travel distance, leading to a decline in the potential population of students and teachers in the less popular school.

(vi) Schools in which the number of learners admitted to a class exceed official norms on class size, necessitating the combination of some learners from one graded class with learners from another grade.

(vii) Schools in which the general structure of classes is monograde but, where, because of fluctuating annual admission numbers, groups of learners need to be combined.

(viii) Mobile schools in which one or more teacher moves with nomadic and pastoralist learners spanning a wide range of ages and grades.

(ix) Schools in which teacher absenteeism is high and supplementary teacher arrangements are non-effectual or non-existent.

(x) Schools in which the official number of teachers deployed are sufficient to support monograde teaching but where the actual number deployed is less (for a variety of reasons).

(xi) Schools in which learners are organised in multigrade rather than monograde groups, for pedagogic reasons, often as part of a more general curriculum and pedagogic reform of the education system (Little, 2006, pp. 19-20).

#### **2.2.4 Multigrade research.**

When reviewing the literature on multilevel classrooms the need to establish a clear definition of the term multilevel becomes apparent. The sheer multiplicity of terms utilized when discussing mixed age groupings can be confusing and therefore problematic. *Multilevel, multiage, multigrade, split, combined, and nongraded* classrooms, the terms I used to search the databases are diverse, and so too can be the philosophy and organization underpinning these educational contexts (*Independent Together*, 2003; Hattie, 2002; Hoffman, 2003; Veenman, 1995). For the purpose of this study, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the multilevel classroom is defined as an educational context where students of differing ages and of varying abilities are

taught within one setting and without apparent grade levels (*Independent Together*, 2003; Wood & Frid, 2005). Curriculum and teaching within a multilevel classroom are based on individual needs and students' developmental levels, rather than on a set of standardized and prescriptive graded criteria (Fosco, Schleser, & Andal, 2004; *Independent Together*, 2003; Wood & Frid, 2005; Hoffman, 2002). It is important to clarify that for the purpose of this research, classrooms that combined children of two or more grade levels, but where grade levels and graded curricula remained discrete were not considered for the study.

Gomolchuk and Piland (1995) clearly noted the need to clarify the philosophical underpinnings and therefore the operational definition, of mixed-age groupings at the outset of a study to prevent misinterpretations of research findings. The central focus of their study was determining educator attitudes towards teaching multilevel classes – the results of which unearthed two unexpected findings. The first was that rural teachers held a more positive perception of multilevel education than did their urban counterparts. This result was surprising to the authors of this study because rural educators usually have little choice in the establishment of the multilevel contexts. Often mandated due to fiscal constraints, they are the antithesis to urban multilevel classrooms more commonly established by 'choice'. Emerging from the first, the second finding was directly linked to contextual philosophy. Unexpectedly, and therefore somewhat puzzling to the researchers, it was discovered that though rural teachers held both the most positive attitudes towards multilevel classrooms and had classrooms that exhibited the greatest cognitive and non-cognitive benefits, they were most likely to recommend the elimination of multilevel classrooms. To explain these findings, Gomolchuk and Piland (1995) cited a major ideological issue. The authors felt that multilevel philosophy was not embedded in the rural educational contexts, rather these classrooms were examples of 'split' or 'combined'

contexts where curricula was kept discreet, in effect the homogeneous treatment of heterogeneous students. Gomolchuk and Piland (1995) hypothesized that this organizational method actually increased teacher workload and this factor was causal of the educators' desire to see the multilevel classrooms abandoned. Little (2001) notes the connections between training, resources and positive attitudes and suggests that these challenges...

... represent a paradox. For children to learn effectively in the multigrade environments teachers need to be well-trained, well-resourced and hold positive attitudes to multigrade teaching. However, many teachers in multigrade environments are either untrained or trained in mono-grade pedagogy; have few if any teaching/learning resources; and regard the multigrade classroom as the poor cousin of the better-resourced mono-grade classroom found in large, urban schools, staffed by trained teachers. (p. 477).

While one may argue that positive perceptions of educators regarding multilevel classrooms result in positive academic outcomes for the students involved (Gomolchuk & Piland, 1995; Little, 2001), Guskey and Lindle (1997) suggest otherwise. The *Multi-age/Multi-ability Grouping* attribute is one of seven attributes of the Kentucky Primary Program, and since its mandated implementation in 1992 is the attribute that teachers scored as being one that they would least like to continue. Somewhat counter-intuitively, it was discovered that despite these negative teacher perceptions, KIRIS (Kentucky Instructional Results Information System, an assessment system developed by the commonwealth to track student and school progress) results showed significantly improved student learning and test scores in these multilevel classrooms. This particular piece of research suggested that multilevel classrooms can be successful *despite* negative perceptions of the teachers towards the multilevel context. In response to these results, Guskey and

Lindle (1997) concluded that it is *practice* rather than *philosophy* that matters. And while Hattie (2002) argues that teachers do not change their practices when the composition of their class changes, Guskey and Lindle (1997) suggest that they do. Guskey and Lindle (1997) argue that while teachers may fundamentally disagree with multilevel philosophy, in classroom practice they utilized strategies and activities that best supported their current context. Either the teachers did not recognize the cognitive dissonance between their beliefs and their practices, or perhaps their beliefs could be disassociated from their practices. In either instance, this particular study raised the question; is teacher ‘buy-in’ necessary to the success of a multilevel classroom? According to Hafenstein, Jordan and Tucker (1993), it is.

Hafenstein, Jordan and Tucker’s (1993) study focused on the effects of multilevel perceptions on the implementation and practices of a multilevel program. In this particular study, the multilevel classrooms were formed because of teachers’ desires to develop classrooms where different levels of social development and academic achievement were both expected and accepted. Teachers reported growth in both their students’ academic and social/leadership skills. The researchers concluded that the success of a multilevel classroom depended largely on the shareholders’ (including students, parents, and staff) perception of it as a positive experience.

Goodlad and Anderson (1987) also speak to the issue of the importance of teacher ‘buy-in’. In a 1963 study of 34 communities, Goodlad and Anderson (1987) discovered the majority of the identified problems associated with the establishment, maintenance, sustainability, and therefore the success of nongraded schools, involved the inflexibility and decided lack of enthusiasm on behalf of teachers for the nongraded program. Goodlad and Anderson (1987) asserted that teacher inflexibility led to reduced parental communication and therefore poor teacher/parent cooperation, whereas Manitoba Education (2003) argues that, when multilevel

philosophy is embedded within a school culture and is embraced by teachers, the issues of parental communication and cooperation can be addressed by engaging learners and evidencing the resultant learning that occurs within the multilevel classroom.

Goodlad and Anderson (1987) cited two key themes in the connection between parental and teacher attitudes. The first was that staff needed to be informed in order to attempt parent buy-in, and secondly Goodlad and Anderson (1987) stated that educators need time to both deconstruct old habits, knowledge, and theory and to reconstruct new theories and shared beliefs. Teacher flexibility then, is the cornerstone of the maintenance and sustainability of the multilevel classroom.

The findings of a longitudinal study (Nye, Cain, Zaharias, Tollet & Fulton, 1995) suggest flexibility may be less of an issue for inexperienced teachers because inductive teachers literally have less to ‘unlearn’ than experienced teachers. Results of this particular study showed that students from the multilevel classrooms significantly outscored their single-grade counterparts in vocabulary, reading, total language, and total math. It was noted by the authors that the traditional (graded) classrooms had the benefit of teachers with the greatest number of years of teaching experience, while the multilevel teachers had the least amount of experience (Nye et al., 1995). This finding raised some substantial questions as to the relationship between teaching practices and academic achievement in multilevel classrooms, and depending on further research, could have serious implications for how divisions and districts select, mentor, and support educators in multilevel classrooms.

### ***2.2.5 Multigrade instructional strategies.***

In a 1990 OERI study, multigrade teachers identified 102 strategies as being effective in multilevel classrooms. At the top of this incredibly daunting list were elements involving

classroom and time management, the effective use of grouping, and farther down the list developing parental relationships and socialization. In 2003, Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth published a document entitled *Independent Together: Supporting the Multilevel Learning Community*. This government document formed, in great part, the framework on which this schools' transition was based, so it is worth some mention here in the literature review. Underpinned by a social constructivist learning framework and supported by brain-based research and Gardner's multiple intelligences, the document identifies five essentials to quality learning and teaching in the multilevel learning community. These five essentials listed within this document include: 1) the learning community, 2) formative assessment for/as learning, 3) differentiated instruction, 4) curricular integration and, 5) planning for inquiry. Similar to the 1990 OERI study, each essential is broad reaching and encompasses many elements.

Multilevel instructional strategies and practices provided the basis for the criteria I used during the classroom observation phase of this study, and part of the data triangulation in the analysis of multiage pedagogy and philosophy. Many of these elements were drawn from the document *Independent Together: Supporting the Multilevel Learning Community* (2003), though I drew from other research as well. There was a fair amount of agreement across the literature in terms of common strategies and practices within the multilevel learning community. These included, among others, curricular integration, peer mentoring, the use of whole class inquiry, the absence of grade designations within the classroom, and the use of flexible grouping. The inquiry model, as described in *Independent Together* (2003), involves the gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the student, in terms of taking responsibility for, planning for, and supporting their learning, and is considered best practice in terms of organization in the

multilevel classroom (Politano & Davies, 1994), and is sometimes referred to as problem-solving grouping, where students work towards a common unsolved topic or problem (Cushman, 1990). Flexible grouping refers to a form of classroom organization which optimizes learning opportunities based on student strengths, needs and interests (Aina, 2001). Examples of these grouping include whole class instruction, smaller teacher-led groupings and dyads; the most important of these groupings include shared interest and common task groupings. These groups ideally should be organized to take advantage of the students' cognitive abilities and needs. Once in the field however, I quickly realized limiting my observations solely to these elements would prove to be a limiting factor in my research. Instead, I changed my strategy and paired my classroom observation notes with the reading I had done to look for evidence of multilevel strategies and practices, to see if indeed, the participants were utilizing these strategies, and if there was any change to their practices over the course of the research.

Anderson (1993) asserts that in order to be authentic, multilevel learning communities should meet seven criteria. These include: 1) non-graded labels such as primary unit, rather than first grade; 2) reporting and assessment that support continuous progress and avoid comparison and competition; 3) groupings contain at least two heterogeneous age groups; 4) grouping for instructional purposes is fluid and dynamic dissolving and reforming based on student needs and strengths; 5) the organization of team teaching to maximize interaction and collaboration; 6) child-centered curriculum; and 7) micro and macro level policy consistent with the multilevel philosophy.

Stone (2004) also compiled a list of 12 components that he determined essential to the multiage classroom. While Stone (2004) and Anderson (1993) agree on several components including authentic assessment, heterogeneous cohorts, flexible grouping, team teaching, and

child-centered learning, Stone (2004) mentions neither multilevel policy nor labels associated with gradedness, and offers several other components not mentioned by Anderson (1993). One component is *continuity* which Stone (2004) suggests is evidenced by multiple years spent with the same teacher and cohorts, which establishes the classroom as a 'family' or 'community'. It is suggested that the consistency of these relationships over time encourages greater depth in children's academic and social development (Vincent, 1999). Although Anderson (1993) makes no mention of this particular concept, it is perhaps because there is an underlying assumption that students within a multiage context generally do stay with the same teachers over the duration of two or more years. The component of *continuity* is built upon Stone's (2004) next component: *respect*. Within the authentic multiage classroom, there is an acceptance by both the educators and the students that each child has his or her own rate and style of learning, often referred to as developmentally appropriate practices (Stone, 2004). Developmentally appropriate practices are the practices and guidelines used to design programs based on the individual needs of the student, focusing on child-choice and integrated learning (Davis, 1992).

Another component of a multiage classroom is a *focus on student success* (Stone, 2004). Within the multiage classroom, students are involved in the process of personal goal setting and self-evaluation. Students are encouraged to reflect not simply on what they are learning, but on the learning process itself (Gaustad, 1997). One could argue that this component of student success could and should be evident in any classroom and that it is not the sole property of a multilevel learning environment.

Authentic *cross-age learning* is another component of the multiage classroom (Stone, 2004). Multiage classrooms facilitate collaborative learning, learning that is intended to benefit both the younger and the older student. Hertzog and Diamond (1994) supported this notion

when in 1994, when they noted that younger students in multiage classrooms evidenced significant development of more complex and interactive play and Pratt (1986) contends that younger children receive maximum verbal stimulation and develop new vocabulary more rapidly when grouped with children who are older than they.

Another essential component in the multiage classroom is the evidence of *peer mentoring* and the promotion of *student leadership* (Stone, 2004). Much like growth in a family or a society, students in a multiage classroom ideally progress from being mentored and lead, to a position where they are leading and mentoring (Independent Together, 2003). Hertzog and Diamond (1994) noted that leadership skills increased significantly in older group members in multiage classrooms. Studies also show that the tutor/tutored relationships between older and younger students benefit both groups of students (Anderson & Pavan, 1993).

Finally, Stone (2004) cites the development of *autonomous learners* as another component of the multiage classroom. Not to be confused with the term ‘independent workers’, independent learners actively participate in the organization, planning, implementation, and assessment of their own learning.

It could and of course, has been argued, that many of these components, with perhaps the exceptions of heterogeneous class composition, the absence of graded labels, continuity, and multilevel policy, should and are evident in monograded classrooms as well (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Mulryan-Kyne (2007) contends that because of these shared elements, separate training programs for monograded and multigraded teachers are not required, skills need simply to be learned in the context of the multiage classroom. That is the only change required.

## 2.3 Change

There is much in the literature in the area of individual change. As stated in my initial proposal for this study, I had wondered if this study would be able to draw connections between the culture-sharing group (participants) and the larger theoretical frames of change. As such, these theories were considered pertinent to this research and a review of these theories seems apposite.

### 2.3.1 *The teacher as an agent of change.*

In his book entitled *The One-Room School in Canada*, Cochrane (1981) introduces us to Kenneth Armstrong, a school board member from Ontario some 50 years ago. Armstrong recognized that teachers struggle with change when in the 1960s he was charged with the task of dismantling the one-room schoolhouses in northern Ontario in favor of larger ‘consolidated’ schools. For educators, the change – perhaps ironically in view of this research – was from small multigrade one-room Ontario schoolhouse to graded classrooms in a larger consolidated school, and as Armstrong remembers it, the change did not come easily.

Retraining teachers was my job. The chief difficulty was teacher adjustment...

It wasn't that teachers were obstinate or mule headed; they just had to come to fit a mold that was suitable to the job they were doing. Some found it most difficult to change. (Cochrane, 1981, p. 161)

Of special note for me, was that the concerns expressed by the teachers in Armstrong's time, some 50 years ago, resonated deeply with those expressed by Sarah, the more contemporary subject in the opening epigraph of this thesis. However for Armstrong, the transition was a mirror image of Sarah's experience, in that rather than transitioning to a

multiage context, the teachers' in Armstrong's were transitioning from the multiage context into a graded milieu:

...they had 35 pupils all in one grade – a very different type of experience. In the rural schools they knew the kids, all of their shortcomings and long-comings, as it were. Then they had a roomful of kids they didn't know at all. In September a few threw up their hands and said, "I don't know how I'm ever going to do it." (Cochrane, 1981, 161)

Such comments, made decades apart, would suggest that despite the era, teachers struggle when embracing new contexts. In terms of this research, the shifting from a traditional graded milieu to multilevel classrooms the school may be viewed as the unit of intervention; however the individual educator is the unit of action, drawing attention to the relationship between collective accountability and individual action (O'Day, 2002). Schools are collections of individuals, and because change involves the behavior of the members of an organization, it must occur ultimately at the individual level.

A growing body of literature highlights both the uniqueness and complexity of the relationship between teacher knowledge and beliefs and classroom practices (Isenberg, 1990). Rich (1990) suggests that teacher's ideological beliefs regarding educational change play a key role in the adoption and sustainability of that change. The correlation seems clear – the greater the similarity between the teacher's beliefs and the philosophy underpinning the reform – the greater the effectiveness and sustainability of the change.

### ***2.3.2 The Effect of Change on the Individual.***

Change can have a devastating effect on individuals and before any reform process is begun, educational leaders should be aware of the possible reactions from the constituents

involved in the change. “Change leaders need to be open to the realities of others” (Fullan, 2001). The effects for individuals who experience significant and direct change within an organization has been likened to the description of stages that individuals negotiate when faced with a terminal illness (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Burke, 2002; Peca, 1994) . Kubler-Ross (1969) outlines five stages of grief: 1) shock and denial, 2) anger, 3) bargaining, 4) depression and finally, 5) acceptance. In terms of traditional teachers transitioning to the multilevel classroom, the application of these five stages may be useful for educational leaders in understanding individual’s behaviors as they respond to change.

During the first stage, an individual responds to change with shock and denial as their individual security and comfort are threatened. Shock is a physiological reaction to the threat of change and denial becomes the psychological cushion with which the individual protects his or her self (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Peca, 1994). When threatened by external forces, individuals often react with ‘flight or fight’ behaviors – denial is the ‘flight’ as individuals actually flee from change by denying its existence. As change persists, an individual may lash out in anger, which constitutes the ‘fight’ behavior (Burke, 2002; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Peca, 1994). Anger within the individual occurs at the cusp of an individual’s transition from denial to acceptance. The realization that change is imminent and irreversible may cause the individual to lash out in the hopes that anger can halt the change. During the third step of the grief process, individuals begin to realize that change is imminent and attempt to hold on to old behaviors through calm and rational means (Burke, 2002; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Peca, 1994). Behaviors exhibited in this stage may include using rationalization, or incorporation of old behaviors into new ones. In either case, the individual is attempting to recreate security and comfort by bringing familiarity to the unfamiliar. As the individual’s attempt to deny, avert, and/or control change are subverted, the

outward anger that they initially exhibited turns inward and manifests itself in the form of depression (Burke, 2002; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Peca, 1994). During this phase, the individual begins to come to terms with the notion that change is inevitable, and their old behaviors are lost and new behaviors must replace them. This stage is underscored by finality as the individual realizes that they have no other choice but to let go of former behaviors. In the final stage, acceptance, the individual comes to the realization that old behaviors are no longer possible and new behaviors are now accepted by the individual as reality (Burke, 2002; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Peca, 1994). In this stage, individuals move beyond their old behaviors and move ahead with change.

When drawing parallels between Kubler-Ross' (1969) grief stages and the intense feelings experienced by individuals embedded within transformational organizational change, Burke (2002) is quick to note the similarity between the two, although offers a caveat to his readers. Burke (2002) asserts that though rare, not everyone passes through all stages. In organizational change there are always those individuals who will fight change, denying that it is necessary and never move beyond the first stage. Others, however, immediately embrace the change and move forward with it. According to Burke (2002), in organizational change either extreme is rare and most individuals move through all stages of the grief process, though not necessarily in a linear, sequential or ordered fashion.

Much like grief, Levinson (1976) argues that all change is a loss experience, especially when it is perceived by the individual as a loss of familiar routines. The more one has invested in familiar routines, the more likely they are to resist change. Like Burke (2002), Kubler-Ross (1969), and Peca (1994), Levinson (1976) believes that all loss needs to be mourned, and that individuals need time to discuss and deal with their losses. According to Levinson (1976) "most

organizational change flounders because the experience of loss is not taken into account. To undertake successful organizational change, an executive must anticipate and provide means of working through that loss” (p. 83). Framed in this way, it could be understood that resistance then, is less about the change itself and more about the loss of something of value to the person – loss of the known, loss of security, or loss of identity. From this perspective it is perhaps understandable that feelings of anxiety surface for individuals during times of change.

Seifert and Seifert (1999) note a different reaction to change, though still an inherently human one. Rather than grief or loss, Seifert and Seifert (1999) suggest that fear is a natural reaction to change. The authors cite fear of 1) the unknown, 2) failure, 3) commitment, 4) disapproval, and finally, 5) success. The fear of the unknown is not simply the idea that the individual is unaware of what to expect, it also embraces the concept of the fear of loss of control over self and circumstance. Fear of failure is straightforward and involves the notion that the initiative, and therefore the individual, will fail. Fear of commitment stems from the notion that if an individual commits to the new reform, other avenues of change, including prior behaviors or reforms will no longer be available. Once begun, the individual fears that they will never be able to ‘go back’. Fear of disapproval speaks to the individual’s perception that others will embrace change more readily and easily therefore placing the individual at a relational disadvantage. Finally, Seifert and Seifert (1999) contend that the fear of success translates into the notion that if the individual succeeds at an initiative, further demands will be made of them. Whether loss, grief or fear is an individual’s reaction to change the resultant emotion is the same; resistance.

Zaltman and Duncan (1977) suggest that one of the greatest barriers to change arises when educators lack the knowledge to understand, accept, or apply an innovation (p. 80). Davis (1992) has suggested that teachers who do not receive training in preparation to work within

multilevel learning communities may, either consciously or subconsciously, resist the change.

Further to lack of knowledge, Hubbard (1988) notes that forced change, in the sense that change is done 'to us' rather than engineered 'by us', generates a feeling of loss of control, which often results in resistance, rejection, or even outright sabotage of the change by the individual.

If nothing else, the volumes of literature on the effect of change on the individual illustrates the point that change is a highly personal and individual experience. This assumption that change is a highly personal experience is one that underpins the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). Hailed as the "most robust and empirically grounded theoretical model for the implementation of educational innovation" (Anderson, 1997) to emerge from the 1970s and 1980s "CBAM views changes as a process, experienced by individuals who seek to or are being asked to change their behaviour in a particular way (Loucks & Hall, 1979, p. 3-4)." This quote is called into question by Anderson (1997) however, who refutes Loucks and Halls' (1979) notion that the CBAM properly addresses the origins of change and in fact cites this issue as one of the major weaknesses of CBAM. "How well the model anticipates and explains bottom-up changes initiated by the participating teachers, versus teacher responses to changes advocated or mandated by others, is a question that has not been systematically explored, and one that would be worthy of future research" (Anderson, 1997, p. 333).

Where Loucks and Hall (1979) and Anderson (1997) do agree in their critiques of CBAM is on the notion that the model is underpinned by five central assumptions: 1) change is a course of action, not a result; 2) individuals bring about change, 3) change is personal, 4) change involves growth in both skills and feelings and 5) facilitating change involves interventions directed among individuals, innovations and contexts.

One dimension of the CBAM is Stages of Concerns (SoC) which attempt to describe the feelings individuals experience in association with change (Hall & Rutherford, 1976). “Concerns refers to the feelings, thoughts, and reactions individuals have about a new practice or innovation” (Hord & Hall, 1984, p. 4). The primary concerns of individuals in the process of change are identified by Hall and Rutherford (1976) as generally progressing in seven stages.

The first triad of concerns, identified as Self Concerns is divided into three stages:

- Stage 0, the Awareness Stage, where individuals are not concerned about the innovation.
- Stage 1, the Informational Stage, where individuals express an interest in learning more about an innovation before they adopt the change and undertake new practices.
- Stage 2, the Personal Stage, where the individual begins to reflect on how the change will affect them.

Concerns for self relate to how proposed changes affect (if at all) the educator on a personal/professional level.

The second core concern, entitled Task Concerns, consists of a single stage:

- Stage 3, the Management Stage, whereby individuals are concerned with managing the work needed to make the change. Time management, efficiency, and organization are central concerns.

Concerns for task relate to management issues created by the change.

The last of the core concerns, entitled Impact Concerns, is identified by three stages:

- Stage 4, the Consequence Stage, whereby individuals are internalizing new practices and are concerned about the effect of this change on their students.

- Stage 5, is Collaboration, individuals at this stage are concerned about relating their work to the work of others.
- Stage 6, the Refocusing Stage, where practices have been integrated into professional life and the individual is examining ways to improve these practices.

Concerns for impact relate to the teacher's adoption of a change and the resultant effects of the change on their students (Hall & Rutherford, 1976, p. 228-229).

Another assumption underpinning the CBAM is the notion that change occurs first (if at all) within the individual, and then within the institution. "Instead of focusing on institutions in the study of the change process the CBAM views the individual as the critical unit of analysis" (Loucks & Hall, 1979, p. 3-4). These perceived spaces which may, or alternatively may not, exist between the individual and the organization is brought to quick focus by Elmore (2007). Elmore (2007) states that there is a contradiction between the dominant culture of education in the United States that tends to define knowledge and expertise as an individual attribute and professionals who tend to speak of practices institutionally or wholly. According to Elmore (2007), the challenge for the next generation of researchers and educators alike is to move away from the culture of personalized practices, and the study of such, and instead move toward a culture of 'shared practices' that can be used as the basis for the construction of a profession.

Virtually all schools, no matter what their demographic characteristics or prior performance, must do different things, not do the same things differently. And these new things require new knowledge and skills... (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001).

However, the CBAM recognizes that the individual does not change in isolation; instead there are powerful social and organization factors at work within the change process. "The

Concerns-Based Adoption Model (Hall, Wallace, & Dossett, 1973) views the teacher as the focal point in school improvement efforts yet acknowledges and attends to social and organizational influences as well” (Loucks & Hall, 1979, p. 2). The key assumption to CBAM is that change can be facilitated (Anderson, 1997). Based on these assumptions then school leaders, valuing the outcomes of their multilevel contexts, must have a better understanding of how educators involved in the transition move from Stage 0 to Stage 6. At the core of this issue is the need to recognize teachers and their concerns as they progress through the transition from traditional to multilevel classrooms in hopes of creating positive change.

Closely related to the Concerns Based Adoption Model is the Teacher Concerns Model adopted by Fuller and Bown (1975). Fuller and Bown (1975) propose that teacher concerns are developmental and fall within three levels. The first level is evidenced by intense concerns about survival as a teacher, and is aptly named *Self-survival Concerns*. In the second level, the teachers’ concerns move from self-survival to worries about the varied demands of the teaching situation, or *Task Concerns*. Task concerns include practical concerns such as preparation of lessons and time and classroom management. Lastly, teachers begin to experience serious doubts about being able to meet the individual needs of their pupils which are referred to as *Impact Concerns*. Fuller and Bown (1975) suggest that these levels are progressive and that every teacher experiences them. Further, Fuller and Bown (1975) suggest that earlier concerns must be resolved before educators can advance to later concerns. Once teachers’ self or survival concerns are addressed and the teacher gains professional experience, concerns tend to be more mature in nature, or as Fuller and Bown (1975) suggest, they become Impact Related concerns. While Fuller and Bown (1975) contend that concerns move from self to task, then to impact, they

may also move from impact back to task or self, depending on the circumstances in an educator's personal or professional life.

While Fuller and Bown (1975) do not specifically reference a transition from a traditional to a multilevel classroom, they do recognize that other contextual changes such as a move to a new district or a change from a rural to an urban setting can see experienced teachers moving to a survival stage of development during their first year, and as such, it is recognized that these educators require assistance with strategies enabling them to become successful in their new context. It is safe to assume that a change from a traditional to a multilevel setting would qualify as a 'major contextual change', a change that would see the educator in survival mode for the first year and requiring resultant assistance and support in making the transition. Because individuals filter their self-concept(s) through their work demands and adapt accordingly (Huberman, 1989), it is important to examine teachers' concerns as they change according to the specific situation or context in which they are teaching. It is even more essential to support the complex interaction between the often conflicting perspectives, beliefs, and practices that accompany the development of their new professional identity. These conflicting perspectives, beliefs, and practices often result in resistance to change, and while resistance hinders the change process, understanding the cause of others' resistance to change can enable educational leaders to strategically place supports to ease these fears and lessen the resistance.

### ***2.3.3 Resistance.***

Educational leaders should recognize that educators are likely to experience vulnerability as they find some aspect of their cultural, social, professional or psychological identity challenged (Ellsworth, 2000). An effective change strategy should set the stage for participant acceptance, create a scaffold to enable individuals to interpret the change and to understand

reasons for their potential resistance to the change, and reward and reinforce new behaviours (Harvey & Kamvounias, 2008). The value of any approach to educational change that considers teachers as key players in the reform process lies in the understanding that the impact of the reforms and resulting emotions experienced is related to their beliefs and to their specific understanding of a reform (Fullan, 2001). From such a unique perspective, teachers' 'resistance to change' could be more clearly understood. Teacher's resistance is often based on common sense and conflicting professional orientations on the part of the teachers involved (Van Veen & Slegers, 2006).

Resistance within individual teachers may arise from a lack of choice or the imposition of change from outside (Hubbard, 1988). In education, this is often the case when government departments affect full-scale reforms in the form of massive curricular revisions or program initiatives. Brehm's (1966) theory of *psychological reactance* suggests that when an individual's freedom is jeopardized, the natural human reaction is to attempt to regain that sense of freedom. This instinct to protect the feeling of free choice is so strongly ingrained; individuals may proceed upon paths that are not in their best interest to oppose the attempts of others to change them. The implications for leaders in transitioning a school to a multilevel learning community are obvious. The success and ease of the implementation of change is directly related to the amount of choice that individuals feel they have in the change process. The greater the feeling of choice that individuals have in both determining and implementing a change – the more successful that reform is likely to be.

Resistance can be categorized by types. Hambrick and Cannella (1989) make several distinctions that are helpful in identifying resistance. The first type is *blind resistance*. This type of resistance is often emotionally based and represents individuals who are afraid and intolerant

of change of any kind. For the educational leader two types of responses are supported here. The first is to provide reassurance, as moving towards the unknown is daunting, and the second is to provide time for the individual to adjust to the change. *Political resistance* is another type of resistance identified by Hambrick and Cannella (1989). With this type of resistance, individuals resist change because they believe they will lose something of value during the change process, such as power, status, or income. The change leader needs to counter this type of resistance with negotiations, or by replacing that which was valued and lost with something of equal value. The final type of resistance as identified by Hambrick and Cannella (1989) is *ideological resistance*. This resistance is based on an individual's genuine belief that planned changes will fail, or that the change is in violation of an individual's deeply held beliefs or values. Put another way, this type of resistance comes from honest and intellectual circumstances or differing beliefs and philosophies. For the change leader, it is important to counter this type of resistance with strong data, facts and substance – mere opinion alone will not suffice.

Seifert and Seifert (1999) broaden the list of descriptors for resistance by adding positive resisters, unique resisters, let-me-be-last resisters, we-need-more-time resisters, cost-justifier resisters and incremental change resisters to the list of Hambrick and Cannella (1989). Positive resisters are those individuals who outwardly embrace change, yet take no action to implement the change. Unique resisters believe that the suggested change is good - for everyone else but themselves because the initiative will not work in their 'unique' situation. Let-me-be-last resisters stall implementation efforts in the hope that the new initiative ends before they need to implement it. We-need-more-time resisters use the excuse of requiring more time to implement the initiative in the hopes that the reform dies. States-right resisters will resist any and every

change that comes from outside their organization. Cost-justifier resisters use cost as an issue to resist new initiatives. Finally, incremental change resisters pick and choose only the elements of an initiative that they feel enhances their existing programs.

When educational leaders see resistance as a naturally occurring effect of the individual change process, rather than as a personal attack, they are in a better position to effect change in their organizations. According to Fullan (2001), there are good political and technical reasons for taking resistance seriously. Resistance can be a form of learning for change leaders because resisters often have a better grasp of local context and culture. In this case resisters with context specific knowledge may be able to help with the implementation of a new initiative. Rather than silencing objectors, states Fullan (2001), educational leaders should be listening carefully to their reasons for objecting to the change.

## **2.4 How Teachers Learn**

There is an assumption that when discussing individual change in terms of teachers change often comes in the form of employing new strategies and practices. Further, it should not only be assumed but perhaps expected that when teachers are asked to change in some way, at least some opportunities for in-career teacher learning be provided.

In Manitoba, these opportunities are generally provided in the form of Professional Development. Tallericco (2005) suggest that there are five typical models of professional development, and describes them as such. The first model is *Individually Guided*. In this model, teachers both define and direct their own learning over a period of time, generally one to two years. The educator sets a goal for her learning, and then creates a plan for achieving that goal. The *Individually Guided Model* is situated within a constructivist framework, in that it is intended to build upon the teacher's interests as they pursue topics that hold the most meaning

for them. Of course there are several limitations inherent within this model, as the goals the teacher set could potentially be vastly different from those of the school, taking them away from a path the school may be attempting to follow. The alternative to this would be that an educator may set what Tallerico (2005) refers to as a ‘safe goal’, ones which are too ‘thin’ and as such act as hindrances to meaningful change. In either instance, should administrators step in and attempt to reshape an individual’s goals, it could be perceived as manipulation on the part of the administration by the individual.

The second model, as suggested by Tallerico (2005) is *Collaborative Problem Solving*. In *Collaborative Problem Solving*, groups of two or more educators work and think together in a task-oriented situation to, as the name would suggest, solve a problem. Generally, these are what are known as curriculum development committees, peer mentoring and/or study groups. *Collaborative Problem Solving* also falls under the constructivist umbrella, in that there is an assumption that learning is as social as it is cognitive. Limitations inherent within this model generally fall under the ‘time’ and ‘time as money’ categories as educators need to be provided with opportunities to meet, and this has both scheduling and financial implications. Group dynamics could also play a part in this type of model, dominant members or those with ‘hidden agendas’ could commandeer such ships and steer them their way, which may be counter to a particular whole-school reform.

The third model as suggested by Tallerico (2005) is the *Observation and Assessment of Teaching* model. In this model, teachers collaborate in dyads as observers in one another’s classrooms and engage in mutual discussion and reflection about teaching practices. The purpose of this model as Tallerico (2005) states is to provide a second ‘set of eyes and ears’ for those involved. The process for this model unfolds as such; teachers meet for a pre-observation

discussion which guides the observers focus, followed by the actual observation, and concludes with a post-observation discussion between the educators. Tallerico (2005) again cites the time/money challenge as with the *Collaborative Problem Solving* model, and adds that the creation of such pairings can also be challenging. Should the administration select the pairings, administrator interference and judgment may be perceived by the participants, or there is the possibility of a weak pairing being created when educators are left to own choice for partners. The danger of a weak pairing is that it may just allay poor classroom practices. Further, Tallerico (2005) states that these discussions are meant to be non-evaluative and non-threatening, though does not comment on how one is ensure they are.

The fourth model, and perhaps the one those of us from the classroom are most familiar with, is the *Training* model. The training model usually has a skill or ‘technique focus’ and involves a large group of educators employing a direct instruction model, that is the ‘key note speaker’. If done correctly, Tallerico (2005) contends there are five necessary components to this model, which include; 1) *theory*, which denotes the value and use of the particular skill, 2) *demonstration* of the skill, 3) *practice*, providing the opportunity for participants to try the new skill under expert guidance and in real life situations, 4) *feedback*, which needs be both timely and constructive regarding the practice, and finally 5) *follow-up* which may be referred to as coaching, and is needed to promote transference and retention of the new skill. Tallerico (2005) readily admits that too often the focus of training rarely extends past the first two components and that this type of professional development if done well is costly and a long-term commitment, one that should not even be entered into unless a school knows they have both the time and money to follow it through from inception to fruition. Of course, this type of professional development relies heavily on the skill of the trainer.

The final type of professional development as described by Tollerico (2005) is *Action Research*, or as some label it, *Inquiry*. In *Action Research*, there is no set number of participants; individuals, small groups or the entire school may be involved. The process unfolds in three parts, the first is the identification of an area of interest, or a problem, the second is collecting data via active experimentation, and the third is adjusting practice based on the interpretation of the data gathered. This model is based on the premise that people are more likely to alter their actions when they explore issues about which they are curious, and can self-interpret, or experience' what works for them or conversely what does not. Tollerico (2005) cites the same challenges inherent with this model as those challenges identified in the *Individually Guided* model.

## **2.5 Leading Change**

Professional development implies change, specifically, changes expected of educators. Fullan and Miles (1992) contend, being knowledgeable about the change process can be both the best defense and the best offense that educational leaders have in attempting to achieve significant educational reform. While anxiety, grief, loss, and fear may or may not act as hindrances to the change process, understanding the cause of others' resistance to change can enable educational leaders to strategically place supports to ease these fears and lessen resistance to change. Despite the fact that change is dynamic, not linear in direction, shareholders can still be somewhat prepared for the process, in effect becoming open to 'expecting the unexpected' (Fullan, 2001). Burke (2002) suggests three ways that leaders within an organization can help their constituents deal with change; *conceptually, achieving closure, and participation*.

By giving individuals a way to understand what they are experiencing, providing a scaffold of sorts, leaders can help individuals cope with change on a conceptual level. One such

conceptual framework is provided by Bridges (2009). Bridges (2009) suggests that change is situational, but transition is psychological and further contends that people in transition move through three distinct phases. The first phase is *ending and letting go*. This phase is predicated by the notion that, individuals must let go of their old identities in order to successfully make the transition. Bridges (2009) contends that much of what others identify as resistance is really difficulty with this first phase of the transition process. The second phase of transition is the *neutral zone*. Burke (2002) suggests that people in this second phase experience ambiguity, confusion, despair and a sense of meaninglessness. Burke (2002) refers to this stage as no-man's-land, and describes it as a time of re-orientation, because as time passes individuals begin to find themselves ready to contemplate *moving on*. The final phase of the transition process is *new beginnings* (Bridges, 2009). In this phase individuals learn new skills and competencies, develop new relationships and visions for the future.

Another way to assist others in coping with change is what Burke (2002) refers to as achieving closure, although this is quite possibly easier said than done. Burke (2002) contends that on some level all individuals are likely to spend considerable energy finishing or resolving unfinished business. When change is suddenly imposed on an individual within an organization, and new behaviors suddenly replace old ones, individuals seek ways to deal with the 'incompleteness' they feel with 'a job unfinished'. Individuals deal with the need for closure simply by talking about former actions and projects, or in extreme cases by sabotaging the new reform. Burke (2002) suggests that what some perceive as resistance to change is simply an individual's attempt to seek closure. For the educational leader the implications are clear. Individuals need closure and the educational leader must find ways to provide the opportunity for them to do so. Ceremonies, even brief ones, commemorating old programs or acknowledging

individual's contributions to those programs provide opportunities to achieve closure in order to proceed with a new reform.

Participation in a reform does much to help individuals overcome resistance to it (Burke, 2002). "With regard to educational innovation, the main function of participation in decision-making appears to be the positive impact on teachers' commitment, motivation, and development" (Slegers, Geijsel, & van den Berg, 2002, p. 89). Burke (2002) further cites the old adage 'involvement leads to commitment', and suggests that the greater the degree of involvement an individual has in both planning and implementing a reform, the greater their commitment to that reform. According to Burke (2002), this notion is based on common sense (though contends it *is* backed by a great deal of research). Burke (2002) argues if leaders single-handedly plan and implement a change, those within the organization perceive the change as imposed and resistance will result, even if the plan is a good one. If an individual had no involvement in the planning process, no influence on the content, nor made any contribution towards it, then she has no psychological commitment to the plan. At worst, this may cause resistance to the change; at best compliance may be slow and reluctant. For the educational leader, the implication is that individuals need to be involved in the change process. This not only alleviates resistance to change, but the benefits to the planning and implementation process in terms of the valuable knowledge and contextual base that an individual can provide, are limitless (Burke, 2002).

It should be noted however that teacher participation in decision-making is not a panacea. Although teacher "participation in decision-making stands out in many studies, it should be noted that participation is a necessary but insufficient condition for schools to realize educational change" (Slegers, Geijsel, & van den Berg, 2002, p. 90). While there may be many theories on

the role of the individual within the larger context of whole school reform, one thing is clear. Those who attempt to create meaningful systemic changes must consider the individual when planning for reform – leaders who ignore this do so at their own peril. According to Fullan (2001), if there is any changing to be done, *everyone is implicated*.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

While initially at least, the literature reviewed for this research may have seemed eclectic, it was chosen to inform the assumptions with which I approached this study. While the broad focus of this study is change, the introduction of multilevel learning within a traditionally monograded school provides a focus for studying change.

The literature shows that while multiage instruction has a long history in formal education, over the course of the last century and a half, it has largely been replaced by a monograded system. Multigrade classes do exist today however, some created through a variety of necessities, and then there are those sometimes created by choice. And while a majority of the studies reviewed for this particular research focused on the myriad cognitive and non-cognitive benefits and detriments for students involved in multilevel education, the purpose of this study was not to question such evidence. Rather, it was to draw from this knowledge base a sense of the impact these educational contexts have on students. If Hattie's (2002) comprehensive research is to be believed, the impact on students within these classrooms is negative, yet other authors (Aina, 2001; Bingham, 1995; Fosco et al., 2004) suggest that quite the opposite is true and that this diverse context has many positive effects on student outcomes. It is quite likely that both cases are true, the effect of multigrade composition on student outcomes can be negative or it can be positive, just as one is likely to discover in any other classroom composition. Whether

the effects are positive or negative, the one common thread that runs through both sides of this debate in the literature, the constant if you will, seems to be the skills of, and strategies employed by the classroom teacher. The skill of the teacher and the strategies they employ are pivotal to whether these outcomes are positive or negative.

The one area in the literature on which there seems to be a great deal of agreement, varying really only in terms of depth and breadth, is the strategies and practices which are considered necessary for student success in the multilevel classroom. From the literature we can gather a set of strategies that are, at least generally agreed upon as being necessary to underpin success in the multilevel classroom, yet Hattie (2002) provides solid evidence that educators do not change their teaching strategies when the composition of their class changes. Again, there seems to be no clear reason why this is so. The literature on individual change suggests several reasons why this may be, citing grief, loss, concern for self and others, the myriad list of elements go on. The literature further suggests that resistance could also play a factor in why teachers do not embrace change. Bridges (1986) situates the individual, who he contends experience ‘transitions’ within the larger organizational framework, which is what he argues is the entity that undergoes change.

The constructivist approach, which suggests an individual’s reality is shaped by their background, experiences and culture, among others, addresses the reality that many factors can and do affect change in the individual. Harvey and Kamvounias (2008) suggest that a variety of factors can influence change. Examples include, among others: organizational culture; a sense of ownership; communication; resources and support; and leadership. It is important to acknowledge that teachers do not develop their professional identities in isolation, but instead are influenced by the powerful forces that exist within the educational context. “Professional

identity is shaped by personal biography insofar as it determines the idiosyncratic way in which teachers cope with and respond to the institutional and situational constraints of the profession, and to their responsibilities and challenges in the workplace” (Flores, 2006, p. 2030). Miles and Huberman (1994) contend that educators develop relationships both with other individuals within their organization and with the organization itself. These relationships impact, either positively or negatively, the individual’s perception of an innovation. What is unclear however, is what cultural scripts come into play regarding the development of these relationships. Clearly, teachers do not work entirely in the world of the classroom. Indeed, these classrooms are located within larger bureaucratic and political landscapes. Schools and the divisions or districts within which they operate are organizations that can and do have an impact on the individuals that work within them and as such it is important to clarify and differentiate between the two competing views that underlie organizational theory.

Educational research has generally conceptualized organizations in two separate ways - the bureaucratic approach and the human resources approach (Owens & Valesky, 2000). The bureaucratic approach, which is by far the most common organizational approach, is predicated by a hierarchical, top-down, and regimented authority. This traditional model promotes unilateral, top-down, directive, and even coercive exchanges which predictably reduce the opportunities for mutual and meaningful discourse (McGregor, 1967). Based on hierarchical control, rules, regulations, standards, plans and schedules, those utilizing the bureaucratic approach believe that the best way to bring about organizational improvement is through policy creation, standardization, and regulation.

Conversely, the human resources approach is built on a framework of relationships, relationships that are built with and among individuals who are engaged in their commitment to

achieve common organizational goals (Owens & Valesky, 2000). The ability to identify with the organization on a personal level is considered a powerful motivator for organizational success under even the most challenging of circumstances. In terms of school improvement, human resource theory suggests that schools are improved from within. Strong leadership, a collaborative climate, and continuous development of theory of practice are all integral elements of human resource theory. Underpinned by the notion of developing the capacity of the learning organization, developing relationships between all educational shareholders is a key element. For me, at the heart of this argument is the premise that organizations exist as human *perceptions*. Organizations are human constructs, comprised of the individuals who work within them. Organizations are built on a framework of relationships amongst those individuals, relationships that are cultivated and shaped within the organizational climate and culture, and if one wants to create change - deep, systemic, sustainable, and transformational change (Burke, 2002) - then one must begin at the core of the organization – the individual, that it is the individual and their experiences that is the loom on which the fabric of change is woven.

Clearly multilevel classrooms, for whatever reason they may have been formed, exist today – this we know. We also know that generally, at least, there is agreement in the literature of the skills, strategies, practices and criteria that underpin these diverse learning contexts. We also know from the literature that when teachers and schools employ these practices and strategies, their students benefit. What we also learn from the literature is that some educators do not embrace these practices, but what we do not know is why. Into this disconnect – this dissonance between what we know and what we do – falls this research project. If we want to support educational contexts, educators, and students as they transition into multilevel learning contexts, then attempting to understand the why and how teachers do, or conversely do not adapt,

to this context is an important step. It is only when this is more clearly understood, that further steps can be taken to help mentor and support these teachers through the transition process. It is hoped that the results of this study provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of teachers as they transition to multilevel contexts and that these insights may support the development of future professional growth models.

## Chapter Three: **Research Design and Methodology**

### **3.1 Identifying the Problem**

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where,” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you walk,” said the Cat

(Carroll, 2000, pp. 64-65).

The search for direction, whether in Wonderland, life and so too in research, is highly dependent on several things. One of them is the ability to recognize where one is at the present; the other is simply knowing where one wants to go. For novice researchers such as myself, an ethnographic journey must begin with at least some idea of where one ‘wants to get to’ – some direction. As well, every destination needs a point from which to begin, a genesis. Ultimately a carefully crafted research question can serve as both a starting point and an ending point in ethnography, providing direction throughout a course of study for the researcher.

Research designs begin with questions that researchers want to answer about a particular problem, population process, or project: or with topics they want to explore (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The research problem is a statement of intent which outlines the researcher’s topic of interest (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Goals generally refer to the researcher’s intention to either fill in gaps or expand upon an existing knowledge base, or to explore neglected lines of inquiry. As mentioned at the outset of this thesis, I recently coordinated our divisional Multilevel Team. Our charter—to improve outcomes for learners through the support and professional development of their teachers—involved meetings for multilevel specific

professional growth soon became secondary to my role of mentoring teachers as they made the oftentimes difficult transition from traditional graded classrooms into the multilevel milieu.

It was at this time that my research interest arose, some three years prior to my application for the Doctoral program at the University of Calgary, and far preceding the selection of a research method, thereby avoiding the problem of a method in search of a problem as cited by Fetterman (1998). The lack of professional growth models available to support teachers as they made that transition into the multilevel classroom was both disconcerting and problematic. How educators develop and change (or do not change) as they transition to multiage context, and what we as educational leaders can do to support them during this time of transition became the topic that I wanted to explore – it became my research problem and purpose.

As Wolcott (1999) contends “ethnography begins with a researcher’s ability to frame an appropriate question or to recognize what contribution ethnography can make toward understanding some larger issue. Ethnography begins with intent” (p. 242). Intent becomes apparent in the researcher’s selection of a topic or problem. This practice is critical in ethnography as the topic or problem guides every other aspect of the research process from data collection to the final presentation of the findings (Wolcott, 1995). It would seem this researcher’s intent developed years in advance of the outset of this research.

### **3.2 Research Purpose and Problem**

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers’ professional identity as they transition from traditional to multilevel contexts.

The research problem as written above, states the overall goal of this research project, and guided it from conception to fruition. A research problem “is really a statement of what the ethnographer wants to know” (Fetterman, 1998, p.3). Creswell (1998) calls this statement the ‘purpose’ of a study and contends that it is essential to both introducing and focusing the study, which I discovered to be quite true. On occasion, when I found myself under what seemed like mountains of discontinuous, at the time meaningless, and often overwhelming mounds of data, I would return time and time again to the purpose of my study to regain focus. Wolcott (1992) contends that framing the research problem can be a slippery slope for the novice researcher, and that it is at that point where many ethnographic accounts go sadly awry. “The resolution of the nexus between setting and problem is always recursive and dialogical” (Wolcott, 1992, p. 70). Wolcott further suggests that because of their related nature, the research problem is easily confused with the research questions, and initially I found this to be true, which became an internal indicator that I had yet to clearly indicate the goals and purpose of my study. Once the research purpose became clear in both content and context, the research questions became clearly discernible from the research problem. Research questions ultimately outline how the research goals are to be carried out. The research questions that further guided this research eventually unfolded as such:

- What do teachers perceive as their greatest challenges and opportunities in making the transition to a multilevel classroom? Do these perceptions change over time?
- Do the teachers’ beliefs and perceptions match their actions and practices?
- What supports were put in place for teachers making the transition from traditional contexts to multilevel learning environments? Were these supports effective?

Those employing ethnographic methods constantly redefine the research questions as the study progresses, in a process known as recursivity. Unfortunately, many a novice ethnographer makes the critical error of mistaking a setting for a problem or a topic of study (Denzin, 1978; O'Reilly, 2005; Wolcott, 2001). Selecting a setting to study rather than a topic or problem is problematic, because while a novice ethnographer may find a great deal interesting 'going on' in the field, without a purpose they have little idea where to focus their attention and efforts (O'Reilly, 2005). In the case of this study, as the multilevel classroom setting was integral to and indeed inseparable from the research purpose, O'Reilly's (2005) comments and concerns were duly noted. Indeed, by the second series of classroom observations I had begun the practice of taking a typed copy of my research purpose with me and leaving it alongside my notebook to remind me to focus on it and not to get immersed in the 'goings on' in the field and to instead focus my efforts and attention on the purpose for my research.

### **3.3 Ethnography**

Ethnography is perhaps one of the most widely used qualitative modes of inquiry into social and cultural conditions, and as such has gained widespread acceptance and respect among researchers, becoming the 'label of choice' for qualitative work (Wolcott, 1990a). Though there is much debate in the literature as to both the benefits and the shortcomings of ethnographic research, its widespread use, especially in educational settings, signals its unswerving popularity as a research tool for novice and experienced researchers alike (Wolcott, 1990a). Steeped in decades of anthropological history and tradition, its perception by others who have no notion of this history or tradition as an 'anything goes approach' to conducting research, masks the underlying truth that "ethnography involves risk, uncertainty, and discomfort" (Ball, 1990, p. 157). Conducting ethnographic research is a daunting and complex task; and without at least

some knowledge of the process, history and conceptual frameworks, it would be easy for novice researchers to lose sight of their goals and to lose focus throughout the course of their study (Wolcott, 1999). “To the budding researcher who does not know how to frame an ethnographic question, or lacks an adequate grasp of what ethnography can and cannot accomplish, initiating a full-scale ethnographic inquiry can be as serious a misstep as failing to do any ethnographic reconnaissance at all” (Wolcott, 1992, p. 31).

At the outset of this section, it is important to clarify that I approached this research project as an educational practitioner, graduate student, and neophyte researcher whose study was conducted *in the manner of* ethnography within an educational setting. I readily admit to having neither anthropological training nor practical experience in conducting ethnography, and so Wolcott’s words of warning weighed heavily on my mind throughout the course of this research. Although this research lays no claim to being a pure ethnographical account, it was conducted using ethnographic methods, and therefore I drew heavily from the literature for guidance during the course of this research.

### **3.3.1 What is ethnography?**

In literal terms, *ethno* means people and *graphy* refers to describing something (Neuman, 1997). Ethnography then literally means *describing people*. While at its heart, this simple definition encompasses exactly what ethnography is – it neither addresses the issue of, nor does justice to – the complexities of people and culture. *Simply put*, ethnography offers a way to make sense of this complexity, however ethnography is not *simply done*, and consequently a *simple definition* is not easily found. Whether attempting an in-depth review of the literature, scanning dictionaries, or taking a quick survey through introductory chapters of ethnography texts, a review of the literature immediately brings into quick focus the difficulty of defining the

term ethnography. It is no wonder that Wolcott (1982) has suggested that those conducting studies of an ethnographic nature should agonize, at least a bit, about how best to define ethnography and in stating its purpose – and for the would-be ethnographer, agonize is an apt phrase. Certainly, when reviewing the literature on ethnographic research the need to establish a clear definition of the term ethnography becomes immediately apparent.

Often used interchangeably, the terms *ethnography*, *ethnology*, *ethno-methodology*, *micro-ethnography*, and related terms such as *qualitative research*, *case study research*, *field research*, *participant observer research* or *anthropological research* are diverse, and so too can be the philosophy and organization underpinning these methodologies (Gay, 1987; Wolcott, 1985b, 1999). For seasoned and neophyte researchers alike the sheer multiplicity of terms utilized when discussing ethnographic studies can be both perplexing and problematic (Stewart, 1998).

An extensive review of the literature supports Ball's (1987) contention that there is, and likely can be, no universally accepted definition of ethnography, and Wolcott's (1982) reference to 'agonizing' is further noted. However, based on this extensive literature review, I have appropriated portions of other authors' definitions of ethnography, in effect knitting together elements of each into a definition that I utilized to frame my research and subsequent discussion in this paper. For the purpose of this research I have defined ethnography as:

The study of an intact cultural group, based primarily on direct observation for a prolonged period of time, and the processes, description, analysis, and reporting of these observations with the intent of generating a theory of cultural behaviour.

While an understanding of ethnography's use in educational setting is not central to the effort to define it, it is worth addressing however briefly because Wolcott (1985a) has suggested that it is in the area of educational research that ethnography has seen the greatest diffusion and abuse as a research methodology. Where ethnographic research had once been the sole territory of a small group of researchers with extensive backgrounds in anthropology and sociology, by the 1980s a swell of discontent with the quantitative methods utilized in educational research saw its emergence on the educational research scene (Gay, 1987; Rist, 1980; Woods, 1992). Ethnography in educational settings has made a substantial impact, either negatively or positively depending on one's perspective, within the field of educational research. While some tout ethnography as providing educational researchers with a valuable alternative methodology that examines the education system as a whole through the study of its many parts (Zaharlich, 1992), others grieve its abuse at the hands of inexperienced researchers lacking the understanding of its underlying principles (Rist, 1980; Wolcott, 1985a).

### ***3.3.2 Rationale for an ethnographic approach.***

The purpose of any ethnographic account is to provide description and analysis regarding human social behaviour. Utilizing a fieldwork approach ... the ethnographer selectively records certain aspects of human behaviour in order to construct explanations of that behaviour in cultural terms. An ethnographic account focuses most often on some particular group of people ... but it may also focus on some special human process, such as communication or divorce.

(Wolcott, 1973, p. xi)

Ethnography investigates a contemporary phenomenon or process, such as change (in this study, the transition of mid-career traditional teachers to multilevel educators), within its real life

context (i.e. within the context of the multilevel classroom), where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly bounded (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Perhaps of greatest importance is that ethnography allows us to see patterns of behavior in a real world context, patterns that can be understood both rationally and intuitively (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, ethnography is an apposite research design when the contextual conditions are pertinent to the understanding of the phenomenon studied. In this study there is the underlying assumption that the multilevel context is inseparable from, and acts directly upon the educator, therefore the context is both influential and pertinent to understanding the phenomena, which is why an ethnographic methods were employed. Further, using the transition of traditional mid-career educators to multilevel classrooms provides the ‘lens’ through which change was examined. A lens is indicated when resources and/or research time is limited.

To accomplish high quality ethnographic research despite relatively brief periods of research time and limited resources, researchers restrict their studies to a topic or “lens” through which to view the community they are studying. (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 5)

Ethnographers develop social relationships with others, variously called informants, respondents, participants, or subjects in order to discover firsthand from them their way of life (O’Reilly, 2005; Stewart, 1998; Zaharlich, 1992). The researcher’s purpose is to learn from the respondents; to acquire knowledge. This knowledge is gained through firsthand observation, over a significant period of time, generally a period of at least a year (Stewart, 1998; Zaharlich, 1992), and in the case of this research a period of 7 consecutive school months from December 2009 to June 2010. During this time, the researcher becomes a member of the community, allowing the researcher to observe people as they go about their daily lives gaining insight that

would not be possible in a sterile research laboratory. In fact, the researcher is the primary research instrument availing him or herself of their five senses to gather data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Zaharlick, 1992). Data gathering and analysis are eclectic and diverse, allowing the researcher to cross-check data collected in one way with data collected in another. Data collection is guided by the topic under investigation, the researcher's theoretical perspective, and circumstances that may allow and conversely limit the use of field techniques. Ethnography allows for researcher response to unique field conditions, the emergence of previously unknown local factors, and the resultant need for new data and different ways of obtaining it (Stewart, 1998; Zaharlich, 1992).

Ethnography takes the position that human behaviour and the ways in which people construct and make meaning of their worlds and their lives are highly variable and locally specific. (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 1)

This study focused on the human processes in which educators engage that most directly relate to their transition from the single-grade to multilevel context. This “attention to context and interrelationships in human lives is what makes ethnographic accounts different from accounts written from the perspective of other social sciences” (Wolcott, 1973, p. xi). The product of ethnography “is an interpretivist story, reconstruction, or narrative about a group of people” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 4). The aim of this study was to create a narrative of the development of the professional identities of three mid-career traditional (monograde) educators as they made the transition to multilevel educators/contexts by examining the ways in which they learned, developed, and evolved (or did not evolve) over the course of their first year of teaching in a multilevel educational context. From these narratives, this study was able to

forward lessons learned from the field – lessons that may assist other educators and educational shareholders in their transition from traditional to multilevel contexts.

The content of ethnography can address among others “beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, emotions, and social networks” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Because ethnographers examine a group’s pattern of behaviours they enable researchers to understand the processes, perceptions, and actions that are unique to that group. Ethnographic methodology was chosen for this study for this very reason; it enabled the researcher to better understand the processes, perceptions, and actions that are unique to each of the mid-career traditional teachers as they transitioned to the multilevel classroom. Ethnographic methods enabled this researcher to develop a deep understanding of each participant and perhaps of even greater importance – how each individual made sense of their changing world. Further, ethnographic methods allowed this researcher to address the conundrum of the Thomas Dictum – if people believe things to be real; they are real in their consequences. Ethnographic methods highlighted the differences between each participant’s perception of their actions (what they said they did) and the reality of what they actually did (Creswell, 1998; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 1999).

### **3.4 In Search of a Site**

Purposeful sampling allows for the selection of information rich cases for in-depth study – cases which illuminate the questions under study (Patton, 2002). In order to locate these cases Creswell (1998) suggests the need for gatekeepers to assist the researcher in both locating and gaining entrance into a research site. My initial proposal for this research was to seek out four mid-career educators, engaged in their first year of a transition from a graded to a multiage context. Although several ‘single’ participants located in various schools throughout the province would have been easier to locate, in an ethnographic study, “a single site is important

where an intact culture-sharing group has developed shared values, beliefs and assumptions” (Creswell, 1998, p. 114). Therefore, it was my intent to locate these participants within a single site. Timing was a crucial element for this study, as the intent was to capture the first year experiences of the traditional mid-career teacher’s transition into the multiage context. As demographics shift constantly, the flexibility for selection of these sites far in advance of the proposed study were limited. Initially, it was the intent of this writer to rely heavily on Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth (Department of Education), as a primary gatekeeper. When I began searching for potential sites and participants in May of 2009, my first telephone call was to the Department, specifically to the lead consultant in the area of Multilevel Learning (see Appendix A, Gatekeeper Script). At this time, I discovered that the consultant had just recently retired, and her replacement had only been in the position for less than a week. Though very supportive, the new consultant had no information that was of value in terms of locating a potential research site in the province. At that time the new consultant promised to forward my query on to the recently retired consultant, in hope that she would be willing and able to assist me with my search. Rather than wait for a response that may or may not come, my next telephone calls were made to personal contacts I had within Manitoba’s three major universities. Again, my queries were met with a willingness to assist; however, none of those contacts were able to assist me in locating potential sites or participants. My next approach was through ‘word of mouth’. I spoke with everyone I knew, but still with no success. As May waned into June, I knew that if I wanted to begin my research in the fall of 2009, my window of opportunity to locate sites in which to conduct my research and potential participants in these sites was rapidly closing. There seemed but one approach left. I compiled a list of all school divisions within the province, located the contact information for their superintendents, and simply started at the top

of the list, cold-calling each superintendent. The superintendents were more than willing to listen to my proposal (see Recruitment Script: Superintendents, Appendix B), many were able to provide further contacts to potential participants, but mid-way through my list, I still was unable to confirm any participants or potential research sites. Finally, late in June of 2009, I made contact with a superintendent who was pleased to inform me that yes; one of their schools was transitioning to a multilevel learning community in September of 2009, and that several educators involved potentially met my selection criteria. At that time he gave me the contact information for the administrator of that school, and permission to conduct research in his division.

### **3.5 Rationale for Selection of Participants**

In terms of sample size in a qualitative study breadth and depth become central issues:

There are no rules for sample size in qualitative case study. Sampling depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what was useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with the available time and resources (Patton, 2002, p. 244).

Creswell (1998) cites the issue of ‘depth’ in his recommendation of at most four cases in a study, and as mentioned earlier the initial proposal for this research was to seek out four participants within a single site. Admittedly, this was perhaps an overly optimistic goal at the time considering though geographically quite diverse, the province of Manitoba is relatively small in terms of student population, and there simply are not as many schools as in larger provinces. The second selection caveat for participants; an educational context embarking on its first year of transition from a graded to a multilevel learning context, had already narrowed down the number of potential sites in which to conduct this particular research to nearly nil. To further

slim down the pool of potential participants, my final caveats for the selection of participants were that they be mid-career teachers, those with between 10 and 20 years of classroom teaching experience, and that these educators have no prior experience within a multilevel learning community.

Despite the somewhat incredibly high odds against finding enough participants to conduct this research, a site was located. I was able to contact the administrator of that school and review my recruitment script (see Recruitment Script: Administrator, Appendix C) with him in late June of 2009. With summer break approaching, we agreed to set up a face-to-face meeting in September of 2009, so that he could further discuss the proposal in detail, before putting me in contact with potential participants. After a nearly three month long wait, that meeting was held and he provided me with the contact information of 5 potential participants, and gave his permission for me to proceed with the next stage of the recruitment process.

Over the course of the next two months I made contact with each of the participants (see Participant Recruitment, Appendix D), and after several cancellations and scheduling conflicts I was able to arrange a face-to-face meeting with five potential participants. By the end of that meeting, I had three signed consents to participate, and two declinations, both stating that they did not meet participation criteria based on the number of years they had been teaching (one was a first year educator, the other was beginning her 35<sup>th</sup> and final year in the classroom), leaving three participants in the study. It was therefore necessary at this time for me to revise the study by reducing the intended number of participants by one.

Although several 'single' participants located in various schools throughout the province were willing to take part in the study, in an ethnographic study, it was important for me to gain access to a location "where an intact culture sharing group has developed shared values, beliefs

and assumptions” (Creswell, 1998, p. 114). Therefore I concluded that it was more important to have three participants within a single site rather than four ‘single’ participants working in isolation of one another. Further, these three participants were located within the only school in Manitoba known at the time to be in the first year of its transition to a multilevel learning community. Several other potential participants eventually declined for the research project met some of the selection criteria, however the school communities which they were joining were already well-established multilevel learning environments, and they would have been the sole participant at each site.

In this particular research design, the culture sharing-group – that is the group of three traditional mid-career educators – formed the *unit of analysis*, and their transition to the multilevel learning context was central to the case as multiaging was the vehicle utilized for studying change. The unit of analysis is typically a system of actions, an individual, or as in this study – a group of individuals (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Tellis, 1997). The unit of analysis is recognized as a critical factor in any qualitative study (Creswell, 1998; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), and it is important to clearly define the unit of analysis at the outset of a study. Once distinct, the unit of analysis both guides the collection of relevant data and enables the researcher to relate the data back to the unit of analysis, which is essential in the later phases of data analysis and interpretation (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Yin, 1994).

Of interest, regarding site and participant selection, I was initially under the assumption that this particular site was transitioning “for pedagogic reasons, often as part of a more general curriculum and pedagogic reform of the education system” (Little, 2006, p. 20). Both the superintendent and the school principal, intimated that such was the case, that the transition in this school was based on sound pedagogic theory and research, and that the transition was being

made by choice, as a pedagogic, whole-school reform. When I arrived on site to conduct the first set of interviews, I was somewhat taken aback to discover that all three participants cited declining enrollment as the reason for the school's shift to a multilevel learning context. When I probed a bit further, each participant told the same story. The transition was initially presented to the school in the form of 'sound pedagogy' by senior administration, and as a *choice* to the staff. The participants reported that staff listened with interest to the presentation by the administrators, agreed that it sounded promising, but in the end, politely and nearly unanimously declined the change, citing the need for greater time to research and plan for such a change. It was only after the staff had said 'no' to the transition that the administration came forward with full disclosure regarding declining enrolments, and said that the school would transition to a multilevel learning community in stages over the next few years. There was no choice in the matter, and one participant recalls her administrator saying "If you're not on board, then where do you want to go?" Then she adds these comments, "It wasn't a threat. I don't want to say it was a threat, but it was just..." her voice trails away at that point and she gives a helpless shrug before continuing, "So all of us were like, 'Well where are we going to fit in? What if we're not on board?'"

Needless to say this turn of events added an interesting dynamic to my research, proving Stewart's (1998) and Zaharlick's (1992) comments regarding the emergence of previously unknown local factors to be true, as rather than a full-scale buy-in by a staff, which was what I had been expecting when I arrived; the change was initiated as a top-down maneuver by senior administration. The three participants in my study felt varying degrees of fear, in terms of job security, some anger and the feeling of being 'duped' in the sense that the administrators had not been entirely honest with them from the beginning, in one participant's words:

Part of it, I think, was that... the change was coming from the top down administration and it wasn't something that was kindled and encouraged and got going from the teaching staff up... [Now] our principal has taken an attitude more like, "This is a necessity, and it's coming because of demographics." Whereas before we were told by the administration, "Well multilevel learning is Good Teaching Practices. Why don't you want to do good teaching practices?"

The term 'best practice' resonated with all of the participants, most especially in the sense that the way the administration touted multiage philosophy as *best practice*, they all perceived that in some way the administration was insinuating that the way these women taught was *not* best practice. In one participant's words:

When it [the transition to a multilevel learning community] was first presented to us, I think the way it was presented made people kind of defensive about what they were already doing. "This is Best Practices. This is what we should be doing. This is what we're moving towards." But we're like, "Well aren't we doing Best Practice? Aren't most of us?" So it got a lot of us on the defensive initially.

This point was reiterated more succinctly by another participant... "Well, why *aren't* we doing *Best Practice*?" "I think I am." She says the first sentence in a disparaging way – whether enunciating her personal distaste for the term *best practice* or mimicking the tone of her administrator I am not certain, though my instinct suggests that it was the latter. However her second statement was said with a tone that could only be described as indignant, laced with an undercurrent of hurt. This comment resonated with me, because although she eventually waved off her feelings, and that particular topic, with a flick of her hand and a shrug of her shoulder,

simulating the manner of someone who doesn't care about such comments – but who you know simply by the tone of voice and the look in her eyes, does – and deeply...

### **3.6 Data Collection**

“The tools of ethnography are designed for discovery” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 1).

The methodology of ethnography was developed within the discipline of anthropology (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Neuman, 1997; O'Reilly, 2005; Wilcox, 1982; Wolcott, 1999; Woods, 2006) and those principles are evident throughout the ethnographic process.

Ethnography as a *process of research* refers to the eclectic variety of research techniques utilized to amass data; however, it involves far more than a mere set of data gathering techniques.

Rather, it is a way of studying human life that encapsulates a method of inquiry which leads to a narrative about a group of people (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

Of note, the techniques employed in this research, as described below are used by, but are not exclusive to, ethnographers and Wolcott (1992) cautions that technique alone does not make a study ethnographic – rather it is the commitment to cultural interpretation that does. In the field, at least superficially, it would be difficult if not impossible to discern between researchers conducting case studies and ethnographies. To discriminate between the two we would need to also discern the difference between the thought processes of each researcher and to which deeds and accounts of the informants they were attending (Wolcott, 1999).

In this study, data were collected in three relatively distinct phases over a seven-month period from early December 2009 to early June 2010. The three phases included a pre-observation semi-structured interviews phase, followed by a series of five, 70-minute classroom observations per participant, and concluded with post-observation semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to keep journals during the course of this study to provide multiple

sources of evidence that were to illuminate different aspects of the research aim and objectives throughout this seven-month period.

### ***3.6.1 Pre-observation semi-structured interviews.***

Unstructured and semi-structured interviews are a method often used by ethnographers. Ethnographic interview is a data collection method whose purposes are to glean in-depth information on a specific topic, to acquire personal histories of the participants, to gain cultural knowledge and beliefs, and to describe practices (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In the case of this research, interviews were employed in an attempt to establish teachers' beliefs regarding the transition to determine how closely these beliefs matched with actual classroom practices noted during the subsequent classroom observations, and to establish a baseline for comparison with respondents' answers to the post-observation interviews. They were also employed to explore the participants' perceptions of the challenges and opportunities that they saw inherent in a multilevel classroom and they provided the opportunity to explore perceptions of the supports that they received and the effectiveness of these supports. In effect, these interviews provided data to paint a picture of the current reality of the work of mid-career teachers as they transitioned to multilevel contexts.

Once key participants were identified, a copy of the Pre-observation Semi-structured interview questions was provided as a guideline for the semi-structured interviews. The purpose of this was twofold, to “ally any fears about the interviews... [and] to alert the participants to what topics would be discussed so they could expand on these in the interviews” (Brunton & Coll, 2005, p. 149).

The questions provided to the participants were as follows:

1. Tell me about your journey in becoming a multiage teacher.

- a. How did you come to be a multiage teacher?
  - b. How is teaching in a multiage classroom different from that of a single-grade classroom?
2. What supports were put in place for you as you made the transition from traditional contexts to multiage learning environments?
  - a. Were these supports effective?
  - b. Who offered these supports?
3. What did you perceive as your greatest challenges in making the transition to a multiage classroom?
  - a. Have these perceptions changed over time? If so, in what ways?
4. What did you perceive as your greatest opportunities in making the transition to a multiage classroom?
  - a. Have these perceptions changed over time? If so, in what ways?
5. Describe your classroom as both a learning and teaching environment.
  - a. How are children learning in your classroom?
  - b. How are your beliefs about how children learn reflected in your classroom?
6. Describe what an ideal teaching and learning environment would look like.
  - a. Is it different than your real classroom?

- b. What do you see needing to change in order to move closer towards an ideal teaching and learning environment?
7. What do you feel is the teacher's central role in the classroom?
8. Explain how you meet the wide range of abilities in your multiage classroom.
9. What would you identify as the advantages of a multiage classroom?
10. What would you identify as the disadvantages of a multiage classroom?

Of course, as a preface to these questions, typical demographic questions were posed, such as where the participants received their training, years taught, grade levels and subject areas, etc. During the first participant's interview however, she said something telling that made me add two questions to all of the participant's pre and post interview questions. They were as follows: "If given the choice between a traditional graded school and a multilevel context, which would you enroll your child/children in?" and "In a perfect world, if you had the choice between teaching in a traditional graded classroom (as you have always done), or a multilevel classroom, which would you choose?"

### **3.6.2 Artefacts.**

Another data collection technique common to ethnography is the gathering of artefacts. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) have suggested that the purpose of gathering artefacts is to elicit themes from them as a body of written or visual media. These artefacts may include planning documents, meeting agendas or minutes, assessment pieces used in the field, student exemplars, pictures and videotape. A review of documents and artefacts considered pertinent to the study was undertaken throughout the course of the study. These artefacts and documents included 20

school newsletters one from each month of the school years of 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, the 2008-2009 and the 2009-2010 school plans, teacher planning documents such as lesson plans and assessment pieces used in the field. Divisional, provincial, and school based planning documents that include multilevel implementation strategies, structures, and procedures were also collected. Of interest, I also combed through nearly two years of the local newspaper looking for any information regarding the change in the school context – and did not find a single reference to either the proposed change, or anything regarding the actual transition during its first year. A data collection guide for documents and artefacts was employed.

### ***3.6.3 Participant Journals.***

I was provided with a maximum of 16 days release time by my employer to conduct this study, though I would have preferred more. There is self-acknowledgement that I was unhappy that I could not be on-site as much as I may have preferred. To help alleviate this and in order to glean as in-depth understanding as I could of the participants, they were asked to keep journals which provided multiple sources of evidence which were used to illuminate different aspects of the research aim and objectives throughout the seven-month period. The participant journal had two aims: to record school, classroom and individual routines over the course of the study, therefore providing a rich source of data about day-to-day activities of participants and second, to facilitate personalized reflections of these routines. As it would unfold, there was very little in the journals referring to the former but a great deal of the latter. At the end of each subsequent visit, I began to write specific questions for the participants to answer. As I was not always available to be on-site with the participants or able to attend specific events with them, such as staff meetings or school visits; the journals afforded me the opportunity to discuss these events

with the participants. For example after one visit on a wintry January morning, I left the following query with all three participants:

You recently attended a PAC (Parent Advisory Council) meeting – my understanding is that the purpose of this meeting was to discuss the school’s transition to a multilevel learning context...

What were your impressions of this meeting compared to your first PAC meeting last year?

Could you reflect on the impact of parental and community perception of multilevel learning communities on you? Your students? Your classroom?

Upon reflection, I soon became aware that the questions I wrote into the participants’ journals were indicative of and became evidence of the recursive and dialogical process in which I engaged in reframing and revisiting my initial research questions.

Data eventually garnered from these journals was utilized as a means of cross-checking information collected through pre and post classroom observations interviews, as well as the classroom observations. The journal questions were generally designed in the field to supplement existing information, to provide details for later illustrative accounts written-up by me, and to verify/clarify researcher’s understandings. Initially the journals were provided for each participant at our first meeting, along with addressed, postage-paid envelopes to facilitate the return to me. However, as was the case with all three participants, the journals were completed by the final interviews and returned to me at that time. The journals were transcribed verbatim, and went through a two-step cleaning and coding process as did the initial interviews. Any references to non-participating third parties, and/or place names which may have been used to identify the respondents were replaced by pseudonyms during the transcription process.

### ***3.6.4 Post-observation semi-structured interviews.***

Post-observation interviews provided data to paint a picture of the current reality of the participants, illustrating how their beliefs and perceptions evolved (or did not evolve) over time, how individual, organizational and contextual influences affect practice, and identified forces that both enable and constrain their work. As with the pre-observation interviews the questions were provided to the participants in advance to “ally any fears about the interviews... [and] to alert the participants to what topics would be discussed so they could expand on these in the interviews” (Brunton & Coll, 2005, p. 149).

As noted below there were few alterations to the initial set of pre-observation questions:

1. Looking back over the past few months what supports did you receive that made the transition from traditional contexts to multiage learning environments easier?
2. Based on your experience, what supports would you have liked to have received but did not?
3. What did you originally perceive as your greatest challenges in making the transition to a multiage classroom?
  - a. Have these perceptions changed over time? If so, in what ways?
4. What did you originally perceive as your greatest opportunities in making the transition to a multiage classroom?
  - a. Have these perceptions changed over time? If so, in what ways?
5. Describe what an ideal teaching and learning environment would look like.
  - a. Is it different than your real classroom?

- b. What do you see needing to change in order to move closer towards an ideal teaching and learning environment?
6. What do you feel is the teacher's central role in the classroom?
  - a. Has this notion changed since becoming a multiage teacher?
7. Explain how you meet the wide range of abilities in your multiage classroom.
  - a. How has this changed as you have become more experienced in the multiage classroom?
8. What would you identify as the advantages of a multiage classroom?
  - a. Has your perception regarding this changed? How?
9. What would you identify as the disadvantages of a multiage classroom?
  - a. Has your perception regarding this changed? How?

As with the pre-observation interviews, the post-observation interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. A second 'cleaned' copy was then created of each transcription. In this second copy, errors made by the transcriber were corrected, context was embedded and details from my notes were added. A third and final copy was then created, this became the copy I used to add thoughts, comments and queries, and eventually formed the basis for the data coding process.

### ***3.6.5 Participant observations.***

The bulk of data collection during the classroom observations were the observer's field notes. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) describe field notes as both data and analysis. Once recorded, these observations become data or the product of the observation process, and they provide accurate description of what is observed. In ethnographic methods, the researcher is the primary data collection tool (Creswell, 1998; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 1999), and

in ethnography as in any qualitative research approach, it is imperative that the researcher gather multiple sources of evidence to allow for converging methods of inquiry (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 1999; Yin, 1994). Participant observation and the resultant field notes were the central data collection tool/data in this study; a research log, participant journal entries and systematic interviewing provided supportive data to the field notes.

Data, in the form of field notes, were gathered through a series of five, seventy-minute classroom observations in each of the three participants' classroom, a total of 15 classroom observations in all. The purpose of the classroom observations was to record situations as they occurred and to record the meanings of these events to the participants (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In this study, the target of these observations was activities, events and sequences, settings, participation structures, behaviours of participants, and conversations and interactions. The depiction of physical setting, acts, activities, interaction patterns, meanings, beliefs, and emotions added depth and breadth to content of this data.

Participant observation involves the researcher's involvement in a variety of activities over an extended period of time that enable him/her to observe the cultural members in their daily lives and to participate in their activities to facilitate a better understanding of those behaviors and activities. The process of conducting this type of field work involves gaining entry into the community, selecting gatekeepers and key informants, participating in as many different activities as are allowable by the community members, clarifying one's findings through member checks, formal interviews, and informal conversations, and

keeping organized, structured field notes to facilitate the development of a narrative that explains various cultural aspects to the reader. (Kawulich, 2005)

Though there are several roles which an observer may take (Gold, 1958), I chose the ‘observer as participant’ stance, because it enabled me to participate in the group activities as desired, yet maintained my primary role which was to collect data. The teachers and students were aware of my activities and my purpose for being there but rarely attempted to engage me in activities. Further, this stance enabled me to “observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 380). DeMunk and Sobo (1998) suggest that there are several advantages to using participant observation in lieu of other methods of data collection. Such advantages include that it provides entrance to the “backstage culture” (p. 43); that it allows for thick and rich detailed description, in terms of describing “behaviors, intentions, situations, and events as understood by one's informants” (p. 43); and further, it provides the researcher the opportunity to participate in unscheduled events, such as staff or parent meetings, as it was in the case of this research. Another reason for choosing this stance is that I am well aware of my own ‘weaknesses’ in that were I to choose another stance, one where I was more involved in the activities in the classroom and in a position where meaningful relationship of a more personal than professional nature were developed, that the likelihood of my ‘going native’ (an ethnographic term whereby the ethnographer becomes so involved in those that they are studying that they lose sight of their research purpose and goals) and losing perspective would have been high. As it was, the aloof facade provided by the ‘observer as participant’ stance was difficult enough to hide behind, and many times I caught myself, quite naturally (as this is both

my vocation and my avocation) wanting to go assist the teacher or the students with their activities. So it would come to pass that the most important facet of this particular stance was that it provided me with the ‘excuse’ as it were to maintain a modicum of ‘disconnection’ with the participants.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Analysis, according to Wolcott (1994), is the ‘quantitative side of qualitative research’ (p. 26), and involves, among others, using charts, diagrams, and figures to display findings. Wolcott (1994) suggests searching for patterned regularities within the data. Although Wolcott (1994) recommends linking emerging patterns to a theoretical model to provide structure to the ethnographer’s interpretations, it became clear that themes and patterns readily emerged as the study was conducted. In this step of the data analysis process naturalistic generalizations were developed in terms of the patterns and themes emerging from the interviews, journal responses and classroom observations.

#### ***3.7.1 Data sorting and organization.***

To help researchers manage the plethora of data generated in the course of a study of directed change, George Foster, (1969) in *Applied Anthropology*, offers a straightforward initial organizational system. In terms of data sorting, I began with the three categories suggested by Foster (1969); the *target group* – in this case the participants. Next, was the *innovating organization*, or the so-called change agents which included the senior administration at the school board as well as the principal and vice-principal at the school level, and finally, the *interaction settings*, which were the arenas in which the target group and the innovating organization interacted. It is important to note that this strategy was employed as an

organizational tool only, and was not employed as a method of coding. It did however provide an organizational framework from which the categories emerged.

Data organization began immediately after the initial pre-observation interviews. The original notes and audio of these interviews were reviewed soon after the interviews were completed so that events, actions, thoughts and context were still fresh in my mind, and initial jot notes and amendments were made at this time. The audio was sent immediately to the transcriber to be recorded verbatim. From this transcription, a second iterative and more fully detailed account was rendered. Participant journals were transcribed verbatim, only identifying information was altered or removed. Notes regarding the content of the classroom observations, were initially recorded in field books in shorthand form, and from this transcription, a second iterative and more fully detailed account was rendered. During a third and final revision of both the classroom observations and the pre and post observation interviews, researcher comments, thoughts, questions, reflections and personal observations were added. Preliminary themes or patterns were developed after a comparison of the initial interview question responses, and at this time the coding process began.

### ***3.7.2 Data coding.***

It is important, no imperative, to construct a coding system not because the coding system represents the ‘true’ structure of the process you are studying, but because it offers a framework for organizing and thinking about the data.

(deMunck & Sobo, 1998, p. 48)

The approach I took during content analysis is what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) refer to as conventional qualitative content analysis. In this approach, coding categories are directly and

inductively derived from the raw data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this research, analysis began with the coding of responses gained during the pre-observation interview phase. As I reviewed each participant's response to the initial questions, commonalities and therefore categories began to emerge almost immediately. I highlighted specific key experiences and phrases in response to my queries. For example, when asked "What did you perceive to be the biggest challenge in transitioning to the multilevel classroom?" one participant answered:

To me, having the two grades, the range of ability would be that much bigger, so that was my biggest concern.

While another stated:

I wanted to always meet the needs of the kids in Grade X, [and] at the same time, bring the [other grade] along like I had to. So I didn't feel that I was reaching either group at the beginning.

While the third said:

The Math curriculum builds on each [previous] year and ... because we're coming the first time into multilevel; these [older kids] have taken Grade X Math. But I've got to teach those [younger children] those building blocks before we can go on. And so that was my major challenge.

For me then, the comments suggested that an initial challenge was meeting the needs of the learner, and so that was an early theme that emerged.

Subsequent coding took place by constantly comparing the responses to the pre-observation interviews with the data gained after each subsequent classroom observation and journal entry, to allow for a continual emergence of categories and themes. As the coding process proceeded, new themes emerged, while others collapsed.

The constant comparative method of data analysis was utilized to seek out common patterns and themes among the data. The constant comparative method is utilized when researchers want to group answers to universal questions and analyze emerging perspectives of central themes (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe the constant comparative method of data analysis as progressing in four distinct stages:

1. comparing incidents applicable to each category,
2. integrating categories and their properties,
3. delimiting the theory, and
4. writing the theory.

According to Goetz and LeCompte (1981) this method “combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed” (p. 58). As social phenomena are documented and classified, they are compared across categories. The process of developing categories is one of constant refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process as new data is continuously fed back into the process of category coding. This constant comparison of new events to previous events allows for the discovery of new relationships (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). As was expected the dynamic nature of this research led to a continuous interaction between the data collection process and the data interpretation phase in such a way that it guided me through each subsequent phase of data gathering (Flores, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The following questions provided data which helped me determine the emergence of patterns.

(1) What do teachers perceive as their greatest challenges and opportunities in making the transition to a multilevel classroom? Do these perceptions change over time?

This question was answered by using an inductive approach to analyze themes or patterns. Data was reported utilizing comments from the participant interviews and participant journals, and was substantiated by classroom observations.

(2) Do the participant's beliefs and perceptions match their actions and practices?

To answer this question, data was reported utilizing comments from the participant interviews and participant journals, and was substantiated by classroom observations. Then I employed triangulation, to determine if the participants' actions and practices matched their beliefs and perceptions. Triangulation refers to the process of "testing one source of information against another to strip away alternative rival explanations" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, pp. 210-211). Using multiple or alternative sources of data builds redundancy into data collection methods (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The purpose of triangulation, whereby multiple sources of data, multiple methods, and multiple theories is utilized to provide corroborating evidence, is to create such redundancy (Denzin, 1978). To answer the above question, data were triangulated in the following way. I noted what the teachers said during their interviews surrounding their beliefs and perceptions of multilevel learning, and compared these words against the teachers' actions in the classrooms, and then layered those words and actions against what the literature says about multilevel philosophy, strategies and practices.

(3) What supports were put in place for teachers making the transition from traditional contexts to multilevel learning environment? Were these supports effective?

This question was answered by using an inductive approach to analyze themes or patterns. Data was reported utilizing comments from the participant interviews and participant journals, and was substantiated by classroom observations and the gathering of relevant artefacts.

### **3.8 Validity and Reliability**

Much of the literature would suggest that the focus of interest in an ethnography is in the fieldwork stage of the research, and it is during this phase that the issues of validity and reliability are addressed (Creswell, 1998). Due largely to researcher subjectivity during the data collection process, establishing construct validity in ethnographic research is considered to be particularly onerous (Wolcott, 1999). Spindler and Spindler (1987) propose nine criteria for ‘quality’ ethnography to offset this problem. They include:

- Criterion I. Observations are contextualized.
- Criterion II. Hypotheses emerge in situ as the study goes on.
- Criterion III. Observation is prolonged and repetitive.
- Criterion IV. Through interviews, observations, and other eliciting procedures, the native view of reality is obtained.
- Criterion V. Ethnographers elicit knowledge from informant-participants in a systemic fashion.
- Criterion VI. Instruments, codes, schedules, questionnaires, agenda for interviews, and so forth are generated in situ as a result of inquiry.

Criterion VII. A transcultural, comparative perspective is frequently an unstated assumption.

Criterion VIII. The ethnographer makes explicit what is implicit and tacit to informants.

Criterion IX. The ethnographic interviewer must not predetermine responses by the kinds of questions asked. (Spindler & Spindler, 1987, p. 18)

These nine criteria were employed as guidelines during the fieldwork stage of the research project. Further attempts at achieving reliability and validity included the use of *multiple sources of evidence*, establishing a *chain of evidence*, and employing *interrater reliability*. Singly, each method is likely to produce results of weak validity, but when used together, they act to support the validity of one another (Keen & Packwood, 1995).

*Multiple sources of evidence* included participant journals, interviews transcripts, artefacts, and also include my field notes and log book. These multiple sources of data “serve as sources of confirmation or corroboration for each other” (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999, p. 161). Additionally, I endeavored to establish a chain of evidence. Chains of evidence are conceptual arguments which link phenomena to one another through a “if this happens, then that will occur” type of relationship (Keen & Packwood, 1995). Triangulation, whereby multiple sources of data, multiple methods, and multiple theories was employed to provide corroborating evidence.

Finally, this researcher very clearly attempted to outline her biases not only at the outset of the study but along multiple points of the research and writing-up process as well so that the reader may clearly understand how these biases may impact the study.

### **3.9 Limitations**

Although I recognize that there are many stakeholders in the transition process of a traditional graded school to a multilevel learning community, including students, parents,

communities, and administration, I fully disclose that this research focused solely on the teachers' perspective. This could be perceived as a limiting factor, and may have been had I reported just the participants' comments via their interviews and journals verbatim without filters. To alleviate this potential bias, I utilized classroom observations (what the participants said they did vs. what they actually did, artefacts, etc.) and juxtaposed that against the multiage literature. In this way, the voices of the participants were heard, but were tempered against the larger bureaucratic framework in which they occurred, as well as prior/current research and theory.

This research took place in an elementary school, and so this limits the transferability of any findings to high school settings. There are also limitations inherent within each form of data collections (Creswell, 1998). One such limitation is the need for the researcher to amend or alter data collection forms after they are already in the field, which I found myself doing, most specifically with the questions I placed in the participants' journals. Also the massive time commitment required in gathering the data, and even the expense of the data collection phase can act as limiting factors. This researcher soon discovered the limitations of both as the costs in transcription services, fuel and other associated travel costs mounted versus the loss of income while conducting the research. Only being awarded 16 days of release time in which to conduct my research limited the amount of time I could be on-site with the participants and therefore limited the data I was able to collect. In order to allay this limitation as best as was possible I attempted to focus on the "intense and efficient periods of observation, rather than the day-in, day-out style of more traditional anthropological fieldwork" (p. 8) to which Wolcott (1994) refers.

In terms of observations, there are many potential areas of bias inherent within the technique. In ethnography, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument; therefore the potential for researcher bias must be recognized. To alleviate this, I attempted full disclosure in the initial chapter of this thesis, attempting to honestly outline my bias before entering this research. While deMunck and Sobo (1998) assert that occasionally the researcher may not be interested in the ‘goings on’ out of the public eye and therefore rely on the use of key informants, which creates bias, that certainly was not true of this research as I was very interested in what was occurring, regardless of whether it occurred in or out of the public eye.

DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) contend that male and female researchers have access to different people, information, and bodies of knowledge, therefore researchers must consider how his or her gender may affect observations and the subsequent analysis. In the case of this research as the participants and I were all female, this effect is somewhat assuaged; however, because there were no male participants in this study, the male perspective could not be addressed. Regardless of group composition, Merriam (1998) notes that no matter the time the researcher spends in the field, or with whom, the participant controls the level of information given. Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) note that observations are filtered through the observer’s interpretive frames, and warn against imposing these frameworks upon early observations, but rather to let them emerge from the community under study. This was true of this research and certainly added complexity to the data gathering and sorting/coding, as the participants became more comfortable with and trusting of me, they were more forthcoming with me in the latter part of the study than they were in the initial stages.

Once in the field, technology effects, or the tendency for individuals to behave differently because they are aware that their actions are being recorded can and did have a limiting effect on

the study. Similarly, researcher effect or the Hawthorne Effect (Gorard, 2001) an effect that implies participants' behaviors can be influenced simply by being involved in a study, could potentially bias the results. The Hawthorne Effect was in evidence during this study, as each participant thanked me at the end of her final interview, and shared with me how my presence caused deeper reflection on their part, and more care and thought on what was happening in their classrooms.

Finally, this study occurred in one specific site, in three different classroom contexts, with three different participants, bringing to mind LeCompte and Schensul's (1999) comment regarding "the ways in which people construct and make meaning of their worlds and their lives are highly variable and locally specific" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 1) this fact does not detract from the transferability of the findings of this study.

## Chapter Four: **Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study, conducted in the manner of ethnography, was to describe and analyze from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers' professional identity as they transition from traditional to multilevel contexts. A better understanding of how mid-career educators navigate the transition process from the role of traditional teacher to that of a multilevel educator would provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of mid-career teachers as they transition to multilevel contexts and these insights may support the development of future professional growth models designed to support this transition. The research was guided by the following questions:

- 1) What do teachers perceive as their greatest challenges and opportunities in making the transition to a multilevel classroom? Do these perceptions change over time?
- 2) Do the participant's beliefs and perceptions match their actions and practices?
- 3) What supports were put in place for teachers making the transition from traditional contexts to multilevel learning environment? Were these supports effective?

According to LeCompte and Schensul, (1999, p. 4) the product of ethnography "is an interpretivist story, reconstruction, or narrative about a group of people". The following is just such a story, and it is told in the words of the participants themselves, utilizing illustrative quotes from the participants' journals and interviews to capture the richness and complexity of this

topic. Consistent with the “thick, rich description” (Wolcott, 1973) that is inherent in ethnographic methods, I employed the use of illustrative quotes to provide an opportunity for the reader to enter this study and better understand the three research participants and their journey. Ethnographic methods enable the reader to develop a deep understanding of each participant and perhaps of even greater importance – how each individual made sense of their changing world.

## **4.2 Findings**

This chapter presents the key findings from three in-depth pre-observation interviews, participants’ journals, a series of 15 classroom observations, and three in-depth post observation interviews. Ten key findings clustered in three areas emerged from this study. These three areas include: *challenges and opportunities*, *beliefs and perceptions*, and *supports*. In each area, the findings are categorized into themes which arose through an analysis of data. In this study, the approach I took during content analysis is what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) refer to as conventional qualitative content analysis. In this approach, coding categories are directly and inductively derived from the raw data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Subsequent coding took place by constantly comparing the participants’ responses to the pre-observation interviews with the data gained after each subsequent classroom observation and journal entry, to allow for a continual emergence of categories and themes. As the coding process proceeded, new themes emerged, while others collapsed. This constant comparative method of data analysis was utilized to seek out common patterns and themes among the data. The following is an overview of the findings followed by a more in-depth discussion of each finding.

### **4.2.1 Challenges and opportunities.**

#### **4.2.1.1 Opportunities.**

Finding 1: It is beneficial to the teacher when they have students for more than the

traditional academic year.

Finding 2: Multilevel classrooms allow for the development of independent thinkers and learners.

Finding 3: Students in the multilevel classroom exhibit positive interactions, nurturance and spirit of cooperation.

Finding 4: Team teaching provides an opportunity to learn and share new skills, and provides both pedagogical and affective support for the educators involved.

#### 4.2.1.2 Challenges.

Finding 1: Meeting the needs of a more diverse group of learners.

Finding 2: Piloting change in a culture and climate that is largely against the change and/or does not fully understand the change.

Finding 3: The instance of negative peer role models within the multiage class composition.

#### **4.2.2 Beliefs and perceptions.**

Finding 1: Participants' perceptions and beliefs changed over the course of the study.

#### **4.2.3 Supports.**

Finding 1: The opportunities provided for the participants to develop themselves professionally was valued.

Finding 2: The objects and materials, such as teaching resources provided to the participants was a valued support.

### **4.3 Challenges and Opportunities of and in the Multilevel Classroom**

#### **4.3.1 Opportunities.**

In terms of opportunities of the multilevel classroom, four distinct findings emerged.

***Finding 1: It is beneficial to the teacher when they have students for more than the traditional academic year.***

Seen collectively as a benefit by all three participants, the participants indicated that because they had the students for more than one year, they developed well-established relationships with these children and their parents. Further, the participants also shared their excitement for the opportunity to see their students' growth over a greater period of time. The participants further stated that having an understanding of where the students 'are' in terms of academic progress meant that less time was needed to determine their needs and learning styles, allowing the teacher to, in effect simply continue on with where they left off the previous year. One participant also noted that she did not need to teach start-up routines as rigidly as she had with previous classes, which was seen as a benefit as more time could be spent on both teaching and learning. Finally, all three participants mentioned that having older students who were familiar with class routines was beneficial as they served as role models to the new or incoming students. According to Mrs. Garnet:

You know the kids. The older kids could teach the younger ones the routines and the expectations. That would be the biggest advantage.

Another participant, Mrs. Smith, had this to say:

The advantage [of the multilevel classroom] is having the students for the second year to push them that extra. I can see how I'm not going to have relearn where they're at and relearn what makes learning work for them... you could say, well, by September 3<sup>rd</sup> I will know what reading level they're at. And hopefully I've got a good read on where everyone is at... I know where they left off; I know where they should be.

The third participant, Mrs. Johnson had this to say:

I think that having the continuous progress is an advantage... I think I'm realizing that more, that I'm getting a better picture of them as they mature.

Taking them from where they were and taking them further.

Months later, during her final interview, when I queried Mrs. Garnet as to whether her feelings on this had changed, she answered with certainty:

That has not changed at all. That is exactly one of the joys of this [multilevel] I think.

In fact, by the end of the year all three participants reiterated their conviction that having students for more than one academic year was an advantage. Although their comments differed little in wording from the initial interview to the final interview, what did change were the confidence, enthusiasm and authority with which the words were spoken at the end of the year as compared to the initial interview. Their comments provide evidence that while each educator held the belief that multiple years with the same students was a benefit at the beginning of the transition and that this belief held true through the end of the year, something had shifted for each educator in terms of degree of belief, almost as if at the beginning of the year, they was some disconnect between the words they were saying and what they really felt to be true. Put more succinctly, it was as if in the beginning, they were playing *lip service* to the idea, but by the end of the year they had fully *bought in* to the notion. This particular element, multiple years with the same students, is referred to as continuity in the literature, (Stone, 2004) whereby multiple years with the same teacher and cohorts establishes the classroom as a 'family' or 'community'. At the end of the year, this sense of family was evident with each participant, as

they spoke warmly about having the opportunity to work with the same group of children the following year.

***Finding 2: Multilevel classroom allow for the development of independent thinkers and learners.***

What was interesting about this theme was that it emerged over the course of the study, and was not readily evident at the outset. In fact, none of the three participants mentioned this aspect as a benefit during the initial interview. Early classroom observations showed no evidence of this either, as goal-setting largely rested in the teachers' hands and instruction was largely whole group oriented. However, this began to change. Within months, classroom observations noted the use of inquiry projects, differentiated instructional methods, and students as experts, cross-age mentoring, and greater evidence of student-led classrooms. For example, during the latter part of the study, in the course of an observation of a math lesson, students were presented with materials and a challenge. They worked in teams to find solutions to their challenge, record and present their findings. The teacher acted as a facilitator if needed, but the activity was so engaging and well designed that little demand was placed on her by the students as they worked independently within their groups. This was vastly different than an earlier observation where the students were doing pen and paper tasks that were for the most part, teacher-led and identical to one another.

Perhaps then, it was no surprise that by the end of the year, all three participants cited that they had come to believe that the multilevel classroom allowed children to become the expert learner and that their students developed the ability to become independent learners and thinkers. In the words of Mrs. Smith:

I think that the kids see themselves as learners now on a broader basis. They don't see the separation in the grades. They see their skill, they're moving along on this continuum. I think it's individualized... in the sense that you're giving them the goals and you're giving them the structure. And you're learning how to push them and conference with them and push them to use some of those skills... They're able to be an expert, even if they're in [the younger grade]. If they understand something, [I ask them] "Could you explain it to your partner? Could you explain it to someone else at your table?"

Mrs. Garnet had this to say:

I think the multilevel is pushing the best way to teach kids as people, and not... "Everybody has to do the same thing at the same time. We all learn to add like this and we all learn to read like this." There's different ways you can [learn] and I think that some of the multilevel philosophy is just good teaching practice, no matter whether you're in a multilevel [classroom] or not. They're taking responsibility for their own learning instead of being spoon-fed by the teacher. So we're giving life skills instead. So that's interesting to me now.

The comments of the participants paired with classroom observations provide evidence, that the development of autonomous thinkers and learners was seen as a benefit by all participants, and that this theme emerged over the course of the year. Further, it was evident that the emergence of this theme was closely linked to changes in the strategies and practices employed by the participants.

***Finding 3: Students in the multilevel classroom exhibit positive interactions, nurturance and spirit of cooperation.***

In the words of Mrs. Garnet:

When I saw [a student of mine] that was kind of known as a bully – and that was a lot of the parent concerns, were this rough Grade Y group in with their innocent Grade X kids? – it was only the second week of school and the bully was helping an autistic child get a book and I didn't even ask. And there's lots of that. It really is a family and grade doesn't matter anymore.

Seven months later, her perspective had not changed:

The interaction of the students with each other... seeing them interact on the playground, when they didn't even know each other last year. Seeing them teach each other. The kids are the biggest reward for me.

These comments, paired with classroom observations provide evidence that there is an affective benefit inherent in these multilevel classrooms.

***Finding 4: Team teaching provides an opportunity to learn and share new skills, and provides both pedagogical and affective support for the educators involved.***

Each participant indicated that benefits of multiage classroom extend to the teachers of these classrooms. In fact when asked to reflect on what she perceived to be the greatest opportunity associated with the transition to the multiage classroom, Mrs. Johnson replied:

I thought the greatest opportunity would be to work as a team... to work with my colleagues more closely.

Each of the three participants cited working closely with trusted colleagues as one of the central reasons they agreed/volunteered to be among the first group of classrooms to transition to the multilevel milieu. I had the opportunity to observe the participants working together to share

lessons, strategies and feedback. However, I also noted on various occasions that the opportunity for these educators to meet together afforded them much needed moral support that only people sharing the same experience can provide for one another. During these collaborative sessions, the participants had opportunities to shore up their resolve, and vent in a safe way with trusted peers and friends. The participants' comments paired with my observations provide evidence that collegiality and collaboration are benefits in the multilevel classroom, but that these benefits are not limited to the sharing of practices and strategies alone, as they extend into the affective realm as well.

#### **4.3.2 Challenges.**

In terms of challenges in the multilevel classroom, three distinct findings emerged.

##### ***Finding 1. Meeting the needs of a more diverse group of learners.***

Meeting the needs of the learner emerged as a challenge for all three participants. This particular challenge unfolded for the participants in two specific areas; strategies and practices, and objects and space.

At the initial interviews, each participant voiced her concern in general terms regarding meeting the needs of their students. In the words of Mrs. Johnson:

I guess meeting all the needs... Meeting all [the students'] needs. All the special needs, I guess, with the language development. I worry that the [younger children] are getting everything they need. Class size maybe. I know that that's part of why we have multilevel, to keep it smaller\* but the actual class size is larger than I'd had for quite a while. I wanted to always meet the needs of the kids in Grade X with, at the same time, bringing Grade Y along like I had to. So I didn't feel that I was reaching either group at the beginning.

(\*One of the carrots offered by the administration was that by transitioning to multilevel learning communities, class-size would be reduced).

Mrs. Garnet had this to say:

Hitting the needs for the wider span, and I knew the kids that were coming up, or I knew *of* the kids. And I knew there were some very, *very* weak students. So for me, having the two grades, the range of ability would be that much bigger, so that was my biggest concern.

Several months later her opinion had not changed:

...it's still hard. I think most teachers are perfectionists and I just don't know. I don't feel like I'm doing a really good job of hitting all their needs because there just isn't time.

While the concerns expressed above were more general in nature, the concern for meeting student needs was mentioned, again and again by all three of the participants in more specific ways. Each participant expressed a need for strategies specific to the multilevel classroom, strategies they could and should employ, strategies specific to meeting the needs of their diverse group of learners. As Mrs. Garnet said:

I think mostly it was Math. That was my big one. It was the overlapping curriculum of Math and right from the beginning I knew that was going to be the hard area, because in my Language Arts I can broaden the range. I can have reading groups, I can have leveled reading, I can do that in Science, I can do it in Social Studies... but the Math curriculum builds on each year and you have to build on some of the [Grade] X concepts that are in [Grade] Y and they've already just done them the year before because we're coming the first time into

multilevel, so these Ys have taken Grade X Math. But I've got to teach the Grade Xs those building blocks before we can go on. And so that was my major [concern].

Though the above comments came directly from my question to each participant regarding what they felt the biggest challenges were/would be during this transition, comments arose again and again during various points throughout our interviews. For example, in the following quote, Mrs. Smith is responding to my query for further information to her comment that she would like more space in her classroom to set up learning centers:

More math ones so the students could work more at their own individual level.

I just don't feel that I quite know how to do that yet.

Mrs. Johnson initially acknowledged that math was an area of concern for her as well, but one that she was certain she could overcome:

... the Math? [She shrugs in an almost breezy manner]. You know, that was something that we could work out. *That* I could work out as I studied it some more and figured out, or had to practice for the year.

So for this particular participant, at this first interview, Math was not perhaps as concerning as it was for the other participants, however she did share another concern; *assessment* which at that time was the greater concern in her efforts to meet the needs of her learners:

And a big thing for me is assessment now; how to assess, and if we are moving into continuous progress "Is the report card an assessment?" (She directs this question to me – the answer, of course is 'no' – however I do not indicate that)... the whole idea of transforming into continuous progress, because our report cards are not set up for that and they need to be.

Thus this teacher's concern for student assessment provides evidence for the overarching concern of meeting the needs of the learner. On a final note, while teaching mathematics may not have initially been an area of grave concern for Mrs. Johnson, it eventually developed as a concern later in the study, as noted by these comments in her journal regarding an upcoming visit to another multilevel school:

Math is more of a concern to me right now. I'm wondering what program they are using and how they are grouping their kids.

For the most part, the challenge caused by lack of strategies did not change for any of the participants over the course of the year. During the final interviews each participant articulated the same concern, and did so with more clarity and perhaps a greater sense of frustration as well.

In her final interview, Mrs. Garnet had this to say:

Right now, I think it would be the Grade X curriculum, becoming more familiar with that, and making sure that those kids are progressing and moving along were the greatest challenges. I think that that, for me, that was the greatest challenge.

Mrs. Smith reiterated her belief that math was and still is a challenge for her, but one that she had convinced herself was improving:

I think the Math is still one of the greatest challenges, but I think it's changed now. It has changed positively now that I've realized that I'll have two years to complete everything, and I think actually once... I have kids for two years in a row; I'll really be able to focus in on their needs. For example, if there's a weaker group of multipliers and dividers we'd have to spend a longer period of time on that, or we'd have to re-do it again the next year. We actually have that

opportunity too, to re-do it again... we've introduced it so we can do it again the next year when they might be ready. You'll have more time. I think it actually gives you more time... I'm hoping... I'm trying to convince myself of that...

Mrs. Smith began her answer to this question with a great deal of confidence, but by the end of her response the cadence, tone and volume of her voice changed noticeably, indicating that perhaps she was not as confident as she thought she was, it seemed that her comments began as a sort of self pep-talk, one that had lost both power and certainty over the course of the answer.

The comments made by the participants provide evidence that the lack of strategies and practices available to them was a challenge that made it difficult to meet the needs of their diverse group of learners. The evidence would further suggest these concerns were evident at the beginning of the transition and remained throughout the year, while others developed in situ as the year progressed.

Also embedded within the theme of meeting the needs of the learner, fell the challenge of *objects and space*, or perhaps stated more clearly the *lack of objects and space*. This challenge was defined by the participants' need for materials with which to meet the needs of their students, and the need for a space in which to learn and teach effectively.

Evidence of this challenge was noted by all three participants when each identified teaching resources, or perhaps to be more clear, the *lack* of teaching resources available to them as a challenge. The participants noted teaching materials such as programs and books, as well as materials such as bins, baskets, supplies and manipulatives, and even tables among their wish list of objects. There was acknowledgement from each of the participants that the administrators did

what they could to provide resources for their classrooms, although limits in budget and in the school's infrastructure limited the scope of these supports.

If objects were a concern for the participants, so too was the space in which these objects were housed. Initially, I was somewhat puzzled at the point in the interview where this concern emerged, and was equally puzzled when it occurred in two of the three pre-observation interviews. This challenge emerged when I asked the participants to describe their ideal teaching and learning environment. Mrs. Garnet responded to this query by saying:

A large room with tables, a designated carpet area for class group work, baskets for my novels, bins with my math manipulatives and supplies for my games, like a little art station, a computer station...

Mrs. Smith reiterated Mrs. Garnet's concern with this statement:

I would like a larger space with a meeting area so the students don't always have to sit at their desks, and so I can meet with smaller groups and... use this area [she waves her hand in the air to indicate the open space where we are sitting, which is an open area, shared by three classrooms] to meet with, a spot to sit with kids, like a table group where you're not right beside another group, so you're not disturbing them, while they're working... and they're not disturbing us, because we're doing our level of material. So ideally I'd like the learning environment to be larger, I guess is the biggest thing.

When framing my question, I had not considered that participants would equate the term 'ideal learning and teaching environment' with the actual physical environment and layout of the classroom. Rather, I had expected to hear them discuss issues of cooperative learning, inquiry, student-centered classrooms and the like. Curious, I asked for further clarification, and it became

clear that two of the participants equated the physical environment of the room - that is the actual contents as well as the physical layout - with supporting teaching and learning in the multilevel learning community.

Of interest, it was what Mrs. Johnson did *not say*, that proved as telling as what the other two participants did say. Mrs. Johnson articulated no concerns over issues of physical space. Self-admittedly, Mrs. Johnson inhabited a classroom that was a ‘physical ideal’, and one which was the envy of the other two participants – in terms of both space and physical layout. Mrs. Johnson’s class size of near to 20 students was also the envy of the other two participants who had much smaller classrooms with class sizes approaching 30. Mrs. Johnson described an ideal learning and teaching environment in terms of affective and cognitive descriptors, and never once mentioned physical layout, space or resources during her response to this particular query. Her response was more what I had expected when I posed the question regarding an ideal learning and teaching environment:

I think that having the kids work on setting their goals and working towards that... Putting [the learning] more in their court so they’re developing and learning how to learn things on their own, making them more independent and building that community so that they can be. That they’re not just waiting to be taught, that they are doing more research and they’re doing more things on their own.

The comments made by the two educators struggling with limited space and crowded classrooms paired with what the third participant did not say, provide evidence that both materials and physical space are challenges inherent within the multilevel classroom, challenges that are associated with meeting the needs of the learners in the multilevel classroom.

***Finding 2: Piloting change in a culture and climate that is largely against the change and/or does not fully understand the change is challenging.***

This finding unfolded in largely three areas, and was generally perceived by the participants as a lack of support across three domains: 1) administration, 2) colleagues and 3) parents and students during the transition process.

In terms of lack of support on an administrative level, Mrs. Johnson had this to say: I think if they didn't try to change so much at once and be so, almost discontent with what we were doing, or making us feel that a lot of what we were doing is not appropriate anymore, that we should be using all these "best practices" they keep referring to... Instead of slowly moving in and encouraging us to get comfortable with it first and *then* make those changes.

Mrs. Johnson was not the only one to bring forth the feeling she held regarding her administrator's perception of her performance. Both Mrs. Garnet and Mrs. Smith referenced it during their interviews as well, but their remarks were more frank and less flattering, and were withheld upon request. Later in the school year, these feelings had not changed, at least certainly not for Mrs. Johnson. The following is an excerpt from the March 2010 issue of the school newsletter in which the principal is providing an update on the transition. The title of the article is *Multilevel Focus of the Future*:

It has been exciting and rewarding to watch teachers transform from worry and being afraid, to being excited and working together in fabulous teams to provide this education.

And this was Mrs. Johnson's response to that sentence, the volume and speed with which it was spoken increased with each word:

I was never "afraid" and [he said that] we've "gone from being afraid..." and he sent that newsletter out to all the parents. (She is deeply indignant here).

So, things like that, like we're not always on the same page as a team. And teamwork has been an issue, I guess. Like in terms of with administration.

Though all participants readily agreed that their administration was willing to provide opportunities to meet, to visit other schools, and provide what materials they could, not one participant articulated the belief that their administration helped build their confidence during the transition process.

It was not only the perceived lack of support from their administration that the women identified as challenging, they also shared with me their frustration over the lack of support from some of their students and parents. In terms of lack of parental support, Mrs. Smith had this to say:

This group of parents of the Grade X students had some issues with the school and they were not, NOT for this multilevel, "Why are you doing this?" It was a huge, huge issue.

Mrs. Garnet also remarked on this issue during her initial interview:

It was really hard on the community to go to a multilevel. They didn't think it was right... they were so against it. Evergreen School had never done it before... [the community] asked "How is it ever going to work?"

The following comment also comes from Mrs. Garnet's journal in response to my query regarding a recent Parent Advisory Council meeting regarding the implementation of the multilevel philosophy at the school:

After this meeting and hearing /reading some of the comments about the school, I became frustrated, defensive and a little angry... I let myself take comments too personally and I had to take a step back and really look at how this was affecting me. Unfortunately the negative people chose to have a louder voice and there are fewer negative parents than positive ones. I just have to keep reminding myself of this. I've been saying that it's the parents that are going to wear me down, not the students.

Social media played a role in the transition as well, when some parents in the community created a Multilevel Parent Support Group on Facebook. The name, according to one of the participants was a misnomer, as there seemed little supportive about the followers on this page. Initially, this particular participant had joined the Multilevel Support Group, but after reading all of the negative comments, ended her association with the group, but not before posting this response:

I've read all your comments and questions and have been contemplating whether or not to post a message. I've wanted to answer each of your questions, but there just isn't enough room on this site to answer them all so you could fully understand what we do as teachers. How do I teach all of you what I've learned over the past 20 years – both as a student studying education to become a teacher and then teaching in the classroom over the last 16 years?

As teachers there is no way we expect parents to understand all the terminology and trends in education. But please trust that the majority of us are doing everything we can to ensure your child is receiving a quality education. And if you are concerned about your child's learning or have questions about assessment, curriculum, continuums, differentiated instruction, group work, cooperative learning, individual learning – it's your job to contact your child's teacher and work as a team to provide the best for your child and to receive answers to your questions. There are always new trends developing in education and as educators it's our job to understand and implement them into our classrooms the best way we know how. There are a lot of assumptions about what we do at school and in the classroom. Unfortunately grocery store or coffee shop talk probably doesn't give you all the facts correctly... I hope I have encouraged you in a positive way on how to seek the answers you are looking for.

The following comment came from the journal of Mrs. Smith, and in this response *they* is in reference to some parents in the community:

I feel like I'm not trusted as a professional. Do they really think I don't know what I'm doing? I am trained and I keep up to date with the newest changes in all areas of education. The students question what I'm doing sometimes because I think they hear snippets of complaining at home. Example: "Are we going to finish grade X math this year? Will I be ready for grade Y?"

This concern however, was only evident and articulated at the outset of the study, and nary was a mention made of it during the final interviews. When I asked each participant

outright if this was still a concern for them, they each replied with an emphatic ‘no’. When asked what they believed caused the change in the feelings of parents and students alike, in the end, and to a woman, they said that they discovered that their greatest ambassadors for the shift to multilevel philosophy were the students themselves. Further evidence is provided when, as Mrs. Johnson reported, near the end of the year she held a meeting with parents whose children would be transitioning to her multilevel classroom, and rather than the large group she had been expecting there were only two attendees. Further, all participants reported that by final parent-teacher interviews, nary a negative comment was made by any of the parents regarding the classroom configurations. The comments made by the participants provide evidence that while lack of parental and student support may have been a challenge initially for each of the women, over the course of the year these concerns were allayed, and largely by the students themselves as they became advocates and ambassadors for their own learning.

Still under the theme of lack of support, emerged the final challenge as reported by the participants, lack of *collegial support*. In my initial visit it was immediately evident that this was a school that was clearly divided on the issue of the transition. There existed two camps, those that volunteered to pilot the transition and those that did not. By the time I arrived on-site, the camps were fully evident, even to the casual observer. In terms of gathering evidence to prove this rift existed, I had to rely largely on my own observations and impressions, impressions that were supported by what the participants asked me not to report. Throughout the course of the study, all three participants shared with me little snapshots that illustrated the rifts that existed in their school. They asked me not to report these stories, and out of respect to the participants, I of course did not. Theirs is a small school and a small community, one in which they continue to live, and one in which I merely visited for a time. There were little in their comments during the

interview phase from which evidence could be drawn, but what a person reports off the record, is as telling as what they say—or do not say—on the record.

I had the opportunity first hand to witness the breach that existed between those teachers in the school who agreed to pilot the beginning phases of the transition and those who were clearly, not in favor of it. One such opportunity occurred when during the course of the study, I was allowed by the administration to attend two professional development sessions provided at the school. The conditions surrounding my attendance at these sessions were that I would not engage in the session, merely observe and that I would not take notes. I agreed to these conditions of course, and was excited to be hearing first-hand what my participants would be learning during the session. However, the focus of my observation shifted almost immediately upon arriving from one of content, to one of culture. I thought it odd that the staffroom went completely silent when I walked in, perhaps not unusual as I was a stranger to most of the people there, but odd nonetheless. Some people left immediately, while others remained stoically silent, or mumbled terse greetings in response to my (in hindsight, perhaps overly enthusiastic) salutations. One of my participants popped in and we exchanged warm greeting, topped up our coffee mugs and headed to the library to get seats for the session.

The tension as we walked into the library for that first session was palpable, and if I thought the tension in the staffroom merely odd, here it was nearly ominous; one had the feeling that a storm was brewing, and it was going to be a big one. There existed an actual physical divide in the room regarding seating arrangements. Those teachers involved in the pilot sitting nearest the front, those not, seating themselves as far back as the room would allow without them actually spilling out into the hallway. For all staff, body language spoke volumes; the pilot teachers sat upright, pens poised and smiles (if somewhat strained) pasted to their faces, their

demeanors somewhat overly cheerful, as if forced or nervous, as if by laughing and chattering overloud and overlong they could somehow disguise the elephant in the room. The elephant, of course, was the dark aura emanating from educators seated on the other side of ‘the great divide’ (which is the term I eventually coined when describing the space that existed, physically, professionally and collegially between the two groups) who sat back in their chairs, arms crossed, unsmiling and whispering in undertones with only their closest neighbors. There was nary a writing implement in sight on the other side of the great divide; it appeared to me during that first session that *over there* was where handouts, writing implements and smiles went to die.

It seemed that my initial impression when I first walked into the staffroom was correct and that the animosity of this group had extended to me as well, as if by conducting this study I was somehow sanctioning the transition process. Even though I did not get to know many staff members outside my group of participants and their team of teachers, I found that over the course of the study I could easily identify (not with any scientific accuracy, of course) which side of the rift caused by the transition, staff members were on simply by walking into the building. There were those educators that smiled and greeted me warmly, and those that simply ignored me, or more pointedly – changed direction to avoid coming into my proximity.

My observations and impressions provide evidence that while peer support existed within a small circle of trusted colleagues for the participants of this study: this support did not extend to all colleagues in the building. This challenge was evidenced at the beginning of the study, and remained as a concern throughout the course of the year.

***Finding 3: The instance of negative peer role models within the multiage class composition proved challenging.***

While all three of the participants noted that that multiple years with the same students can be of benefit to educators, students and parents alike, two of the participants pointed out that it can also present a drawback. This notion of negative peer influence emerges as the fourth theme under the construct of challenges.

In the words of Mrs. Smith:

If you've got students for two years, what if you have a student who is a bad influence? You know, this kid's in Grade Y and ... he's with a Grade X and the Grade X student is starting to do those things now too, [things] that he never would have been exposed to if he hadn't been in a X/Y [multilevel classroom].

Mrs. Garnet noted the same concern:

And only now after this many months have I really noticed it, were some behavior issues that our Grade Xs are seeing Grade Ys do, [and] that they may not have exhibited those behaviors if they weren't in a room with older students.

This was an interesting finding, in that these same two participants had listed prosocial behaviour as a distinct benefit of the multilevel classroom. Of further interest, the two participants who mentioned this concern were teaching at a middle years' level, while the participant who did not mention it was in an early years' classroom. It is important to note that the above concerns arose in the former part of the study, rather than the latter, and by the final interview, no such concerns were raised by any of the participants. The lack of such concerns at the end of the study, in fact the assertion by all three participants that mixed age groupings benefitted both the youngers and the elders in the class, provides evidence that while this was perhaps an initial challenge for the participants, it was one that was allayed or assuaged over time as relationships among and between teachers and students developed.

The participants' comments paired with classroom observations provide evidence that over the course of the academic year, the participants retained at least some of the same challenges as they held at the beginning of the school year. These were concerns for administrative support and meeting the needs of the learner, specifically in the areas of objects, strategies, materials and space. However, as the school year developed, the concerns initially shared by the participants regarding lack of student and parental support seemed largely assuaged, as too was their concern regarding negative peer effects, which also disappeared as a concern for the participants by the end of the year.

#### **4.4 Perceptions and beliefs**

***Finding 1: Participants' perceptions and beliefs changed over the course of the study.***

The finding showed, at least initially, that the participants' beliefs and perceptions regarding the multilevel classroom initially ranged from somewhat neutral to slightly negative. While each participant conducted themselves with the utmost professionalism, keeping their reservations and concerns to and among themselves, classroom observations provided evidence that initially, their classroom practices were largely traditional in nature, and there were rare instances where flexible groupings and other strategies synonymous with multilevel instruction were employed. In fact, Mrs. Garnet had this to say at the outset of the study regarding the difference between multilevel and traditional teaching:

I don't find it that much different actually. I think it's more prep, but other than that? [She shrugs].

The findings also show however, that by the end of the school year, all three participants held very positive beliefs regarding the multilevel classroom and observations provided evidence of a growing repertoire and use of multiage strategies within their classrooms.

#### ***4.4.1 In the beginning.***

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, I was under a misconception that this particular site had opted to transition to a multilevel learning facility by choice, that the staff and administration had embraced the multilevel philosophy and that the decision was based on a pedagogical choice. I was surprised to find out upon first meeting the participants that this was, in fact, not true. Curious as to why these women had agreed to be among the first of the educators to volunteer to take part in the pilot year of the transition, I asked them outright just what they thought of the transition in particular and the multilevel philosophy in general.

In her journal, Mrs. Johnson admitted to initially being “excited and looking forward to having a multilevel classroom” however the reality of the multilevel classroom soon set in, changing excitement and optimism to feelings of being overwhelmed and pressured:

Now that I am into it, I am feeling a little overwhelmed. We are being bombarded with “best practices” and many concerns that should have been worked out before we started... A lot of buzz words and strategies are being discussed by administration. Meanwhile...I have to get these kids reading and writing, counting and adding. I am trying to use “best practices” that work for me but the pressure is building.

Mrs. Smith’s journal comments also suggest that at least initially, she too was having feelings of concern at the outset of the transition:

Initial reaction was one of why? Why do we need two grades in one classroom, what possibly could be the benefits? I was feeling scared (change is good, but still scared of more work, not the best for all involved).

When I asked this participant why she had agreed to be among the first of the teachers to transition to the multilevel classroom, she had this to say:

I think that it was easier for me to buy into [the change] because I'd already been doing it. We'd already had our books leveled, had guided reading groups at different levels. We already had a multi... <fades away> [she pauses then re-phrases] we were already using those strategies.

And these comments from Mrs. Garnet when asked how she was dealing with parental concerns:

I just tried to come up with the positives I could think of. The [children] get the same teacher for two years. [I told the parents] everything that *I'd* been told... I wasn't sure it was true.

And these comments, from her journal:

... I had to remind myself that I also had concerns about multilevel before I started teaching it.

And further comments from Mrs. Garnet suggest the reason for volunteering to pilot a multilevel class was held more closely to self:

For me, with the age of my kids, I decided to speak up for the X/Y multilevel, cause we started looking at the document that year and I had taught the triple-grades [a combined class] so I knew I could do it. I knew how it worked. And I just thought it would be less prep, honestly. Wasn't sure if I totally believed in

the philosophy, but for me I was looking at my point in my personal life and what was going to be serviceable for me.

And this from her journal:

My initial reaction was negative. I instantly recalled the [combined] class I taught the first two years of my teaching. ALL THE HOMEWORK!! And I was single with no children. Math was frustrating and I was overwhelmed with the workload. I was always correcting or prepping. I felt scared. I worried about how I could possibly keep up with the work now that I had children.

When, to a woman, each participant was able to easily articulate what multilevel philosophy entailed, how it was different from split or combined grades (a classroom combination in which each of the participants had formerly taught), and why it was ‘good’ for children, I was surprised to hear the above concerns. To try to get a greater sense of the participants’ perception regarding the multilevel composition, I queried of each participant if given the choice, would they place their own children in a multilevel learning community, and to a woman they answered with a caveat. This question was utilized specifically to extract a sense of the participants’ perceptions of the multilevel learning. Of interest, this question was not on my initial list of open ended questions, but was amended in situ, after I discovered that the schools transition to a multilevel learning community, was not one of choice, as I had initially been led to believe by the administration, but instead one created because of a declining demographic. In response to my question, one participant qualified her answer by stating that it would depend on the school and the teacher. For another, the answer was qualified at least initially on her children, and she was willing to admit that it would be good for one of her children, who would benefit from the mentoring of his peers, and after a bit conceded and said

that it probably “wouldn’t hurt my daughter to do it” either. Mrs. Johnson also held strong opinions on this subject:

[My child] was a child who needed more time and more attention, so I thought to myself I would be happy that he was in a small, one-grade classroom. But you know what? ... I would be happy if he had gotten a couple years when he was just developing reading skills in a one-grade [classroom], and the older grades I think it would have helped him to be in a multilevel classroom because they’re with older kids and they learn to be more mature or responsible with the older kids. So I think it would depend on the grade now...

I also asked each of the participants if, given a choice for the next academic year, would they continue in a multilevel classroom, or would they go back to a graded milieu. Each participant indicated that they would ‘stick it out’ and ‘see it through to the end’.

These comments provide evidence that at the outset of the study, privately, none of the educators held exceptionally positive perceptions of the multilevel classroom. As a researcher, this was an interesting finding as it is important to note that none of the educators shared these opinions publicly. Simply by volunteering, for whatever their personal or professional reason they gave the impression within and outside of the school community that they held positive beliefs regarding the transition. While each educator initially held reservations of one kind or another before embarking on the transition, they in no way let it affect their professional attitudes or actions. To a woman, there was a commitment to see the transition through to the end, and do their very best at making their classrooms successful for their students and themselves. This was evident in their care and concern for their students, the professional grace with which they conducted themselves during public meetings and with colleagues, their desire to learn and

educate themselves on multilevel strategies and practices, and their willingness to employ these strategies in their classrooms.

#### ***4.4.2 In the end.***

While the participants may have held negative perceptions at the outset of the study, seven months later, things had changed. In the words of Mrs. Garnet from her journal:

I'm really enjoying the multilevel philosophy, so I feel I really do prefer it over a single grade classroom now. I don't need to be convinced of the positives anymore.

And these words, spoken by her in our final interview, add depth to these remarks. Although the words were not largely dissimilar in content from those spoken at our first interview, what did change was the animation with which they were spoken:

It's wonderful. You have to do it, you have to experience it. You can go to all the professional development, you can go to other schools as many times as you want, but until you're actually doing it and figuring it out for yourself... You can't understand it until you do it.

Referring back to the four-day summer institute Mrs. Garnet had this to say in response to my query regarding its helpfulness to her:

It was, in that we got a lot of good ideas to teach, but it still didn't help me know. I needed to just do it. For me, I was like, "Okay, this is good hypothetically, but what are you doing here?"

Mrs. Smith had this to say:

I just don't know why I get it now, or I understand it better. It could be just watching others. Seeing how it [single grade philosophy] doesn't work, even in

other rooms in our building. I just don't think that's the way to go anymore. I mean, I've heard it for years, instead of, [being the] "Sage on the stage, [you need to be the] Guide on the side" and maybe just, I don't know... I don't know why [it has changed for me]. I see it as being better, maybe it's just from what I've seen happening... and now it's, "Okay, here's the problem that I'm going to pose to you, here's the materials." I give them a bit of background... and then I'm letting them find it out, and then we're sharing it, instead of me telling. It's like, "God, this is working! That makes sense!

... and added this later in the interview:

The biggest light bulb for me actually, has just been in the past year or so with the inquiry-based learning. If they are interested in what they are learning you do don't have to do any classroom management because they want to learn.

While each educator expressed a very positive perception and a clearer understanding of multilevel philosophy by the end of the year, the journey to this epiphany was not necessarily an easy one. In this particular segment of her final interview, Mrs. Johnson seemed almost relieved at the prospect of sharing her angst-ridden journey with me - her pet subjects lining up in her mind like paratroopers ready to jump; her response emerging in corrugated breaths:

I've changed... because I think what I'm doing now is... I'm letting go of some things that I always thought were pretty important... and I'm realizing that they're maybe not. I'm structuring it [the learning environment] differently... so that the students can have more control over what they're doing. But then every once in a while I panic... and go backwards, because you fall back on what you know.

The comments made by the participants during interviews and in their journals, paired with classroom observations provide evidence that by the end of the academic year, the participants evidenced a greater congruence between the practices that they described as being reflective of a multilevel classroom and their use of these activities in their classrooms. Further, the evidence would suggest that it was the resultant successes the participants saw by employing these strategies which were directly causal in their improved perception of and belief in multilevel philosophy. Their ability to identify the changes that had occurred in their practices suggests a greater pedagogical understanding of multiage practice and philosophy which seems to have occurred through critical reflection on their practice, the employment and resultant and immediate gratification of the success they saw when employing specific multiage strategies in their classes, and positive peer mentoring in the form of school visits and team teaching.

#### **4.5 Supports**

Largely, though the supports put in place for these women were thin at best, they fell under two major findings. Administrative support for the above categories was a common thread in and among these findings.

***Finding 1: The opportunities provided for the participants to develop themselves professionally was a valued support.***

When asked outright at the final interview if they would speak to the supports put in place for them during the transition, what struck me at the time was less *what* the participants said, than *how* they said it. To this point each participant had allowed me to see the entire range of their emotions from worry to enthusiasm, joy to angst, but on this question the gates to these emotions snapped shut, their replies were terse and brief, their body language and facial expressions became tight and closed.

In the words of Mrs. Smith:

<Long pause>... I thought that visiting other multilevel classrooms was a good support, and <uhh> we were given some time to plan together... <inaudible – pause> Yeah...

While Mrs. Garnet had this to say:

We didn't have a whole lot. We had a couple of meetings where we were introduced with a document.

Mrs. Johnson added this:

I guess I feel that I got the support when we started to pull together as a team, [with the other] the Grade X/Y teachers [this was spoken warmly]. In terms of our administration, <long pause> I don't feel that we... [she shakes her head in the negative]. He [the principal] would ask us what we wanted, or what we needed. We did get a new Math program ordered by our assistant superintendent. We did study the multilevel document; uh, we were encouraged to study the multilevel document by our administration. But in a sense I felt that we were pretty well left on our own until the beginning, until the fall.

Despite these initial comments, the participants eventually expanded upon the construct of supports, and what was meaningful for them. Thus, the first theme emerging under the construct of support was professional development, a support to which all participants referred. These professional development opportunities unfolded in four ways, the first was a summer institute on multilevel learning, the second comprised school visits to other multilevel learning communities, the third involved a guest speaker who visited the school on two occasions over the

course of the first year of its transition to a multilevel learning communities, the final opportunity for professional development emerged as collaboration.

While several opportunities may have been provided for the professional development of each of the educators participating in this research during this transition it became patently clear that one of the professional development opportunities they valued most were the school visits they attended as they provided the participants an opportunity to have professional contact with educators in the same situation. In fact, when asked what support they found to be *most* beneficial during the transition process all three participants cited school visits to other established multilevel learning communities, and having the time to dialogue with the teachers in these communities.

In response to my query, Mrs. Garnet had this to say:

I thought that visiting other multilevel classrooms was a good support.

While Mrs. Smith said this:

The idea of a meeting space was something that we gained from visiting [other multiage] schools...

After each of their visits to a school, I observed the use of new programs, strategies and practices in their classrooms. It was largely the acquisition of strategies, materials, and information, something immediate and concrete that excited and invigorated the participants the most. These visits were not without their limitations however, there was some frustration that parents were invited to attend and two of the participants noted that this was a limiting factor for them. They felt that they had to keep up a façade of sorts and that their actions and questions were being observed, and to a degree – judged. Also, on one visit, the classroom teacher of the

school they were visiting was away, and the participants did not have the opportunity to query him on how he ran the Mathematics program in his classroom.

While all participants spoke quite warmly of their visits to other multilevel classrooms, it was an external force that seemed to have brought about the greatest and perhaps most painful change in both the thinking and the practice of these women.

This particular force arrived in the form of a woman, Mary Green, brought in by the school administration to work with the entire staff, over the course of two separate days, to facilitate the transition process. This woman also facilitated the summer session that all three participants attended. Mary Green brought with her notions that challenged the status quo of traditional graded education *and* what the participants understood as multilevel philosophy. Still under the theme of professional development, intended as a support, it was difficult to determine from the participants' responses, if this particular professional development was a support or not.

In fact, during her final interview, when I asked Mrs. Johnson if her perceptions and practices surrounding multilevel learning had changed I received an emphatic "Yes!" and when I asked what brought about this change the participant replied:

I think probably, Mary Green, because she just got me thinking more. Even though I didn't agree with everything that she said, it was food for thought that made me want to research a little bit more. [As a school] we've always talked about continuous progress, we've always talked about the more formative assessments, it's just learning how to build that in... she drove me crazy talking about all the stuff she did!

The other participants were alternatively more dismissive and outright questioning of this facilitator as a support. Reflexively, Mrs. Smith agrees that she too has changed her practices

and that the process was not an easy or smooth one. There was something in her approach to the answer to this question that at least initially I found careful, even evasive despite her almost breezy manner in answering.

I found it hard. Her personality and my personality... [she indicates by gesture that their personalities did not mesh], I didn't get what she was saying some of the time, it's almost like she was [speaking] in code and I was lost... I was overwhelmed with how inadequate I was...

For a moment she was silent, and then as she continued to speak, her demeanor changed, lightened so that she sounded like a different person entirely.

It could have been beneficial, or it could have been a support to others, and I don't say it as a total write-off, because she certainly challenged my thinking, and I guess maybe that's why I'm... not upset, but um... how would I say it? Why I didn't really like her. You know? It's because she challenged what I already thought.

And these comments from an unsolicited response in her journal:

Thursday, February 4<sup>th</sup> – Still feeling inadequate about teaching in a multilevel after Friday with Mary Green. After various school visits, I was feeling on track and I thought I was doing a great job of teaching in this multilevel community. I still know I am on track but I am not near as confident as I was.

During her final interview, when I posed the same question to Mrs. Garnet question about her perception of the support given by her administration in the form of Mary Green, this participant gave me another of those by now, familiar quirky – almost self-deprecating smiles that seemed almost habitual, before answering my question:

The staff had a professional development day with Mary Green and I was really excited to listen to her because we had her at our workshop in the summer. But now I feel less confident and more confused. I thought I was on track, now I'm not too sure. I believe she was probably a wonderful teacher but I'm not her.

And these comments came from her journal:

I've decided again, I have to do what I'm comfortable with and what works for me. There are so many trends, etc. that constantly change that I think I'm somewhere in the middle. I enjoy learning new things but I don't throw out what works for me.

These comments provide evidence that the women's long-held beliefs and graded practices were being challenged, and we begin to see evidence of the unlearning graded norms and relearning new philosophy. In all cases the participants are beginning to question self and long-held beliefs.

While the presentations by Mary Green caused discomfort for the participants as some of their long held beliefs were both outwardly and inwardly challenged, it also provided them with common ground, and as the evidence would suggest, the common ground was anxiety. And while Mary Green brought with her new ideas, ideas that challenged the status quo, she also brought with her the opportunity for all three participants to bond with one another on an affective level in addition to a professional level. I had the opportunity to observe that as political divisions within the school over the transition to the multilevel context began to wear away at the participants' resolve, this team began to turn to one another more and more for support and advice. However, if the political divisions and parental concerns initiated these bonds, Mary Green's visits solidified them. Each visit by Mary Green caused a great deal of

anxiety with the participants, anxiety that they held in common with their colleagues. I had the opportunity to watch and listen as they worked through their angst, and it was at this time that the notion of collaboration emerged as a finding.

Collaboration, a construct which all three participants initially identified as an opportunity at the outset of the year, had by the end of the year become a valued support, but not perhaps in a way they had initially considered. As the school year progressed, the women began looking more and more often to one another in a collaborative effort to share both ideas and angst. These shared experiences became the springboards for discussions amongst the group. Although these discussions may have begun in an informal way, what became clear over time was the trust these women had for one another. So a discussion begun by sharing angst or fears or negative feelings, soon evolved into one of problem solving and positive next steps. In this particular culture of collaboration, while the sharing of ideas and strategies was valued, it was the affective piece, the notion of a journey shared, that resonated deeply with them all. In the words of Mrs. Garnet:

I found the supports most beneficial for me were our planned preps, where the administration made sure that the three of us had preps altogether. Talking with them, the ones that were going through it with me was probably my biggest support.

***Finding 2: The objects and materials, such as teaching resources provided to the participants was a valued support.***

To a woman, the three participants looked to their administrators for an understanding that this type of transition would require the provision of resources and materials, as well as the physical environment to support the multiage environment.

I do lots of projects, but I have to take it out, and then put it back so I can start something new. I would like stuff set up so it's always there.

Though thin, the participants were thankful for the materials they did receive, and constantly searched for ways to integrate ordinary (cost free items) into their daily instruction. After each visit to another multilevel learning community, they would return and happily to show and share with me the ideas and materials they had gathered on their visits.

#### ***4.5.1 A common thread.***

It is important to note that none of the above supports could have nor would have occurred without the support of the school administration. Though each participant acknowledges that the administration was limited by fiscal restraints, they also acknowledged that the supports they had were because they were approved by the principal. The professional development activities available to the participants were both sanctioned and organized by the administration. Materials, where provided, were also made available through budget approval by the administration. In fact, any efforts at support on behalf of the administration, whether it was materials or professional development opportunities, were remarked upon by the participants. Even deflecting negativity away from the participants was viewed as a support by one participant. Mrs. Garnet had these comments to make after a community meeting held during the latter part of the study to discuss the whole school transition to a multilevel learning facility.

I felt our principal and superintendent did a very good job of answering questions and keeping the negativity off of the teachers.

The comments of the participants, paired with my observations, provide evidence that supports in the form of a variety of professional development opportunities and the provision of materials are necessary supports in the multilevel classroom. There is the underlying assumption

that without administrative support and approval, these particular supports would not have occurred.

#### ***4.5.2 In their words.***

It would be remiss to have asked the participants what supports they received during the transition and the value of those supports to them, and not to have asked them what supports they would have liked to receive. Within this theme, two findings emerged.

***Finding 1: The professional development, what the teachers wanted differed greatly from what was actually provided.***

In the words of Mrs. Garnet:

It would have been nice to have someone come in and help, you know? It would have been nice to have a consultant that would come in and give us more direction that way...

While in her journal, she expounded on this topic further:

Practice planning with topics that are relevant to my subjects/grade.

Why? Because I think the ideas are good but I don't know where to start!

Thus, professional development opportunities geared towards the practical applications of classroom strategies and the want for materials and space in which to employ these strategies emerged as findings in this study.

***Finding 2: Participants need time, and a safe and supportive environment within which to develop new skills.***

In Mrs. Johnson's words:

I think if they [the administration] didn't try to change so much at once and be so, almost discontent with what we were doing, or making us feel that a lot of

what we were doing is not appropriate anymore, that we should be using all these “Best Practices” they keep referring to, you know? Instead of slowly moving in and encouraging us to get comfortable with it first and then make those changes.

And this from Mrs. Smith:

It was too much to try for time given, give us what to start with in an appropriate way...easier to understand with our language! In our words!

The comments made by the participants provide evidence that, for them, the most helpful supports were those that addressed the concerns for immediacy; those that addressed the day-to-day issues within their classrooms. For these participants, the provision of strategies, materials, objects and space were most helpful. Yet each educator clearly articulated that they needed both the time and a supportive atmosphere in which to try out these new strategies and materials.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, findings were presented in three areas: challenges and opportunities, beliefs and perceptions, and supports. In terms of, challenges and opportunities, the research was guided by the following question: What do teachers perceive as their greatest challenges and opportunities in making the transition to a multilevel classroom? Do these perceptions change over time?

In terms of opportunities, four findings emerged from the data. These findings included: 1) the opportunity of having the same students for more than the traditional single academic year, 2) multilevel classroom allowed for the development of independent thinkers and learners, 3) positive interaction and spirit of cooperation amongst mixed aged peers and 4) team teaching. Initially only team teaching and the opportunity of having students for more than one academic

year were identified by the participants, and these remained as identified opportunities at the end of the study. The other two findings emerged at a later point in the study.

In terms of challenges of the multilevel classroom, three findings emerged: 1) meeting the needs of the learner, 2) negative peer role models, and 3) lack of support. The participants retained at least some of the same challenges as they held at the beginning of the school year. These were concerns for administrative support and meeting the needs of the learner, specifically in the areas of objects, strategies, materials and space. However, as the school year developed, the concerns initially shared by the participants regarding lack of student and parental support seemed largely assuaged, as too was their concern regarding negative peer effects, which also disappeared as a concern for the participants by the end of the year.

The second area, perceptions and beliefs was guided by the research question; do the participant's beliefs and perceptions regarding multilevel practices and philosophies match their actions and practices? The findings show that initially, the participants' perceptions of the multilevel milieu were tepid at best and slightly negative at worst. However, to a participant, these perceptions changed significantly over the course of this research, eventually becoming very positive. In terms of actions, initially, classroom observations provided little evidence of the employment of multiage classroom strategies, however this also changed considerably over the course of the study.

The final area, support, was guided by the following research question: What supports were put in place for teachers making the transition from traditional contexts to multilevel learning environment? Were these supports effective? In terms of supports, the findings show that these fell largely under two categories, professional development and objects and materials.

The findings further reveal that while the supports provided were appreciated by the participants, they did not fulfill the educators' need for immediacy, or the practical day to day strategies they needed to employ in their classroom. The evidence also shows that under the umbrella of support, time and a supportive environment are key.

## Chapter Five: **Discussion and Conclusion**

*If there were only one truth, you couldn't paint a hundred canvases on the same theme.*

Pablo Picasso, 1966

Ten key findings clustered in three areas emerged from this study. In each area, the findings were categorized into themes which arose through a conventional qualitative content analysis (Heish and Shannon, 2005) of the data. These three areas include: *challenges and opportunities, beliefs and perceptions, and supports*. The following is a discussion of the findings.

### **5.1 Challenges and Opportunities**

#### **5.1.1 Opportunities.**

Generally speaking, what the participants identified as opportunities unfolded largely as being child-centered. Having students for longer than one academic year eased classroom management, as olders already knew classroom routines and expectations and it also allowed the teachers to gain a better understanding of their students both academically and affectively. Each participant further noted that start-up routines would ease at the beginning of the year, allowing more time for teaching and less time simply trying to 'figure out' where students were 'at'.

As the year progressed, the participants noted that the multilevel composition also allowed for the development of independent thinkers and learners. This development emerged in tandem with the participants' employment of multilevel strategies that allowed for the gradual release of responsibility for learning (i.e. goal setting, developing criteria, etc.) from the teachers to the students. This notion of the development of independent thinkers and learners is supported

in the literature. Stone (2004) cites the development of *autonomous learners* as a component of the multiage classroom. Not to be confused with the term ‘independent workers’, independent learners actively participate in the organization, planning, implementation, and assessment of their own learning.

Another opportunity noted by all participants was the sense of ‘community’ or ‘family’ within their classrooms. Indeed, one of the important recognized assets of a multilevel classroom in the literature is the socialization of students (Aina, 2001). McClellan and Kinsey (1999) reported a significant positive effect on children’s prosocial behavior among those students who participated in the multiage classroom over those in same-age classrooms. Veenman (1996) discovered that students in a multiage classroom have a more positive attitude towards school, themselves, and others. Pavan (1992) ascertained that fully 52% of multiage students had more positive and willing attitudes towards school than did their age-segregated counterparts. Forty-three percent of these multiage students had similar attitudes, and only 4% of the students studied held attitudes that were worse than their single grade counterparts. In a follow-up study conducted the subsequent year, Anderson and Pavan (1993) found that the multiage approach was favorable to African American students, males, and children of poverty. They assert that the findings regarding the benefits of multiage programming for these groups of students is the most critical finding of this research, as these children tend to do poorly on standardized evaluations. In a review of 18 studies that specifically examined low-income populations and multiage groupings, Anderson and Pavan (1993) found that multiage classrooms promote higher academic achievement scores, stronger social development, better self-concept, retention, and that they evidenced more positive attitudes toward school.

McClellan and Kinsey (1999) reported that aggressive behaviors were noted significantly less often in a mixed-age setting rather than those in same-age groupings; conversely, no differences were found in the friendship patterns of the children enrolled in same age settings. Follow-up ratings taken of third grade children who had previously participated in mixed-age classrooms, but who were subsequently placed in same-age groupings, supported these findings (McClellan & Kinsey, 1999). The children with previous mixed age experiences continued to be rated as significantly more prosocial and significantly less aggressive than their same-age grouped counterparts (McClellan & Kinsey, 1999). Some examples of prosocial behaviors included helping, sharing, and cooperating. “Researchers generally agree that students in multigrade classes tended to be higher or better than those in single-grade classes in the following affective areas: ... social interaction ... and co-operation...” (Bingham, 1995, p. 9). Stone (1996) contends that respect is an inherent component within the multilevel classroom. Within the authentic multiage classroom, there is an acceptance by both the educators and the students that each child has his or her own learning rate and style and that the notion of respect is one which develops over time (Stone, 1996).

This sense of community extended beyond the classrooms, embracing the teachers involved in the transition as well. At the beginning of the research, each participant cited team teaching as an opportunity in the multilevel classroom. During the course of the year, the administration provided time for the educators to have shared preparation time, something valued by each of the teachers. During this time, the participants had the opportunity to plan together, share materials and strategies, and ask and answer questions of one another. This collaborative and communicative effort as evidenced by the participants is well supported in the literature. The collaborative and communicative nature of team teaching is associated with an

increase in the skill development among educators, (Gaustad, 1994), and so it was true of this particular group of educators as well. In fact, Stone (2004) and Anderson (1993) cite the organization of team teaching to maximize interaction and collaboration as a necessary component of the multilevel classroom. Ultimately, whether they recognized it or not, the women were provided with multiple leadership opportunities and participated in, albeit a somewhat informal, shared decision-making process. Gaustad (1994) suggests that collaboration with colleagues and other experts provides these leadership opportunities and the opportunity for shared decision-making.

I noted that among the group of educators piloting the transition, collegial support was positive, affirming, and as I became more familiar with the school culture, necessary. This was perhaps the most interesting finding for me as while the opportunity to work together in teams was initially provided for planning and skill development, it soon evolved to envelope the affective realm in terms of shoring up participant resolve and providing moral support for one another. Though not initially the purpose intended by the administration nor participants and therefore entered into somewhat unwittingly by the participants, this dynamic arose and strengthened over the course of the study as a necessary component as the educators stood together against powerful negative elements from within their school and the community.

### ***5.1.2 Challenges.***

In terms of challenges, these too unfolded largely as child-centered concerns. At the forefront of challenges as noted by the participants was meeting the needs of the learner. Arguably, every educator would also cite this as a challenge, whether they taught in a traditional monograded classroom or in a mixed age grouping. However, for these educators, the concern was addressing the broader range of learners that is inherent within the multilevel milieu, a range

with which they were unfamiliar. In this concern for meeting the needs of the students, teachers are evidencing some of what Hall and Rutherford (1976) refer to as ‘impact related concerns’, those concerns that relate to the resultant effects the transition to the multilevel class has had or may have on their students.

These concerns emerged in many forms. For Mrs. Johnson, the need for proper assessment techniques to employ within the multilevel classroom was very important. Her concerns are supported in the literature, as in the multilevel classroom, grouping and instruction are based on students' achievement, and because students are learning at different rates, the teacher must continually monitor and document their students' progress in order to best meet the needs of the individual learner (Leier, 2010).

For Mrs. Garnet and Mrs. Smith this challenge emerged in the form of the limited materials and space with which they had to implement their multilevel groupings and programs. Admittedly at the time, I thought this an odd challenge, but soon came to realize that the sorts of groupings the teachers needed to create in order to meet the needs of their diverse group of learners was dependent on such things as space and tables and the like. This finding is supported in the literature where it is argued that due to the dependency on flexible grouping to meet the needs of a wider range of learners; multilevel classrooms need to be physically organized in such a manner to be conducive to a wide range of learning opportunities (OERI, 1990). Gaustad (1992) contends that tables are a necessity in the multilevel classroom because of the instructional practices that must be employed by the teacher. In multilevel learning environments, flexible groupings based on student interest and ability, require frequent and fluid movement within the classroom, fluidity that the more traditional desks do not provide. The participants' desire for materials and the space in which to employ them in is further supported

by the 1990 OERI study which states that because of the dependency of educators on groupings in multilevel classes to meet the diverse range of learners' needs, multiage classroom need to be physically organized in a manner that is favorable to facilitate these groupings.

Groupings suggested by the OERI (1990) to implement within multilevel classrooms include the standard whole class, as well as teacher-led small group, student-led small group, partners (dyads) and opportunities for teachers to provide individual instruction when needed (Chapman, 1995). When viewed through this lens, it becomes clear why the teachers held that space and tables were a necessity in order to meet the diverse needs of their learners. And if multilevel classrooms need to be a resource rich, allowing for more successful student-led learning across a diverse group of learners (OERI, 1990), then it becomes clear why this too arose as a concern for the participants. After spending a great deal of time in the participants' classrooms, I would argue that the few resources provided for the participants could hardly be defined as rich.

It was interesting for me to note that one of the challenges as identified by the participants was negative peer affects. This finding was initially quite puzzling, as at both the initial and final interviews, and at continuous points throughout this study, each participant articulated their belief that the multilevel classroom provided many opportunities for positive interactions amongst mixed age peers, yet two of the three participants also noted the challenge of negative role models (exclusively the negative behaviours of older having a negative effect on the younger) in the grouping. Each of these participants expressed their concern that younger children may be (and were) exposed to behaviours and language that they would not otherwise have been exposed, had they been grouped in a traditional monograde classroom. This finding seemed odd in that there is some fallacy in their argument that the younger in the grouping are

being exposed to these negative behaviours only during classroom hours. These children would have multiple opportunities daily to be exposed to negative role models, during recess, during lunch hour and bus rides to and from home, even at the local community arena or from an older sibling at home, not to mention through television, radio and social media websites and the like.

What was further interesting about this finding is that it emerged only at the outset of the study, and was not mentioned by any of the participants at the end of the study. That it was the two participants who taught in the older grades who identified this challenge, may suggest that these concerns are more related to age and stage rather than the classroom composition. Further, while findings in the literature report aggressive behaviors or negative behaviours as significantly less in a mixed age grouping (McClellan and Kinsey, 1999) and competition and aggression was higher in same-aged groupings while multiage classrooms demonstrate increased instances of nurturance and accord (Pratt, 1986); neither Pratt (1986) nor McClellan and Kinsey (1999) contend that negative behaviors were entirely non-existent in a multiage settings. Even in the closest of family groupings there are at least moments of discord. Further, and of equal interest, this initial concern was also articulated by several parents during the early stages of the transition process as a reason why the school *should not* transition to a multilevel learning community, and so perhaps this was not a concern actually held by the participants, but more one that was imposed onto them by the concerns of others.

That none of the participants cited this concern at the end of the study suggests many possibilities. Perhaps as the year evolved and there were no noted instances of negative peer affect that could be directly attributed to the multilevel milieu, the concern died away. Perhaps this challenge was an uninformed concern raised by parents in an attempt to prevent an inevitable transition. Perhaps the concerns forwarded by the participants were ‘what if’

concerns, but one that never actually developed beyond thought into a reality. Or perhaps, it was that the classrooms had developed into community of sorts. Referred to as *continuity* in the literature, defined by Stone, (2004), multiple years with the same teacher and cohorts establishes the classroom as a ‘family’ or ‘community’. While these particular cohorts had only been together for the year, there existed a real sense of family in all of the classrooms I observed, the sense of caring and kindness to which the participants continuously referred. This sense of caring was palpable – so real it could not only be seen, but physically felt when one entered these classrooms.

The final challenge, as noted by all participants was lack of support. This challenge unfolded in various ways, but each was bound together by a common thread. As noted earlier in this thesis, there was a great deal of collegial support within the group of teachers piloting the transition, but this support did not extend far beyond this group. In fact, one telling illustration of this point is that only one parent refused to sign a permission form for their child to participate in this study – and that parent was a teacher within Evergreen School. She stated that she did not believe in the transition and would not support it or my research – I found it interesting that she linked one with the other.

The teachers looked to their administration for help in this area, but reported that they found little from that direction in the way of support. It should be made clear at this time that the participants were very appreciative of the support they *did* receive; it was just that they needed so much more. For example, after the first community meeting, the three participants left with a sense that they had been ‘hung out to dry’ by their administration, in that they fielded (and were ill prepared to do so) a great deal of the community’s outcry and backlash over the transition. By the second community meeting, each participant remarked on how well the administration did

deflecting any negative comments from them. Educating the community remains an essential component to any perceived change in education. Administration needs to recognize that one facet of the professional development of their staff is that it enables teachers to be the professional contact within their community.

Also in terms of support, each participant articulated that they would have appreciated – no, welcomed – visits to their classrooms by the administration, however they received none. Visits, they believed were necessary, as they felt it would have shown ‘silent’ support (in the face of their nay saying colleagues) of their efforts. Even some comments made by the administration were perceived as *slights* by the participants. The participants’ reference to the constant use of the term *best practice* by their administration – comes to mind first. Each participant felt that by using this term, there was an implication that what they had done previously was wrong, a subtle, if implied criticism. Through lack of classroom visits, some perhaps poorly worded newsletter articles, and other poorly worded comments during staff and parent meetings, the participants took away a sense that their administration lacked confidence in their abilities. For one participant, this was disappointing, for the other two there were varying degrees of anger and derision aimed at the administration. To be fair, none of the participants brought their concerns forward, at least not to my knowledge, but then this too speaks to the climate of the school at the time. Holloway (2001) suggests that one of the most critical things administration does to support any initiative in schools is to help build teachers’ confidence in their goals for student achievement and in their ability to assist students in meeting those goals. From the participants’ perspective this suggestion seems apposite.

Lack of support also unfolded in terms of materials and objects and space, as the participants looked to their administration to provide them with the tools they needed to meet the

diverse needs of their students. Gaustad (1994) argues that administrators need to understand the necessity for providing enough resources and space to create and support a multiage environment. Arguably, infrastructure and funding – the bane of many administrators – proved a limiting factor here, but when one trolls the literature and discovers that space and materials are necessary factors needed for successful multiage groupings, one can understand the frustrations of the participants.

Another support that the participants looked to their administration to provide was also a ‘space’ issue, but in this instance, space unfolded as time – time to adjust to the new class composition, time to acquire and experiment with new strategies, time to reflect on their practices, and the time to merely, as Mrs. Johnson put it, “catch my breath”. Admittedly, the change of Evergreen School from a monograded class combination to a multilevel learning community occurred, at least when considered in the larger bureaucratic landscape of the education system, in nearly the blink of an eye. In a January 2009 excerpt from the school newsletter comes this:

Our enrollment at Evergreen School continues to decline, which has created a need for combined classrooms, however we are also looking at the research that supports multilevel classrooms as sound educational practice. As part of our school plan our staff is currently doing some investigation into multilevel learning communities.

By September of the same year, these ‘investigations’ of such learning communities had changed almost overnight into actuality with the creation of six established multilevel classrooms. As Anderson (1993) argues, initial implementation of a multilevel program involves a process requiring at least two years of advance preparation time, well-established,

mature and smooth running programs, can take as many as five years. This advance preparation time is considered necessary to develop "policies and procedures, to make curriculum changes, to prepare the community, and to provide appropriate staff development and training" (p. 12). Teachers need this time to professionally develop themselves on developmentally appropriate practices and multilevel programming (Cotton, 1993). Surebeck (1992) agrees with the two-year time frame, noting that teachers need this time to develop programming, observe others in established multilevel communities, and to develop a set of strategies to use with a diverse group of learners. I had the opportunity to view both the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 Evergreen School Plans, both a matter of public record, and neither document directly nor fully address the whole-school transition to a multilevel learning community. In fact there was no reference at all to a transition to a multilevel learning community in the 2008-2009 school plan. The 2009-2010 school plan, which oddly is not accessible online at the time of this writing, had (to the best of my notes and recollection) only the briefest mention surrounding the 'exploration of multilevel learning communities'. Suffice it to say, the participants in this study were not afforded a two year period of grace to develop skills and resources, they were simply swept, ill prepared, and quite suddenly, into the tides of change. Their professional learning occurred in situ, and alongside their students.

## **5.2 Beliefs and Perceptions**

It was clear that by the end of the study that the participants' perceptions of the multilevel classroom had changed over the course of the study. The question raised by this finding was, 'why?' When asked outright, the participants were quite clear on what caused the change – it quite simply, was the students. For the participants, it was watching the development of their students as autonomous learners, goal setters, as leaders and experts, and as mentors to others. It

was the opportunity of developing deeper relationships with their students and their families, and watching the relationships deepen among and between the students. It was also watching as the relationships deepened among and between the participating staff members. As Mrs. Garnet succinctly put it, “You can’t explain it – you just have to do it!”

What they hadn’t noted perhaps, was something that I had. I noted that as the participants began employing the developmentally appropriate strategies and practices associated with multilevel communities within their own classrooms, they began to see the development of the students as autonomous learners and goal setters. It was as if each ‘small win’ created the momentum for larger risks and gains. As new strategies were employed by the participants and comfort and confidence built among the participants, the students themselves became more comfortable and confident wearing the hat of ‘mentor’ and equally comfortable in their role as ‘mentee’. Success continued to breed success, and with each small success, everyone in the classroom – educators and students alike were willing to try more, to risk more. It was a cycle of success that continued to breed more success. While the participants may not have noted it, it was when the benefits of the multilevel classroom began to emerge for both the students and the teachers, the beliefs of the participants began to reshape in nearly direct relation to these benefits. This finding is supported in the literature when Katz, Evangelou, and Hartman (1990) found that the implementation of teaching strategies specific to the multiage classroom fostered successful learning experiences for both students *and* educators. Rogoff, Matusov and White (1996) define learning “as a community process of *transformation of participation* in sociocultural activities” (p.388). Participation in a multilevel learning community, with its inherent collaborative nature, and nod towards inquiry learning, changed the process of learning from mere transmission of knowledge (teacher-led) to that of engaged collaborative and participatory learning for *all*

involved, including the participants, as they too were members of the multilevel learning community.

### **5.3 Supports**

It was interesting for me to note that two of the areas the participants identified as being challenges in the multilevel classroom also emerged as themes under the category of supports. It initially seems somewhat contradictory to have them emerge as similar themes in two disparate categories, however the connection seems clear. Both professional development and objects and materials emerged as challenges as the participants reported that they did not receive enough – or in some instances, the correct type of either, thus they presented a challenge. In this case it was more a lack of professional development and resources made available to them that posed the challenge. However the participants considered what they did receive as necessary and welcomed supports. The participants were clear that one support they perceived to be helpful during the transition process were the professional development opportunities they received. One of the most beneficial as cited by the participants was the visits to other well-established multiage schools to observe other teachers at work. This notion is evidenced in the literatures as Hargreaves (2007) contends that “principals and teachers find the experience of visiting each other's schools and sharing strategies that make an immediate difference exhilarating and empowering” (p. 116) and so it seemed was the case for these three participants. The arrival of Mary Green was not exactly seen as a support by the participants, in fact it was considered much more of a negative than a positive. From my observations, the source of their angst seemed two-fold. Some frustration arose from the delivery model. Mrs. Green’s presentations to staff were reminiscent of Tallericco’s (2005) *Training Model* in that it involved a large group of educators,

and employed a direct instruction model, and employed Mrs. Green as the ‘key note speaker’.

To be employed correctly, Tallerico (2005) contends there are five necessary components to this model, which include; 1) *theory*, which denotes the value and use of the particular skill, 2) *demonstration* of the skill, 3) *practice*, providing the opportunity for participants to try the new skill under expert guidance and in real life situations, 4) *feedback*, which needs to be both timely and constructive regarding the practice, and finally 5) *follow-up* which may be referred to as coaching, and is needed to promote transference and retention of the new skill. Tallerico (2005) readily admits that too often the focus of training rarely extends past the first two components and that was true of this particular professional development opportunity. The participants were not afforded the opportunity to engage in the other three components, and this is where some of their frustration emerged.

The second area that created this angst was held more closely to each participant, and one I am not certain that they clearly recognized. From the comments made by the participants, it became clear that Mrs. Green and her ways of thinking challenged the current thinking and practice of the participants. Quite frankly, this was not a comfortable feeling for any of the participants. Learning or re-learning instructional strategies can cause veteran mid-career educators to experience as much or even more anxiety than inductive teachers as they cope with the transition (Miller, 1994). The behaviours exhibited as the participants rationalized their actions and/or incorporated old behaviors into new ones are reminiscent of Kubler-Ross’s third stage of grief (Burke, 2002; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Peca, 1994) whereby the individual is attempting to recreate security and comfort by bringing familiarity to the unfamiliar. However, in the end, Kubler-Ross’s (1969) model of grief did not hold up over the course of this study. Although at times throughout the course of the study each the participant, when faced with

moments of extreme duress, would exhibit mild forms of some of the stages as forwarded by Kubler-Ross (1969) such as denial, bargaining and anger, they certainly did not exhibit any signs of depression and exhibited acceptance of the change right from the outset of the study. In terms of traditional teachers transitioning to the multilevel classroom, the application of these five stages are not considered useful for educational leaders in understanding individual's behaviors as they respond to change.

What was certain, however, was the three educators were experiencing vulnerability as they found particular aspects of their professional identity and practice challenged (Ellsworth, 2000). For me it was at these points that the participants began to reflect deeply on the multiage philosophy, holding up their old practices against their new ones, filtering those actions through a budding awareness of multiage theory. These reflections were difficult for each participant, but necessary if they were going to deconstruct their graded way of seeing and create new practices and philosophies. So although Mrs. Green may have been a point of contention amongst the three participants, her visits acted as a catalyst, which in my observation brought about the greatest change in the participants understanding and embracing of multiage theory.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

The period we are living through has been marked by extraordinary challenges that test our determination, our creativity, and our resources. It is a time of transition not only for education, but also for all our society. As we move from the Industrial Age of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Information Age of the 21<sup>st</sup>, we keep tripping over remnants of the past, old ideas that we have failed to change (Cohl, 1996, p. 22).

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century fades into history, so too fades the industrial revolution it epitomized. With assembly-line philosophy and lock-step education giving way to the more eclectically diverse possibilities of an information age, a new movement is afoot, that of global reform. For centuries, teachers served as fonts of knowledge, their sole function to fill the metaphorical empty vessels of their pupils. However, the education system's centuries-long monopoly on knowledge has been broken and teachers are no longer the key access point for knowledge acquisition (Wiles & Bondi, 2002). "Teaching and learning as we have always understood them are in a period of transition" (Wiles & Bondi, 2002, p. 171). In today's society, our students have access to unlimited information, via its constant flow of information to the learner; the Internet has altered the dependency of the learner-teacher relationship. Competing with multimedia, the World Wide Web, indeed a world where knowledge is accessible twenty-four hours a day, seven-days-a-week, teachers are no longer the sole bearers of knowledge, and new learner-teacher relationships are emerging (Wiles & Bondi, 2002).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century presents schools with great challenges. Strained social conditions, new understanding of human growth and development, current brain research, and technological advances require changes in both the programs that schools deliver, and in the context in which they are delivered (Wiles & Bondi, 2002). The philosophical foundations of multilevel classrooms challenge the current graded systems contextual underpinnings that students learn best in an age-segregated milieu. "If the twentieth century in education demonstrated anything, it was that students are not alike and that standardizing unlikes is difficult if not impossible" (Wiles & Bondi, 2002, p. 190). Graded schools, structured as factories, are expected to produce uniform products; to this end children are labeled, sorted, tested, and tracked in our continual efforts to fit square pegs into round holes (Cuban, 1989).

According to the literature, while the multiage classroom may hold much promise in terms of cognitive and affective benefits for students, for many rural, northern and remote communities the stark reality is that the shift to these compositions is driven largely by declining enrollment, rather than by sound pedagogy – it is necessity rather than choice. Another reality is that these changes, as was the case with Evergreen School, come quickly, with little time for advanced preparation or adjustment. So while the literature is rife with research on planned transitions encompassing a two to five year time frame, perhaps that is where this research steps into the breach – by addressing the issue of “what if we do not have a time frame that great?”

Admittedly, more research needs to be done in quick transitions to multiage classrooms; and certainly there is little research available from secondary schools on the effect of multiaged contexts on students’ cognitive and non-cognitive achievements. This additional research needs to focus on identifying the causal factors of this academic and affective achievement. This sort of research would offer richness and depth to those who are planning this type of transition. It is, of course, encouraging for educators, parents, and students to learn from the literature that children in multiage classrooms generally do well both academically and affectively, but it is more important to know *why* they do so, to discover what critical factors exist that create, foster, and support this growth. Monograde or multigrade, as educators, we must continually reflect on educational settings and embrace the elements of those contexts that most benefit our students. This reflection is perhaps more critical in multiage classrooms where these diverse learning communities, rather than being a physical construct, embrace a philosophical approach to learning and teaching that exists exclusive of physical setting. Simply creating a multiage environment does not ensure a better education for students. As Guskey and Lindle (1997)

concluded, it is not the *way* in which you group students for instruction that matters; it is the sets of instructional techniques utilized within these groups that count.

A multiage classroom is an organizational model that needs to be underpinned by a local willingness and capacity to accept the multiage philosophy. This philosophy embraces the concept of diversity. As educators, we need to be as accepting of diversity in educational reform models as we are with the diversity that exists in our own schools and classrooms.

Initially, in the early stages of this research, I proposed the notion that I would search for emerging themes among the larger theoretical frameworks of change, however, what I soon discovered was that such change theories seemed overly simplified, linear and reductionist, and now believe that they do little in terms of fully addressing the richness and complexity with which these individuals interacted with and within the organization, and the culture and context of their school, and within the broader bureaucratic educational landscape in which they worked. This constructivist approach runs counter to the notion that change exists solely with the individual or with the organization and instead suggests that change resides somewhere in the shared space that exists between the two. For me personally, there has been a dissolution of the borders between the individual and the organization, the lines as I had seen them previously are now as conceptual to me as the way I had formerly viewed the organization.

Knowing how “teachers act in context—their expectations and their needs, their limitations and their constraints—becomes a key issue if meaningful learning opportunities are to be provided for them” (Flores, 2006, p. 2023). In the case of this research, the participants expectations were clear, as were their needs. What these educators had shown me was that they expected the support of their administration and fellow colleagues. If they were to change on an individual level, then what they needed were the strategies, resources, space and time necessary

to implement the transition. These supports could only occur without the support of the organization. Further, what these three women had shown me is that when a multilevel classroom is created out of necessity and with little advance planning or preparations as theirs was in response to shifting enrolment demands, the philosophical underpinnings that form the foundation of this change are not, at least in the beginning, of utmost importance. For these educators, what was most important were concerns for immediacy, concerns such as materials and strategies as well as the practical strategies they are to employ on a daily basis in order to meet the needs of their diverse group of learners.

Bridges (2008) speaks to the notion of *change* versus *transition*, claiming *change* is situational or contextual, while *transition* is psychological. Over the course of this research, I came to agree with Bridges (2008) statements as I had the opportunity to observe their authenticity first hand. It soon became obvious to me that although the reorganization of the school into a multilevel learning community (the change) posed obvious challenges to the participants, it was the inner reorientation and self-redefinition to which Bridges (2009) refers in order to incorporate these changes into their personal thinking and professional lives (the transition) was what the participants struggled with the most. It also became clear that without this transition made by each participant, the change that occurred within their classrooms would have unfolded simply as a reorganization of class composition. If the transition had not occurred within the participants themselves, the first steps towards a change to a multilevel learning community would not have occurred. What else I learned, however, was that the individual *transition* would never have occurred without the organizational *change*, and vice versa.

Bridges (2009) further states that a contextual change attempted without a paradigm shift in the thinking of all shareholders simply does not work. Bridges (2009) theory, applied to this research, implies that there needs to be more than mere class composition reorganization when transitioning an entire school to a multilevel learning organization, as simply rearranging class composition does not create a multilevel learning environment. Instead, Bridges (2009) theory supports the notion that it is the transition of the individual educators, the process through which they applied techniques, evaluated, adjusted in a constant and recursive dialogical cycle that eventually led them to understand and embrace the multiage philosophy, and it were those individual transitions which eventually created these learning environments.

As a foundation for the change of Evergreen School from a traditional monograded context to that of a multilevel learning context and the transition of the individuals involved, school staff was provided with some grounding in multiage philosophy and research. However, I came to realize that it was not the introduction and exploration of theory and/or philosophy or research that acted as the vehicle of transition for these participants. Throughout the course of this study I came to the realization that it was the *actions* (and reactions to certain events and experiences) of these women that initially drove the innovation, and it was these *actions* (and reactions) that caused their eventual transitions, transitions that informed both their practice and their philosophy. In what amounted to an energizing (micro)culture, a culture of mutual learning and collaboration with one another and with other established educators of multilevel classrooms, they gained practical ideas, practices and strategies, information and ideas that answered their need for immediacy.

In the voices of the participants themselves, it seems clear then that in a planned change professional development strategies need, at least initially, to center on strategies and actions for

the educators. This is because individuals in general and these participants in particular, construct their understanding of new theory based on their own experiences. In the case of this particular research, the participants drew from their experience as graded teachers to make sense of the multilevel philosophy, in essence filtering multilevel philosophy through the lens of gradedness. In doing so each participant created a 'false understanding' of the multilevel philosophy. Time and again, the participants insisted "I am/was already doing multilevel", when in fact they were not. It was not until they began employing multilevel strategies within their classrooms and saw the resultant benefits of those strategies that they began to reflect, personally challenge, deconstruct and finally begin to reconstruct their understanding of the multilevel philosophy, and in essence their professional identities. Once this occurred the real transition to a multilevel learning community began for these women and this school, until that point it was merely a contextual re-organization of the student population by the administration. It is not until individuals engage in new experiences and employ new strategies, the types of experiences and strategies that challenge their former beliefs, that they are able to connect these experiences to the proposed theory.

In the case of Evergreen School, rather than an amorphous grasp of a somewhat misunderstood philosophy, the most essential ingredient of this transformation resided within and among the collective consciousness of the three educators who lived it - both the individual and the collective psyche of the group. Through action and reflections and discussion and successes and the occasional failure, the transition to multilevel learning communities was driven by these educators. However, these changes did not and could not occur in isolation. Rather than being seated solely within the individual or within the organization itself, change occurred instead somewhere in the space that existed between the two. The less one attempts to separate

the two – the individual and the organization – to attempt to set each neatly in their place – the more comprehensive the understanding of change becomes. The individual, the organization... neither alone, but together they took the first tentative steps toward change, admittedly these were the first steps in what will surely be a journey of a thousand more such steps. I wish them well on their collective journey.

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## **Appendix A: Gatekeeper Script**

### **Telephone Script # 1 - Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth**

**Audience:** Well-situated people in Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth

**Purpose:** To identify schools who are currently in their first year of transition from traditional single grade facilities to multiage contexts.

Hello \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Julie van Kommer and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my study is to examine from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers' professional identity as they transition from traditional to multiage contexts. Mid-career teachers are those individuals with 7 to 18 years of teaching experience.

The aim of this study is to create a narrative of the development of the professional identities of four mid-career traditional educators as they make the transition to multiage educators/contexts by examining the ways in which they learn, develop, and evolve (or do not evolve) over the course of their first year of teaching in a multiage educational context. From these narratives, it is hoped that this study will be able to draw connections between this culture-sharing group and larger theoretical frames of change.

I am calling several well-situated people in Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth, such as yourself, to identify schools in the first year of their transition from traditional to multiage contexts.

Successfully implementing instructional improvement efforts we know is complex. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of mid-career teachers as they transition to multiage contexts and that these insights may support the development of future professional growth models designed to support this transition.

I understand this request will require some reflection of your part, and I would like to follow this phone call with an email outlining the request I have made of you. I would like to confirm your email address as \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you for your consideration of assisting with my study.

### **Follow-up email #1 - Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for speaking with me about my research project. As we discussed, I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership.

The purpose of my study is to examine from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers' professional identity as they transition from traditional to multiage contexts. Mid-career teachers are those individuals with 7 to 18 years of teaching experience.

The aim of this study is to create a narrative of the development of the professional identities of four mid-career traditional educators as they make the transition to multiage educators/contexts by examining the ways in which they learn, develop, and evolve (or do not evolve) over the course of their first year of teaching in a multiage educational context. From these narratives, it is hoped that this study will be able to draw connections between this culture-sharing group and larger theoretical frames of change.

I need your assistance in identifying schools in the first year of their transition from traditional to multiage contexts. I would like to interview mid-career educators with traditional backgrounds and who are in the first year of their transition to the multiage context.

Successfully implementing instructional change efforts we know is complex. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of mid-career teachers as they transition to multiage contexts and that these insights may support the development of future professional growth models designed to support this transition.

I understand this request will require some reflection of your part, and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Julie van Kommer

## **Appendix B: Superintendent Recruitment Scripts**

### **Telephone Script #2 - Superintendent**

***Audience:*** District superintendents

***Purpose:*** To seek permission to conduct research in their jurisdiction

Hello \_\_\_\_\_

I am Julie van Kommer and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my study is to examine from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers' professional identity as they transition from traditional to multiage contexts. Mid-career teachers are those individuals with 7 to 18 years of teaching experience.

The aim of this study is to create a narrative of the development of the professional identities of four mid-career traditional educators as they make the transition to multiage educators/contexts by examining the ways in which they learn, develop, and evolve (or do not evolve) over the course of their first year of teaching in a multiage educational context. From these narratives, it is hoped that this study will be able to draw connections between this culture-sharing group and larger theoretical frames of change.

One of the schools in your division \_\_\_\_\_, was identified as being in its first year of a transition from a traditional graded context to a multiage facility. I would like to approach this school to see if any members of its staff would be amenable to participating in this study. Therefore, I am seeking your permission to approach your staff members, and to conduct research in your jurisdiction. The research would be conducted in 3 phases, a pre-observation

semi-structured interview, a series of 5 classroom observations, and a post-observation semi-structured interview. The research would be conducted over a period of seven or eight months.

Of late, progressively declining enrollments coupled with an aging demographic within the province of Manitoba have created a greater instance of multiage classrooms. Successfully implementing instructional change efforts we know is complex. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of mid-career teachers as they transition to multiage contexts and that these insights may support the development of future professional growth models designed to support this transition.

I have received permission, in accordance with University of Calgary Guidelines and the Tri-Council Policy Statement on *“Ethical Conduct in Research Using Human Subjects”*, to conduct a research interviews with members of your staff. As well, I will comply with your jurisdiction research permission and approval process.

The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be maintained in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board approves these interviews under these conditions.

I would like to send you the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form for your review. I understand this request will require some reflection of your part, and I would like to follow this phone call with an email outlining the request I have made of you. I would like to confirm your email address as \_\_\_\_\_.

I look forward to hearing your comments regarding accountability. I can be reached at 204-476-3305 if you have further questions.

Thank you for considering my request.

Julie van Kommer

**Follow-up Email # 2 - Superintendent**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This letter is a follow-up from my phone conversation with you. As you know, I am Julie van Kommer and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my study is to examine from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers' professional identity as they transition from traditional to multiage contexts. Mid-career teachers are those individuals with 7 to 18 years of teaching experience.

The aim of this study is to create a narrative of the development of the professional identities of four mid-career traditional educators as they make the transition to multiage educators/contexts by examining the ways in which they learn, develop, and evolve (or do not evolve) over the course of their first year of teaching in a multiage educational context. From these narratives, it is hoped that this study will be able to draw connections between this culture-sharing group and larger theoretical frames of change.

One of the schools in your division was identified as being in its first year of a transition from a traditional graded context to a multiage facility. I would like to approach this school to see if any members of its staff would be amenable to participating in this study. Therefore, I am seeking your permission to approach your staff members and to conduct research in your jurisdiction. The research would be conducted in 3 phases, a pre-observation semi-structured

interview, a series of 5 classroom observations, and a post-observation semi-structured interview. The research would be conducted over a period of seven or eight months.

Of late, progressively declining enrollments coupled with an aging demographic within the province of Manitoba have created a greater instance of multiage classrooms. Successfully implementing instructional change efforts we know is complex. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of mid-career teachers as they transition to multiage contexts and that these insights may support the development of future professional growth models designed to support this transition.

I have received permission, in accordance with University of Calgary Guidelines and the Tri-Council Policy Statement on "*Ethical Conduct in Research Using Human Subjects*", to conduct a research interviews with you and the members of your staff. As well, I will comply with your jurisdiction research permission and approval process.

The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be maintained in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board approves these interviews under these conditions.

I have attached the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form and for your review.

I look forward to hearing your comments regarding accountability. I can be reached at 204-476-3305 if you have further questions

Thank you for considering my request.

Julie van Kommer

## **Appendix C: Administrator Recruitment**

### **Telephone Script #3 - Principal**

*Audience:* School Principal

*Purpose:* To seek permission to access to their facility, to identify mid-career teachers, seek permission to speak with their staff

Hello \_\_\_\_\_

I am Julie van Kommer and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my study is to examine from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers' professional identity as they transition from traditional to multiage contexts. Mid-career teachers are those individuals with 7 to 18 years of teaching experience.

The aim of this study is to create a narrative of the development of the professional identities of four mid-career traditional educators as they make the transition to multiage educators/contexts by examining the ways in which they learn, develop, and evolve (or do not evolve) over the course of their first year of teaching in a multiage educational context. From these narratives, it is hoped that this study will be able to draw connections between this culture-sharing group and larger theoretical frames of change.

Your school was identified as being in its first year of a transition from a traditional graded context to a multiage facility. Therefore, I am seeking your permission to speak with your staff to see if they would consider participating in my research and if so, to conduct research in your school. The research would be conducted in 3 phases, a pre-observation semi-structured

interview, a series of 5 classroom observations, and a post-observation semi-structured interview. The research would be conducted over a period of seven or eight months.

Of late, progressively declining enrollments coupled with an aging demographic within the province of Manitoba have created a greater instance of multiage classrooms. Successfully implementing instructional change efforts we know is complex. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of mid-career teachers as they transition to multiage contexts and that these insights may support the development of future professional growth models designed to support this transition.

I have received jurisdictional permission and approval from your division, as well as permission in accordance with University of Calgary Guidelines and the Tri-Council Policy Statement on "*Ethical Conduct in Research Using Human Subjects*", to conduct a research interviews with members of your staff.

The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be maintained in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board approves these interviews under these conditions.

I would like to send you the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form for your review. I understand this request will require some reflection of your part, and I would like to follow this phone call with an email outlining the request I have made of you. I would like to confirm your email address as \_\_\_\_\_.

I look forward to your reply. I can be reached at 204-476-3305 if you have further questions. Thank you for considering my request.

Julie van Kommer

### **Follow-up Email # 3 - Principal**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This letter is a follow-up from my phone conversation with you. As you know, I am Julie van Kommer and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my study is to examine from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers' professional identity as they transition from traditional to multiage contexts. Mid-career teachers are those individuals with 7 to 18 years of teaching experience.

The aim of this study is to create a narrative of the development of the professional identities of four mid-career traditional educators as they make the transition to multiage educators/contexts by examining the ways in which they learn, develop, and evolve (or do not evolve) over the course of their first year of teaching in a multiage educational context. From these narratives, it is hoped that this study will be able to draw connections between this culture-sharing group and larger theoretical frames of change.

Your school was identified as being in its first year of a transition from a traditional graded context to a multiage facility. Therefore, I am seeking your permission to speak with your staff to see if they would consider participating in my research and if so, to conduct research in your school. The research would be conducted in 3 phases, a pre-observation semi-structured interview, a series of 5 classroom observations, and a post-observation semi-structured interview. The research would be conducted over a period of seven or eight months.

Of late, progressively declining enrollments coupled with an aging demographic within the province of Manitoba have created a greater instance of multiage classrooms. Successfully

implementing instructional change efforts we know is complex. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of mid-career teachers as they transition to multiage contexts and that these insights may support the development of future professional growth models designed to support this transition.

I have received permission, in accordance with University of Calgary Guidelines and the Tri-Council Policy Statement on “*Ethical Conduct in Research Using Human Subjects*”, to conduct a research interviews with you and the members of your staff. As well, I will comply with your jurisdiction research permission and approval process.

The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be maintained in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board approves these interviews under these conditions.

I have attached the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form and for your review.

I look forward to your reply. I can be reached at 204-476-3305 if you have further questions

Thank you for considering my request.

Julie van Kommer

## **Appendix D : Participant Recruitment**

### **Recruitment Script #1: Potential Participants**

***Audience:*** Mid-career teachers

***Purpose:*** To seek the participation of educators in the study

Hello everyone, thank-you for agreeing to see me today.

I am Julie van Kommer and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my study is to examine from a cultural perspective the complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual influences on the development of mid-career teachers' professional identity as they transition from traditional to multiage contexts. Mid-career teachers are those individuals with 7 to 18 years of teaching experience.

The aim of this study is to create a narrative of the development of the professional identities of four mid-career traditional educators as they make the transition to multiage educators/contexts by examining the ways in which they learn, develop, and evolve (or do not evolve) over the course of their first year of teaching in a multiage educational context. From these narratives, it is hoped that this study will be able to draw connections between this culture-sharing group and larger theoretical frames of change.

Your school was identified as being in its first year of a transition from a traditional graded context to a multiage facility, and you have been identified as mid-career teachers, with traditional teaching backgrounds. It is my understanding that you are all in the first year of your transition from a traditional graded classroom to the multiage context. Today I am seeking your participation in my research. The research would be conducted in 3 phases, a pre-observation semi-structured interview, a series of 5 classroom observations, and a post-observation semi-

structured interview. The research would be conducted over a period of seven or eight months. Each interview would last about 30 minutes, and the observation periods would extend to a period of about 120 minutes. Interviews would be conducted in a location that is convenient to you, would be face to face, and audio taped for later transcriptions.

Participation is completely voluntary, and data shared is confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the interview or the study. Simply inform myself verbally and follow-up with a letter or email indicating you wish to withdraw from the study. Data that has been collected from a participant before a withdrawal will remain in the study. No one except me, my supervisor, and transcriber will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers on the interview tape. The audio tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by me and the transcriber. The transcriber will sign an oath of confidentiality. The data will be kept in a secure location at my home in a locked cabinet. The raw data on the interview tapes and script transcripts will be destroyed after my successful completion of the dissertation and attainment of Doctorate of Education. Only group information will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results. This research is governed by the CFREB Ethics Certification and the transcriber will sign an oath of confidentiality.

Of late, progressively declining enrollments coupled with an aging demographic within the province of Manitoba have created a greater instance of multiage classrooms. Successfully implementing instructional change efforts we know is complex. It is hoped that the results of this study will provide school administration, policy makers, and other change leaders with insight into the needs of mid-career teachers as they transition to multiage contexts and that these insights may support the development of future professional growth models designed to support this transition.

I have received jurisdictional permission and approval from your division, as well as permission in accordance with University of Calgary Guidelines and the Tri-Council Policy Statement on “*Ethical Conduct in Research Using Human Subjects*”, to conduct a research interviews with members of your staff.

The data gathered from you will remain confidential and anonymity will be maintained in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board approves these interviews under these conditions.

I would like to provide for you the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form for your review. I understand this request will require some reflection of your part, and I would like to follow this phone call with an email outlining the request I have made of you.

I would like to confirm your email addresses as \_\_\_\_\_.

I look forward to hearing your comments, questions or concerns.

Thank you for considering my request.

Julie van Kommer