STORIES FROM A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY OF TEACHERS:
PLC AS THIRDSPACE TO GENERATE WAYS
OF LEARNING AND BEING

by

VICTORIA LEIGH EVANS

SHARON NICHOLS, COMMITTEE CHAIR
NIRMALA EREVELLES
KAREN SPECTOR
RACHEL RAIMIST
NITIN CHOPRA

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2012
ABSTRACT

In this narrative inquiry, stories were collected from a small group of science teachers collaborating as members of a professional learning community (PLC) in a local high school. This is qualitative research with a postmodern approach, a place-based micro-ethnography of particular teachers in a specific time. The purpose was to gain insights into how these teachers view their experiences as members of a PLC, specifically with regard to teacher agency, and perceptions of success teaching persistently low performing students in standard level science courses. This work is an arts-informed inquiry, using narratives and digital photographs—as well as reflections of themes revealed—collected as a gallery of portraiture walls giving voice to teachers. This study posits that PLCs can be constructed as thirdspaces, informed by Foucault’s notion of heterotopias—places both real and imagined—to generate new ways of learning and being. Conceptions of space are a major focus throughout this research. Third space is approached through a lens of sociocritical literacy as hybrid space where traditional power dichotomies and assumptions of privileged forms of knowledge are re-negotiated. The findings suggest that professional learning communities hold powerful possibilities for increased teacher agency and improved student learning, especially with groups of underserved, marginalized students in classes where challenges are often ignored and silenced. It is strongly suggested that PLCs should not be mandated or forcibly implemented through administrative policies; in contrast, PLCs of particular groups of teachers sharing a common vision should be nurtured, encouraged, and supported with time and resources. Further holistic research is called for to reveal short- and long-term impacts of PLCs with teachers and students in the authentic context.
of learning to live well in a place. Implications for teacher retention, professional development, and teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: PLC, professional learning community, professional development, conceptions of space, thirdspace, heterotopia, narrative inquiry, arts-informed inquiry, micro-ethnography, place-based, secondary science education, teacher retention, teacher education, placement, teacher agency, equal access to educational opportunity, social justice in education, issues of equity, critical education, collaboration, ways of being, teacher learning, teacher narratives
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Paige “birdie” Spencer, whose grace and magic inspire me every day. I only hope I have told some of your story well, and in doing so have furthered the cause of justice and equality. Thank you for your vibrant spirit, your calm ways, and your courage in sharing all the days.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people who were part of this work, and people who helped me to make it through the whole Ph.D. process, I cannot possibly thank them all. I fervently pray they all know how much I appreciate every effort.

First and foremost, I will again thank Paige Spencer. Without her strength, help, and support, I could never have done any of this. For all those times she graded my papers in addition to her own—and tirelessly picked up a million more of my responsibilities so that I could write this dissertation—I will be eternally grateful. Her wisdom, humor, and energy have lifted me up even when I thought I could not possibly stand.

To all the people at the University of Alabama who have given encouragement and support, I extend my undying appreciation. The professors on my committee all inspired me in different ways through their courses, work, and interests. Dr. Nirmala Erevelles sparked my ongoing interest in Foucault, and pushes me to become a better scholar. Dr. Karen Spector challenged me to examine and confront many issues regarding language, class, pedagogy, literacy, and narrative. Dr. Rachel Raimist opened my eyes to the possibilities of images, film, and stories in giving people voice. Dr. Nitin Chopra reminded me of my love of science and design with his energetic outreach in engineering, and he calmed my panic with his wise, soft-spoken advice. My chair, Dr. Sherry Nichols, never stopped expressing her conviction that I had something valuable and unique to offer—even when I did not really believe it myself. I will forever be grateful to her for all the time, talks, vision, and perseverance. I must also thank Dr. Aaron Kuntz for sharing his fascination of space, Dr. John Petrovic for his discussions on justice
and fairness, and Dr. Dee Goldston for her ideas and encouragement. I hope these people never stop challenging the world to be a more equitable place. I look forward to seeing what we might accomplish together as a force for change—a community of advocates and activists in this place and time where we live. Thank you all for sharing your knowledge and your passion.

To my family, I extend my heartfelt apologies for being so absent—especially in the past year or two—to work on this dissertation while also teaching full time. On the days when I most questioned my sanity and wanted to quit, I thought about you and decided to keep going. To my mom Paulette, dad Bill, stepmom Denise, sister Nikki, brother Greg, nieces Emma and Sophie, nephews Elijah, Seth, and Ben, and new nephews Hunter and Parker—thank you so much for your understanding and love. I look very forward to spending more time with you now!

To all my sweet, wonderful friends: Thanks for your patience and encouragement…I promise I can get back to being more fun.

I would like to acknowledge all the teachers in public schools who fight for justice and equal access to educational opportunities for all children. Nobody would completely believe the challenges unless they have been there.

To the teachers in our PLC—especially to Lauren and Anna—you know this is for you as much as it is for me. Thank you for your input, and for your belief in being community teachers and learners. No matter how hard it gets, we have seen that the payoffs far outweighs the costs. Thank you for being so excited that I am trying to share our stories.

I extend my deepest gratitude to our students. I especially offer my respect to those students who are silenced and ignored, yet come to school to learn and work towards their own goals—to pursue their own dreams—in spite of all the barriers, mazes, and injustices that confront them every single day. You amaze and inspire me, you make me laugh and you make
me cry. I will never stop believing that together we can change the world—the place where we live—one step at a time.
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PROLOGUE: A STORY

A new teacher in our high school science department, Lauren, is crying again at lunch and trying to hide it. Her eyes are red and she seems exhausted, defeated. Her navy blue pumps shine from under the table where her ankles are properly crossed, one foot slightly trembling, almost still. This is the third day in a row she has been in tears. She gets to school at 7:00 a.m. and leaves at 5:00 p.m. every day. Lauren is 25 years old, newly married, has a bachelor’s and master’s degree—as well as doctoral work—in biology, and a master’s in secondary science education. Lauren is white, with startling wide, blue-green eyes, from a privileged home in Dallas, Texas. [She entered the profession four weeks ago, bright-eyed, intelligent, excited, ready to work with kids to make a difference and share her love of science. She had felt prepared, energetic, youthful, and ultra-organized.] After lunch, all but two of the science department members hurried back to their rooms, busy. On the way out the door to her class of nine advanced placement chemistry students, one veteran teacher—Lauren’s official “mentor”—calls out cheerfully, sincerely, “Don’t worry, it gets better, let me know if you need anything!”

The two remaining teachers get on both sides of Lauren and ask what is wrong. At first she says “Nothing, I’m okay.” Stoic, back regally straight, head up. Then the two other women are more insistent. They wait patiently, silently for one minute that feels like a hundred years. The big round white school clock ticks off plain seconds in halting clicks, with a needle thin black arm, from high on a matte grey wall. Distant shuffles in the hall amplify into a thundering mass of people changing classes. Someone in the thundering mass can clearly be heard yelling “Fuck you man, shit, I’ll kill you motha fucka, know what I’m sayin?!?” Followed by hard thuds
against a wall, not revealing whether or not the exchange is playful, or violent. Lauren’s shoulders start shaking, gently at first, then harder. Somebody from the hall slams the classroom door shut amidst laughter, instantly muffled. Sound bounces around the room, filling the space even when it stops. Student projects—toothpick bridges and molecule models—hang from the ceiling by clear fishing line or pink string. Two suspended bridges abruptly start swinging back and forth as the giant industrial air conditioning roars through its vents. A cutout of Albert Einstein sticking his tongue out leans from atop the front white board. A metal sign, World War II memorabilia, shows Rosie the Riveter proclaiming “We Can Do It!” Lauren cannot hold it in, tears start to streak through her mascara and onto her navy blue dress with white polka dots. A blackish spot sits defiantly, glistening on her starched white pilgrim collar. For a minute it seems she cannot breathe. There is grief in her sobs, loss. Lauren says, “I just don’t think I can do this. I think I need to quit. I need to get out now.” She shivers from the freezing blast of roaring air, as the other two teachers lean in and strain to hear what she is saying. “I could do something else.” Her voice creaks out a few more words, “This is horrible.” She bows her head and whispers, “I’ve made a big mistake. But I don’t think we can afford…” Glossy strands of dark chestnut hair fall in front of her face. She could be a little girl looking for something on the floor that has gotten lost near her feet.

One of the science teachers hugs her, offers a joke, and promises to make strong drinks Friday after school. She turns on some music, but Madonna seems all wrong. She quickly flicks through a couple more songs on her IPod, but they all seem even worse. 50 Cent, his growly spark usually igniting at least a bit of relaxed movement, is uninspiring. When Seal’s Crazy offers no comfort, the third teacher turns off the IPod and stereo. The speakers give a resolute pop. The roar of air shuts off. Finally there is silence again. Then the other teacher, Paige—
herself only 27 years old with five years teaching experience—looks Lauren straight in the eye and says, “You are coming to sit in on my class today during your prep.” Lauren sniffs, replies, “I don’t know, I have to make a lot of copies and I’m behind on my grading, I can’t get caught up, I have to call some parents…” she sighs deeply, pauses, then continues, “I have to do that today, I just can’t take it another day, and I have to put away the lab materials…” As she speaks her volume lowers to nearly inaudible, and she starts crying again, softly this time. She chokes and coughs, then there is a lone, violent hiccup.

Paige says, “No more excuses. You’re coming if I have to leave my class alone and come get you. And that is just really not a good idea, so please don’t make me have to do that.” Paige smiles. Her voice is steady, calm. She takes a black elastic band from her right wrist, then both hands sweep back long, dark-gold hair with ballerina speed, confining it behind her bowed head with the black elastic band in a serious gesture. A tiny silver chain flashes at her throat above a crimson blouse. Paige stands up, placing her hands firmly on the hips of her straight black skirt, bold, graceful. One of her black leather loafers taps a single time on the hard floor, holding back more taps. Blue eyes twinkle, hinting at intelligent humor. She is the smallest person in the room, but her determined stance takes up substantial space. There is an instant where it seems all three women might burst out laughing, but the moment passes…lost laughter slips out through invisible cracks like ghosts, not quite real. Lauren agrees with a nod, but does not smile. She says something, maybe “Okay,” or “Thank you,” as she turns away to walk out of the room, pumps clicking a fading, resigned cadence down the hall.

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A bell rings to signal the end of class. The third science teacher runs next door to Paige’s room immediately after the class Lauren was observing. It’s a packed room of tenth grade
physical science students. Many of them are tough, some are several years older than their
classmates. A few show off prison tattoos and proud bullet scars. A few seem happy and
innocent, safe and sheltered, shouldering bright new book bags neatly packed with schoolwork
and supplies. All students in this class are black, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds,
grouped as a “regular” or “standard” (as opposed to advanced) class. They all ride busses from
across town to attend this “neighborhood” school, fallout action from recent re-segregation.

Students spill out of the room, chatting over one another. One tall, smiling boy says, “A’right
then, Ms. Spencer.” Another says, “That was pretty fun. We should do more stuff like that.”

One large girl loudly says to a boy, “Get your fuckin hands off me, fool” as she slaps his hand
away. The boy says back to her, “Lookin’ good, hmm, mmm.” Another girl asks on her way
out, “What we doin’ tomorra?” Two other girls talk about their own babies at home. An older
boy says, “That class makes me feel smart.” Another replies, “Whatever.” A tiny girl, very
dressed up, wearing round glasses and a deep green silky blouse sparkling with gold threads,
says “I’m gonn major in chemistry in college.” A boy near her counters “You gotta pass high
school first!”

Paige and Lauren exit the room last. They are both smiling. Paige chuckles and tells one
student, “Good job today, La’Darrius, I noticed a big improvement from yesterday, keep it up,”
then answers the girl’s question, “We’re doing more super cool fun chemistry stuff tomorrow for
your brilliant self, atoms and molecules.” To a boy in a big pink baseball hat peppered with
green camouflage, she says “Hide that hat Bo, or I’m adding it to my collection.” Bo has his left
hand clenched into a fist clutching bunched denim at his waist, that hand having the sole full-
time job of holding up his baggy dark jeans. Bo flashes a gold-tooth smile, intense eyes
revealing sweetness and intellect behind the cool exterior façade. “Oh yeah, I forgot,” as he
reluctantly slides the hat off with the same hand formerly employed with holding up pants. The pants immediately sag down to reveal layers of underwear, bright blue gym shorts and plaid boxers. The left hand seems to remember its responsibility and pulls his pants back up, now having the double duty of holding both pants and pink-and-green-camouflage-hat. The other hand hangs empty at his right side, or sends a half-waive to friends passing by. The third teacher, standing in the hall watching, wonders if the cap might have been better left on Bo’s head than functioning as a modern day codpiece, but says nothing. Lauren shakes her head in disbelief. She is standing up straight again, several inches taller than Paige. The red splotches on her pale skin are fading, looking more like rosy blush. Even the gray spot on her white pilgrim collar is barely noticeable, a faint reminder of mascara-filled tears falling earlier. She and Paige and the other teacher get together after school that day for hours, to plan and collaborate and share their vision. Hopeful toasts are made. They laugh and tell stories.

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That was the last day Lauren cried at lunch, and that was three years ago. I am the third teacher.
PREFACE

This dissertation is borne out of experience—some before, and some after the story above. It is borne out of frustration and anger, overwhelming stress and sadness. It is borne out of hope, excitement, and victories big and small. It is borne out of steps forward, and steps back. It is also borne out of ideas and discussion. It is grounded in theory and in research literature—especially literature on space. Terms will be defined and explained, but as an initial overview: This work has the focal point of a teacher learning community as individual agents working together in a third space, where shared goals and vision connect them both in and out of school. Narrative inquiry will be used to tell these teachers’ stories.

What’s At Stake

What’s at stake is the chance for teachers to learn together—before they give up and leave the profession, or worse—before they become bitter and resigned to existing rather than thriving. What’s at stake is for pre-service teachers to hear real stories of hope—to see how teachers collaborating in community can shift being in school spaces—before they become miserable in their isolation. What’s at stake is the chance for students—especially those with the greatest need to utilize the promise of public education—to find an environment where teachers are happy and thriving and learning. What’s at stake is showing possibilities and sparking dialogue about schools being places where all students can learn in meaningful ways to improve their life chances.

I introduce this dissertation with several key points critical to understanding deep assumptions I bring to my work as a teacher and researcher of education. Fundamentally, I see
the need to rethink what it means to teach [science] education--bracketing science here because I believe science education has been complicit to the larger hegemonic practices of public education. I also see the need to challenge practices of education research to expand how insights are communicated and acted upon—and who is involved—practices which for the most part are retained as the elite practices of "academic researchers." What’s at stake is whether or not, through re-thinking and re-framing, the practice of science education can be a worthwhile endeavor to benefit those in our society who have the fewest advantages and who are critically underserved by our social systems. The focus of this research is to tell teachers’ stories of how they learn and work together to improve their own lives, as well as the lives of their students and the communities to which they will belong.

As I move into Chapter 1: Situating the Study, I will explain my stance and positioning. In much of the introductory discussion, I refrain from citing outside sources in order to maintain a flow important in setting up this work. If the reader will indulge me this, you will find a great inclusion of researchers and citations as we move along.
Chapter 1: Situating The Study

Researcher Positionality

You couldn’t work in the American South and not have a full dose of ironic detachment. His message when he handed me that book was not that utopia was possible, but that we have a moral duty to imagine it. And perhaps more than that, we have a responsibility to pass that imagination from generation to generation…We have a challenge to change a culture, to adapt, to make meaning out of the efforts of our lives. (Lambert, 2002, p. 18)

Subjectivity

As a researcher, my positioning is multi-layered. I think it is helpful to clarify who I am, why I am asking these questions, values I bring to this inquiry, and what I hope to achieve by doing this research. As someone with a science background—primarily in physics—I am accustomed to traditional expectations that academic writing will be done in third person, as if from a disconnected “objective” reporter devoid of emotion, opinion, positioning, or subjectivity. In that same mode, ideas from articles are referenced in the past tense—even if the context is very present- or even future-centered. However, in many of my best doctoral level courses, I have been repeatedly encouraged to examine and embrace my subjectivity, and to write in a style that gives voice to that subjectivity, in an effort to resist the continuing colonial regime of forced objectivity through dominant structures.

Narrative. I embrace my subjectivity, which includes emotions as well as thoughts, a methodological stance best supported by qualitative approaches which explore human contexts and the multiplicity of interpretations of lived experiences as “storied.” In an effort to reflect
those values I write in first person and use writing style that seems to me to have the most integrity as being honest with regard to situation and researcher position. Accordingly, I am a storyteller, for which I make no apologies. Discussion, reflection, dialogue, books, movies, blogs: These are all ways to share stories—a deeply embedded compulsion which connects humans to one another.

I am also a practitioner, a full time science teacher of 19 years in Alabama public schools. I hear and see a hundred stories each day in my work as a classroom teacher. I strongly believe in the power of education to improve life chances. However, when regarding human society, I no longer believe in any easily definable “problems,” or simple cause-and-effect relationships. Nor do I believe in any “answers” in the sense of packaged steps that will “solve” the problems. People are not chemical compounds which can be identified, controlled, and mixed in predictably reactive equations. There are complex threads involving power, history, politics, space, time, class, race, accessibility, fairness, identity, goals, and individuality that make “solutions” impossible. That is to say, no amount of educational research will bring all students into the middle class world of college educations and white picket fences—a “savior” which arrogantly maintains the privileged life ways of the academic researcher.

**Dominant discourse of middle class goals.** Surely the paths to the middle class world mentioned above—including decades of schooling—must be as baffling and unattractive to some people as is the practice of head-hunting is to most middle class North Americans. We must remember there is multiplicity, a wide spectrum of people and beliefs no matter what scale we use. People can have very different backgrounds, worldviews, and goals. If one student is seriously invested in having no goals that could be construed as mainstream White, and in resisting all aspects of the status quo, it might never be worth the sacrifice in identity and social
acceptance for that student to “succeed” in any middle class notion of that term. However, as I have seen, many students are repeatedly denied access to tools that could help them gain access into the middle class world they do strongly desire. We know that schools tend to be factories where striated social systems are reproduced, as has been discussed and described by many authors (Bordieu, 1984; Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Freire, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Oaks, 1986; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Willis, 1977). Schools work very well for students who already embrace knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors valued by the dominant classes. Schools do not offer much at all to other students except confinement, stress, negative emotions, and further alienation. When I speak of “improving” conditions for students, I mean interrupting the situations that continually disregard, underserve, and misrepresent students identifying with marginalized groups described.

**Core Beliefs Regarding Schools and Praxis**

Rather than being places that primarily reproduce social striations and attempt to impart disconnected factual knowledge, schools should be a venue for praxis—a place where students learn to embody the process of action. I agree with Arendt (1958/1998), who suggested that praxis—the ability to think, communicate, and take action—is the highest form of human freedom. Students should be helped to see themselves as agents with choices, and to understand the power in that freedom. This is not a simple endeavor, but also not impossible. I maintain that schools do not have to be factories of reproduction where power structures are re-inscribed, and where notions of being “other” and “less than” are constantly reinforced, as many students are pushed into (or held in) the margins.
Educational Teaching and Research

Educational teaching and research, then, from my position, should be about expanding life chances for students and helping to create a more just world. Typically, we frame these efforts as a matter of addressing “problems” and what we can do to alleviate them. It does not make sense, however, to continue pursuits to find teaching practices or research which superimpose generalized “models” of a “good teacher,” “good student,” “good school,” or “good class.” It will never work to essentialize a dynamic, human social process into a traditional paradigm of problem-solution. Educational research needs to be oriented differently. A large part of this change is to find ways to share voices of teachers and students in venues and formats which are accessible, meaningful, and interesting to people moving together in school spaces.

In my quest to share teachers’ stories, I was a participant observer in this research, which I think is an advantage in having access to teachers and the contexts where we naturally share our stories. Furthermore, I believe the process of educational research—as well as the process of education in schools—is more important and more revealing than an attempt to observe a finalized “product.” Hegemonic research is unacceptable if we are trying to confront ongoing colonization of all people by the dominant classes. There is no reasonable argument I can imagine to maintain the status quo of educational research if we do not wish to maintain the status quo of education.

This brings me to another relevant layer in my positioning, that of a scholar-activist. I believe in human pursuits of knowledge, art, music, travel, science, philosophy, and social justice. I believe these things provide great agency and heighten the individual experience of being alive, therefore improving the human condition one person at a time—that is why I value being a scholar. Therein lies the activist side of being a scholar-activist. Although I highly value
intellectual curiosity and stimulation—hence the draw of both science and philosophy—I do not find fulfillment in remaining within purely theoretical realms. I enjoy the theory in context of spaces where teachers learn, plan, discuss, and act. I actually think this is one of the greatest shortcomings of schools now, as they are—in my experience—places of extremely disconnected, hyper-compartmentalized, de-contextualized brain tasks. We fall short of creating a school where all students create a personal story of meaning and value. We have a responsibility as scholars to be local activists, a collective voice and force for change to make schools better for kids, and for teachers. This requires a much more holistic view of individual people, and of schools. It requires being aware of local context and situations, connecting what happens in schools to what matters to students. We need to re-think what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how we can change the way things happen in schools.

Potential Significance and Intended Audience for Study

Part of my conception of being a scholar-activist, teacher, and story-teller is an enduring hope that I can make a difference—in some small way—to improve the human condition. In doing this, I am focused on individual people and places. There is a small group of four science teachers, of which I am the fourth member, who have formed a collaborative professional learning group. I wish to share these teachers’ stories of their ways of being, knowing, and doing in science classrooms. I want to know what teachers in this group are doing that is so different from the “normal” routine, what is causing unusually encouraging interactions with students in “regular” (as opposed to “advanced”) science classes, and how this knowledge can be shared with other teachers.

My primary intended audience is, therefore, other teachers—especially pre-service teachers and new teachers—as well as teacher-educators. The hope is that opening up
possibilities—new ways of being together in science classrooms—can help teachers and students feel a greater sense of agency and success, and to be happier and healthier in the setting where much of their lives are lived. When this happens, students can develop tools to help them reach their own goals. Among these tools are learning to inquire, to collaborate, to discuss, and to critically reflect. I am not suggesting anything simple, as the complexity is infinite. Every individual person is different, every class of students is different, and every day is different. That does not change the fact that we are called to educate students, to provide education.

What does that mean, to provide education? I like the etymology offered by Wikipedia: “the word education is derived from educare (Latin) ‘bring up,’ which is related to educere ‘bring out’, ‘bring forth what is within’, ‘bring out potential’ and ducere, ‘to lead’. ” In contrast, I think we often lose sight of what exactly it is we are trying to do in education, and with educational research. Accordingly, I use visual media, particularly photographs, to show teachers and students learning and doing together in science classrooms. Visual re-presentations are filled with meaning, and provide a uniquely accessible venue through which to portray and narrate meaning through a storied approach.

Background: Identifying a Problem

speak the truth and, as a monster, display in their monstrous light the rule of lies and the foul machine at whose whim his fellows, the disinherited of the earth, are and always have been crushed, each day, each life. (Foucault, 1975, p. 177)

Persistent Trends

Like many others in the field of education, I am seriously concerned about the persistent trends indicating that African American students perform poorly in science. Poor performance in
science is often linked with poor performance in overall academics, as well as with diminished opportunities for quality of life. These trends can be argued to stem from issues of poverty and marginalization—primarily issues of social class rather than race—which impact many groups in addition to African American students. However, there are separate issues of race which are intertwined and cannot be denied, a stance held in Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). I have a special interest with this particular group of students due to my position as a teacher in a local public high school in a city system in Alabama. Here—in the local context—historical factors of slavery, civil rights, segregation, and oppression have persisted the longest against African Americans as compared with other marginalized groups. I believe this continues to result in more entrenched problems locally.

What has long been reported about this particular group is a persistent achievement gap. The term “achievement gap” has been used so much that it seems to have lost power to capture the attention of most people. In my 19 years’ experience as a teacher in Alabama public schools, the majority of educational professionals seem to accept these trends as “normal” and permanent. The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) summed up the trends in a statement made all the more disturbing by its simplicity: In "Score Trends for Black and White Students, Grade 8 Reading, 1998-2007...There was no significant change in the gaps for any of the states" (p. 7). These trends are repeatedly documented in multiple studies at the national and state level.

In the same report, Alabama ranked in the bottom four states in the nation for all Black students’ math and reading scores, except fourth grade reading. Hanushek and Rivkin (2006) compiled and analyzed a number of related statistics, with the conclusion that the outlook is indeed “dire” for African American students. They showed that—based on documented trends and percentages so far—Black students are far less likely than White students to finish high
school, attend college, complete college if they start, or work; and they are far more likely to be sent to prison or other institutions. While the national rhetoric in science education reform documents have for nearly half a century called for increasing student attraction into STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics] careers, we have a fundamental need in Alabama to deconstruct the current pathways of traditional education.

**Causal Thinking**

The incessant search for “causes” reminds us to use caution, as cause and effect is a structuralist idea with yet another dualism that is rarely fruitful in the messy business of humanity. Even so, there is little way of avoiding the term completely, but I mean it in the poststructuralist, postmodern sense of processes deeply rooted in historical colonialism. *Causes* have social and political contexts tied to power dynamics, but can—like politics—shift. Accordingly, reasons for this recurrent pattern are complex and deep. No single cause has actually been identified as the main contributor. Rather, there are myriad historical, political, and cultural issues—some made more insidious by their invisibility—tangled into the mesh of our society. I will briefly discuss a few large contributing factors.

**Poverty.** Conditions of poverty underlie and impact everything else. Much has been written about the cycle of poverty and the tendency of human social structures to reinscribe class striations. This includes the social structure of public education, and gets at the heart of what I find interesting and encouraging: Although schools do tend to reinforce and reinscribe social structures, I do not believe this is a purposeful goal; nor do I think educational systems must necessarily remain entrenched in old paradigms. Jacobs’ (2004) findings support the assertion that conditions of poverty are intertwined with other social problems being addressed here—including the persistent achievement gap and life chances for Black students—noting that in
1996 almost one third of African Americans lived in poverty. Also, noting that in 1990, nearly 23,000 African American men earned college degrees whilst 2,280,000 were in prison or on probation and parole—yielding “a ratio of 1 to 99 compared with a ratio of 1 to 6 for white men” (p. 75). Certainly cultural capital is tied to economic capital as an ever-pervasive factor.

**Cultural capital.** At the forefront, the part played by middle class White students’ ownership of *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1984) cannot be overstated. Cultural capital includes attitudes, skills, knowledge, and behaviors valued by dominant authority. Middle class students come to school already owning these tools, never having to expend energy learning to navigate privileged knowledge which has been passed to them through family life and social connections—as would be a trust fund of financial capital which has grown with compounded interest over time. Language structures and modes of communication are a huge arena within this concept. The aspects involved in cultural capital are almost as numerous and multi-layered as the issues of poverty.

Lareau (1987) wrote about how social class differences in cultural capital have a tremendous impact on relationships students and their families form with schools. She said that processes of social reproduction in schools have been given little attention as compared with outcomes. If we cannot illuminate the processes, it is hard to see how we can expect positive systemic change. Lareau listed a number of critical conditions, including “sociolinguistic experiences…the curriculum, the hidden curriculum, the social organization of the classroom, and the authority relationships between teachers and students…parental behavior…parental involvement…[and] institutional discrimination” (1987, p. 73). Any one of these social reproduction processes presents a tremendous challenge to educational change all on its own. These and other factors continue—seemingly undiminished—today.
**Low expectations.** Both subtle and overt racist attitudes are at play in perpetual low expectations, according to Landsman (2004). In referring to a father trying to counteract these effects with his sons, she wrote that these are “assumptions that his sons are likely to face in school: that they cannot do the work assigned, that they do not come from a functional family, and even—tucked back in a teacher's subconscious—that they are innately less intelligent than their white peers” (p. 28). I will give an example of one such factor from my professional experience. Since I intend for this work to be place-based, it is relevant to introduce the situated context of the problem(s) from which my research questions originally grew. Although my research is ultimately about teachers’ ways of learning, knowing, and being—their stories and their ways are intricately intertwined with their students.

**Administration.** No one part of the network of educational systems deserves to be blamed for all the problems. The problems are incredibly complex, deep, and interwoven from all parts and members of education and society. From my experience as a teacher, however, there is often a vast chasm between perspectives of classroom teachers and administrators. This is not something which can be solved by a simple mission statement or new committee, but rather needs to be addressed as an overarching problem—a pervasive problem with dire consequences for student achievement—requiring urgent, prolonged attention. Although we cannot change history or change the cycle of poverty overnight, we do have the power and ethical responsibility to change things happening in schools which exacerbate the cycle of poverty and work to maintain the achievement gap. Many—but not all—administrators with whom I have worked spend far more time and energy expressing their wishes for fewer discipline referrals, fewer parental complaints, and fewer failing grades than they ever do about Black students’ academic achievement.
I can actually attest to the fact that I have never heard a single administrator in 19 years ever ask about the curriculum in regular/standard level classes, ask what experiments or projects we are doing in these science classes, ask what we are doing that involves literacy, inquiry, technology, or critical thinking, ask if we need lab supplies, ask how many students we are moving up into advanced classes, ask which of these students we have helped find jobs or get into colleges, or ask where any of these students are after they are no longer attending our high school. I do not wish to vilify all administrators, nor to place blame on one segment of education or society; we all are part of the problem, and there are multiple discourses at work in schools. I do, however, wish to illuminate things which need to be addressed locally. Not surprisingly, it is politically unpopular to try to discuss and change these things. I fervently believe it is the responsibility of educational researchers to be activists, to refuse to take part in the ongoing delusion of The Emperor’s New Clothes (Anderson, 1837/1993; Price, 2005).

Course registration. Although it might seem like a small thing, registration is actually a tremendous area for improvement, and a glaring example of the problematic situation within which we find ourselves. When students register for courses, they are making decisions that will impact their lives, including whether or not they will be prepared for next steps they need to take to reach their own goals. There are currently no systems put into place to help these students with registration, except the random hope that some individual teacher will make sure they register for what they need, rather than for all P.E. classes. (I actually had a student last year who signed up for P.E. in four of his eight course slots for the next year before I—quite randomly happening to look at his registration card—helped him change this.) Ways of schools are often middle class ways, and students from backgrounds outside the middle class might not have anyone at home who knows how to navigate the confusing ritual of registration with course
numbers and requirements, catalogues and forms, applications and approvals, prerequisites and course sequences.

Astonishingly, there is even resistance when trying to arrange for speakers to come during registration to talk to these classes—even if the speakers are from other places in our system such as Tuscaloosa Center for Technology (TCT). We have course offerings which include high-tech equipment and training for high paying trades such as welding, electricity, graphic design, building construction, and automotive mechanics. Yet there are no systems in place in school to pass on the knowledge of these classes and associated opportunities to many students who could most benefit from it. I have experienced multiple scenarios where course offerings—including programs at TCT—select students with applications and reference forms which are mysteriously unavailable on the web or in counselors’ offices; rather, the applications are offered to select groups of students who are already enrolled in advanced (read: preferred) classes.

*Statistics followed.* The administration does, however, spend a great deal of time and energy making printouts concerning the following three things for this group of students, by teacher: 1) Number of students passing (and failing) standardized tests, 2) Number of students receiving discipline referrals, and 3) Number of students graduating. I have been in a meeting where I heard with my own ears that it would be better to do only book work and have students stay in their seats if that means there will not be any discipline problems. In contrast, for *advanced* students, many more characteristics are gathered and charted, including: ACT scores, Advanced Placement (AP) test scores, GPA, number of AP courses taken, extra-curricular activity involvement, community service/volunteer hours, college recommendations written by
teachers, college applications completed with counselors, awards and honors, and phone calls with involved parents.

Status quo. The party line attitude has been—and I do not say this lightly—one completely unconcerned about establishing and maintaining high expectations and academic standards for minority students. Even when teachers have given strong evidence for significantly improved student achievement in “regular” or “standard” level academic classes (99% Black), administration has been repeatedly unsupportive in providing the schedule and procedures that would allow effective programs to continue. This year we have completely changed our schedule to a complex situation specifically due to grant money for the A+ College Readiness program; the schedule is driven by Advanced Placement (AP) college level courses. Although it has been repeatedly shown that when standard level students are enrolled in academic courses during the last class of the day (4th period), the failure rate rises drastically, we have a packed schedule this year of 4th period regular level core academic classes. Predictably, even in the first month of school, the majority of discipline problems and failures have been in these classes.

There are always costs in time and energy—and usually money—when making it a priority to plan and set up systems such as scheduling, registration, counseling, and speakers for students belonging to a certain group. But there are much larger, long-term costs—to individuals and to society as a whole—associated with the wide acceptance of low expectations for marginalized students, thus sustaining inequities in schools and in the larger community.

Special interests. Other “solutions” in educational reform are misguided attempts borne of good intentions, mixed with masked social agendas, which ultimately further advantage the privileged. In Applebome’s (2011) recent *New York Times* article, *The Promise and Costs of Charters*, he quoted a wise respondent on the matter of addressing special interests through
specialized curriculum, “‘It would divert funds out of the public schools for the interests of a small group of people… It could be a group that wants Mandarin, or Swahili or a cooking program. You could think of a thousand programs that might serve a small group, but it’s preposterous to think that’s serving the public good, and economically it’s just not sustainable’” (p. A23). This is an example of a “solution” that is also a “cause,” exacerbating the persistent trends in low performance by African American students.

**Tracking.** The continued practice of tracking is similar to the special interest curriculum efforts. Tracking is undertaken in the name of providing students with classes that match their “ability” and “need,” when often the greater concern is to separate and striate based on perceived behavior patterns, and hegemonic notions of intelligence (Oakes, 1986). Howe (1997) asserted that “segregation often reemerges within schools through practices such as tracking” (p. 76). Although students are allowed—and encouraged by some mindful teachers—to move into advanced classes, it rarely happens. There are pressures both in and out of school that often keep students from wanting to move into classes that are perceived as “White,” or even just “hard” or “strict.” From my experience, the more common reason is literal lack of knowledge about the potential benefits in taking advanced classes, lack of understanding about registration procedures, and inertia. It is difficult to have conversations about the fact that tracking benefits the most gifted students, while not tracking benefits those students with the least privileges and advantages (Howe, 1997).

**Disparity in resources.** Another pervasive critical component in the persistent achievement gap is the disparity in resources allocated for Black students as compared to those provided to White students. Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Crowley (2006) submitted that
ongoing educational and spatial striations deny resources that are embedded in educational structures and tied to higher achievement.

In Tuscaloosa, financial resources allocated for “regular” level classes in local public high schools is zero, whereas mandatory fees associated with “advanced” classes give those teachers on average $800 to spend in each “advanced” class. At the school where I teach, this situation translates into a tremendous difference in the educational experience of a student in “regular” vs. “advanced” 9th grade Biology. For instance, the best lab equipment, material, and technology is reserved for “advanced” students, as they are believed to take better care of the materials. Even further, reform initiatives drive grant funding to prepare teachers to enhance instruction that moves advanced students into college pathways and career ways. At first glance, these appear to be a factor of financial resources, but the issues of teacher professional development, policy mandates, grant funding, and delivery of materials to classrooms demonstrate the complexities framed here simply as disparate “resources”.

Reframing the Problem

Many solutions have been suggested, but based on the statistics, as of yet none have “worked.” This is undoubtedly due to a complex matrix of factors, including the questionable effort to sustain reforms over time. For example, an intensely debated “solution” at present is that of charter and magnet schools. This has been a Republican drive for quite some time, including the argument to have vouchers which would allow parents to redirect their tax money into private schools. This has been recently disseminated in popular propaganda including the widespread viewing of the “documentary” Waiting for Superman (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2011), punctuated throughout the second half with questionable “statistics.” Yet there was no difference in Black students’ academic performance in elementary magnet schools as compared
with their performance in non-magnet schools according to Reed’s study in North Carolina (2004).

Overall, research does not consistently support a pattern of sustained “high performance” in special schools—especially inner city schools in poor areas—over time. Leadership is critical, and driven, charismatic leaders typically do not stay in the same high pressure challenging position for extended years. We are further misled with the deceptive withholding of important information about special schools such as teacher/student ratio, amount of money spent per student, and the process for selecting (and excluding) students. I do not find it impossible to believe that charter and magnet schools could improve performance in some circumstances. However, as already mentioned (Applebome, 2011; Rawls, 2001), it cannot ethically be seen as serving the greater good to take money away from public schools to support special interests.

I completely believe that schools can become places that offer all students improved life chances. Doing so, however, requires that we embrace and respond ethically to the concept that inequalities are not inherent, but are as Jacobs put it, “by design” (2004, p. 73). In saying by design, Jacobs implied Bordieu’s notion of social reproduction; that is to say inequalities which further the status quo. We know that knowledge is socially constructed and situated, but it is helpful to remember that embedded concepts such as “inequalities” are included. We have to move into spaces where we explore who, how, and why we are being in and beyond schools. According to Lemke (1992), the design of education itself must be re-shaped to become far more connected to authentic contexts that students will encounter in the post-schooling larger world of work.
What Works

We now know that there will not be any easy solutions. According to Reeves (2003), there is no proprietary set of actions which will equal desired results; there are, however, certain things that high performing schools (in urban areas of high poverty) have in common: “1) A focus on academic achievement, 2) Clear curriculum choices, 3) Frequent assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement, 4) An emphasis on nonfiction writing, 5) Collaborative scoring of student work” (p. 3). This makes sense to me, to identify schools in high poverty environments where students have multiple socioeconomic challenges but are showing high achievement, and find out what they are doing. From my point of view that means talking to teachers and students for their input about what factors are adding to success.

Reform pedagogies and culturally responsive teaching. This brings me closer to my specific area of interest. There are many things we can do to move towards narrowing the achievement gap. Most of these actions come under the umbrella of culturally responsive teaching. There are numerous studies showing promise in various reform methods. There are many reform approaches being studied, but most culturally responsive reforms include shared power in classrooms, a student-centered approach, opportunities for critical reflection, classroom dialogue, and multiple literacies (Adamson, Banks, Burtch, Cox, Judson, Turley, Benford, & Lawson, 2003; Agnello, 2007). This includes use of youth-privileged literacies such as digital media. I am encouraged by what I have read and experienced especially in three areas: 1) service learning in pre-service teacher programs, 2) intense, sustained collaboration between teachers in the form of professional learning groups or communities, and 3) third space as a place for challenging dominant discourses, sharing power, taking risks, creating new culture, valuing multiple literacies, bridging home and school, scaffolding, co-constructing knowledge,
employing multimedia and digital environments, considering lived contexts, focusing on the importance of place, and working towards shared goals. In the workings of all three areas, practices of continual reflection and dialogue are key to how teachers and students are being—learning and living through challenges in and beyond the [science] classroom.

Service learning. Learning through being in an unaccustomed place can be a rich context for cultural learning. According to Stachowski, Bodle, and Morrin (2008), service learning “coaxes the student teachers to place themselves in social and cultural situations where they may likely feel somewhat vulnerable, out of place, or uncomfortable, and where they might not know how to act, what to say, or whom to turn to” (p. 43). This is a strange prospect, putting oneself in an uncomfortable position on purpose. Yet every day, people in the most marginalized groups and underserved social classes must feel this way many times. Surely many of our minority students and children from poverty come to schools and feel this way constantly. If the majority White, middle class teachers only see what is “other,” and assume that everything from our reference frame is “normal,” we can hardly expect to reach students who are very different from ourselves. This is closely connected to my study, as I believe pre-service teachers and new teachers benefit dramatically by being immersed in the collaborative teacher culture of professional learning community (PLC). I experienced this for many weeks last year with a methods student—Tyler—now a first year teacher in Florida. I have included some of his stories in this work. I am amazed daily at the shifts in new teachers’ stories as they become increasingly involved in non-traditional ways of being teachers, within third spaces of PLC.

Teacher collaboration in PLCs. Teacher learning in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), within ideas involving third space, currently frames my greatest area of interest. Gutiérrez (2008) views third spaces through a lens of sociocritical literacy as zones of
proximal development, hybrid spaces where traditional power dichotomies and assumptions of privileged forms of knowledge are replaced with re-negotiated dynamics. “PLCs have become an operational approach for professional development with potential to de-isolate the teaching experience in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)” (Hamos, Bergin, Maki, Perez, Prival, Rainey, Rowell, & VanderPutten, 2009, p. 14). There have recently been assertive calls for PLCs—with a strong argument and supporting research—some with an admonishment (Lumpe, 2007), to all who do not shift the paradigm of professional development towards this model of teacher learning communities. I have personally experienced dramatic changes in student progress, attitudes, and achievement by engaging in PLCs during the past four years (since 2007). My introduction to collaboration and PLCs took place in 2007 after a new teacher at my school attended a conference in New Orleans conducted by the DuFours, who have been instrumental in reporting successes and promise of PLCs (DuFour, Eacker, & DuFour, 2005). Their work has been especially encouraging in the context of improving academic achievement with students in traditionally marginalized groups. Berry, Clemans, and Kostogriz (2007) also compiled a great deal of promising research concerning collaboration and PLCs. The teacher—Paige Spencer, introduced in the Prologue story—brought back new ideas and ways of learning from this conference, and science teacher culture at our school has been surprisingly altered since that time.

**Third space.** Third space is a backdrop I propose for all other reforms—especially PLCs. This will be discussed further in Chapter 2, but as a general definition, *third space* is a space created where dominant discourses meet non-dominant discourses, and new culture is created for the purpose of collaboratively working towards shared goals. In third space—a risky and unpredictable space of shared power—assumptions are challenged and ideas can be changed.
Something amazing happens when several teachers work together with shared goals and commitment, and collaborate to construct new space. There is increased accountability, but in a spirit of positive cooperation rather than micromanaging surveillance. Two metaphors may be helpful for illustration at this point.

The first metaphor is resonance, a concept common to many phenomena in physics. When teachers—and teachers with students—collaborate, there is a resulting phenomenon much like resonance where two waves constructively interfere to create dramatically increased amplitude (height) of the resulting wave. The second metaphor is orchestra music. Although a violin or cello may be beautiful on its own, there is something entirely different created in the space of an orchestra hall where the instruments are playing together. It is much bigger than the sum of its parts, and cannot be deconstructed to analyze the parts away from context. Everything is changed depending on the participants and observers—in true quantum physics form (see YouTube video Dr. Quantum – Double Slit Experiment, n.d.)—the musicians, the audience, the music, and arguably the space itself. Third space is such an extensive theoretical construct underpinning this study, I will explore and explain it further in Chapter 2 as salient to science teacher learning and service. In the section which follows, I present the purpose and guiding research questions for this dissertation study.

Purpose of the Study

This study describes a professional learning community of high school science teachers to better understand what it means to be teachers of low-performing students in “regular” (as opposed to advanced) science courses. The aim of this inquiry is to gain insights into teachers’ perspectives of their experiences as members of the PLC, and to give these teachers voice by sharing their narratives. To describe the purpose succinctly, I will state my research questions
here; I will then follow in Chapter 2 with a brief overview of the literature that has encouraged me to undertake this study.

**Research Questions**

1) How do these teachers view their experiences as members of a professional learning community?

2) How do these teachers perceive their success teaching persistent low performers in light of their PLC experience?
   - How do they feel it impacts their own agency?
   - How and why do they feel it impacts learning for students in this group?

3) How might the notion of “space”—especially third space—be used to ground experiences in this teacher PLC as a unique focal point for professional learning?

4) How might narrative research methodology and digital media—in addition to text—tell these teachers’ stories about what they are learning and doing in a way that is approachable and meaningful to a wide audience?

This is not a study wherein teaching can be understood in parts and pieces, and in turn calling for an if/then hypothetical study question. Rather, the purpose of this study is to gain insights into teachers being teachers in community, and to explore research approaches to better understand possible reasons and ways they are science teachers thriving in the challenging context of regular science courses.

**Steps**

While being careful to avoid the structuralist trap of a cure, we are nonetheless bound to take positive steps. Educational institutions should be dynamic places that respond to needs and dialogue of people. Attention, time, money and power should be shifted to teachers and students.
in local schools, rather than being siphoned by disconnected administrators in bureaucratic central offices. These resources, as argued by John Rawls (2001), should be allocated to most benefit those who have the least in the interest of a more just society. In my experience, the current situation is clearly reversed. We should be using all methods possible to change the trends, narrow the gap, and create a more just world. Clearly though, there are other positive steps we can take, as we know that all the shifting of money and power in the world will not “fix” the problems.

**Stories for learning and inspiration.** Rather than trying to compile a list of steps to take in a Western medicine model for cure, I want to describe teachers *learning at the elbow* of one another (Roth & Tobin, 2002) in the anthropological spirit of phenomenology. In this study I use narrative inquiry and digital media to re-present teachers’ stories—as much as possible—in their own voices. I want to share their ways of knowing, learning, and doing, and to show—from a holistic perspective—how their collaboration as a community of empowered learners impacts their own professional lives, and the lives of their students. I do not want, however, to be afraid to share the hard stories—those often subverted, quieted, assumed as stereotypically unfortunate, or deleted from the educational research record as politically unpopular—as well as the happy ones. We are people, after all, which necessarily means we are messy and complicated, thus calling for re-presentations in educational research that are reflective of lived, and in the moment—*being*, experiences. As an emerging researcher, I call for my own space to draw on narrative inquiry to explore rather uncharted waters in arts-informed educational research featuring use of multimedia—primarily digital photographs.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Review of Relevant Literature: Conceptions of Space for Teacher Learning in Community

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. (Foucault, 1986, p. 22)

This chapter provides a detailed explanation of theoretical tenets underlying this study. Conceptions of space are explored, and the theoretical construct of Third Space is presented in greater detail. I have included both the main theory and the relevant literature from which I am drawing. With the research literature encouraging contextualized and community-based professional teacher learning, I introduce the notion of “being” teachers in spaces claimed through praxis for generation of new ways of knowing.

In reviewing relevant literature and theory which has supported and encouraged my interests, I find myself at the intersection of several areas represented in Figure 1, which include professional learning communities, third space, and narratives of teachers learning and being. I want to look at teachers gravitating together, choosing to form a professional learning community from which to act as free agents for positive change, not because they were told they must follow a certain model—but because they needed and wanted to find ways to live better as teachers. I specifically am informed and interested by viewing this as action occurring in a created third space, a space claimed and co-created for learning and being in new ways; therefore most of the literature I review comes from extensive study of space. I am also drawing
on work regarding teacher professional learning communities (PLCs), an area in which much has been written—especially in the past 10 years—and which I will weave into the discussions in this chapter.

While there is an obvious area of intersection of professional development in my work, I am opposed to past scholarship wherein learning is regarded as progression from knowledge deficits and located only in the minds of individuals. The reason is that I do not agree with the overarching hegemonic notion of professional development which—from my experience—is a dark cloud constantly hanging over educators, rather than a venue for continuing growth and stimulating new ideas. Drawing on sociocultural learning theorists (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003, Wertsch, 1991), development references the *extension* of ideas made possible through interactions amongst people and other resources. Rogoff (2003) wrote: “...people develop as participants in cultural communities. Their development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities – which also change” (pp. 3-4; emphasis in the original). The notion that learners bring “community funds of knowledge” (Moll, Armanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and learn in community resonates with professional development of teacher learning envisioned in this study. I certainly dream of this work being useful in some practical sense, which necessitates the sensible connection to professional development, and to pre-service teacher education.

As shown in Figure 1, the theoretical notion of *third space* offers a rich means for framing teachers *being* learners in a PLC. Notably, the language and drawn models which I have already introduced in writing about professional development and spaces of learning tend to lay out as flat 2-D entities. It is important to point out that, indeed, that I am seeking methodological research approaches that resist portraying teachers being, learning, and acting as collectible,
analyzable, and manipulative “things”. I will more fully discuss this methodological concern in Chapter 3, but suffice it to say here, I believe that narratives re-presenting teachers working in PLCs—shared through text and various digital media—can provide an immense opportunity to rethink how we engage in and re-present teacher professional learning.

*Figure 1. The Notion of Professional Development.*

I will begin by introducing what I view as the commonplace notion of teacher learning as “professional development”: A Dark Cloud. Teachers are told at every stage of their professional lives, multiple times per year, that they need to be “developed.” This implies, of course, that they are not developed, under-developed, or incorrectly developed. As a useful analogy, let us consider photographs. If you wish to develop pictures on photographic paper
(non-digital media!) in a darkroom, you first expose the paper to light through the negative film (itself already having been processed) being magnified by an enlarger; then you place it in the correct chemical baths, in the correct order, for the correct amount of time—to produce the correct image. It is easy to forget all the wonderfully creative things you can do by changing each of these steps, however, to make infinitely variable versions of that “correct” picture.

Still, we know that people from all professional fields value keeping up with new information, gaining new knowledge, and being infused with new insights. I believe this value is implied with the term professional. I do not argue or wish to change that, although in most fields the process is given a more positive, less demeaning name, such as continuing professional education. Guskey and Huberman (1995) admit that the word development:

reflects a ‘deficit’ model...something is lacking, and needs to be corrected. Typically these deficits are determined by others... Teachers are, in turn, seen as the objects, rather than the subjects, of their professional growth. (p. 269)

Unfortunately, the authors move past this insight into a discussion of how the deficit model cannot, after all, be discredited. Whichever term is in vogue, or whichever term we choose to use—professional growth, continuing teacher education, in-service teacher education, or professional development—it is important to retain focus. Schools are in the business of learning, and certainly most teachers embrace life-long learning as a central part of their identities. Yet in real school culture, professional development often has little to do with meaningful learning from the perspective of teachers.
Contrast with Other Professional Development Models

In my experience, traditional professional development is ineffective for several reasons: 1) whole professional development models suggested by research are not actually attempted in schools; only the most convenient pieces are selected and tried on a temporary basis; 2) teachers are not provided support in terms of time or other resources to implement reforms suggested in their professional development activities; 3) professional development is disconnected from classrooms; 4) teachers rarely have any say in their own development. I therefore find it to be as much a problem of implementation as of model; even though my approach is quite different from any model I have seen or read about when all parts of it are conceived as one paradigm shift. The challenge toward effectively enacting a PLC is not a matter of lacking a clear model, rather it calls for moving beyond traditional pre-fabricated parts and piece "models" of professional development toward embracing different ways of thinking and being teachers.

Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989), early front runners articulating recommendations for professional teacher training, advocated five components for an effective professional development “model”: (a) individually-guided staff development, (b) observation/assessment, (c) involvement in a development/improvement process, (d) training, and (e) inquiry. Nearly each of these components has been translated into the hierarchical and bureaucratic structures which undermine the holistic PLC vision. Component B, for example, refers to observation and assessment by an administrator, locating the authority for critique of teaching beyond the expertise of teachers and situating teaching as decontextualized practices that can be generalized.

Some recent models reflect a shift from “staff” development to “professional” development, and three broad models reflect this trend:
1) Standardized TDP programs: Focus on rapid dissemination of specific skills and content, often via a ‘cascade’ or ‘train-the-trainer’ approach; 2) School-centered TPD: Focus on longer-term change processes, usually via locally facilitated activities that build on-site communities of practice; 3) Individual or self-directed TPD: Focus on individualized, self-guided TPD with little formal structure or support. (Gaible & Burns, 2005, p. 19)

The second of the three models is closer to the foundation of my approach, as activities are “facilitated” (not forced), with a focus on change in processes through communities of practice.

The most glaring contrast I see in other models is a severe lack of attending to a teacher as a whole person. Most models are anything but holistic, and attend only to tasks and policies to be implemented, managed, and judged. This is evidenced in AERA Research Points (Resnick, 2005) where even the title belies beliefs counter to mine: Teaching Teachers...Essential Information for Education Policy. This ethos that policies can undergird or drive teachers’ continuing professional education simply cannot work for deep, lasting change to benefit students and teachers. As Guskey (1995) pointed out: “The teaching and learning process is a complex endeavor that is embedded in contexts that are highly diversive. This combination...makes it difficult, if not impossible, for teachers to come up with universal truths” (p. 117). Although I want to steer clear of any conception of a universal model, or notion of a “right” way implied by parts and pieces, I do not deny the crucial need for understanding practical steps we can take towards improving the life chances for all children.

There is no blueprint for building a correct model to develop the professional needs of an individual. Instead, I embrace praxis as the basis for teachers’ ideas and actions. Whereas a "model" traditionally tends to reflect a static set of procedural and declarative knowledge, my
research would feature *modeling*—more like the dynamic shaping of clay—a narrative portrayal of the infinite and place-based ways of knowing enacted by teachers. I agree with Roth and Tobin (2005) who described teacher learning in a similar sense, as they resist reductionist approaches and attend to complex areas that are difficult to describe—arguing for praxis with co-teaching as a process for teachers to embody their co-generation of knowledge and learning by doing—including the messiness, the uncertainty, the anxiety, and excitement. I want to focus on ways of being, and generating research in ways that permit others to learn about how and why this success is taking place among groups of teachers.
The figure below is my representation of PLC as Third Space. I follow this with a discussion of the theoretical tenets underlying this work.

Figure 2. PLC as Third Space.

Theoretical Tenets of Learning and Third Space

I propose drawing on perspectives of postmodernism and critical pedagogy as described in the writings of Paulo Freire (1970/2004) and Hannah Arendt (1958/1998) as a theoretical basis for framing learning in PLCs. Critical pedagogy is a term coined by Giroux (1997). As defined by Shor (1992), critical pedagogy is:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context,
ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (p. 129)

My notions of learning in third space are also informed by some of the ideas embodied by Bordieu (1984), including social capital, habitus, field, power, and practice. To further clarify, this is not postmodernism in the sense of chaos and disconnectedness often found in responses to the strict modernistic dichotomies and claims of objectivity. Rather it is postmodernism as a conscious refusal to accept a position of oppression, subordinance, and passivity. It is a call for teachers and students from all groups and social classes to claim praxis as learning as an alternative to fictional fairness—standardization as learning—which leads to disillusionment, fatalism, and social reproduction.

The term *praxis* is meant here as freedom obtained through the ability to synthesize theory and practice; this is power to act, to use lessons, skills, and ideas in a practical way to effect change in personal prospects as well as in larger social structures. Notably, I suggest praxis applies to teachers—and for purposes of this research--especially to those teachers focused on helping students who are marginalized by social systems, including educational and class systems. Teachers often feel helpless to effect change. Through collaboration and PLCs, teachers can experience compounded strength and a healthier, more holistic approach to living within the profession.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1958), a French existential philosopher who played an important role in the ideas of Arendt and Freire, suggested that people are produced from and confined by social structures, and are also producers based on praxis. Although existentialism holds that we are responsible for our own existence through our self-defining choices, Sartre proposed that freedom to make choices is limited by social structures; he also argued that the condition of
being human is largely defined by self-identity as free agents. I submit that creating spaces that allow teachers and students to be agents with choices and identity is crucial; some teachers figure out ways to do this, but it is rare knowledge that often stays within the confines of an unusual classroom. Knowledge is in relation to something, it is not suspended independently from our experience; it is created within the context of our situation. This is part of the reason narrative and collaboration are both so important. Our situation shifts when we share stories and build spaces with other people.

Foucault’s work heavily informs my understanding of knowledge-power being constantly created within social contexts (1966/1971; 1969/1972). His discussions of discourse, power, language, and the genealogy of knowledge redirect and remind me that everything has a history worth looking into, and more importantly—that everything has a future which has not yet been determined. There is much empowerment in believing that we can be agents to effect change, to make a difference, to actively work towards a more just world. Foucault also gives a basis for grounding some concepts of space, and for the way in which science is deeply intertwined with philosophy.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Quantum Physics explains how an observed phenomenon (such as particles in the Double Slit Experiment) can change depending on the observer. I find the other side of this coin to be equally interesting, and deeply connected: Foucault uses Las Meninas—a famous 17th century painting by Spanish artist Velazquez—to explore spaces and the way in which an observer can also change depending on the situation. Simply looking at this painting causes a destabilized reaction in many viewers, as the painter is intensely visible as if he stepped out from behind the huge canvas to peer at the observer for an instant. The canvas itself
takes up much of the space in the painting, although a person observing the painting cannot see the front of the canvas where it is being painted.

As though the painter could not at the same time be seen on the picture where he is represented and also see that upon which he is representing something. He rules at the threshold of those two incompatible visibilities. … [a] slender line of reciprocal visibility embraces a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges, and feints. The painter is turning his eyes towards us only in so far as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject. We, the spectators, are an additional factor. (Foucault, 1966/1970, p. 4)

Many people have studied and written about this painting; one unknown author on a website wrote about the painting (Velasquez, 1656): “Yet, the mirror is also an illusion, for it does not directly reflect reality. Rather, it reflects an altered copy of the truth...in the end, we cannot say that what we see is the truth because it is only part of the illusion.”

Activity theory (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 1997; Tan, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978) lends further understanding of the process of agency, where we can see that actions, behavior, even our own “objective” realities are our perceptions of life which are socioculturally mediated. (See Appendix 3). Therefore if the desire for projects embracing conscious freedom and leading to self-identity of being in universally meaningful ways is constantly thwarted, a person is denied much of the human experience. The person is thus cut off from the freedom to fully construct identity, agency, and meaning. Referring back to Figure 1, Activity theory helps frame the situation, where PLCs are used as tools—agentically created in third space—for the action of generating teacher learning, which can ultimately lead to the objects of student learning, and towards the goal of improving human conditions. For example, human conditions are improved
through education by expanding students’ opportunities to make choices, have options, think, travel, communicate, work, actively participate in democracy, pursue their own dreams, and have greater chances for a safe, fulfilling life.

**PLC as Third Space.** Figure 2 portrays a PLC as a multi-dimensional context of layers—represented by core, peeled back segments, and surrounding spaces. Although object-like in appearance, this PLC model should be viewed as a holistic representation of teachers’ ways of knowing and being which are constantly transformed and are without rigid boundaries or rules. These ideas embrace the postmodernistic spirit spread widely throughout political theory following World War II, including philosophies found in Feminism, Marxism, and Critical theories. These theoretical tenets have only marginally been applied in teacher education, and to a much lesser extent in science education research, yet there is great potential to rethink professional development as I challenge fundamental assumptions about how teachers learn.

There is yet another dimension, which I explore as *Third Space* in the next section, as we must also rethink the places where teacher learning takes place

**Conceptions of Space**

I have found it to be extremely enlightening to explore human conceptions of space in thinking about shifting practices to improve the learning experiences of both students and teachers. The following graphic (Figure 3) shows what I perceive to be the main areas from which we imagine our notions of space, and which I apply in PLC research. This representation is not exhaustive or “complete,” rather it is my vision of how these important conceptions are connected and in constant motion.
Figure 3. Conceptions of Space.

At first mention of the word *space*, I conceive of emptiness, a three-dimensional place where there is nothing, as in the vacuous void of outer space. But the idea is not that simple. It has morphed to involve innumerable meanings, with almost mystical nuances. Since articles on outer space or astronomy were excluded from this review, it might seem confusing that I feel compelled first to discuss the conception of physical space in some detail—including references to outer space. Hopefully it will become clear, though, as these notions of space are at the center
of all our other notions of space. Conceptions of physical space anchor, focus, and connect a multi-layered web of ideas.

**Physical Space**

This is the most immediate conception of space, and the one shown first on Figure 3 above. As physical beings we are constantly aware of our spaces, and the places we occupy within them. The meaning we make of these conceptions is much of who we are. Being able to take up space, to control geographical areas, to own private property, to move up, to be mobile across spaces, to expand horizons—are central tenets of agency and identity. Our language and culture is as much about space as about any single concept I can imagine. Spaces compel humans, and affect us in physical, emotional, and psychological ways. The figure below shows a covered veranda, an outside architectural space intersected with lines and shadows. A blue sky is the backdrop, and one wall reflects the space. People are working within it. This image reminds us that physical spaces impact us constantly, in more than physical ways.

![Veranda, architectural space](image)

_Figure 4._ Veranda, architectural space (World Architect News, 2011). Life science building in Phoenix, Arizona.
**Literal physical place.** One meaning of place is purely physical. This would be a place devoid of meaning, disassociated from emotion, politics, or history. It would be rare that “place” would have this definition. An example would be a two-year-old’s conception when hearing the name of an unknown place that could as easily be a shop or cartoon character as a foreign country. Another example would be latitude and longitude coordinates as perceived by a person completely unfamiliar with latitude and longitude.

**Space-time.** Within the context of outer space, there is still conception of a volume—at least three measurable dimensions—x, y, and z, or length, width, and depth. Even in outer space there are a few atoms per square meter of “space.” So we conceive of space as a three-dimensional area that can hold matter. To complicate things, we throw in time, which has been suggested to be a fourth dimension. Albert Einstein made the concept of the space-time continuum famous in his theory of special relativity in the early 20th century. It has been repeatedly measured that time itself dilates and space contracts when an object moves very fast, especially when approaching the speed of light. At 300,000,000 m/s or 186,000 miles per second, this is a speed which is about a million times faster than regular human-related speeds—including the speed of sound waves. Strangely, if something can travel through space at that maximum universal speed (given current knowledge), it is moving completely through space and not at all through time.

When explaining this to my students, I ask them to imagine a slinky as a one-second time interval. The faster an object moves, the more the slinky is stretched out. At the speed of light, the slinky is stretched out infinitely far, and you are not able to reach the end of the one-second time interval slinky. So no matter how far you go, no time passes. It is not merely a matter of perception. Time is bigger and space is smaller—therefore time passes more slowly (or we
move through a time interval more slowly)—the faster we go through space. Of course we have no idea if humans will ever be able to travel at speeds where this effect would be noticeable to our physical bodies, although we have measured it with various phenomena. But it is a deeply interesting concept, and relevant in the fact that time and space are intricately connected.

**Nature abhors a vacuum.** This famous myth has been credited to the Greek philosopher Parmenides around 500 B.C., and made famous by Aristotle a couple hundred years later. This concept actually informs my ideas quite a bit, as it is culturally ingrained in Western structures. People have held to this dogma that spaces need to be filled, because unfilled they are “unnatural.” Therefore places should be conquered and colonized. Clutter, noise, and all signs of human occupation are considered progress. The goal of infinite acquisition and growth—an absurd premise—is the logical endgame. Aristotle hypothesized the ether (or luminiferous aether) as mysteriously clear matter that filled all of outer space, allowing substances (including light) to travel. It was not until 2,000 years later that Michelson and Morley (1887) disproved this in what might be the most famous failed experiment on record. As it happens, most of outer space is as far as we know just that—empty space.

On a much zoomed in perspective, most of inner space of atoms mirrors this set-up; that is—mostly empty space. Very strange things happen if you collapse atoms so that positive nuclei and negative electrons are forced closer together in the formerly empty space—as in stars that collapse in a stage of “dying” when their fuel is consumed—to become neutron stars and black holes. Einstein suggested that space itself is warped due to gravity effects of large masses, which can cause even light (pure energy with no mass) to move towards the massive object. This is similar to a baseball rolling around and around, closer and closer in to a heavy bowling ball sitting on a trampoline. In extreme cases, this might even cause a wormhole—a passageway
from one place or universe to another—when space is extremely warped due to the collapse of space in a huge star becoming a black hole. Figure 5 below shows an image of this (Pili, 2008).

![Image of space](image)

Figure 5. Physical Space (Pili, 2008).

This is oddly significant in that much of the research literature speaks of creating new spaces. Even the idea of reflexivity, going beyond reflection to bending back and reacting, changing, is given a form by this concept. If space itself can warp, bend, and possibly make new connections to old and new places based on the force of gravity which accompanies mass—especially large mass—surely people can shift and create changed spaces in reaction to new ways of thinking and doing.

**Inner space.** This conception, while interwoven with many other conceptions of space, will not be explored in depth except as it relates to other ideas. Meditation and religion are intimately connected to inner spaces. The spiritual, emotional, and psychological aspects of inner space within all of the other conceptions would be a fascinating look for further study.
**Cultural space.** The ideas in this red part of the graphic chart shown (in Figure 3) will be the focus of this literature review. As someone who is positioned to explore the shifting culture and structures of schools—as well as the political and historical contexts—this is the center of my interest. The rather lengthy discussions from this area are my attempt to “answer” (or explore) Research Question 2: *How do we make meaning of and use of these conceptions of space, especially in the social structures of schools?*

**Constructed place.** Place is a human construction. Other than the rare disconnected “Literal physical place” described previously, place will refer to a space with human meaning. In discussions of closely related terms such as “making spaces” or “constructing places,” it will be understood that places are easier to describe and define. Spaces are more open to people moving and changing within them. There may be great attachment to or repulsion for a place, such as “home,” or “Sing Sing Correctional Facility.” A space may be malleable, where culture is created and identities are built. A space may be opened up when a place has not physically changed at all; a place may change with no change in political power structures. According to Gruenewald (2003b), space can be measured geometrically, whereas place is relational with people. No matter what, the terms do overlap, are sometimes used interchangeably, and can lead to confusion. For example, both spaces and places may be formed in the mind, and both are necessarily human constructions at some point in their evolution, as are all things connected to language.

**Metaphorical space and re-presentations of space.** This part of the graphic chart shown in green (see Figure 3) is closely tied to the previous meanings involved in cultural space, and adds to my exploration of Research Question 3 concerning the way we make meaning of and use these conceptions of space. Here we create metaphors of space that are useful in conceptualizing
ideas, forming new models, and applying these models as tools to move towards our goals or objects. Other re-presentations of space include pictures and video in addition to written text, and could include audio narrative as well. In addition there are various digital media and digital space environments, such as second life and social networking sites as transmission of ideas. Linked to these are the more familiar digital space tools of email, discussion boards, blogs, and web sites, all which may be thought of as places. Key to most of the themes explored in this literature review is collaboration in shared third spaces, an effort to create more just spaces and places.

**Heterotopias.** In *Of Other Spaces* (1986), Michael Foucault described a unique synthesis of two types of spaces. In contrast to a utopia—by nature an unreal space—a heterotopia is both real and unreal, physical and mythical. Foucault posited that all cultures are heterotopias, and they can change. He said heterotopias can be contradictory sites, both sacred and deviant. These can be places of ritual, purification, or crisis, where there is a break in the traditional notion of time. Examples of such spaces could be a prison, museum, fairground, psychiatric hospital, retirement home, inner sanctum of a church, or honeymoon bed. For purposes of this study, the notion of museums as heterotopias is useful and elegant. I likewise argue that schools and classrooms can be heterotopias, both real physical places and magical spaces.

The mythical dimensions of schools contain epic proportions of promise and fortune-telling, passed along as part of the story. Some elements in the story are goals, success, victory, popularity, superiority, knowledge, power, opportunity, invincibility—and a clear, straight path to a happy life. Contrasting elements within the story—also real and mythical—are promises of disappointment, defeat, inferiority, discrimination, disparity, hostility, violence, invisibility—and a blurred, winding path to poverty and despair. Heterotopias in schools can be hybrid spaces—
even third spaces—which can be opened up to interrupt and interrogate the story as it has been
told, and to write new narratives of shared power, knowledge, and hope.

Review of Literature on Space

According to Levine (2010), there has not yet been research using ideas of third space to
foreground teacher PLCs as tools of agency as suggested by activity theory (see Figure 1).
In my review of literature on space in education research, I have identified seven major themes
which include: 1) Place consciousness, 2) Sociospatial factors, 3) Power geometries, 4) Third
Spaces, 5) Online/Digital spaces, 6) Agency, and 7) Risk. These themes relate well to Research
Question 3, regarding how we make meaning of conceptions of space, and how we use these
ideas in education.

Place consciousness. Researchers who discussed this as a main focal point included—
roughly in order of their emphasis of this theme—Gruenewald (2003a; 2003b), Boon (2006), Lee
(2010), Powell (2010), Tupper (2008), Dean and Hursley (2002), Soja (1996), and Massey
(2005). According to Gruenewald (2003b), place is the context of life, and “schooling often
distracts our attention from, and distorts our response to, the actual contexts of our own lives” (p.
621). I agree with his argument for having place-based education, that schools continue to be cut
off from "the pulse of cultural life and experience" (p. 625). In a different work (2003a),
Gruenewald discusses ecological space, and challenges us to look at "interactions between
cultures and ecosystems" (p. 5). He points out that domination is an issue both socially and
environmentally. He compares a resident to an inhabitant, and says that students must learn to
love the world before they can care for it. Of course this takes energy, space, and time, so it is
often ignored in schools where there may be no “conversation about what it means to live well in
a place” (p. 11). This is a painful thought, because what is the point of education if we do not
regularly have that conversation? Gruenewald discusses Freire's notion of "'Reading the World' as the core of critical pedagogy" (p. 5), and argues for a blending of discourses which would result in a critical pedagogy of place.

Place consciousness in terms of landscapes was discussed by Boon (2006), who said that landscapes have multiple histories, and "The value given to a particular landscape therefore, is a product of the social imaginations invoked to give it meaning" (p. 4). He discussed the politics and identity of landscapes using disputes in New Zealand, including the fact that meanings given to places can be contested. Boon gives as an example that colonizers burn down old forests to provide grazing for sheep; the land becomes pastoral and culturally familiar, even nostalgic. That may become attached to local mythology about the land, which may have nothing to do with the "natural" environment. It is always changing, and always political.

Lee (2010) submitted that school is isolated without a natural environmental context, a place set apart from the world, a place without any authentic context and connections except for its own cultures. This indicates that we should be aware of bridging the place of school with places of the world. Powell (2010) suggested that activities such as mapping and local research help to bridge these places, helping students develop a sense of place. She encourages the use of visual and aesthetic practices such as architecture, landscape design, and urban planning to involve students in their lived, constructed contexts. Tupper, Carson, Johnson, and Mangat (2008) worked for several years with students creating and discussing photographs of school landscapes. The researchers explored how students’ navigation of those spaces influenced their constructed meanings of those places. Development of student identities and construction of citizenship was a focus; this is of interest to me, as I do think people—especially students—are constantly morphing their identities based on experiences and interactions. It was found in the
study that students place great significance in school spaces outside of classrooms, which is often downplayed in adults’ perceptions. Many things in schools can hold symbolic meaning for students.

Meaning is made about our places and spaces from many dimensions, continually building our place consciousness. According to Samuel Mockbee of the Rural Studio project, the most important thing is not to have just a warm, dry house, "but to have a warm, dry house with a spirit to it" (Dean & Hursley, 2002, p. 17). If places and spaces were neutral, we would feel nothing different about one house than another. Even the image of a Rural Studio house (Dean & Hursley, 2002) evokes emotion and meaning:
This small house, shown in the figure above, is made of local materials and blends into the natural landscape. Yet the exposed beams under the roof jutting out and reaching skyward seem to offer hope and possibility. The building itself—as well as the entire Rural Studio project as a model—challenges assumptions about what a house should be, and who “deserves” to live in a mystical artwork.

Work from critical geographers Massey (1996; 2005) and Soja (1996) further intertwines and deepens place consciousness with political-social issues. Massey looks at issues of globalization and the impact on local people, and she criticizes the contradictions in political stances of capitalism. She illuminates the paradox that those in power have the “right” to defend their own local culture, as well as the “right” to invade foreign cultures under the moral superiority of the profit motive. Soja (1996) involves urban planning with social justice, actively
demonstrating the fact that place consciousness cannot be disconnected from social, political, and historical contexts.

**Sociospatial factors.** All places including neighborhoods and schools have both social and physical aspects, which Barthon and Monfroy (2010) refer to as sociospatial factors. According to these authors, "control over the spatial dimension appears to be a capital in its own right, unequally distributed among social groups, which contributes to the production of schooling inequalities in urban environments" (p. 177). I think this is a terribly overlooked part of embedded racism. In the high school where I teach, for example, I walked into an Advanced Placement (AP) chemistry class last year being taught in a lab room with 9 students—6 white and 3 Asian—sitting up straight and silent in the first two rows. These 9 students were able to meet for 98 minutes a day, 5 days a week, for 2 semesters. Next door was an advanced chemistry class—also being taught in a lab room, but only for one semester—with 28 students, approximately 70% White, 10% Asian, 10% Hispanic, and 10% Black. This is in a school which is about 60% Black, 36% White, and 4% “other.” Across the hall was a “standard” level chemistry class (called physical science because it is a survey of both chemistry and physics). 35 students were in this science class, taught in a regular room—not a lab room. 100% of students were Black, and all were on free or reduced lunch. With zero lab fees and no money provided for classroom supplies last year—even from the school’s Title I funds which are designated specifically for these classes—the disparities were glaring. Yet almost every professional in the school responds that this is normal, predictable, and non-problematic.

In a spirit reminiscent of Marx and Bourdieu, Gruenewald (2003b) discussed uneven spatial development as necessary to maintain divisions of wealth and power: “Private property,
in other words, is a spatial expression of power and surveillance that we have obediently internalized” (p. 629). Soja (1996) succinctly described the social-spatial connection:

The spatial dimension of our lives has never been of greater practical and political relevance than it is today. Whether we are attempting to deal with the increasing intervention of electronic media in our daily routines; seeking ways to act politically to deal with the growing problems of poverty, racism, sexual discrimination, and environmental degradation; or trying to understand the multiplying geopolitical conflicts around the globe, we are becoming increasingly aware that we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities. (p. 1)

Naively, schools are sometimes viewed as separated from sociopolitical factors. As Lee (2010) pointed out, schools are a place set apart from the world. Yet public schools are also concentrated microcosms of society, offering a more confined reflection of structures which are often masked from middle class places. Drennon (2006) said that individual school districts are thought of as “absolute,” with an unproblematic, stable identity (p. 570), although it is frankly hard to believe this is truly a common assumption. She wrote that difference must be established in order to create identity, and that vast amounts of energy are spent to maintain power differentials within educational systems. The classic work by Willis (1977) argues that schools purposefully reproduce our striated class structures; hooks (1990) posits that places of marginality offer sites of resistance to these power structures. In a disturbing twist, Gruenewald (2003b) suggests that even the goal of closing the achievement gap itself “can be interpreted as another act of colonization” (p. 633). I have heard rustlings of this sort in doctoral classes recently; yet I find it highly problematic to offer students goals involving middle class lives—
houses, professions, hobbies, vacations, neighborhoods, and “clubs” of every sort—without providing the tools (skills, behaviors, attitudes, expectations, academics, cultural knowledge) necessary to gain entrance into the reportedly sought-after middle class places.

**Power-geometries.** Massey’s term of “power-geometries” (1996) is an extension of the sociospatial, but deserves its own category due to the number of works discussing specific power arrangements. She said we have to look at the embedded nature of space in "interlocking maps of power" (p. 123). Adair (2008) wrote about the need to create “de-privileged spaces” through the lens of Critical Race Theory2, to make room for “otherness” where whiteness is not automatically privileged; this author claimed that teachers usually do not know how to listen to all voices equally, and need to have this modeled in colleges of education. Cutrara (2010) claimed “Historic Space” can be a pedagogical model of transformation, to deconstruct dominant discourses: “Conceptualizing history as space,” we can rebuild “the narrative of history, just like the floor of a playroom” (p. 6). There is great agency and empowerment in the act of designing, deconstructing, constructing, and re-building. I think there is something about renovation and restoration that appeals to us as educators—the hope and promise of a future—new possibilities in an old world.

Several articles focused on inequalities regarding gender and sexual orientation. Keddie and Mills (2009) wrote about “disrupting masculinized spaces,” and the need for teachers to create spaces that reject the normalization and valorization of oppressive forms of masculinity. Massey (1996) discussed gender dichotomies as well, especially regarding the disparity in value of work at home vs. work away from home, and power dynamics between males and females. In a related article, Roberts (2008) talked about bullying primarily in verbal spaces—an area I find to be horribly disregarded in local public schools. It is considered “normal” and acceptable for
students to use the term “gay” in a derogatory manner—as in “that’s so gay” or “he’s so gay.”
Roberts claimed that “25% of teachers did not define name-calling as bullying” (p. 12); based on
my experience, at least 75% of teachers do absolutely nothing to stop it.

**Political nature of space.** Referring back to Figure 3, the two pieces at the right of the
circle (red and green) are my greatest areas of interest. The top right piece (red) is largely
associated with the theories I discussed above. Other authors have further added to my
understanding of the political nature of space, and the importance of place-based education
(Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; see also Boon, 2006; Barthon & Monfroy, 2010; Massey, 1996,
2005). According to Gruenewald (2003b), sense of place is the context of life, and “schooling
often distracts our attention from, and distorts our response to, the actual contexts of our own
lives” (p. 621). I agree with his argument that schools continue to be cut off from "the pulse of
cultural life and experience" (p. 625).

In a different work (2003a), Gruenewald discussed ecological space, and challenges us to
look at "interactions between cultures and ecosystems" (p. 5). The author pointed out that
domination is an issue both socially and environmentally. He compared a resident to an
inhabitant, and says that students must learn to love the world before they can care for it. Of
course this takes energy, space, and time, so it is often ignored in schools where there may be no
“conversation about what it means to live well in a place” (p. 11). This is a painful thought,
because what is the point of education if we do not regularly have that conversation?
Gruenewald discussed Freire's notion of “reading the word and world as the core of literacy
learning and critical pedagogy” (p. 5), and argued for a blending of discourses which would
result in a critical pedagogy of place. I find this to be inextricable with culturally relevant,
culturally responsive teaching and local activism. Herein lies the bridge from the top right (red)
piece of the circle to the bottom right (green) piece, the hopeful space where we can create something new through collaboration in teacher learning.

**Third Space**

To help define this intriguing concept, Moje et al. (2004) wrote:

Following the lead of several scholars (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Tejeda, et al., 1999; Soja, 1996), we call this integration of knowledges and Discourses drawn from different spaces the construction of ‘third space’ that merges the ‘first space’ of people's home, community, and peer networks with the ‘second space’ of the Discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions. (p. 41)

Benson (2010) uses *Third Space Theory*, as described by Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, and Collazo (2004) and Bhabha (1994), as a lens to introduce "everyday knowledge into the contested space" of classrooms to increase participation in learning (p. 555). The idea of third space is rich and deep. Where a dominant discourse meets an alternate discourse, there is space in between those boundaries where both sides can change. There is a clash, discordance, and unpredictable things happen. It involves risk, giving up control, and sharing power.

As an example of the possibilities and risk in hybrid spaces of classrooms, Amobi (2007) said we should be having the hard dialogue about race—even if some conversations are filled with controversy and even hostility—if we are ever to disrupt the structures underlying schools’ lack of fairness and equal access to educational opportunities. Friend, Caruthers, and McCarther (2009) illuminated the potential for *dangerous memories*; a risk associated with confronting stereotypes, where previous events and memories can actually reinforce those stereotypes. This requires a longer commitment to exploration and dialogue to unravel the layers of social issues embedded in our perceptions. As noted by Levine (2010), we must be careful not to romanticize
the notion of community in third space as a place where all wonderful things happen. Relationships are, after all, difficult. But fear of the unknown is a terrible reason to keep doing things the way they have always been done. It is our job as educators to have hope and vision, and to explore new paths that might improve the life chances for children.

In third space, assumptions can be broken down, new culture built, and there can be meanings constructed that join with shared goals and vision. Multiple literacies are valued, and dominant discourses can make way for pluralistic social systems. It is also useful to think of third space where bridging occurs—such as the space between the boundaries of home and school, or home and work. McAlpine and Hopwood (2009) posited that third spaces offer degrees of freedom to people interacting within them to collaboratively set goals and build paths to work towards them.

**PLCs in third space.** (Please see Figures 1, 2, and 3). In my view, science teacher continuing education would feature professional learning communities where ways of knowing and doing are generated in third spaces. These would be PLCs that teachers envision, embody, and sustain as dynamic spaces. Collaboration—in a far-reaching, deeply embedded sense—would be the heart of my professional development approach. It would be foregrounded by notions and discussions involving space, with an overlay of culturally responsive teaching. Teachers would challenge the status quo, and be free to try new things in response to their critical read of the students they teach. Again, PLCs grow out of a collaborative space created by teacher-learners with shared goals, where discourses are confronted and new culture is created.
Literature on PLCs

Although I have weaved professional learning groups/communities into the discussions in Chapters 1 and 2, I will briefly summarize the main researchers who have added to the body of work on PLGs/PLCs relevant to my study. The main themes discussed in the literature are the potential of PLCs to change the discourse of teaching in isolation, to improve and enhance student academic performance, and to create a professional development approach where teachers guide their own learning. Collaboration and shared goals are central tenets of PLC.

Teacher communities—Levine. Although I found no articles specifically dealing with high school teacher PLCs in this sense—as tools for agentic action in third space—except for Levine (2010), this has become my particular area of interest which I pursue in this dissertation. Levine focused on four types of teacher communities: 1) Inquiry Community, 2) Teacher Professional Community, 3) Community of Learners, and 4) Community of Practice. This article was quite helpful in helping me define my interest, but I do not agree with Levine’s rigid approach and compartmentalization of those four categories; rather, I find the tendency to over-categorize to be a large part of the problem in educational research, and in schools. Levine did, however, submit that collaboration, activity theory, and third spaces are common to all four categories. For clarification, I will include tables from this article:
Table 1
Different Conceptions of Teacher Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conception of Community</th>
<th>What This Conception Brings into Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry Community</td>
<td>How teachers learn from asking questions and finding answers together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Professional Community</td>
<td>How shared norms, beliefs, and routines affect teachers’ work with colleagues &amp; students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community of Learners</td>
<td>How schools can promote learning for adults as well as students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community of Practice</td>
<td>How people learn from seeing, discussing, and engaging in shared practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common to these four conceptions of teacher community</td>
<td>That ongoing teacher collaboration helps achieve learning that improves schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity Theory</td>
<td>How individuals engage in the joint production of material or non-material outcomes; how human activity is mediated by culturally-transmitted tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third spaces</td>
<td>How discourses and activity structures that are usually invisible or devalued may co-exist with dominant discourses and activity structures; how the resulting “hybrid” spaces can create generative tensions and learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Levine, 2010, p. 111)

I find there to be tremendous overlap and interactivity amongst the four different types of PLCs described, so the categories are not useful to me in themselves; the table is helpful, however, in summarizing the main characteristics of PLCs, and in clarifying how activity theory and third spaces are connected to PLCs. I follow with a table I adapted from a combination of Tables 1 and 2 from that article—along with some information from the author’s discussion—for the purpose of summarizing the research Levine associated with each category. These references are included in their own list in Appendix 2 rather than in the main reference list, except those referred to elsewhere in this paper:
Table 2  
**Different Conceptions of Teacher Community and Associated Research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conception of Community</th>
<th>Relevant Research According to Levine (2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry Community</td>
<td>Cochran-Smith &amp; Lytle, 1992a, 1992b, 1999; Hubbard &amp; Power, 1999; Sagor, 1992; Fairbanks &amp; LaGrone, 2006; Curry, 2008; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, &amp; McDonald, 2003; Stokes, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Professional Community</td>
<td>Lortie, 1975; Little, 1990; McLaughlin &amp; Talbert, 2001; Achinstein, 2002; DuFour, Eaker, &amp; DuFour, 2005; Grossman, Wineburg, &amp; Woolworth, 2001; Stokes, 2001; Louis &amp; Marks, 1996; McLaughlin, 1993; McLaughlin &amp; Talbert, 2001; Little, 2002, 2003; Horn, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community of Learners</td>
<td>Barth, 1984; Sarason, 1971; Brown &amp; Campione, 1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity Theory</td>
<td>Vygotsky; Bahktin; Horn, 2007; Cole, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third spaces</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Levine, 2010)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the Levine (2010) article, which included an extensive survey of the literature relevant to PLCs summarized above, I will briefly review works related to my particular interests which I found in various searches for PLC research. These works are also cited by Levine (2010) and are therefore included in Tables 1 and 2 above; however, all of those in the following discussion are works I have read and drawn from, so they have been included in the main reference list for this dissertation.

**Third space and community culture.** Martin, Snow, and Torrez (2011) used third space as useful for communities of practice involving university faculty members, cooperating teachers, and preservice teachers working together in teacher educati
De-isolation and critically reflective dialogue. Many researchers (Elmore, 2002; Hord, 2004; Louis & Kruse, 1995) have argued that a critical action in PLCs for improving practice is enabling teachers to observe each other (or team teach when possible), and to critically reflect/discuss the events. As cited earlier, according to Hamos, et al., “PLCs have become an operational approach for professional development with potential to de-isolate the teaching experience in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)” (2009, p. 14). Hargreaves (1994) found that teachers working together offer much needed support in a demanding profession. In that same year—early in PLC research—Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1994) discussed five dimensions of PLCs, including reflective dialogue.

Improving academic achievement. DuFour, Eacker, & DuFour (2005) have been front runners in the work on PLCs—conducting research, editing and collecting supporting evidence, designing and leading conferences on PLCs, and consulting for teacher professional development workshops on the topic. Their work has been especially encouraging in the context of improving academic achievement with students in traditionally marginalized groups. Berry, Clemans, and Kostogriz (2007) also compiled a great deal of promising work concerning collaboration and PLCs towards the end goal of improved student learning. Within that edited volume, Kostogriz (2007) lends strong support to my own ideas, as he offers:

a deconstruction of spaces of professionalism and criticizes the reductive typologies in the production of what counts as learning. Politically, it reaches towards a more nuanced account of professional identities, stressing the local, situated and dynamic nature of
professional learning, and the inescapable dimensions of diversity in becoming a teacher.

(p. 25)

Limitations in the literature on PLCs. I find most all the work concerning PLCs to have an overall structuralist approach where “success” happens as a result of following careful steps over a sustained period of time, an approach not as holistic and malleable as the one I would propose. Even Levine (2010), in his well-researched article—deeply insightful and openly thoughtful in parts—that has been so relevant to my interests, lapses into discussions about Mechanisms of Learning, routines for systematic inquiry, a construct’s fit to various modes of teacher learning, prescriptions for teachers, number of coded responses transcribed, and hyper-categorization of types of teacher communities in other parts. There is not a recipe which can provide reliably predictable outcomes in every situation. Surface level attempts at forming PLCs have as little transformative potential as any other professional development models which have been tried; that is to say, it would undoubtedly prove useful in some situations, but would not enhance professional learning in any deep, lasting, or meaningful way.

I also think that a deep exploration into teacher learning through PLCs—combined with a willingness to be changed along with the discourses, culture, and practice of traditional teaching—can have dramatic, unpredictable consequences. Levine said PLCs can be used “to take multiple perspectives, to deeply question existing knowledge, and to jointly construct more contextualized ‘knowledge in practice’ ” (2010, p. 113). In his discussions regarding future research, Levine suggested that ethnographic and phenomenological methods—including participant observation and narrative inquiry approaches—might be employed to “create richer, nuanced portraits of the norms, routines, beliefs, and trust fostered in specific professional communities” (p. 117). Libby Tudball, in the edited volume by Berry, Clemans, and Kostogriz
(2007), offered some insights on PLC research. She maintained that professional growth is actually about learning in community, and argued that educational research on PLCs have relied heavily on survey instruments, and lack intensive ethnographic study and *thick description*. It is to this lack which I hope my work can respond.

**Online/digital media spaces.** The realm of virtual spaces is vast all on its own. In a world increasingly dependent on technology, it is understandable that online places offer growing possibilities for interaction by and with students and teachers. Adams and van Manen (2006) discussed how strange it is that closeness can be built in cyberspace. These authors submit that the act of reading or writing text transports a person to another place, there is a "complex space experience" involved (p. 5), which shifts away from immediacy to a different temporal-spatial quality when done on a computer screen. According to Moje (2004), teachers should make use of information technologies (IT) which youths privilege in virtual spaces they explore on television, film, radio, and the Internet. This includes everything from chat rooms, websites, blogs, email, and discussion boards, to “second life” avatars and interactive games. Reflective journaling, as described by Friend (2009), holds promise as a space-method. Wang (2010) suggested that computer-aided instruction harbors “the modernization of the teaching idea” (p. 112) through information technologies such as three-dimensional (3D) modeling.

An interesting article by Minocha and Reeves (2010) dealt with designing 3D spaces for “second life” learning. These authors included much quoted dialogue to represent the variation in opinions about these virtual learning spaces. As in regular physical environments, some students and teachers preferred a much more structured virtual environment—as being more conducive for focused learning goals—than did other students and teachers. Conversely, some people preferred a more relaxed, informal, non-structured space which allows participants to take
more advantage of the virtual world. For example, your avatar could shape-shift into an eagle
and fly to Mars during a 10 minute break; the possibilities are basically infinite. Scaffolding is
regarded as necessary to help people become comfortable in these new types of spaces, and co-
construction of both places and knowledge is a key theme.

Digital technologies have also made it easier to incorporate visual media such as
photography and video into projects and communication. Benson (2010) suggests that we should
use non-print literacies to bridge print literacies. Cronje (2011) "employed particular pedagogies
of difference to activate border spaces" (p. 37). Video production was used as a means of
border-crossing into hybrid spaces to explore cultural identity and meaning-making, but it was
not without its risks and problems; some students paradoxically reinforced the stereotypes they
were attempting to confront with ridicule. This author therefore strongly suggests that method
alone is weak; only with reflection and dialogue can we restructure social spaces.

Research by Dotger and Smith (2009) involved the development of novice teacher
professional identity in community practice through simulations and video reflections. Powell
(2010) brought in place-based education with the interesting concept of “micro-ethnography”
through art, mapping, urban planning, architectural design, and other intensive visually rich
fields. The use of photography as a tool for both research and pedagogy has become much more
affordable and accessible in recent years with the widespread proliferation of reliable digital
cameras—especially those in cell phones. Tupper, Johnson, and Mangat (2008) used student
photographs to explore the meanings students’ make of spaces in schools.

**Agency.** According to Freire (1970/2004), an important part of being alive is to have
power to critically think and act in a situation. Kuntz (2007) pointed out that activism—to act, to
take action—is agency and makes us more fully human. Becoming more aware, we are more
able to resist oppression and transform our world. Referring to a student in her research, Benson (2010) wrote that as he “tried to use classroom space for his own purposes and preserve his sense of competency in this setting, he was simultaneously being pushed into spaces he did not want to enter” (p. 561). This represents the tension in educational settings between immediate agency—acting exactly as one “feels like” acting in a given moment—and another type of agency where rewards are often delayed as we develop new knowledge, skills, and goals. Agency is constantly at stake in classrooms, and power and agency are often intertwined. In a case study involving a First Nations woman named Ann becoming a teacher, Sinner (2010) said “Ann’s sense of autonomy was strengthened by residing on the borders between self, community, and teacher culture” (p. 35). This was an interesting account of tensions involved in agency and identity formation for someone moving across spaces from familiar to unknown, to a place where Ann had to find her way and risk alienation from people she had previously known.

**Risk.** As with Ann’s risk of alienation from crossing boundaries, risk was a recurrent theme in a number of articles reviewed. Benson (2010) said there should be room in education for risk and exploration. Interestingly, agency and risk are connected in more than one work reviewed. Pryor and Crossouard (2010) suggested that university lecturers, in taking the chance to share authority, can find “the learning space is essentially less predictable but therefore opens up possibilities of learner and teacher agency” (p. 274). According to Skerrett (2010), drawing heavily from Gutiérrez (2008), “the learning that occurs in the third space may reinforce, broaden, or complicate students’ prior knowledge, dispositions, and repertoires of practices” (p. 70). Several articles look at specific areas of risk.

For example, Amobi (2007) discussed the need for honest dialogue about issues of race, even when there is a risk of hostility, and outcomes in classes are not predictable. He claimed
that there cannot be any meaningful multicultural education without space for these interactive discussions, which requires that teachers confront their fears about losing control of emotional conversations. Heinz (2003; 2006) promotes the same argument when dealing with hard topics of war. In researching a video production project where students used parody to open up stereotypes, Cronje (2010) reported a paradoxical risk: “The students seem to, in the production of counter-memory, employ counterintuitively the very same stereotypes entrenched within structures of the older generation and their baggage of social memory, thereby strengthening and perpetuating the stereotype which they ridicule in the process” (p. 46).

This argument is echoed in the article “Re-living Dangerous Memories: Online Journaling to Interrogate Spaces of ‘Otherness’…” where Friend, Caruthers, and McCarther (2009) challenge participating administrators to face the risk of memories that might perpetuate dichotomies and stereotypes, since it is only through confronting these notions with reflection and dialogue that transformation can happen. Confrontation, reflection, and dialogue are notions commonly regarded in the literature as worth the risks involved. The tendency to leave issues of “otherness” hidden and unspoken is actually more risky over time, as that tendency inflames feelings of unfairness and magnifies perceptions of difference. The invisibility, according to Roberts (2008), provides space for bullying.

In some related arenas, Guccione (2011) suggested it is worth the risk to make learning more inquiry-based regardless of an overwhelming curriculum filled with mandates. Learning should be meaningful, which is difficult if students are not allowed to explore and ask their own questions. Learning is also much more meaningful within authentic contexts for activities. Petchauer (2010) discussed the contemporary importance of hip hop, including the fact that “general discourse about hip-hop concerns whether undesirable themes and images in rap music
and videos have negative effects on students, particularly among African Americans” (p. 359).

This is a concern that we can hardly afford to ignore, but it should not mean that we instead ignore the entire genre of hip hop—a context in which many students’ lives are immersed. In a fascinating, extreme example of risks involved in space reconstruction, the Warner Brothers movie *Inception* (Nolan, 2010) recently stretched us to conceive blurred borders between real and imagined spaces, where place and time can be manipulated without traditional boundaries. The popularity of this unique movie with high school students is an interesting area for discussion, as I think it reflects their acute awareness of (and anxiety with) challenges to their conceptions of culture, education, and life in the space and time of an unpredictable world.

**Moving Theories to Praxis in PLCs**

**Teacher praxis.** I suggest that teachers invested in true collaborative community are claiming agency and praxis by creating their own collaborative culture. I have observed and participated in this praxis through community with other teacher-learners for the past four years. It has often required no small amount of resistance to the status quo, and has consistently been an empowering endeavor which has drastically changed my practice and outlook. Through narratives generated in this study, I describe teachers’ perceptions and experiences of this phenomenon.

**Student praxis.** The community approach with multiple adult personalities working together has the effect of diffusing the traditional authoritarian atmosphere of a classroom, lending itself as a venue for shared power. This has been a most surprising effect in the challenge to resist hegemonic practices, leading to many positive interactions in classes. Teachers working in community model teamwork, accountability, and authentic problem-solving for students. A simple act of one teacher discussing with another teacher—in front of students—
a decision that must be made, or doubt about an unknown answer to a question, shifts the paradigm from the mythical tradition where teachers are the magical holders of all knowledge to be bestowed at will. Students sometimes look astonished, make comments, sit up straight, or become very quiet. I furthermore suggest that numerous methods teachers employ through their PLC encourage students to practices of make their own meanings. The PLC environment also guides students to shift identities toward becoming more successful in reaching their own goals, including academic achievement, as active participants with increasing praxis.

The students in “regular” as opposed to “advanced” classes—often and unconsciously referred to as “those kids” (Delpit, 1995)—largely function outside the dominant discourses and without the privilege of middle class cultural capital; therefore they often give up on seeing themselves as academically oriented, or even as learners with multiple literacies. This sets up the tragic and often reenacted cycle where students give up on school altogether in favor of an opposing stance that may briefly feel like an identity strengthened with some power and agency, as shown in MacLeod’s ethnography (1987). The greater tragedy, however, is that students cutting themselves off from gains they could make through education might also cut them off from any hope of reaching goals they have set for themselves to be successful in a middle class world (Neuman & Celano, 2006). I believe this is our biggest challenge in education: To provide tools for every student to be able to better their life chances, to pursue their own goals, and to be active citizens in a participatory democracy.

Making the Narrative Turn to Re-present Teacher Learning

I turn now to an introduction of narrative as another aspect of the “model” framing this study. Narrative as a means for inquiry in this study is important as I study teacher learning as a community-based phenomenon and in light of the critical interest for teachers, and their students,
to work out what it means to be educated in spaces where they can be people learning and living well together. This brings us back to the stories of teachers, like the one told in the Prologue. It is narratives from the third spaces of PLCs that I wish to hear and re-tell—re-presented in ways that go beyond the realm of academia to reach a broader community—ultimately provoking our ideas about what it means to be successful science teachers of “low performing” students.
Chapter 3: A Narrative Inquiry: Approaches for Methodology and Methods

“The stories...give us a reason to make the decision to go forward. They inspire us. The very word inspire, in its archaic meaning, is to breathe again” (Lambert, 2002, p. 52).

Life is full of stories. People think, plan, dream, remember, share, talk, relate, teach, and entertain through stories. Narrative is a way—arguably the oldest and most deeply ingrained in human cultures—through which to share knowledge and emotion. Transformations are realized and passed on through stories. Narrative gives context to events, and gives voice to participants in a unique way, in space purposefully opened for multiple perceptions, stories, and meanings.

Narrative Research

Narrative research is a methodology broadly accessible to humans in lived contexts. That is to say, it is a methodology uniquely appropriate to situations where a subjective researcher chooses to present participants’ stories within a context. According to Coulter and Smith (2009), “the point of narrative research is to reveal the subjective experience of participants as they interpret the events and conditions of their everyday lives” (p. 578). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative as “both phenomena under study and method of study” (p. 4). In a later article they wrote: “To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375). So narrative inquiry can be seen as a special breed of phenomenology, where multiple voices reveal pictures of experience through stories. Narrative inquiry aims to get at the meanings people make. Narrative is not simply “storied” in the sense of uniformed yarns or conjectured tales. Both
narrative researchers and qualitative researchers “judge their work on characteristics of verisimilitude, fidelity, coherence, plausibility, usefulness, and evidentiary warrant,” and both “seek to test their accounts with participants and peers” (Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 587). Coulter and Smith (2009) further argue for continuities between narrative and qualitative research. To analyze human experience is a complex, rigorous, and tricky task regardless of methodology. Narrative inquiry offers a different gaze into phenomena, and adds uniquely to the body of educational research

**Narrative Inquiry as a Way of Knowing**

Narrative research draws from ethnography, anthropology, phenomenology, and other qualitative research methodologies, yet is also divergent and unique. What is ethnography in cultural anthropology if not stories of people and the meaning they make, as can be seen in work by Geertz (2000) and Rosaldo (1993)? Stories can be told in pictures and film as well as in text; as Pink (2001) said regarding visual ethnography, it “demonstrates the importance of sensitivity to media narratives and the meanings that informants invest” (p. 81). Coulter and Smith (2009) discussed narrative as an evolving, emerging research methodology; they suggest that more traditional qualitative “analysis of narrative” in coding for themes can give way to studies where the actual “narrative analysis” can be the production of stories “as a way of knowing” (p. 577). This is what I have attempted to do, to craft an emergent, possibly even creative dissertation format, with a method of narrative inquiry to lend insight through teachers’ stories.

**Multiple Meanings**

Surely in education research we are past the positivistic claims of cerebral description as a manner of “objective” reporting. Connected to the meanings people make, narrative is incredibly rich in the broad spectrum of possibilities to evoke multiple senses, emotion, spirit,
thought, and dialogue. I argue that narrative research has the potential to respect unique individuality, and to study and report authentic phenomena in lived context more fully than any other method known. According to Freeman (2007), narrative involves reflection and consciousness. Narrative, with its holistic orientation, has the capacity to draw on the notions of space and place as discussed in Chapter 2. Narrative is conducive to thirdspace-based research, a methodology with room for new discourses and shifting cultures. Also discussed in Chapter 2 is the lack of thick description or intensive ethnographic exploration in educational research regarding PLCs, making narrative inquiry the most well-matched methodology for this study. Narrative avoids the pretense of objectivity, as this way of thinking about research intermingles researcher, participants, research as process, and research as product through the concept of narrators and stories.

Some have argued against narrative, claiming there is a presumed “truth” in stories—especially in first person accounts—which can be misleading. I find this to be a weak argument, as there is an astonishing amount of presumed “truth” in all research, even though all research is limited. There is inherent bias even in the decision about what will be researched. Discounting narrative on this basis also disallows the power inherent in a person’s voice sharing life experiences through their own stories. Regardless of methodology, there is choice in what to focus on, what interview questions to ask, which persons to speak with, when to observe, what to measure, what experiments to use. I argue that what is “lost” in micro-truth due to the human impossibility of telling an objectively “true” story, is gained in macro-truth due to the human propensity to describe experience with the texture of physical space, time, surroundings, emotion, and context. The heuristic science principle often referred to as Occam’s razor reminds us to make as few assumptions as possible. I suggest that narrative can thus be an elegant
approach, allowing a surprising simplicity by including data holistically in context; this can inherently limit assumptions and gaps found in data reported out of context, by people removed from the context. I agree with Coulter and Smith (2009; see Rosaldo, 1993), who suggested that “narrative researchers emphasize constructing accounts of participants’ subjective experience and pursue particular rather than general understandings of phenomena” (p. 588). Coulter and Smith (2009) also argued the importance of re-presenting multiple voices through multiple perspectives in stories, thereby allowing readers to construct their own meanings. Varying the person telling the stories, tense, point of view—and whether the story is told in first person or third person—can all limit authoritarian stance and can lend plural representation to the narrative work. Communicating through the authentic context of stories is a way to deconstruct dominance, challenge the status quo, and claim the power of voice.

**Authentic Context with Resistance**

One reason it is valid to claim stories as an authentic context—implying more authentic than some other contexts—is the potential to re-present a person’s voice as directly as possible, with as few degrees of separation from the source as possible. Herein lies the draw of documentary films, memoirs, blogs, ethnographies, and artists’ discussions of their work. Much has been written about the need for teacher empowerment; I suggest that teachers reclaiming their voices by telling their stories is an empowering move. This is especially true if—by telling their stories—they can resist systems that tend to silence voices of the powerless. Barone (2009) asked: “May we presume to hope that the work of these and other socially engaged researchers somehow goes beyond the documentation of existing evils to effect real change in the world outside the texts?” (p. 593). The answer to this is a resounding yes.
For preservice teachers, hearing teachers’ stories is also empowering, as it engenders development of professional identity with voice and context. Without the ability to identify ourselves within cultural contexts, humans tend to wander and become lost in isolation; we learn, produce knowledge, and make meaning through connections within cultural contexts. Foucault thus described his main character Pierre Riviere—an outlaw who murdered his family—as “a man without culture…like something which, specifically, did not exist; a mythical being, a monstrous being impossible to define because it does not belong to any identifiable order” (1975, p. 195). Narrative resists hierarchical rankings, and cannot be held hostage by dominant power structures. As Foucault said in his compelling case of parricide:

No king or potentate had been needed to make them memorable. All these narratives spoke of a history in which there were no rulers, peopled with frantic and autonomous events, a history below the level of power, one which clashed with the law…battles simply stamp the mark of history on nameless slaughters, while narrative makes the stuff of history from mere street brawls. (1975, p. 205)

As in Foucault’s powerful book referenced above—I, (1975)—a number of works have employed narrative to communicate ideas in education in the authentic context of stories.

Examples of narrative works in education. In one such example, Ladson-Billings used vignettes—short stories primarily from students and from teachers—to communicate important points about culturally relevant teaching in her widely read book, The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children (1994). Paul Willis’ epic ethnography, Learning to Labour, has likewise been a steadfast pillar in the body of educational research since it was writing in 1977. Willis suggested that the use of schools as factories to reproduce larger societal
striations, as described through the stories of working class boys, is by design; this disturbing argument is a thick thread in contemporary discussions and research, and continues to challenge our thinking. Much of its iconic power comes from the memorable narrative approach. The same can be said of Bowls and Gintis (1977), and of MacLeod (1987), both storied accounts of working class students struggling to survive in school and in the world. In a similar vein, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) explored complex themes of poverty, race, and education through narrative in their seminal work—*Growing up Literate: Learning from Inner-City Families.* Jalongo and Isenberg (1995) said that teacher knowledge is passed along through narrative in *Teachers’ Stories: From Personal Narrative to Professional Insight.* Ten years later, Michie (2005) echoed this value of teachers’ sharing experiences through their stories; I especially liked this work, as it revealed both good and bad events, and allows readers to make our own interpretations—especially regarding how the stories might effect change in the context of our classrooms. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot used narrative in *The Good High School* (1983) to describe the situations within six high schools—a mixed group of urban, suburban, and rural schools. This was a sort of narrative micro-ethnography, written from inside the schools by Lawrence-Lightfoot as an observer looking for “goodness” within the multiplicities of schools and the people within them. She called her methodology *portraiture.*

**Portraiture.** Lawrence-Lightfoot pioneered the idea of portraiture as its own methodology, linked to—yet separate from—other qualitative methodologies. Portraiture is a narrative approach that attempts—as the name implies—to paint a picture of a person or people within a specific context. This is described in depth in *The Art and Science of Portraiture,* “a book about boundary crossing” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). As in a portrait or picture, the person’s image is re-produced with texture, expression, emotion, surroundings; yet it
is only part of the person which is in that instant shown. It is impossible to capture all the complexities, the good and bad, shifting beliefs, past experiences, and future hopes of a person. It is even more impossible to “accurately” capture something as complex as a community—including a school. Featherstone (1989) gave rich support to my belief that portraiture is a well-matched approach to my study of teachers’ ways of being in PLCs when he wrote about Lawrence-Lightfoot’s work:

*The Good High School* utilizes portraiture to argue against today’s top-down reformers. It reminds us that the creation of a learning community is an essential feature of successful schools. Community, in this context, suggests the power of the local actors on the scene to create conversations and find shared meanings, the significance of the voices of teachers, and the crucial importance of local context, as well as the commitment of a scholar to truth and solidarity. The methodologies are inseparable from the vision…Now, as we look for ways to explore context and describe the thick textures over time in institutions with a history, we want to reckon with the author’s own stance and commitment to the people being written about. Storytelling takes on a fresh importance.

(p. 377)

Harking back to the earlier discussion of Foucault’s study of the Velazquez painting *Las Meninas*—as well as to quantum theory in physics—we are reminded that the artist and the subjects being painted, the observer as well as those being observed, are changed by the interaction. This is true even if the only apparent interaction is observation itself.

My vision of portraiture is not precisely the same as that of Lawrence-Lightfoot. She argues against the false objectivity of traditional methodology in a positivist bent, yet she submits that the portraitist is removed from the subjects being painted enough to be reasonably
detached and objective. I find this to be a problematic argument on a couple of fronts. First, although I think there is great value in attempting to document from a distance in many situations, I think that distance is often mythical or imagined—and becomes more so after the first few moments of changing the situation by being an intruder-observer. The space becomes a sort of heterotopia—Foucault’s notion of a hybrid space both real and utopian—discussed earlier in Chapter 2. In this space the intruder-observer has a sense of being invisible, suspended in time and space, as would be a small inanimate fossil hidden in a high corner of a classroom shelf collecting dust—unnoticed, unchanged, unmoved. Yet the intruder-observer is not invisible, nor unnoticed, nor do the dynamics of the classroom remain the same once they have entered. Being a detached observer might work fairly well with observing soil samples under a microscope; it cannot work well with observing humans in their surroundings. The stories told—including those in *The Good High School*—are filled with emotion, opinion, and subjectivity of the narrator who is writing the stories.

Also problematic is the fact that an equally valid—although very different—image can be created in a self-portrait. New things can be revealed by having the painter be within the painting. The participant-observer can gain access denied to outsiders (such as the intruder-observer), and can draw from experience in that setting—including knowledge of people and place. The intruder-observer may become a participant-observer in some sense over time—this often happens in a long-term ethnographic study—but is still as an outsider. Again, Velasquez had a fascinating sense of this when he painted his own image as a focal character in *Las Meninas*—as a painter working on a huge canvas in the Spanish royal court—looking out of the painting toward the observer of the painting. This is unsettling to a person looking at the painting, and is testament to the impact of realization, that moment when we know we cannot
control the power dynamics of who is being observed. Although Velasquez was still set apart from the royalty and maids of honor in the painting, he claims power by the act of putting himself in the portrait, and with his steady gaze outward. His might be the greatest agency of anyone in the painting, as he is the one making all the decisions, and the only one who can clearly see what is on his canvas. As a teacher-researcher, and participant-observer, there is agency in being in the picture, in choosing what to notice, what to magnify, where to look. Being an unembarrassed co-creator of knowledge and culture within third space we have constructed is an asset rather than a hindrance. What is lost in not noticing and not attending to some things—due to my familiarity with the context, is gained in noticing and attending to other things—also due to my familiarity with the context.

It is the co-production of teacher knowledge and culture within the hybrid spaces of PLCs which is, after all—along with narrative inquiry as a methodology giving teachers voice to tell their own stories about learning in community—the focus of my present interest. In *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (1993), Renato Rosaldo gave powerful argument for narrative ethnography as an important way to illuminate cultural phenomena, including individual differences and shifting power. He submitted that central topics include “consciousness, collective mobilization, and improvisation in everyday life practices…social inequalities and processes of social transformation [are] particularly critical for study” (p. 105). This supports my stance that the use of narrative inquiry is a particularly appealing methodology to help reveal the *consciousness, collective mobilization, and improvisation* in the life practices of teachers evolving new discourses for being. In the spirit of Geertz (2000), anthropology, being the study of human beings, can shed light on shifts in culture for social change. I truly believe the creation of PLCs—and the collaborative generation of new ways of being teachers—
is a social transformation as much about social inequalities as academic achievement or pedagogy. I do not propose simply to tell teachers’ stories; rather, I propose to employ narrative inquiry and portraiture as a way to critically study, illuminate, and communicate—in authentic context through stories—transformations in teacher culture, practice, knowledge, identity, agency, power, and space.

Multiple Formats

Multiple formats are appropriate to re-present multiple meanings people make. Although every format is limited as being able to re-present only part of a situated context captured in space and time, pictures and film—for example—can reveal different parts than can text alone. Narrative research can be co-created with written texts, oral histories, photographic essays, video documentaries, and combinations of formats that lend themselves to stories. For me it is especially useful in this way, as I think methods of educational research must be able to respond and change—as do people and landscapes—with changing times. Geertz (2000) discussed the fact that entire discourses and ways of being in anthropology must likewise respond and change. This does not imply a need to reduce rigor or compromise integrity in research. Furthermore, narrative offers the possibility of a more “user-friendly” format—for researcher, participants, and audience—thus opening up a broader community of participation in educational research, not limited to academic researchers.

Digital storytelling. According to Joe Lambert in Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community (2002), “The only real way to know about someone is through story” (p. 17). He said there is great invisible power in the seemingly simple act of people sharing stories, and:
media assists and amplifies our ideas in a complimentary context…digital storytelling…speaks to an undeniable need to constantly explain our identities to each other…as we improvise our ways through our multiple identities, any tool that extends our ability to communicate information about ourselves to others becomes invaluable…digital stories…assist in this larger project of allowing us to coexist in a world of fluid identity. (p. 17)

Identities are constantly changing, and that is much of what is interesting as we create new identities and culture within third spaces. Lambert asserts that creatively using a mixture of digital photography, voiceover narration, video, music, texts, and other methods gives “a tremendous play space for people. They can experiment…in a way that enlivens their relationship to the objects. Because this creative play is grounded in important stories…it can become a transcendent experience” (p. 10). I cannot imagine a better argument than Lambert’s for employing multiple formats which can draw us into stories with the challenge to become involved not just intellectually, but also in a deeper, more holistic way—with emotions, spirit, beliefs, desires, and senses. Most of us love movies because they are stories that involve us—and reflect us—in multiple ways through images, characters, and music.

There is continuing resistance to change in education and academia towards merging multi-media with traditional text-based scholarship, and there is good reason to carefully examine new approaches. Lambert boldly admitted that it has been “thoroughly documented that the prolonged exposure to mass media over time disintegrates our critical intelligence” (2002, p. 24). Critical intelligence is, after all, what we aim to foster in schools. Lambert points out that—in our consumer culture—status and recognition takes far less effort and can garner more attention than telling about “life in a way that moves” (p. 24). Increasingly we are made aware
of the overlay of extreme sensory overload in students’ lives. Still, in a world where youth strongly privilege digital literacies with the constant companionship of iPods, YouTube, Facebook, interactive web sites, music videos, avatars, camera phones, and computer games, we should pay attention to the possibilities for learning in student-friendly formats.

Zenkov, Harmon, Lier, and Tompkins embraced the idea of using student-friendly formats in an after school program with urban youth, *Through Students’ Eyes* (2009), a literacy project featuring student-created visual images which is documented online. Zenkov, et al. (2009) talked about the promise of using *New Literacies*, as did Lankshear & Knobel (2003), a constructivist approach that allows students to begin their expression in a medium where they feel comfortable and proficient. In Zenkov’s project, students took pictures, then built on this by writing about their images; this and connected dialogue then led to more writing and reading in various contexts for English. I find this works in science as well. Many of his questions and ideas resonate with mine. Zenkov pointed out after searching for relevant literature for his own studies, that student images—while employed in some fields—have been much underutilized in P-12 academic classrooms. Starting where students are, and building knowledge by scaffolding and grounded experimentation with feedback, reflection, and dialogue, is a constructivist approach which has been prominent for years in education research literature.

**Constructing Knowledge**

I do not mean to promote a constructivist approach as a rigid prescription. I mean it as a fluid possibility for building knowledge and making meaning which is often useful. For example, we read hundreds of research articles and books, reflect on those readings, critically discuss them, and write reviews of the literature. These activities all serve to scaffold learning, and are accepted as important parts of the scholarly process leading towards deeper
understanding, inquiry, and conducting research. In a similar spirit, creating a learning environment with shared power and multiple literacies—including youth-privileged literacies like digital photography, blogs, and music—can help students develop identities as learners, and can help them bridge home and school literacies. This increases the likelihood that further scaffolding can help build academic-privileged text-based literacies required in order to pursue the promise of educational opportunity.

To further clarify, when I use the word constructivism, I mean it as a theory of knowledge—in the sense that learning happens when people construct their own knowledge and meaning through experience, ideas, and dialogue. I do not mean constructivism as “the correct model” that can be mapped out and followed, however. The concept of constructivism is useful, and stretches back to Piaget (1950). As Garhart (2000) pointed out, prominent writers in education a century ago—including Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky, and Montessori—agreed on the central facets of the progressive education movement of the time: “education should be child centered; education must be both active and interactive; and education must involve the social world of the child and the community” (p. 4). Over a hundred years later, these ideas are still considered “progressive,” and are often unrecognizable in contemporary classrooms.

Narrative research seems to be especially well suited to tell teachers’ stories in a rich, personal format about how these constructivist ideals can benefit students and teachers in a specific, collaborative third space of learners. I wish to bridge teachers’ ways of knowing and doing to a greater understanding of educational processes which can improve academic achievement and life chances for underserved children; I wish to build these bridges through teachers’ stories. Especially appealing to me is the possibility that this narrative research will be highly accessible to preservice teachers. “Taking the audience to the moment of an important
scene…and putting them in your shoes, is why we listen to the story… We want to know how characters react. We want to imagine ourselves there as participants or witnesses” (Lambert, 2002, p. 38). Narrative is a highly underutilized tool in teacher education, one that could be used to prepare us through imagining ourselves as participants or witnesses in the stories teachers tell. The stories themselves could engage discussion and reflection, and have the potential to scaffold understanding about fluid ways of being in the profession.

**Research Questions Revisited**

For the sake of clarity and continuity, I will now revisit my research questions which were introduced in Chapter 1:

1) How do these teachers view their experiences as members of a professional learning community?

2) How do these teachers perceive their success teaching persistent low performers in light of their PLC experience?
   - How do they feel it impacts their own agency?
   - How and why do they feel it impacts learning for students in this group?

3) How might the notion of “space”—especially third space—be used to ground experiences in this teacher PLC as a unique focal point for professional learning?

4) Can I—as a participant observer using a narrative research methodology and digital media in addition to text—tell these teachers’ stories about what they are learning and doing in a way that is approachable and meaningful to a wide audience of practitioners and educational researchers?
Research question 4 is a question directly concerning narrative methodology and digital media. I suggest that Questions 1, 2, and 3 will also be well-served by the methodologies I have proposed above in this chapter.

Study Methods

Participants

I focused on four teachers in the core professional learning group of science teachers here at Northridge High School. Two of these teachers in the main group, Paige and Lauren, have already been introduced in the Prologue. The third teacher in this core professional learning group is Anna. Anna recently turned 24 years old, and is a brand new teacher. She joined us for her first teaching position in March of 2011, just three months after graduating from Auburn. In a span of six months, Anna graduated from college, moved to Tuscaloosa, started her first full time teaching job, and got married. Anna is slim, of medium height, with long blond hair and a bent for fun. She coaches the dance team here at Northridge. I am the fourth teacher in the group. Although I did not originally propose to include myself in the core group being “studied”—intending to stay somewhat removed as a participant observer in the research—it quickly became clear that this was not only contrived, but would be inconsistent with my theoretical assertion—that learners are not individually contained, they are socially interconnected.

In the larger professional learning community we have formed, there are several other educators who were included in this research. At any given time, the PLC is actively functioning with 3-8 members, and could expand to include more at any time depending on the situation. During the time of this study, there were clearly four core members and several peripheral people who joined in discussions, and who shared their own narratives. I most enjoy the stories I hear
from the other members when we gather in person. My study is a personal, place-based study about people in space and time. We are embodied beings, interacting primarily in physical space. At times we use virtual space to enhance, clarify, collaborate, and share our communications; however, we all admit that these are limiting venues, to be used sparingly. To miss expression, body language, and tone of voice, and sharing a physical space, is—for me—to miss a majority of the story. The narratives are often enlightening, thought-provoking, and entertaining. My attempt is to give these teachers voice, as they repeatedly say they feel silenced, invisible, and disempowered by the larger educational systems.

I originally proposed to include several peripheral members of our PLC—people who interact with us in meaningful ways—but who either do not work at our school, or do not collaborate with the four core members on a regular basis. In the final analysis, I had to make the difficult decision to leave out a great deal of data collected from these educators in the interest of focus, time, and space. I hope to include their narratives in a later work. I did elect to keep a single story from one of these people to include as the closing piece in Chapter 4. That is one from Tyler, a brand new young teacher who is just now—in February of 2012—embarking on his first job as an active teacher, as he has accepted a position in Florida.

Tyler experienced working with us in our PLC during his science methods placement last year, and interned as a student teacher in our local school system last semester—in the fall of 2011. His outlook and his practice were both dramatically altered by collaborating within our PLC, a space which was also changed for the better due to his involvement. I actually have several stories from Tyler—ranging from disturbing, to funny, to exasperating, to uplifting. Out of all the data and stories collected from this group, however—including the multiple narratives from Tyler—I have decided to include in this dissertation only one. It is a letter from Tyler. I
hope to include all the stories in a later book, when there is time and space to give them adequate
discussion. For this dissertation, it has been better to focus on the core group of four teachers in
the PLC, in the interest of clarity and simplification of a complex study.

**Research Design: Case Study Narratives Represented as Portraits**

I have used case studies through a narrative approach to describe the teachers’
experiences of their own teaching from within the frame of the PLC. A case study design is well
suited to using multiple methods and for using a holistic description to explore themes and
implications (Patton, 2002). To clarify, I have not used a rote formula for case studies where
there is a conflict and resolution leading to a lesson. Rather, I have drawn upon authentic stories
from lived context, which is far more complex than traditional formulaic case study. I diverge
further from tradition in the representation of these stories in my attempt to collect them into an
artful gallery, as will be explained later in this chapter. Narrative inquiry used to generate
cases—represented as *portraiture walls* grouped around the teachers—has been by far the most
well-suited method to present data collected.

Michie (2005) used narrative to re-present teachers’ stories of small victories in
challenging classes; I find this to be a meaningful method of telling, and have employed it in my
own work. There are certainly elements of ethnography and phenomenology that will come into
play as well, since I am interested in how these teachers work together, how they work with
certain groups of students, and how they communicate their knowledge to others in the
profession. Since the teachers are creating their own culture in the PLC, there have been
interesting descriptions (Geertz, 2000) of the teachers’ interactions with each other, and also with
their students. I have also become more deeply aware through the research process that there are
individual factors making each different person’s experience and perspective uniquely her
own—with each individual story having value in adding to our understanding—as described so well by Rosaldo (1993). In other words, no two people or human interactions are exactly the same. In fact, no two observations of the same human phenomenon can be exactly the same, as even no two photographs of the same event can be identical. As May and Patillo-McCoy (2000) have shown, my observations may be different from what others observe in the same setting. I have been careful to maintain ethical considerations in working reflexively with colleagues, using real names only when given express permission was given by adults. Names of a few teachers who wished to remain anonymous have been changed. Pseudonyms were also given to any students mentioned in the teacher narratives. As discussed by Etherington (2007)—I have embraced the opportunities to be changed myself through the process.

### Methods of Data Generation and Analysis

In this process, I would like to think of it as approaches to data generation and analysis rather than the traditional methods of collection. I have used a blend of approaches including observation, interview, researcher journal, and focus groups. In addition, I have collected emails, photographs, and video. I have invited teachers in our professional learning community—both core group as well as peripheral members—to contribute a story of their own in any format they chose. This could be in writing, by email, on video, or orally to be recorded by digital audio. Those who wished to give their direct communications chose to do so by email, or in person as an informal interview. I used both formal and informal methods of observation, as suggested by Mulhall (2003), and wrote field notes while observing teaching and other activities of teachers in the PLC, as described by Wolfinger (2002). Since all four of the people in the core group of this PLC—Paige, Lauren, Anna, and myself (along with our close friend “Ellen” who teaches science in the Tuscaloosa County System)—live in the same neighborhood,
and often gather to informally reflect on our teaching practice—I suggest that my most interesting data has come from stories we share in these informal spaces. Especially rich have been front porch talks. One of these talks is shown in the following photograph, with Paige, Lauren, and another friend—Scott—a UA graduate student in biology.

**Observation.** Much of my observation data was gathered on campus at the picnic tables outside, sometimes in my classroom where we gather for lunch, and often away from school. These are primarily the informal places of front porches, kitchens, bars, and campsites. I originally proposed to record these observations with a digital audio recorder or digital video camera when possible. However, I did not record as much on video or audiotape as first proposed, as it presented an awkward intrusion to introduce a recording device into an otherwise natural, casual setting. Although I expected this would be the case to some extent, it proved to be a far greater factor than I would have ever predicted. It undeniably altered the dynamic, so I wrote down my recollections and reflections in my researcher journal. Whenever possible, this was done immediately following relevant interactions. At times I recorded my recollections and reflections with the digital audio recorder, but found this to be a more unwieldy
method, introducing another layer of separation in time and space between an event and the later transcription which felt overly antiseptic.

I did find it helpful to take a number of digital photographs of teachers in the PLC. The familiarity of “snapping” a picture may help explain why this introduced surprisingly little awkwardness or change in dynamics, even in places away from school. It was, however, difficult to capture the spirit of the group in action through pictures, due to the tendency to pose for pictures rather than have candid shots which could possibly offer more authentic glimpses in context. I would like to work on this further in later research. Wherever we met or talked, away from school and at school, I tried to take pictures. I also took photographs of projects or objects used in teachers’ activities. I have incorporated some of these in Chapter 4 as parts of the portrait walls—the collections of stories for each teacher in the core PLC—in attempt to give a more visual, multi-dimensional view of that person and the stories.

As suggested by Paterson, Bottorhoff, and Hewat (2003), I did take some video and pictures in classes. Some videotape is of whole collaborative lessons I took while engaged in observations of teachers. I watched these and made notes, reflecting on emergent themes relating to my research questions. The videotape, audiotape, and pictures were sometimes of classroom teaching and learning that happening with or without my presence; that is, I used the multi-media to support teachers’ stories and describe phenomena, but not to engage in designated research through student questionnaires, surveys, interviews, or any sort of experimentation. Any observations were of lessons planned completely on their own, with no attention or planning of lessons being given to my particular work. No images of students’ faces are included at this point, and I will only do so if given release forms including those I recently obtained to renew
my National Board Certification. Currently I am more interested in exploring meaning teachers make as revealed through their oral histories.

I observed five entire lessons outside my own classroom, making detailed field notes of all five observations. I videotaped one whole lesson in Paige Spencer’s room. The thing that all five of these observations have in common is that all were in situations observing teachers considered to be “excellent” in the opinion of administrators in working with regular or standard level classes. It might be an interesting point to note that I was not allowed to observe a class at Central High School, since there were no teachers considered to be in this category by the administrators at that school, according to my principal. One of these observations was of a science teacher teaching a lesson in a regular level physical science class at another school. Two were of social studies teachers at our school. Two were science lessons taught in Paige Spencer’s classroom—one with her teaching alone, and one with her teaching collaboratively with Anna and Lauren. I gained deep insights through these observations, and especially through the following reflective discussions with the teachers who were gracious enough to allow me entrance into their classrooms. I made notes from seven more lessons taught within my classroom; I chose these from days when there were collaborative efforts with other teachers.

These combined strategies allowed me the ability to access, analyze, and re-present authentic conversations in the best way I could create. I believe the inclusion of digital multi-media allows a more powerful, holistic, engaging re-presentation of teachers’ stories. After doing this intensive work, I strongly believe that creating documentaries through film is a next step for providing access to teachers’ experiences and insights to a wider audience. I am hopeful that Dr. Rachel Raimist, film-maker and professor in the Department of Telecommunications and
Film, still has interest in being a partner on such a project. I am grateful to my advisor and chair, Dr. Sherry Nichols, for connecting me with her.

**Interviews.** I interviewed the teachers in the PLC separately on several occasions, as planned, at least three times each over a period of six months. These interviews were loosely scheduled to follow an observation so we could discuss what happened during the observation. They happened partly at school during work, but more outside of working hours and away from campus. The types of questions I used to elicit teacher responses related to several overarching questions:

1) What are you doing that works well with students in “regular” science classes?

2) Why do you think these particular methods are effective with this group of students?

3) What might teachers be doing right now to improve the life chances for these students?

4) Do you think there is an impact on student learning due to teacher collaboration in your PLC, and if so, what and why?

5) How does interacting within a collaborative group of teachers affect you personally and professionally?

6) How do you think you could share these successes with other teachers in a way that would make them actually try to incorporate your best practices?

I intended that these open-ended interviews would invite teachers to tell their own stories, and to share freely beyond the bounds of preconceived questions, as suggested by Weiss (1995). This is exactly what happened, but to an even greater extent than I predicted.

Invariably one or two questions led to that teacher sharing stories. In allowing teachers to have their own voice, rather than me attempting to stifle them through over-controlling the path of discussion, one theme came into focus above all others. If I had pre-crafted it as a probing
question to add to the six general questions outlined in the previous paragraph, it would have looked something like this:

How does working in community with other science teachers in this professional learning group allow you not only to remain in the profession, but to thrive, and to believe in your ability to offer high educational opportunities to students in regular level science classes?

As previously mentioned, I believe the informal interviews, done more as discussions—on my front porch, in a coffee shop, or at a pub—have yielded the most rich descriptions from teachers talking, telling their stories in a comfortable environment where dialogue and reflection is a natural part of their lived experience of being teachers. Some conversations were of stories from that day, some were recollections from further back and shared as oral histories informing the present. To be clear, though, I have desired to focus on a micro-ethnography—not on a broad or long-term scale—since I hope to describe the intensity of learning and emotion I have experienced in this PLC. My researcher journal has been critical, since I have been able to write down field notes as recollections, reflections, and stories following a discussion, even if jotting notes during the discussion was not desirable or possible. Writing in the researcher journal was also done in spite of other constraints which were difficult to predict, and which limited my ability to collect digital video and audio recordings.

Focus groups. In addition to observations and interviews, I proposed to use a variety of focus groups as well. However, it did not prove to be very interesting or viable when I attempted to engage the entire science department, nor in subject area groupings, as these things have changed from semester to semester. For example, Paige Spencer is not teaching biology at all this year, a twist I could not have predicted. Prior to this year, that was a predominant course the people in the PLC—other than myself—shared in common. That particular detail has not proven
to be problematic, however, as there is still a great deal of overlap with our courses. Paige and Anna both teach chemistry, Anna and Lauren both teach biology, and Paige and I both teach physical science. Paige, Lauren, and Anna actually get together almost once per week to plan together, even though it is now for two separate courses. I get together with Paige to plan for physical science.

I had originally planned to use three groupings: 1) Main PLC focus group, 2) Whole science department focus group, and 3) Subject area focus groups. In the final data gathering, however, the notion of focus groups was partly abandoned, and partly became blurred into the other data gathered—previously described—since the one focus was the core group of four PLC teachers. Hence, it became clear that this would be the only focus group for this dissertation.

**PLC focus group.** In the main focus group, I met together with all 4-7 teachers involved in the PLC numerous times. I know there are risks involved with group dynamics, but as suggested by Hollander (2004), given the particular group nature of a PLC it seemed a fitting method. I opted not to include a written questionnaire with this, as it came to feel a confinement of narratives given my interests. I did give written questions by email—in hopes of eliciting honest, detailed responses through a more anonymous medium—which proved to be quite useful in providing insights. The focus group conversations happened primarily at my house, and in my own classroom.

The four of us in the core PLC are Lauren, Paige, Anna, and me. The next section contains more individual details about our ages, experience, and comparative teaching responsibilities in the context of the whole department. There are a few areas of discussion I encouraged in this focus group: 1) I asked these teachers as a group about their impressions regarding the impact of their collaborative work on their students’ learning, as well as on their
own professional learning. 2) I asked them how belonging to a PLC has changed their perspectives, feelings, and beliefs about teaching and learning. 3) I asked them to discuss why there is such a huge resistance against collaboration in spite of the evidence in their favor. 4) I also asked the teachers’ perceptions about what, if anything, they think would entice others to use the teaching methods they are finding so successful.

Science department members. As background information, there are nine science department faculty members at our school. All nine teachers in the department gather each day for lunch in my classroom—except for days where weather allows us to sit outside at the picnic tables. Although I tried to provoke general discussion about all teachers’ feelings concerning collaboration, PLCs, and teaching standard versus advanced classes, there was overall discomfort and resistance to these discussions. Therefore my original plan to incorporate a whole science department focus group into this work was abandoned. Six of us in the science department teach a mixture of students—both advanced and standard level classes. Four of us from that group of six are the core teachers in the PLC—Lauren, Paige, Anna, and me. One of those six—Narissa—initially collaborated in the PLC, but for the time being she no longer joins us in projects at work. Narissa is the only African American member of our department. In fact, she is the only non-white member of our otherwise pale palate of science educators. I am not sure why we are so monochrome, since Paige and I are always advocating for diversity when a position in the department is open. Narissa lives in Birmingham, and is married with two young children. The tiring commute, busy schedule, and physical distance prohibits frequent interactions after school, but Narissa does gather with us sometimes in casual settings outside of classrooms. She often commiserates with the rest of us in the PLC about the pervasive racism in some spaces here.
The final science department member teaching any regular classes is Michael, a brand new teacher this year. He is a tall, sweet, gentle person with an easy smile. He also coaches football. He has expressed with wide-eyed dismay the multitude of unimagined challenges in moving from optometry school to teaching here—without benefit of education classes or practicum experiences. (Most of us are amazed that he survives.) For now, Michael is hesitant to open up to the concept of community teaching, and prefers—at least for the time being—to “figure it out” by himself. I imagine there is fear in being vulnerable, and doubt about introducing an unknown facet to an already complicated, confusing web of responsibilities. Even the possibility of giving up perceived control is sometimes not worth the risk. But Michael does sometimes join us after school at Innisfree or the Alcove, and the best thing about a closed door is that it can be opened. Each of the four of us in the PLC spends 1/3-1/2 of our instructional year teaching advanced classes, and 1/2-2/3 of our time teaching regular classes.

Paige, Lauren, and Anna are 31, 28, and 24 years of age respectively, with 8, 3, and 0 years of experience respectively. I am by far the oldest, most veteran teacher in the PLC, 46 years old with 20 years of teaching experience. It should be noted, however, that I am the only one in our group who can stay up literally all night, and still come to work and teach all day—a topic of which the three younger teachers, for reasons unknown to me, never tire of discussing.

Three of the other teachers in the science department currently teach all advanced classes. Two of those teachers—Marilyn and Beth—are approximately 60 years of age with over 30 years teaching experience. Marilyn teaches only AP classes—two sections of AP biology, and one of AP chemistry. She has a total of approximately 70 students for the entire year, as both of those courses meet for 98 minutes every day both semesters. That is not to say her situation is without challenges; in fact, I do not think anyone else in the department would trade positions
with her. Still, the challenges in an AP are vastly different from the challenges we face in regular classes. I honestly cannot think of any similarities. The only “challenge” I have in AP physics involves students feeling it is too difficult at times. These are, for the most part, students who have never made below a 95 on anything in their lives. They are driven, privileged, and well-versed in the discourse of the “good student.” I imagine teaching them is like teaching a class of doctoral students.

Beth has a single preparation all day—advanced 10th grade human anatomy. She has taught the course for decades, and has created a niche in which she thrives. Her class is extremely popular, as the focus is on making science fun, with many projects, activities, and field trips. The other teacher with all advanced classes—Angela—is also in charge of Student Government Association (SGA) one period per day. She is 43 years old with 17 years’ experience. Like Beth, Angela has created a niche for herself; she teaches two zoology classes each day, having one block for SGA. Angela’s zoology class is—like Beth’s anatomy class—an advanced-credit course based in fun activities, especially in the semester-long focus on each group of three or four students getting a pet (hamster, snake, rabbit, pig, etc.) to observe and interact with each day during the class. The zoology classes are generally filled with seniors, who get first priority in registration.

Tension. There is very interesting tension in the fact that these teachers of all advanced classes will do almost anything to avoid teaching a regular class if they can—even threatening to retire if they are given a single regular class—so they have a definite interest in the teachers of regular classes discovering (or creating) teaching methods that work to keep them reasonably happy in their jobs. However, the more interesting tension comes in when everyone in the department admits that successes with students in standard level classes are exponentially more
difficult, needed, and often rewarding than parallel experiences in advanced classes. Although this is highly subjective and debatable, it is an intrinsic part of the current situation being lived and discussed in local schools. Even with the increased number of challenges and difficult situations arising in “regular” classes, there has recently been a noticeable shift in the whole existence of teachers working together in the context of this professional learning community.

**Resistance to collaboration.** This shift is strangely resisted by the other science teachers in the department—especially those choosing to teach in isolation themselves. It is also resisted by other employees, including administration, office staff, and security. As an example of this context, security or administrative personnel often comes to one of the science rooms, finding two other science teachers working with a whole other group of students in that room, while the teacher who “belongs” in that room is down the hall using the chemistry lab space, or outside at the baseball field conducting an activity. This scenario usually brings exclamations from the person at the door, asking with aggravation as they strain to look back at the name plate outside the door, “Whose class is this, anyway?” or “Where is Ms. So-and-So, and why is she not in here?” We tend to be entertained with these responses, since it becomes more difficult to think of a space, a room, materials, lessons, or a group of students as belonging to only one of us.

**Those kids.** I hear multiple comments daily from some teachers about how they just cannot believe anyone would enjoy teaching “those kids,” but “thank God somebody does!” There might be the interjection of some terrible news story concerning a gruesome murder recently committed at a housing project by one of our dropouts. This is often followed by contrasting twitter, maybe about a new BMW convertible—black with huge red bow—which was delivered to a wealthy student for her surprise birthday gift that morning during a 1st period advanced science class. Talk might also be about who is getting into Princeton this year, who is
“white trash,” who is selling drugs, who is pregnant, who should transfer to another school, or who cannot pay their fees and therefore will not be allowed to participate in labs and fieldtrips. Trying to confront and derail these conversations is astronomically, amazingly difficult—even if attempted by two or three of us on a regular basis.

Discord and new culture. New culture is created when there is discord and clash. I have observed informally on several occasions the tension that comes from some teachers wanting the traditional autonomy of closing the classroom door and teaching in isolation on one hand, but wanting to share in the PLC teacher camaraderie on the other hand. The camaraderie is steady and obvious, with teachers sharing planning time, co-creating lessons, team-teaching each other’s classes, grading tests together, meeting in between classes to exchange materials, and analyzing the worth and effectiveness of particular activities. Particular resentment has been communicated about the fact that the four of us in the department who are teaching and learning in the PLC often spend time together away from school—without offering blanket invitations to everyone in the department or school—even though we formed those relationships and maintain them largely due to a spirit of cooperative support at school.

Shared goals and tasks. All four of us operate through a lens of shared goals—including fairness and equal access to educational opportunities for all students (not just those in advanced classes)—and sacrifice personally in terms of time and energy for the greater good of other teachers in the group. Of course this balances out, because everyone in the PLC is paying attention to considering the needs of each other. In any final accounting, there is a vast overall savings in time and energy due to the sharing of responsibilities. Tasks do not have to be repeated as often, since one person will cover a task for all four people. If one person is ordering labs, another will be making out the test for everyone to use, another will make all the copies we
need, and another will do the lesson plans. The overwhelming repetition of multiple tasks is one of the most daunting aspects of the teaching profession, and one of the most practical reasons to consider being in a professional learning group. Ensuing discussions, critical reflections, and responses made possible by sharing those tasks are some of the deeper reasons to consider being in a professional learning group.

**Researcher Journal**

As previously mentioned, a journal with my notes, reflections, and stories was a primary source of data generation. I wrote in the journal when things happened which struck me as relevant, after meeting with other teachers in the PLC, and after making observations. I also wrote in the journal when I reviewed audiotapes, photographs, or videotapes, and when interesting discussions happened through blogs, email, or websites.

**Analysis/Coding**

As previously mentioned, Coulter and Smith (2009) suggested that narrative analysis is the construction of stories. Also, Rachel Raimist said, “I would never code narrative, I would never code people’s stories...Is it doing justice to the subjects to code their words?” (personal communication July 07, 2011). We discussed the fact that trying to quantify words, identify themes, and group reactions is an attempt to reduce and essentialize data—exactly what we are trying to get away from in a humanizing narrative.

Accordingly, I began data analysis as a matter of looking for themes in the teachers’ stories about their experiences in the PLC. I have not wished to quantify this qualitative data by counting codes or transcribing every bit of audio and video. That would be counter to my entire view. I identified interesting themes from teachers’ stories of their experiences in the PLC, coding as themes from each of the four research questions. I created a list of possible codes as
described by Miles and Huberman (1994) based on my research questions and theoretical framework to help organize the study before and during data collection. After data generation I used these codes to analyze what was transmitted through the stories. As Basit (2003) pointed out, analyzing qualitative data is “to determine the categories, relationships and assumptions that inform the respondents’ view of the world” (p. 143). The complexity of this is part of what makes it interesting to me.

I had originally planned to do this data coding and analysis in stages—first from observations, then from interviews, and finally from focus groups—but this proved to be fragmented and discordant to my interests to an unreasonable degree. Therefore I abandoned this effort, in favor of coding the stories themselves, which grew from the various methods of communication already discussed—including field notes and researcher journal. This made sense to me, as the narratives were actually the fruitful representation of data collected—an exploration of relevant themes through a narrative methodology. I looked for common themes useful for understanding the teachers’ experiences from their perspectives, since the main point of this research has been to give voice to teachers in order that they might share their insights of being and learning in a professional community. Rather than a conventional “coding and chunking” approach, I elected to discuss themes which emerged from coding and analysis at the close of each collection of stories. Each collection, as will be seen in Chapter 4, represents a few of the stories which I believed most strongly represents that teacher. I have referred to each collection as a *portraiture* of that teacher—as any story is only one small facet of a person—frozen in time and space through the narrative. Each collection might also be thought of as a wall in an art gallery, a creative turn I will attempt to explain shortly.
Concluding Justification for Narrative Methodology

In the justification for narrative as a methodology, Freeman (2007) put it well with his suggestion that narrative inquiry “might lessens the distance between science and art and thereby open the way toward a more integrated, adequate, and humane vision for studying the human realm” (p. 120). This succinctly states an incredibly complex interaction of multiple facets. I find narrative research to be accessible and inviting to various audiences outside of typical academic research. This is attractive to me as I am interested in working with interactive readers/listeners/watchers in the practitioner world where it can translate into better life chances for underserved students.

In my search to understand why collaboration, team-teaching, and multiple reform methods—including incorporating visual student representations—are showing improved academic achievement by many “at risk” students, I have come to believe it is a complex group of intersecting factors. These factors combine to make school a much more familiar, welcoming, encouraging environment than it usually is for students outside the middle-class. Through this environment students can begin to thrive. I happen to think this is an environment where teacher learners—perpetual students ourselves—can thrive as well. This is part of the reason that narrative inquiry is such an appropriate methodology for my study. Many teachers want to share their stories. Many other teachers—especially pre-service and new teachers—have a critical need to hear these stories, and to be part of learning communities where teaching is a culturally responsive art always in the practice of becoming.

At this point in my academic and professional life, I find it problematic to attempt a “generalizable” study for several reasons. For one thing, situations are different. A particular school or community in Alaska might bear little resemblance to a school or community in
Alabama, or one in Massachusetts. Local issues are not the same in every place. We know there can be vast differences even in two public schools in the same district. Political, historical, and other social structures vary widely from place to place. As discussed in the response to Question 2, I think education should be increasingly place-based. Sarrour (2008) discussed literacy and “living gloally,” a concept I appreciate as it does not ignore global concerns, yet has a focus on the local, with the argument that learning cannot and should not be forced out of local contexts. I have yet to see a “survey” or any other “generalizable” study have a direct impact on teacher ways of thinking, learning, doing, and being. For example, no matter how many generalizable studies there have been on the importance of homework, there are still classes I have taught where assigning homework had absolutely zero positive outcomes, and in fact only served to further privilege students who already had more power over those who had fewer socioeconomic advantages. Narrative research arguably has great potential to move from printed qualitative accounts toward multimedia-based research accounts, and therefore to be worthwhile in its attempt to share knowledge in lived context. Of crucial importance is the holistic manner of exploring human interactions and the meaning people create without trying to separate cerebral from emotional aspects.

Embarking on Narrative Inquiry

Following the approval of my dissertation proposal, I set out to engage in narrative inquiry—eliciting stories from teachers in the PLC, and crafting my own narratives reflective of years of observing and practicing science teaching. Mindful of the theoretical tenets of this study, especially that of space, I honed the writing of stories drawing from my own experiences centered upon these ideas. I listened for the stories of other PLC teachers, at times hearing their narratives, or storying emerging experiences. Throughout the semester, I took opportunities to
check out my emerging interpretations and data generation needs and strategies with teachers and other research peers. Beginning early November, I began uploading drafts of narratives to Google Docs. One PLC teacher in the study—Paige, and my dissertation chair—Sherry, began reading the emerging stories, serving as “peer debriefers” to more critically review the narratives. I used digital document tools to highlight and “code” passages from the narratives, coding to identify questions and insights I was considering in relation to my original Research Questions prompting interactive feedback from my peer debriefers.

![Figure 7. Data Analysis via Google Docs.](image)
Using Images Within the Narratives

I have incorporated images to support the narratives, although the reverse is true as well—the stories support the images. The images are an integral part of the narrative inquiry, weaving texture and depth into the text. Even though both narratives and photographs could stand on their own, the meaning conveyed would not be the same. I submit there is interaction between the words and images, a reciprocal informing that results in heightened meaning. At first, I was obtaining images to provide readers a means to virtually see where the PLC teachers were thinking, working, and being through the study. As I started incorporating images, various participants made suggestions that I include images to reflect feelings associated with the stories—“Hey, what about putting in a picture of a teacher walking alone down a long hallway to capture Lauren’s feeling of loneliness.” And, would it be good to use black and white for a more dramatic effect?” As I began to sequence written stories and incorporate supporting images, suggestions were made by teachers and peer debriefers that I try to overlap stories, “Why don’t you introduce Malcolm here, and then bring in the rest of that narrative at another point where it also fits well?” I found myself wishing I could have a hypermedia dissertation that could more fluidly allow readers to move between hyperlinked texts, images, voice narration, and even video. I actually spent many hours searching for a way to do this—to no avail—although I believe that will develop as the predominant format in the future. As I tried to organize my study “findings” as insights in linear form for Chapter 4—linking the narratives to the guiding research questions and theoretical underpinnings of this study—I struggled.

The notion to describe Chapter 4 as an “Art Gallery” came during a discussion one night, as Sherry, Paige and I tried to figure out how and why to organize Chapter 4. This made sense—the art gallery would conceptually fit with the focus on *thirdspace*, and would practically help
the reader to look across printed texts and fixed images to imagine connections across these
insights. It also appealed to my strong desire to make this work accessible to a wide audience of
current and future practitioners. Literature searches for “museum theory” and “art-based
educational research” opened up pathways to works by educational researchers desiring to draw
on hybrid ways of knowing, and inclusive ways of performing research (e.g. poetry, drama, film,
novels, paintings, drawings, interactive emergent design). The approaches and justifications
articulated by those engaged in arts-informed inquiry resonated with techniques and rationales
guiding my own emergent work. Accordingly, Chapter 4 became a “Gallery of Insights,” and
Chapter 5 a “Travelling Exhibit” to better enable my rendering of insights gained through this
study.

**Arts Informed Inquiry**

Scholarship in *arts-based research* (ABR) emerged from interpretive qualitative research
roots over twenty years ago. Elliot Eisner (2002) especially gained high recognition for this line
of interpretive research in the early 1980s, encouraging “connoisseurship” as an alternative to
“scientifically” based practices. He was an early, influential proponent for creative dissertation
formats including the novel. In *The Kind of Schools We Need* (1998), as quoted by Smith
(2005), Eisner made the eloquent argument for arts in education:

> The arts inform as well as stimulate, they challenge as well as satisfy. Their location is
not limited to galleries, concert halls and theatres. Their home can be found wherever
humans chose to have attentive and vita intercourse with life itself. This is, perhaps, the
largest lesson that the arts in education can teach, the lesson that life itself can be led as a
work of art. In so doing the maker himself or herself is remade. The remaking, this re-
creation is at the heart of the process of education. (Eisner, 1998, p. 56)
The phrase—*Arts Informed Inquiry*—has only recently gained significant ground in the educational research arena within the past decade. The Centre for Arts-informed Research (CAIR, n.d.) at the University of Toronto has promoted Arts Informed Educational Inquiry since 2000. Cole and Knowles (2008) define *Arts-Informed Research* as follows:

The central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible. The methodology infuses the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts with the expansive possibilities of scholarly inquiry for purposes of advancing knowledge. (p. 59)

It is important to note the shift in language, from “research” to speak of “inquiry,” diverging from legacies associated with scientific research conducted in classrooms on teachers and/or their students.

A Move Into the Art Gallery of Chapter 4

We now move into Chapter 4, organized as *portraiture walls* in an art gallery. Each wall re-presents a brief glimpse into one teacher in the professional learning community. The wall contains a collection of narratives and images, grouped as they give voice to that teacher. At the end of the each collection—each portraiture wall—is a brief discussion of relevant themes tying that collection to the ideas of *space* explored in this dissertation, and to the guiding research questions of this study. It is intriguing to think of an art gallery—including the upcoming one in Chapter 4—as a sort of *heterotopia*. Beth Lord (2006) described Foucault’s notion of museums as heterotopias:
The heterotopia is a space of difference, in which ordinary cultural emplacements are brought together and represented, contested, and reversed. Sacred and forbidden spaces, ‘crisis’ spaces, and spaces for holding deviant individuals are included in this definition. Heterotopias are spatially isolated places that juxtapose incompatible objects and discontinuous times…(p. 13)
Chapter 4: Narrative Findings from an Arts Informed Inquiry

This research has been an intense experiment. It continues to be a journey of exploration. In this qualitative study, I have used a blended approach of phenomenology, micro-ethnography, and case study, with narrative inquiry being the overarching methodology. The organization of the findings is a creative experiment, informed by arts-based research. We are encouraged to make forays into “more open and original ways” by scholars such as McNiff (2007):

We are discovering how these art-based methods, making use of a larger spectrum of creative intelligence and communications, generate important information that often feels more accurate, original, and Intelligent than more conventional descriptions. (p. 30)

As introduced in Chapter 3, arts-based inquiry values the aesthetic and multiplicity involved in moving beyond a linear approach to transmitting information through text. The potential to widen access to the study beyond an elite, exclusive group of educational researchers is part of the draw of this arts-based narrative inquiry.
I took the previous photograph of a door front in a restored building downtown Birmingham, Alabama during an arts festival called Art Walk. I am reflected in the glass. Walker Evans’ words on the glass resonate with my findings. We need to pay attention, really listen, pry, stare, and learn—directly from the people who are living and working in the places where we have a stake. If, that is, we actually care about the outcomes for our community and its people.

My interest in the research topic has come from experience through 20 years as an educator in Alabama public schools. The work is subjective, personal, and specific to actual people in local places in the present time. Although I do not pretend that such contextual knowledge is generalizable, I do believe it can communicate possibilities and hope. I desire that it spark honest dialogue, as so much of what happens in public schools is hidden, ignored, and covered up. Teachers are pushed into submissive silence, as are marginalized students. I submit that teachers of students in regular level courses at our school are stifled and disempowered. This translates into greater losses for the very students who can least afford to lose more. Those
who dare to speak openly, to share their experiences, to turn a light onto problems, to advocate for equal access to education for all students—are not considered heroes—but renegades to be squelched. A person speaking an unpopular truth—anything that questions the powerful paradigms of the status quo—is a trouble maker on a tirade. We are told to be quiet and take it. “That’s just how it is.” “That’s just how these kids are.” “Get over it.” “Let it go.” “Move on.”

**Vignette.** For example, three days ago—Wednesday, February 08, 2012—a student of mine began having seizures on the floor outside my door after abusing a chemical inhalant. He was foaming at the mouth and his limbs were convulsing; he could have died. After being escorted by security to the nurse, he came back to class five minutes later. Within one hour he was using the inhalant again—which was still in his backpack. This time he was convulsing in my room with students watching. I wrote a full incident report, including medical and legal references, and sent it to all administrators. This is a picture of the actual can I took from the student, after he returned from the nurse and security, and was seizing in my classroom, with foam pouring out of his mouth across the table where he sat. The 25 students in the room were so still, so quiet, except for one “Oh my God, Billy, are you okay?” and one “Oh gross, that’s sick,” and one “That’s one crazy motha fuckin’ white boy.”

The principal came by my room the next day, and told me obviously this young man was “challenged,” and “teenagers will do anything to get a buzz,” and things had been too busy to figure out what to do, so the student would probably come back to class that very day. This
would never happen in an advanced class, because parents would revolt, and the young person
would probably get the help he desperately needs. Yet as teachers in a highly functioning PLC,
we have been able to claim far more power and voice than I would have ever predicted. I
explained to the principal why it would be a terrible idea to have the young man come back to
class, and said the student could sit with Ms. Spencer since that was her preparation period.
Working in community and previously discussing this traumatic event with her, I was confident
that this would be a workable—if not ideal—solution. Principal X replied that maybe he would
go ahead and deal with it right then, and could “find something to do with Billy.” If four
people—half of the science department at the largest high school in the city—speak up, give
evidence, and embark on drastically untraditional methods—it is difficult to dismiss us. So far,
the student abusing the chemical substance has not been put back into the classroom. Thankfully
thus far we have been able to continue doing science, without anyone else thinking it was just
fine to engage in abusing chemical inhalants or other neurotoxins to the point of seizures in my
classroom. I have not yet gotten the promised update on how Billy is doing, or whether he is
receiving medical attention and therapy.

**Why this matters.** So why does any of this matter? Because public education here is in
a state of chaotic decline. Great teachers are leaving the profession. Many fair-minded people
are exhausted from the lack of support. Unbelievably shocking things are happening in the halls
and classrooms—some of them violent, abusive, and dangerous. Teachers are expected to keep
our mouths shut if we want to keep our jobs. The message is that it does not matter if education
comes to a SCREECHING halt every five minutes in regular classes. I informally polled every
teacher I know who teaches a majority of regular level classes. Every single one of them—
except those of us in the PLC and one social studies teacher—admitted they would take all
advanced classes if given the chance, and will look for other job possibilities if they continue to have a majority regular level classes. This should be startling and disturbing, and everyone should realize this is all connected to increasing crime and unrest in our larger community.

**Symptomatic crime in our community.** The following table and explanation of *crime index* were retrieved through a real estate search (CLR, n.d) for demographics in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. This CLR search tool was found linked from a website called *Great Schools.* The results are frightening, and cannot be unlinked from the admission that a majority of these crimes are being committed by those citizens who are failed by our educational systems. Crime statistics are merely one example, one measurement of a symptom, in the much larger diseases of inattention and injustice in our community. I have much narrative evidence about this as well from my good friend and neighbor—an Assistant District Attorney here in Tuscaloosa. Those stories are not included into this dissertation due to space and time. These statistics are for 2010, so are not skewed due to the tornado disaster in 2011.
In Tuscaloosa, a citizen is two and a half times more likely to be a victim of rape, robbery, or burglary than the national average. We stand a five times greater chance of being the victim of larceny than the national average. These crime statistics are just one example of the current state of our local community. Yet I see absolutely nothing being done to slow the decline in schools.

**Low expectations and social promotion.** There is great rhetoric about helping students pass courses and pass standardized tests. Although it is not discussed, this specifically means

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*Figure 8.* Crime Risk Index, Tuscaloosa Alabama 2010. 100 = National Average. A score of 20 indicates twice the national average total crime risk, while 50 indicates half the national risk. Please see Appendix 4.
students in regular classes. It is exceedingly rare for students in advanced classes to take any graduation exams after 10th grade, since those students passed the [biased] tests the first time. (See Appendix 7 for NHS graduation exam results for 11th graders in 2009-2010. Only science scores reach the state average.) It is also exceedingly rare for any students in advanced classes to fail a course. In fact, in the wake of No Child Left Behind, teachers must now fill out a great deal of paperwork to justify the assignment of a failing grade. Most teachers I interviewed admitted that now they almost always give a “60” just to avoid the extra “headaches.” One teacher had a senior student last year who had less than a 30% average in her science class. He had missed 26 days of the semester with unexcused absences—4.5 weeks out of the 18 weeks, or 25% of the contact time. In the last week of the semester, this teacher was encouraged by an administrator to “Give him make-up so he can pass, just make him feel like he has worked for it.” This all has consequences we cannot possibly predict.

Beyond the pressure on teachers to: 1) do whatever is needed so that students will pass standardized tests, 2) keep students in the classroom (to keep discipline referrals minimized) regardless of the degradation in learning opportunities for other students in the class, and 3) assign passing grades regardless of effort or achievement in order to make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress), I see no other system policies, nor school-wide (or department-wide) attempts to level the playing field for equal educational opportunities. Other than these misguided, shallow veils, there is nothing but background hiss like the microwave static of the universe from a few billion years ago. Nothing, that is, until you take a closer look at a few individual teachers, including—but definitely not limited to—those in our PLC.

Resistance to injustice. If those of us in our PLC refuse to keep students in standard level classes sitting in their seats in rows doing bookwork, and insist on high expectations
including group projects and lab experiences, it becomes difficult for others to continue claiming these students are incapable of high level academic work. I am not saying it is easy. It is still often dreadfully difficult, disheartening, even defeating. I have many anecdotes from teachers collected as data that I am not including in this dissertation, but hope to include in later work as examples of the deep challenges inherent in working with students in regular level classes. The violence, hostility, and abuse would be (and are) paralyzing for many. But teachers in the PLC hold each other accountable for not giving up. And we hold each other up with daily successes, new strategies, emotional support, and the undeniable—but astonishingly often ignored—power of physical presence in shared space. We also have the mythical medicine of funny stories told on front porches. I furthermore submit that stories are what we as humans have to give us voice, and to share our insights.

**Hypothesis within science model.** If forced to explain this narrative inquiry as research through a scientific model, it would appear as follows:

*Observations*

- Public education in the specific location of the schools where I have worked for 18 years is in dramatic decline.

- There is growing disparity in access to educational opportunities in “regular” classes as compared with “advanced” classes. This disparity is interconnected with issues of social class. This continues throughout and after high school, having devastating impacts on our local community, as well as on the individual people.

*Problem*

- Teachers are ill-equipped to deal with the challenges in local public schools.

- Teachers in the local school under study are silenced and disempowered.
A vast majority of those teaching regular classes report being “miserable,” and are actively seeking to leave the profession.

Prospective teachers are so disheartened by experiences in challenging placements in “standard” level classes that they often leave the profession before they ever fully enter.

Prospective teachers protected from experiences in challenging “standard” level classes—by receiving placements in all advanced or AP level classes—find it impossible to function in any meaningful way when entering a job teaching “standard” level classes. There is rarely ever a case where a brand new teacher is assigned all advanced classes of course, as veteran teachers request those classes.

**Hypotheses**

- It is not possible to simply “train” teachers to be successful in challenging classes. It is far too complex. However, teaching in a professional learning community may offer opportunities for some teachers to learn to live well in the spaces of schools with students who are very different from themselves.

- Sharing narratives from a professional learning community of teachers can offer unique insights, inspiration, and hope.

- An artographical rendering will allow the narratives to reach a wider audience of practitioners and potential teachers, who live outside the elite circles—practice, language, and places—of most academic educational researchers.

- Ultimately, the goal is that hearing teachers’ voices might inspire some people to remain in the profession, and to collaborate with each other in the spirit of community to help all students build bridges to achieve their own goals.
The Art Gallery of Findings

As I move through Chapter 4, I will take the reader through a collection of stories as through an art gallery. Each teacher featured in the gallery is re-presented by a portrait wall. Each portraiture wall contains a few select stories and photographs, grouped as portraiture collections within the gallery. Each story—each item on that portrait wall—is in that collection based upon that story’s strongest connection to one person. They hold together within the collection as giving voice to that teacher. All the stories are interconnected, which is why they are in the PLC gallery. They all offer glimpses into multiple people, experiences, and spaces of this particular community of teachers. These stories were chosen for the gallery based on their insights into the research questions, although this is not the conventional case study work of shopping for quotes and looking for rigid themes. Over 20 narratives were collected, in addition to enough data to write many more. Hopefully I will gather them all in a later book. Those I chose to include here were the ones most relevant as findings to the research questions.

Rational of Findings as a Gallery of Portraits

1) Learning is Holistic: Stories are re-presented in authentic context to give voice to marginalized teachers.

2) Viability and Genuineness: I know these people and have unique access to these stories, which would not be possible for an outside researcher.

3) Artographic Micro-Ethnography: The research resists deconstructing and diminishing into parts and pieces.

4) Inspiring and Engaging: The approach is more artistic, aesthetically engaging, and more accessible to a wider range of people than traditional formats.
Being physical people in a physical world, we are affected by what we sense around us. We cannot claim immunity to aesthetics. In this simple photograph I took at the Chez Lulu Continental Bakery in English Village, an area of Birmingham, Alabama, it is easy to be reminded of how we are drawn to textures, images, stories in spaces. I believe we cannot help but wonder about the things we see collected in this photograph—Who is in the portrait and what is she doing? Why is her picture on that wall? Where is that tree laden landscape? What do the newspaper articles say? When were they written? What kinds of breads are nestled on the shelves? What is the history of this place? I find it strange that we cling to a tradition that values linear text in the absence of the familiar physical contexts of texture, color, and light.
As we move into the art gallery, we first come to Lauren’s collection, the first *portraiture* wall. In her first story, *Lauren Almost Quits*, we see the beginnings of our larger PLC…
Lauren Almost Quits – From Prologue

A new teacher in our high school science department, Lauren, is crying again at lunch and trying to hide it. Her eyes are red and she seems exhausted, defeated. Her navy blue pumps shine from under the table where her ankles are properly crossed, one foot slightly trembling, almost still. This is the third day in a row she has been in tears.

Lauren gets to school at 7:00 a.m. and leaves at 5:00 p.m. every day. She is 25 years old, newly married, has a bachelor’s and master’s degree--as well as doctoral work--in biology, and a master’s in secondary science education. Lauren is white, with startling wide, blue-green eyes, from a privileged home in Dallas, Texas. [She entered the profession four weeks ago, bright-eyed, intelligent, excited, ready to work with kids to make a difference and share her love of science. She had felt prepared, energetic, youthful, and ultra-organized.] After lunch, all but two of the science department members hurried back to their rooms, busy. On the way out the
door to her class of nine advanced placement chemistry students, one veteran teacher—Lauren’s official “mentor”—calls out cheerfully, sincerely, “Don’t worry, it gets better, let me know if you need anything!”

The two remaining teachers get on both sides of Lauren and ask what is wrong. At first she says “Nothing, I’m okay.” Stoic, back regally straight, head up. Then the two other women are more insistent. They wait patiently, silently for one minute that feels like a hundred years. The big round white school clock ticks off plain seconds in halting clicks, with a needle thin black arm, from high on a matte grey wall. Distant shuffles in the hall amplify into a thundering mass of people changing classes.

Someone in the thundering mass can clearly be heard yelling “Fuck you man, shit, I’ll kill you motha fucka, know what I’m sayin?!” Followed by hard thuds against a wall, not revealing whether or not the exchange is playful, or violent. Lauren’s shoulders start shaking, gently at first, then harder. Somebody from the hall slams the classroom door shut amidst laughter, instantly muffled. Sound bounces around the room, filling the space even when it stops. Student projects—toothpick bridges and molecule models—hang from the ceiling by clear fishing line or pink string. Two suspended bridges abruptly start swinging back and forth as the giant industrial air conditioning roars through its vents. A cutout of Albert Einstein sticking his tongue out leans from atop the front white board. A metal sign, World War II
memorabilia, shows Rosie the Riveter proclaiming “We Can Do It!”

Lauren cannot hold it in, tears start to streak through her mascara and onto her navy blue dress with white polka dots. A blackish spot sits defiantly, glistening on her starched white pilgrim collar. For a minute it seems she cannot breathe. There is grief in her sobs, loss. Lauren says, “I just don’t think I can do this. I think I need to quit. I need to get out now.” She shivers from the freezing blast of roaring air, as the other two teachers lean in and strain to hear what she is saying. “I could do something else.” Her voice creaks out a few more words, “This is horrible.” She bows her head and whispers, “I’ve made a big mistake. But I don’t think we can afford…” Glossy strands of dark chestnut hair fall in front of her face. She could be a little girl looking for something on the floor that has gotten lost near her feet.

One of the science teachers hugs her, offers a joke, and promises to make strong drinks Friday after school. She turns on some music, but Madonna seems all wrong. She quickly flicks through a couple more songs on her IPod, but they all seem even worse. 50 Cent, his growly spark usually igniting at least a bit of relaxed movement, is uninspiring. When Seal’s Crazy offers no comfort, the third teacher turns off the IPod and stereo. The speakers give a resolute pop. The roar of air shuts off. Finally there is silence again.

Then the other teacher, Paige—herself only 27 years old with five years teaching experience—looks Lauren straight in the eye and says, “You are coming to sit in on my class today during your prep.”
Lauren sniffs, replies, “I don’t know, I have to make a lot of copies and I’m behind on my grading, I can’t get caught up, I have to call some parents…” she sighs deeply, pauses, then continues, “I have to do that today, I just can’t take it another day, and I have to put away the lab materials…” As she speaks her volume lowers to nearly inaudible, and she starts crying again, softly this time. She chokes and coughs, then there is a lone, violent hiccup.

Paige says, “No more excuses. You’re coming if I have to leave my class alone and come get you. And that is just really not a good idea, so please don’t make me have to do that.” Paige smiles. Her voice is steady, calm. She takes a black elastic hair band from her right wrist, then both hands sweep back long, dark-gold hair with ballerina speed, confining it behind her bowed head with the hair band in a serious gesture. A tiny silver chain flashes at her throat above a crimson blouse. Paige stands up, placing her hands firmly on the hips of her straight black skirt, bold, graceful. One of her black leather loafers taps a single time on the hard floor, holding back more taps. Blue eyes twinkle, hinting at intelligent humor. She is the smallest person in the room, but her determined stance takes up substantial space. There is an instant where it seems all three women might burst out laughing, but the moment passes…lost laughter slips out through invisible cracks like ghosts, not quite real.

Lauren agrees with a nod, but does not smile. She says something, maybe “Okay,” or “Thank you,” as she turns away to walk out of the room, pumps clicking a fading, resigned cadence down the hall.

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A bell rings to signal the end of class. The third science teacher runs next door to Paige’s room immediately after the class Lauren was observing. It’s a packed room of tenth grade
physical science students. Many of them are tough, some are several years older than their classmates. A few show off prison tattoos and proud bullet scars.

A few seem happy and innocent, safe and sheltered, shouldering bright new book bags neatly packed with schoolwork and supplies. All students in this class are black, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, grouped as a “regular” or “standard” (as opposed to advanced) class.

They all ride busses from across town to attend this “neighborhood” school--fallout action from recent re-segregation. Students spill out of the room, chatting over one another.

One tall, smiling boy says, “A’right then, Ms. Spencer.”

Another says, “That was pretty fun. We should do more stuff like that.”

One large girl loudly says to a boy, “Get your fuckin hands off me, fool” as she slaps his hand away.

The boy says back to her, “Lookin good, hmm, mmm.”

Another girl asks on her way out, “What we doin’ tomorra?”

Two other girls talk about their own babies at home.

An older boy says, “That class makes me feel smart.”
Another replies, “Whatever.”

A tiny girl, very dressed up, wearing round glasses and a deep green silky blouse sparkling with gold threads, says “I’m gonn major in chemistry in college.”

A boy near her counters “You gotta pass high school first!”

Paige and Lauren exit the room last. They are both smiling. Paige chuckles and tells one student, “Good job today, La’Darrius, I noticed a big improvement from yesterday, keep it up,” then answers the girl’s question, “We’re doing more super cool fun chemistry stuff tomorrow for your brilliant self, atoms and molecules.” To a boy in a big pink baseball hat peppered with green camouflage, she says “Hide that hat Bo, or I’m adding it to my collection.”

Bo has his left hand clenched into a fist clutching bunched denim at his waist, that hand having the sole full-time job of holding up his baggy dark jeans. Bo flashes a gold-tooth smile, intense eyes revealing sweetness and intellect behind the cool exterior façade. “Oh yeah, I forgot,” as he reluctantly slides the hat off with the same hand formerly employed with holding up pants. The pants immediately sag down to reveal layers of underwear, bright blue gym shorts and plaid boxers. The left hand seems to remember its responsibility and pulls his pants back up, now having the double duty of holding both pants and pink-and-green-camouflage-hat. The other hand hangs empty at his right side, or sends a half-waive to friends passing by. The third teacher, standing in the hall next door—watching from only a few meters away—wonders if the cap might have been better left on Bo’s head than functioning as a modern day codpiece, but says nothing. Lauren shakes her head in disbelief. She is standing up straight again, several inches taller than Paige. The red splotches on her pale skin are fading, looking more like rosy blush. Even the gray spot on her white pilgrim collar is barely noticeable, a faint reminder of mascara-filled tears falling earlier.
She and Paige and the other teacher get together after school that day for several hours, to plan and collaborate and share their vision. Hopeful toasts are made. They laugh and tell stories.

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That was the last day Lauren cried at lunch, and that was three years ago. I am the third teacher.

Wanda and the Frog

Wanda is the custodian on the science wing at the high school where I teach. She and I often engage in deep conversations when I am working late at night. One night she shared with me that she had always wanted to be an astronaut, and asked me to copy a picture for her of the Columbia crew. I think about that often.

On this particular day, she had just finished cleaning the student bathroom on our hall, and was conducting an investigation, moving from classroom to classroom.

When Wanda came by my room, she asked, “Have y’all been cutting up animals today or yesterday?”
I was somewhat caught off guard, and just replied, “Um, neither day, no ma’am, we don’t cut up animals in physics or physical science, why?”

She grumbled something, maybe “Never mind then, it’s not you,” as she left my doorway shaking her head, continuing her rounds.

At the beginning of the lunch shift, students from my 2nd period class were making their way out the door, a few 3rd period students were in the mix to drop off their book bags on the way to the cafeteria, and science teachers were coming in to eat lunch.

Lauren ran in red-faced and laughing, interrupting whatever conversation was going on to tell me what happened when Wanda came to her room. Lauren blurted out, “Wanda came down and banged on my door during my class, and wanted to know if we had been cutting up things! At first I didn’t know what she meant, and then I told her, ‘oh, yes,’ because we had been dissecting earth worms. But then, Wanda said—in front of my whole class—‘Well you need to tell your students not to put animals down the toilets, because there was a FROG in there and it nearly scared the SHIT out of me!!’”

Lauren’s eyes were sparkling with glee as she continued, “The students were stunned at first, they really didn’t know if it was okay to laugh, and I don’t think they could believe she said that right in front of them—then they all just died laughing! Oh my gosh.”

Lauren relayed this several more times as other science teachers came in my room to have lunch.

Anna, Paige, Lauren and I especially found this incident to be exceedingly funny, knowing that Lauren is
extremely organized and particular, and would know better than to let kids with dissected frogs into the halls and bathrooms. The entire event made me think about a scene in the movie E.T., where Elliot released all the frogs from his biology class before they could be killed and dissected. I enjoyed seeing Lauren so happy, and recognized that much of the source of her happiness was being able to share her funny story with people she knew would appreciate the humor. I reported that I had to go write down the story immediately.

Later in the day, Lauren got an unfriendly note from the principal about the incident, indicating that he was concerned about dissected frogs being left in the bathroom, and how she should take care to ensure that it does not happen in the future. Lauren was not happy about this turn of events, and said to Paige and me, “Really, are you kidding me, I would NEVER in a million years send kids to the bathroom with dissection pans and animals to clean up! That’s what the lab sinks are for, of course something would happen. I can’t believe the principal knows so little about who we are individually, which of us are obsessive about details and who leaves everything to chance. I mean, my God, everybody on this hall knows I am not responsible for Wanda’s frog scare! I’m frankly just glad nobody got stabbed with a scalpel.”

We are still trying to decide whether or not to tell the principal that it was NOT Lauren who let students take their dissecting pans, complete with frog parts and tools, into the bathroom…

Sharing Interpretive Insight

Space. The first story, Lauren Almost Quits, primarily reveals themes relating to research question 3 about space. Lauren’s reflections when looking back on this day, which we have discussed numerous times, bring up themes from research questions 1 and 2. For the sake
of clarity, the interpretation of findings here will focus on themes revealed in the story at the time—again, question 3: *How might the notion of “space”—especially thirdspace—be used to ground experiences in this teacher PLC as a unique focal point for professional learning?*

At the start, we have said the portraiture collections on each wall are based on each individual teacher. The experience of Lauren, however, unravels this as a simplistic notion. Her experience debunks the myth of a teacher as a singular entity who should be held accountable for the academic outcomes of all students on her roster. In the moment Lauren immersed herself in community—after resisting it strongly for her first couple of months teaching—she rejected her own fears and feelings of inadequacy and stopped being alone. Rather than quit or continue in a miserable state of perpetual suffering, Lauren stepped into a hybrid space. In fact, she had to take part in creating the new space. This contained risk, unpredictability, and an opening up of self to join others. Inevitably there is doubt about sacrifice in autonomy and personal agency. Yet there is immense possibility to be able to draw upon the resources of a social group. These resources include knowledge, skills, and material equipment. Yet more importantly, they include emotional support and a complex system of dialogue—the chance to juxtapose, diffuse, and shift.

When Lauren walked back down the hall after co-teaching with Paige that first day, everything for her had changed. It was not the same
dreadful hallway leading to the isolation and chaos of her room that it had been when she walked the same path earlier that same day. With her sense of belonging to a community, her identity was integrated into a social body. *Thirdspace* has been created, a hybrid space of multiplicities rather than singularities and dichotomies. It is Foucault’s notion of *heterotopia*, both real and utopian. We imbue the heterotopia with mythical powers, as it has changed us. Lauren, when her initial experience of resistance as an individual, clashed with her integration into community; she experienced a new space which became her entry into the dynamics of community. Her entry meant new culture for her and for the group. From the clash of self and group, space is changed. Community is one of diversity, the dynamic of being, and learning to live well in the midst of clash and chaos—to reorder the pieces into something new; this idea will be revisited in Chapter Five.

**Viewing experience as a member of PLC.** In the second story, *Wanda and the Frog*, Lauren said: “I can’t believe the principal knows so little about who we are individually, which of us are obsessive about details and who leaves everything to chance. I mean, my God, everybody on this hall knows I am not responsible for Wanda’s frog scare!” This reveals an insight into research question 1: How do these teachers view their experiences as members of a professional learning community? The implication here is that there should be—and is among some faculty members—enough sense of community that we know the people we live and work with for half our waking lives. With some effort and attention, we can form a community and know each other to a reasonable extent. This is especially true if we voluntarily form small communities within the larger body of an institution. It might be impossible to know everyone well in a large school, giving many of us an excuse to remain isolated; I know this was the case for me during most of my career. There is an immediate assumption that it is expedient and
appropriate to maintain strict boundaries at work. There is also the associated—although unrealistic—lure of being able to do exactly what we as individuals want to do, when we want to do it. The larger truth is that this is impossible. Supreme individual agency is incongruent with fair social systems, since we must compromise and live up to our agreements to maintain social relationships. We are all jointly accountable for student achievement. I submit that we perpetuate the problem of an educational system that repeatedly fails our most underserved students if we insist on maintaining the delusion; the delusion that we are not bound to know, care about, or act for those in our teaching and learning communities.

Further themes from research question 1—regarding the way teachers view their experiences as part of a PLC—emerge in our reflective group dialogue later that day, after the incident with Wanda and the frog. When Lauren, Paige, Anna and I discussed this over beer after work, Lauren described the importance of being able to share these things with us—with colleagues actually working and learning together. She said it “wouldn’t be the same” if she just worked alone and came to lunch with totally disconnected teachers, admitting that she might not even tell the story at all, and would probably just eat lunch in her room by herself. This small detail reveals a glimpse into the narrow confines we create when attempting to work as disconnected, singular entities, especially in the complex spheres of educational institutions. I told Lauren that would be a sad waste of a very funny story, and silently thought of the nearly 15 years I had eaten lunch alone in my own classroom.
Negotiating topics and shared spaces. Only five years ago did that change for me, with the sudden, dramatic shift of working in community with other teachers. Now the entire science department—including teacher interns, people from Science in Motion, and sometimes other visitors—gathers each day to eat lunch in my room. On a related and noteworthy theme, in the early years of this shift, I found it quite difficult to adjust to the typically gruesome, negative, and politically incorrect topics of conversation brought to our shared lunch. There was and still is tension where I sometimes long for the isolation of my own thoughts, and the greater—although admittedly not absolute—ability to control the topics invading “my” space.

In the same discussion following the frog incident, Anna echoed this sentiment, saying she hates coming to lunch if any of the three of us (Lauren, Paige, and I) are not there, that it is “boring and stupid and everybody just talks over each other and doesn’t listen at all.” Anna added that “nobody else cares about what we are doing in regular classes.” She also remarked, “I hate that some of them are so racist.” Anna said, “Hell, it’s damn hard, I mean last year when I taught all chemistry when I first came in mid-semester, wow, I knew I had it good, but I had no idea how cushy and easy that really was compared to what I’m doing now. There is NO WAY I
could do this without ya’ll, I would have already quit. For real, I’m not kidding.” Clearly Anna views her experiences in the PLC as something necessary to sustain her participation as a teacher. This is a recurring theme that emerges through the narratives, which speaks directly to research question 1.

**Advocating for students in regular classes.** In reply, I complained that when any of them are absent, the lunch talk drifts to gossip and/or hyper-horrible news about rape, murder, or some other tragedy. We also talked about how most other science teachers do not allow students in regular science classes to do ANY dissections. Some do not have labs of any kind, in fact, in those classes at all. The two main reasons given are: 1) lack of course fees, and 2) lack of appropriate student behavior. These are two tremendous, valid concerns, and cannot be dismissed lightly. Rather, they should be a primary source of intense, honest discussion and problem-solving by multiple adults in our educational system (and wider community) on a frequent, regular, permanent basis if we are interested in justice and equity. There was protracted dialogue about how none of us would be able to do the planning, lab set-ups, purchasing, or evaluations we do without collaboration and support. This brings out themes related not only to research question 1, but also to research question 2: How do these teachers perceive their success teaching persistent low performers in light of their PLC experience?

- How do they feel it impacts their own agency?
- How and why do they feel it impacts learning for students in this group?
- How do they think it impacts the outlook for resulting systemic change to benefit all students?
- How does each teacher make meaning of what they are doing in working with this group of students?
There is agreement among the four of us that our own agency as teachers, as well as student learning, is interwoven with our partnership as members of a PLC. This comes through as themes in the narratives themselves, as well as in follow-up discussions and reflections which happen in real time along with, or in close proximity to, events leading to narratives shared.

Paige offered the following as her peer debriefing of this story: “Wow. Remember when every day at lunch you and I would just sit there and try to ignore the death, rape, and tragedy stories because Lauren was too new to stand out during conversation (meaning she just had to eat and be quiet), and Anna wasn't there yet? Notice that all those stories have nothing to do with us, our jobs, our kids—nothing to do with anything except hyper-news for shock and attention. They were conversations you might have with a stranger on the bus after watching Fox News. Conversations you would have only with people you don’t know!” Through these statements is revealed a rich kernel about social structures in schools.

Teachers working with regular level classes, often ignored and silenced, can claim power and voice when working together in community groups with shared goals. With this voice they can advocate for marginalized students, and can effect change in the atmosphere, topics, and spatial agreements of the whole department. In some ways the changes are fast and punctuated; in other ways they seem as slow moving as glaciers. We have continued to work for removal of things including:

1) calling children “white trash,”

2) comments like “that’s one little black boy who could go to college,” and

3) mindless acceptance of prevalent slang such as “that’s so gay.”

We also continue to rally for positive topics at lunch which will help further our causes of equity, student achievement, and teachers learning to live well in a place. This photograph shows
Lauren, Paige, and Ellen—a teacher at another school, and therefore a peripheral member of our PLC—camping and canoeing at Lake Lurleen in Northport, Alabama. They spent a great deal of the time during this personal weekend planning a field trip to this swamp for their combined biology classes to take this spring. It will include students in advanced biology, regular biology, and students from the urban areas of the Tuscaloosa City School System, along with Ellen’s students from a rural area of the Tuscaloosa County School System. This is revolutionary, but none of us really understand why that is the case.

We now leave the Lauren collection to visit our next grouping, featuring Paige…
I grew up in a small town—lots of space, not lots of people; kind of like the universe with all its atoms spread out. I was good at almost everything and good at helping people get better at things, too. I knew every secret word of the day in kindergarten and skipped second grade reading.

I tried to major in biology in college until I cried so many days in a row my mom said “You know it’s ok if you quit for a while.”

I was so shocked, I couldn’t speak for a minute and then sputtered, “What? It’s not that bad; how could you say that?”

Mom said, “Well honey, you know, it’s okay if you want to be a teacher...” Now, that called for a longer pause.

After the long pause and a Bachelor’s Degree and a Master’s Degree, both in Secondary Science Education, I found myself in front of an 8th grade class. It was the worst teaching anyone has ever done. I am not exaggerating nor am I going to elaborate on my many dismal failures. I
have either blacked out all memory of this first year or refuse to relay the memories I do have so that’s it. Carry on.

In college, I had one course in special education. By the time I was a working teacher (but still before I was technically a paid teacher), special education became general education, or inclusion, or main-streaming depending on the day and the people conversing. As far as I could tell, the only actual consequence behind all of these terms was a room of all differently-abled students and a collaborative teacher.

Please keep in mind that no one at any point gave any instructions on how to teach with a “collaborative” teacher to the general teacher or the collaborative teacher. So, three weeks into my ridiculous attempt to apply all the life skills and knowledge acquired in twenty-three years and two college degrees to a room of fourteen-year-olds, my collaborative teacher, Wendy McShan, said in a last exultation of exasperation, “Paige, can I PLEASE just teach the class today?!” Her exasperated sigh was joined by own sigh of relief.

Wendy McShan is an energetic Black teacher who had 30 years’ experience when I first began teaching with her. Her own children were grown by that time. She enjoyed using technology, and had a fierce belief in education as opportunity for all kids. She is small in stature but big in personality. Engaging, positive, always ready with a jolly smile—every student in the class would stop and listen when she spoke. I can still remember how she smiled and leaned to one side, cocking her head when she said, “Okay, kids. Today we are going to…” I just watched in awe as her sparkly magic made everyone turn around and be quiet. Wendy was my first collaborative teacher, and she changed my life. A lot has happened in the past six years, but here are the basics:
• 6 principals
• 1 pink slip, ouch
• 3 classrooms
• 12,432 committees
• Teacher of the Year – Northridge High School AND Tuscaloosa City School System, 2011-2012!!!

Guess you didn’t see Teacher of the Year coming, did you?

During my seven years as an educator, I have enjoyed palpable growth, chrysalis, and agency. I have also suffered stagnancy, helplessness, and frustration. Mostly, I have reveled in helping children be better—better problem-solvers, thinkers, and learners; better citizens, neighbors, friends; better children and better parents; more prepared and less afraid; ready to decide who to be and how to find what they need and what they want in the world. I get to do this almost every day because of the people who share themselves with me. Not only my students, but my colleagues. Wendy McShan was my first collaborative teacher and she taught me how important it is to work with my co-workers and not just beside them.

Today, I work with a small group of three other science teachers on a daily basis to maximize growth and agency. My job description of educators would be defined by my previous list of ways to help students be better. In our professional group, being an educator is a little different because it includes:

• me helping my students
• helping my colleagues
• my colleagues helping me
• everyone helping each other’s students
• . . . which makes them ALL our students.

By sharing ourselves, we share life. We create a new space through the act of acknowledging the space of another. Without this knowledge of my neighbor’s space, my perspective of my own space wouldn’t be the same. My classroom is connected with these three other classes – hallways, doorways, and walls are integrated into our learning space rather than dividing it. I share in creating and living the culture of this group. We discuss lesson plans and grading practices, behavior modification techniques, filing systems and classroom management. We consult each other on lab schedules, specific student situations, and whose turn it is to drive the carpool to adult ballet on Mondays. We create innovative group projects, administer common assessments, and pool our resources. My own space is bigger because of them.

I wonder what I am going to teach tomorrow first block? Whatever it is, I know they’ll be meters away trying to change the world, too. I am not alone and that feels good.
Hands in the Pants

Julie Covin is the Physics Specialist with the University of Alabama Science in Motion Program. We collaborate often; Julie is a peripheral member of our PLC. She was in my room this particular day helping teach a lab.

Today, Julie was accompanied by a PhD student from the Physics department named Khalid, who wanted to help teach the lab and get a feel for being in a high school science class. He was trying to decide whether or not to pursue obtaining a teaching certificate. Paige Spencer was in there as well, as this was an especially challenging class at the end of the day.

Most teachers do not do labs at all with “standard” or “regular” level science classes, citing concerns with issues of behavior, equipment, safety, and lack of course fees. However, those of us in my professional learning group strongly believe in equitable access to education for all students. This is not just theoretical writing or dialogue. We actually consider ourselves to be activists—we DO things instead of just talk about them. Therefore we put great time and energy into building students’ skills, knowledge, and understanding so that we can conduct labs and do projects in all our classes.

This day was a perfect example of the need to collaborate and work together. I admit that if I were teaching alone in a room in traditional autonomy/isolation, I would not attempt to do a lab with this class, either. It is simply too difficult, in too many ways.

Most students were excited about the chance to participate in a “real” physics lab with “fancy” equipment. Comments and questions peppered around the room, “How much did all this stuff
cost?” “How come we never get to do anything like this?” “What are we going to do?” “What is this for?” “Will this blow up?” “I ain’t never seen any of this stuff.” “This is way better than just sitting in a boring class doing nothing.” Students got quiet quickly and joined their groups, listening to directions about how to proceed with carts, graphs, motion sensors, ramps, and laptops.

There were a few aggravating behavior issues to be dealt with even at the beginning: “I ain’t fuckin doin this, gimme some book work or I’m goin to sleep.” “I ain’t workin with that ho, she stank!” But this was minimal, as most students really wanted the opportunity to get their hands on some science equipment.

Then Ms. Spencer walked over to me with a look of disbelief. She said, “That boy over there won’t take his hands out of his pants.”

I was astonished, and replied too loudly, “WHAT? Who? Where? You cannot be serious.”

She indicated with a motion of her head, and I saw a student named Jeremy moving his hand up and down slowly inside his pants. I made a pitiful attempt at recovery from my shock that there was a student masturbating in my classroom, especially with five adults present—one of them a first time visitor.

Ms. Spencer continued speaking to me quietly, her head turned away from the class so students could not hear, “I discreetly asked him to take his hand out of his pants, and he just looked at me and kept on.”

The most surprising part of the scenario was that Ms. Spencer is extraordinarily great with these students, better in fact than any other teacher at our school, better than any teacher I
have ever seen. She asked, “Does he have some special issues, does he have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan)?”

I replied, “No, not as far as I know.” I could feel my heart beating in my throat in response to the terrifying lack of ability to control and predict a situation—even if I am supposedly responsible for doing so.

Ms. Covin came over to see what was happening. When we told her, her eyes flew open wide, and she commented that she was glad it was us and not her who had to deal with things like that. There was some debate about whether or not this behavior was against the law. I said, “I have never before had to deal with anything just like this!”

Then Julie chuckled and quickly put her attention back on the rest of the class, and continued introducing the lab.

I went over and asked Jeremy to stop, and explained to him that he had to be able to follow directives from adults during labs if he wanted to participate. He said, “I can do what I want.” I really could not believe this was happening.

In what seemed to be a stroke of good luck and timing, the principal happened to drop by. I was temporarily relieved to tell him what was going on, and to pass Jeremy off to him in the hall. However, I was stunned when a grinning Jeremy walked back in the room less than 3 minutes later, obviously without being required to do so much as go wash his hands before returning.

When I asked the principal why Jeremy was being allowed back in after being not only defiant but sexually offensive, Mr. X turned red and ran away—jogging down the hall while looking at his watch and handling his walkie talkie—saying, “Lemme know if it doesn’t stop.” It was then that I knew we would either make it as a community of teachers, or I would not
continue to make it in this profession at all. I could not help but think about how parents would react if this same thing happened in an advanced class.

This incident of rebellion without consequences resulted in a rash of hands-in-the-pants episodes in physical science classes taught by both Ms. Spencer and myself over the following weeks. In retrospect it is interesting and even a bit humorous. At the time it was fairly horrible.

One day Paige was sick of it, and had a conversation with a class where four boys were blatantly putting their hands down their pants (although not noticeably masturbating as Jeremy was). Neither of us had ever experienced this sort of issue, so it was somewhat interesting that exhibiting this behavior in class “caught on” so quickly from the initial incident with Jeremy. All students in this class were black, and all were from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Ms. Spencer tried to explain things in a discussion with these students, but the related issues are multiple and complex. Issues about the right of everyone to be free from sexual harassment in public places, the importance of respecting self and others, the urgency of personal hygiene, the necessity for societies to have boundaries between public and private, the notion of individual rights in a civilization, and the long-lasting impression that we make in representing ourselves through our behavior. Concepts like delayed gratification, consideration for others, public vs. private, boundaries, power, and space, are difficult to unpack when students and teachers are from vastly different cultural backgrounds.

Paige started the discussion with questions like: “Does an individual person have the right to do whatever they want in a public place?” “Do students in public schools have the right to expect certain things in their classrooms?” “As a parent, what would you think is or is not appropriate for your own child to experience at school?” “Can you think of any reasons that touching your genitals in public might not be a good idea?” “Do you think this would be
tolerated in an advanced class, or in a college class?” “Do you think this would be tolerated in a workplace?” “How might behaviors like this cause people to make judgments about you that would impact your own opportunities?”

Almost all students added in productive ways to the discussion, explaining the reasons you “just don’t do that” in public “even if you want to and it feels good.”

One student said, “We live in the projects too, but on God my grandmother would kill me if I ever did that in public. How do you NOT know that? Jesus.”

Other students chuckled, and some nodded in agreement.

Another said, “We don’t do that at our house, either. Nobody I know does that. In public I mean.” More laughter, and an “aw shit I know that’s right!”

Another student added, “This is a stupid conversation, why are we even having it? Everybody knows you shouldn’t touch your private parts in public. Oh my God, can we just do our science lesson?”

Some students rolled their eyes, and some looked embarrassed.

The four young male students whose repeated behavior prompted this class discussion shared their reasoning as follows:

K. spoke angrily: “If I bought my pants, I can do what I want with them!”

R. said in a calm voice: “If I ain’t hurting anybody else, what difference does it make?”

L. snarled: “Even my momma don’t tell me what to do in my pants.”

S. was definite: “If my hands are cold, that’s what I do to get them warm.”

R. added: “Yeah, that’s how boys are used to waking up in the morning.”

L. continued, “I think girls like it.”
K. blurted out, “It’s 2011! Who cares? You know everybody does it, even on TV. and videos and out on the street. Y’all caint make us act how you want.”

Although these comments—as well as the rebellion itself—hinted at the deep importance of personal agency and social power, the behavior finally diminished as other students separated themselves from these boys and made it clear that this was not “cool” or acceptable. It was one time that many students in a “regular” class realized how much of their time and their own educational opportunity is squandered by the choices made by only a few students intent on (or unaware of) dragging everybody else behind. And the systems put into place in schools magnify this effect with low expectations for behavior and academics. This includes drastic long-term consequences to almost all students in “regular” level classes.

Anna, Paige, and the Screaming Kid

In my chemistry class, an advanced level class, one student—Alex—came in at the beginning and said his phone was missing. He wanted to know if he could go “check on it.”

I said, “Sure but hurry. You’ll miss the bellringer, and we are going down to the chemistry lab.”

He asked how long we would be there. When I told him the lab would take most of class—at least an hour—he said, “Oh, I don’t want to miss the lab,” and he stood there looking at me. I told him the class couldn’t wait on him to go find his missing phone, but to do what he needed to do. He huffed and took his seat. Five minutes later, right after the class had started to go over the bellringer, Alex YELLED: “I NEED TO GO FIND MY PHONE RIGHT NOW! DO YOU NOT UNDERSTAND THAT???” His face was red, contorted in anger.
I said calmly, “Alex, I already told you to go see about that phone if you need to. Now please go on! Stop disrupting this class, and go find your phone for heavens’ sake.” He left immediately and we continued class without him. We went down to the chemistry lab (Anna’s room), and while the students worked, I told Anna about the outburst.

Over an hour later, with only five minutes left in the class period, Alex knocked on the lab door. Before I could tell Anna to let me answer the door (I was afraid Alex was going to further disrupt my class), she quickly opened it. I covered my minor irritation at Anna, thinking: \textit{Why would you just open the door and let anybody come in the room? There are so many times that is not going to work out well...} But then I realized that is just part of the compromise of collaboration and sharing spaces, learning to clearly communicate expectations and navigate those shared spaces.

Alex came in and said to me with an irritated, demanding tone, “Can I please do the lab?”

I told Alex to step outside, and I turned and said to Anna, “You too, Mrs. Schwartz, please join us.” I motioned for Anna to accompany me into the hall with Alex. Anna stood right there beside me while I tried to explain to Alex that the best thing to do was talk about this tomorrow. I calmly said, “Alex, you are having a bad day. You are excused from the activity due to the circumstances with your phone. We have just spent the last 20 minutes packing up the lab materials to be picked up in the morning. You are upset. This conversation needs to wait until tomorrow. Everything will be okay.”

Alex angrily yelled, “I don’t understand WHY you won’t just let me stay after school with you to do the lab! What kind of teacher ARE YOU that you don’t want to help me?!?”

I told him I would not stay alone with a student after school to do a lab, especially not an angry volatile one who is yelling at me.
He shouted, “Well just explain to me what to do right now and I’ll do it by myself after school!”

I replied, “You cannot do labs unsupervised. We need to talk about this tomorrow.”

When he continued to argue, Anna said, “Alex, Alex. You need to stop talking. You are only going to get in more trouble, and Ms. Spencer is not going to change her mind. There is not another good option for us today. You are getting zero points out of zero; it is not going to hurt your grade. The lab equipment is already packed up. You need to go to your next class.”

Alex said angrily, “Fine can I just get my stuff out of the classroom?” The bell rang before he even finished his sentence. He marched in, grabbed up his backpack, and threw out a quick “I still want to do that lab, though!” as he left the doorway.

After the 3rd block students were gone and Anna’s 4th block was coming in, Anna said, “Oh my gosh. That was so awful. You are a better woman than me. You stayed so calm. I could never do that.” Then she asked, “Did you call me out there so I could see how that’s supposed to go?” I smiled, because that was not my only motivation, although it is so cool that these effects accumulate in unplanned ways when you are teaching in community. Anna did get to see how you should handle an irate student, how to stay calm and professional, without making a personal emotional investment in a situation. However, at the time, I primarily knew that it was smart to have another adult in a situation where I saw the young man was so volatile and angry, as he had already yelled at me and disrupted class.

I told her, “No, that was not the primary reason, although I had a hunch it would be a learning experience.” I smiled, and continued, “It is just a good thing to do when you can arrange it. For multiple adults to stand together—not just as witnesses—but to diffuse the tension, is an effective strategy to maintain a positively functioning educational environment. If
you are ever around and a conflict begins to escalate between another teacher and a student, just stand there. Lend your support. You don’t have to say anything or do anything, just the presence of another person changes the physical parameters of the experience. I feel it changes the space, makes it safer for everyone, and increases the likelihood of agreeable resolution—even if the resolution is temporary—like postponing the conversation until the next day. This is often a useful strategy unto itself, because emotions have calmed by the next day, and it’s easier for everyone to be respectful and reasonable.”

I explained to Anna that I was heading to call the student’s parents that moment, and pointed out that she should do the same in similar situations. Parental support is a crucial component of successful education, and parents deserve to know if a student’s behavior and choices are leading away from achievement.

When I called, Alex’s mother was completely apologetic, understanding, and supportive. She said, “I am so embarrassed about his behavior, and he will come and apologize. I am so sick of these expensive cell phones, this is the second five-hundred-dollar IPhone he has lost at school! If he doesn’t find it, he is NOT getting another one. And if he DOES find it, I’m taking it away for a long time.” She sounded exasperated, frustrated, parental. I expressed thanks for her help, and said we would get Alex back on the right track, predicting no further problems.

In my subsequent emails to the principal and the student’s mother, it made a big difference—although no one would say it—that I could mention that both myself and Mrs. Schwartz tried to calm Alex down. No one questioned my authority, actions, judgment, or motives. As teachers, these are in fact frequently questioned—especially with a teacher in isolation; this is a sad state I never could have dreamed up or predicted before gaining experience in the profession myself. I fully believe this situation went as well as it did because of the
smooth collaboration between Anna and me. No one accused the adults of “ganging up on the kids,” that “the teachers are tryin’ to lie,” not even that we were “friends sticking together”—all insulting accusations I have heard from angry parents in various scenarios. And I have been relatively fortunate, as my experiences have been mild compared to many teachers’ stories I have heard. Anna and I were clearly just two professionals doing our jobs much better than either could do on our own. Our collaboration gave validity, order, and professionalism to what could have otherwise been a chaotic, protracted course of unpleasant events.

Incidentally, after Anna went in her room to teach her 4th block, I asked Mrs. Stephens and Ms. Allaway (two teachers at Northridge that do not work as part of our professional learning community, but are very experienced, well-respected teachers) what they would advise me to do about the lab grade for Alex. I wanted to know if they thought I should give him an alternate assignment, or if I should take steps to make sure he had reason to miss an hour and 15 minutes of chemistry class to pursue a lost cell phone, or simply excuse it. Mrs. Stephens explained to Ms. Allaway exactly who Alex was—noting his last name with some meaning hidden from me—and they both said to just go ahead and excuse him. They were eager to hear the “gossip” at first, but then backed away while saying, “Oh yeah. Excuse him. His phone was stolen so that is something we have to let them take care of during class.” Both ladies quickly shut their doors and I was left standing alone in the hallway. I chuckled at the power dynamics in schools, and said a silent prayer of thanks. I am grateful for being able to work in community with some teachers who make decisions in fairness, regardless of a student’s last name, address, income, or parent’s profession.
This picture shows Lauren, Anna, and Paige after the four of us attended ASTA (Alabama Science Teachers Association) Conference in Birmingham, Alabama this year (2011). Paige had just finished a dynamic presentation. We were headed for drinks, to debrief and share what we had learned, and talk about how the day might translate into learning opportunities for kids. We often refer to ourselves as “nerds,” since we can usually be found planning and talking about work—even if there are martinis involved. We keep saying that is going to change, and sometimes agree to an hour here or there without any mention of work. Somehow we always come back to it—much to the aggravation of several friends and a few husbands—since it is what we have on our minds.

**Sharing Interpretive Insights**

Paige’s collection resonates with Lauren’s, especially in the beginning of her career. In the first narrative, we see how doors are opened in one day as Paige sees the possibility in collaboration. This lends insights into research question 1, regarding the ways in which teachers view their experiences as part of a professional learning community. She stated that it “changed her life” when Wendy McShan stepped in and started Paige on her journey as a community
teacher. (*Community teacher* is a phrase coined by Paige Spencer, to refer specifically to teachers working in a PLC.) In the second story, *Hands in the Pants*, another punctuated moment reveals a dramatic shift towards the way we view our experiences as members of a PLC when I specifically knew that “we would either make it as a community of teachers, or I would not continue to make it in this profession at all.”

**Shocking elements.** Paige’s stories quickly shift our thinking into what it means to be in community with her students in regular classes, revealing themes involved in research question 2. Themes from research questions 1, 2, and 3 become intermingled. Trying to separate the way teachers view their experiences as members of a professional learning community from issues of agency, advocacy, and space becomes unwieldy and false. This in itself lends credence to arts-based inquiry, where insights are shared holistically, and the attempt to break down—the analysis of traditional research—is resisted. *Hands in the Pants* is uncomfortable and shocking. It reminds us of the complex challenges involved in creating hybrid spaces with students who are quite different from the middle class, college-educated adult teachers. Yet Paige helps us work through our immediate responses, to see and hear the students, and the importance of putting energy into “those kids.” She is a constant advocate for their access to high level educational activities. Knowing I love physics, she points out that without tension, you would not have bridges. In spaces with students who are culturally different from the teacher, bridges are crucial.

This story has been shared many times in many venues with many people over the past months, especially in the weeks immediately following those events. In discussing these happenings, Ms. Spencer, Ms. Covin, and I all agreed that we would probably not attempt to do labs or projects at all in this class if we were as teaching as isolated individuals. Working in
community for us is having a dramatic impact on our own agency, as well as on the agency for our students. Students repeatedly report feeling "smart," and exhibit increased confidence, effort, and determination when working through challenging, interesting activities. These are things that happen regularly, and are in fact taken for granted, in advanced classes.

But it has been only from within the PLC that I have seen these sorts of activities happen in regular classes. Paige Spencer and I especially gained insights from this about the crucial need for dialogue, reflection, and teachers working in community. We both agree that it is only in community that we have been able to help guide students to think about and talk about the reasons for their choices…and the consequences of their choices. Helping them to make connections between choices, actions, and academic performance is one of the most valuable skills we can teach. Of course it is day by day, tiny step by tiny step, and often it feels like one step up and two steps back.

**Space and agency.** One thing I have noted in increasing amounts is the fact that—in the spaces of my experience—most teachers operating as individual entities apart from collaborative community have one primary goal: To get as many (preferably ALL) advanced classes as possible, and to separate themselves as far as possible from “regular” kids. Those of us in our professional learning community certainly admit that teaching standard level classes is a much tougher job. Yet there is a way the space is changed, shifted, made bigger, when some students come so far and start realizing the power they do have regarding their own lives. This speaks to themes of space in research question 3, as well as to the themes of teacher agency and student agency in research question 2. Within the opening piece in this collection, Paige shares some major steps in her journey to being a community teacher, including giving a her perception of doorways and halls being connected through our PLC. This directly speaks to physical space,
and to third space where culture and shared goals are created among people who might not ordinarily share space. These third spaces can be zones of development (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez & Tejeda, 1999).

**Being an activist.** Paige is a major proponent of clear procedures and structures to provide a sense of place and safety. This includes repeatedly, frequently communicating high expectations, and allowing students a voice in the contractual agreements necessary for learning to occur. For Paige, being successful means helping students to move forward—to work towards their own goals. It is important to note that this is not in the sense of being the *great white hope*. It is in the sense of being an educator with a social consciousness who believes in the freedom of
opportunity accessed through education, and in the praxis inherent in being an active citizen in a participatory democracy.

There are many *pink elephants* in the rooms of education we choose to ignore. Much of what happens in schools is simply not discussed—it is just too uncomfortable. A great injustice is enacted daily in our schools, where many structures are put in place to make students in regular classes disappear; that is, *those* students are consistently shoved to the margins and denied high expectations and educational opportunities. It is immeasurably complex and challenging for most teachers to try to figure out how to co-exist with students who do not share their own background, culture, behavior, and worldview. Within that cloudy co-existence lies the expectation of academic achievement for all students. By creating hybrid thirdspaces in the context of a community of teachers and learners, the tension and clash can result in places of possibility. As Levine said, “How discourses and activity structures that are usually invisible or devalued may co-exist with dominant discourse and activity structures; how the resulting ‘hybrid’ spaces can create generative tensions and learning” (2010, p. 111). Paige addresses the invisible and devalued, and has provided guidance for teachers in our PLC to co-exist and thrive.
Notions of success. For teachers of these students, being successful has multiple layers. First of all, the fundamental “success” (e.g. research question 2) of being there with these students—and not retreating to the ease of advanced science classroom spaces. There is risk and unpredictability in being there, and in working to create third spaces where there is room for multiplicity (e.g. research question 3). It takes us to a deep exploration of community—with other teachers, and with diverse students—the clash is intense.

In Paige’s first story, she speaks of helping children be “better.” This is a word which might raise questions, as who is to decide what is better? In discussing this with Paige after she shared this story with me, she was referring here primarily to students in regular classes. Paige requested to teach all standard level courses for the previous three years after observing the deficiencies in the standard curriculum. She was very vocal in describing her perspective that students in regular classes are usually denied educational opportunities to which "advanced" students have easy access. These opportunities include preparation, skills, and knowledge to plan for college or jobs. Paige clarified that being better, like being successful, is defined in relation to that student—specifically in the context of whether or not they are becoming prepared to reach their own goals.

I honestly believe we lose sight of the actual goals of public education. By our actions and inactions, we are shaping our community. It is all undeniably complex. There are many facets in preparing students to participate fully as active citizens in a democracy. This includes skills involved with communication, language, and behaviors expected by dominant classes.

Synergy of multiple adults. The importance of having multiple adults to help absorb shock should not go unacknowledged, as it is key in many alien situations—exemplified by Hands in the Pants. This is where my impression is that the notion of third space is critical in
transforming educational spaces, “success” of both teachers and students. When people from
different cultures and backgrounds come together and brave that clash, building a space for
shared goals, learning happens for both teachers and students. However, what usually happens is
that people on both sides quit. They give up hope that there can be a shared space or real shared
goals. It is the quagmire of hopelessness that is the threat to public education.

**Praxis and community cannot be mandated.** I am not suggesting that PLCs are THE
answer, nor—please deliver us from this possibility—that there should be any mandated PLC
structures in education. That would reduce a voluntary, agentic community to a required
committee—one of the most tragic misuses of resources, energy, and groupings in the history of
human societies. Still, there are many insights to be gained if we will immerse ourselves—listen
to people, and look at what is happening—into all educational spaces where students are
achieving and teachers are thriving. Ask teachers what is working, and why. Ask students what
is working, and why. Then listen. Then act. Not taking action as a bureaucratic policy, which
would undoubtedly fail. But taking action in gathering like-minded adults in communities to put
their bodies, time, and resources into places where students are struggling.

**Modeling.** So much has been said about the need for “role models” that the term has lost
much of its power. Almost everything humans do, however, we do by example. When students
see problem-solving, compromise, cooperation, and adult interaction in a classroom, their own
agency is broadened in surprising ways. Interestingly, students are invariably uncomfortable
when first confronted with multiple teachers moving in and out of their science classroom, and
groups of students being combined or shifted to different areas. It is alien to their experience,
and requires patience and determination. We keep doing it, over and over, until there is a
palpable shift where students—surprisingly—become not only accustomed to these dynamics, but comforted by them.

As explanation I can only offer what I believe to be true from experiencing this: Some traditional power structure, the dichotomy of singular authoritarian versus classroom of underlings, is dissolved. Some tension is diffused. Certainly many assumptions are challenged, and new ways of being together must be created and negotiated.

Small revolutions. In this picture, Lauren and Paige have combined their two regular classes during advisory, putting over 50 students into Paige’s classroom. This single decision caused the principal to literally come running down the hall, asking why all “THOSE” students were going into a single classroom. But the details of that will be left for another story.
Anna is bent over, head down, thin body diminished, and shuffles into the space of my classroom doorway. She looks questioningly, asking with her expression if she can have some of my time. I can tell she is about to cry. She apologizes for interrupting.

I sigh inwardly, thinking: “I hope I can leave the school campus before 9pm.” I stop what I am doing, squash my selfish frustration, and go sit on top of a table in my room, offering a smile and a gesture beckoning her to come on in. I cannot help but think of Lauren three years ago, and regret that I am the only veteran teacher in the room with an emotional new teacher this time. I feel her frustration and sadness, and feel inadequate to ease her suffering.
Anna comes in and sits at the next table closest to the one where I am sitting. We turn and face each other. At first she doesn’t look at me, and just looks at the floor.

Anna just starts talking. “I was good at being a waitress. I could go back and do that. I know how to do that, and I can still rest, and get finished. I could go home. I could spend time with my husband. Nobody could complain that my dance line girls are trying to have sex with the floor while they’re dancing...” She cries, softly. Then continues, “I know Lauren said she cried every day her first year, and I really love it sometimes, I do, I just don’t know if I’m very good at it. It’s too much, there are too many things to get done, I can’t do it all. I can’t get the grading done and the lesson plans and I can’t remember when the meetings are and all the deadlines for paperwork...”

We talk for an hour and a half. After working through a number of issues for the first hour, she calms down and tries to find the bright side. This is what she came up with: “If it weren’t for you and Lauren and Paige, I would go nuts. I don’t know how other people do it, teaching all alone with their doors shut in their own rooms every day. I think I would have quit already. I see why a lot of older teachers seem bitter. The days when Paige and I are teaching in the same room, or Lauren and I are teaching together, or all three of us are working together on something— and you too, you help so much, you know what I mean!— those are the days when I can see what teaching can be like. It doesn’t have to be so brutally lonely and sad. The whole thing changes when we are learning together and planning together, because it makes me teach differently and it makes me feel differently. It makes me feel like maybe I have moments where I am good at this, where I have more to give. It makes me think maybe I didn’t make a mistake by going into education.”
It’s 6:30pm and we are still at school, 11 hours after arriving. This is standard, as it is impossible to do anything close to a decent job and put in less time.

I give Anna a quick hug, and she stands up more straight and tall. I tell her “Day by day little sister, you are so great with the kids, you put so much energy into it, don’t be too hard on yourself. We love having you here, for real. It’s hard to relay to you how much better things are now that you are here teaching. I hope you will come to see that you really are a big asset.”

She smiles, thanks me, apologizes for taking my time, and says, “Guess we’ll see.”

Anna’s Birthday at the Pub with Kristy

Five teachers sit around a table at a local pub after school. It’s Friday afternoon, 5 o’clock. They range in age from 24 to 46. They have decided to hit two local “dive bars,” old Tuscaloosa institutions, to celebrate Anna’s 24th birthday.

As a new teacher just out of college and married, living in a new town, Anna has had some major adjustments to make. She has been open about her depression, missing her family and friends, and the challenges she did not foresee in teaching. Anna has mentioned that her last several birthdays have seemed just like any other day, so they all want to do something fun.

One teacher—Kristy—is tall and athletic, married, with a baby. She is stressed about money because her husband has lost his last two jobs—one as an athletic trainer, and the most recent position in sales and construction of trailers. He still works out religiously. Kristy teaches math, coaches track, and has a heart for all kinds of kids. She has immense patience with challenging students, and is one of the few people who does not request to teach all advanced classes—an astonishingly rare scenario in our school system. She has a gentle, honest
disposition and gets along with people easily. Students enjoy being in her classes. Kristy loves teaching, but has decided to go back to graduate school to become an accountant.

Kristy sighs, stress showing in shadows on her face, and says, “I don’t know Ria, I’m just so tired. And it’s really lonely down the math hall. Everybody just closes their doors and does their own thing. And a lot of the younger teachers are always making fun of people, and the older teachers don’t help the younger teachers, and the only time people talk is to gossip.” She drinks her beer quickly, flashes a stoic smile, then looks down. “I just don’t think I can do it long term.”

Ria, the oldest person at the table by at least a decade, fills up Kristy’s mug and frowns, saying with a groan: “No, please, you are exactly the kind of person we don’t need to lose! We would miss you so much, and so many students will miss out by never getting to have you as a teacher…”

Kristy replies, “It’s not that I really want to get out of teaching, but it’s so hard for the money we make. I need more financial security with a baby, and I don’t want to be all alone, the only adult in a room full of kids every hour for the rest of my life.”

Along with Kristy and Ria, Lauren, Paige, and Anna--the core members of the PLC--are all there. Lauren’s husband Scott, Anna’s husband Andrew, and Kristy’s husband Donny are also there. There is talk in the group about missing Eve and Mike, who are in San Francisco at a Geological conference.

The teachers and their guests order a Harry’s Bucket, a crazy reddish concoction of white liquors and beer, served up in a big silver paint bucket with straws--and a clear plastic cup as a dipper. Cups are filled from the shared bucket. A strange communion, the non-religious fellowship has a ceremonial feel, if only for a moment--until a toast is made.
Lauren: “Here’s to Anna! Happy Birthday, and we’re so glad you are in our group!”

Everyone claps and cheers.

Somebody puts money in the jukebox, exclaiming that there is an actual jukebox with a bizarre assortment of music. Tunes range from Hank Williams, Sr. to Lil Jon, with Garth Brooks, Tina Turner, and Madonna in between.

Kristy says, “I love this place! Thanks for including us.”

Donny: “This place has had an update in the past five years. It really isn’t so much of a dive now, they painted it and everything!”

Paige: “I think this is one of the oldest bars in the state, hasn’t changed names or anything in like 50 years. The famous Harry of Harry’s bar has subbed for me before!”

Ria: “Is it true he sold this place to pay alimony?”

Scott: “I heard it was a drug problem.”

Paige: “Can you believe he’s a substitute teacher? I spent hours leaving really good plans one time. But Harry totally ignored them and put in a movie he brought himself, I think it was rated R. The kids said Harry told them ‘If you need to go to the bathroom, just get up and go. You don’t need to ask me about it. If somebody bothers you, knock the hell out of ‘em. Just keep the damn noise down.’ Then about half an hour before the end of the day, he just left! Said he was going up to the office, and the kids swore he never came back. I can’t believe nobody got killed in my 4th period class.”

Lauren: “Weird how it’s scary and stressful to be absent if you teach regular classes, but it’s no big deal if you teach all advanced. Some teachers are out all the time and there’s never a problem, the kids even do all their work when the teacher’s gone!”
Anna says, “I couldn’t even sleep last time I had to be out, because there had been a fight in my room the day before. “ Then she abruptly changes the subject, and yells out a cheerful:

“I’ve needed this! And we’re going to Big Al’s for karaoke after this? Where is that? Are y’all going to do karaoke with me? What a great birthday!”

Ria points across the street and says, “Big Al’s Famous Backstreet Lounge is right there. It is quite...an experience!” (This picture shows Lauren, Anna, and Paige joining in karaoke that very night at Big Al’s, after leaving Harry’s.)

Andrew, Anna’s husband (shown with her in the picture below), who is in law school studying to be a civil rights attorney offers: “Yep, it’s a statement, walking over there a block through the projects into a bar where no black people go.”

Somebody argued defensively, “Nah, I have black friends that go in there.”

Anna: “Well I hope we don’t run into any of our students in there! I mean, I know they’re under age, but I
Andrew continues, “For that matter, please look at the rules on the door of this place! ‘No large gold chains, no hats, no jerseys except for Alabama’--can you really enforce that? ‘No profanity’--are you kidding me?! ‘No long T-shirts past mid-thigh allowed’. Why don’t they just add: ‘No black people from around here allowed’?”

A nervous chuckle passes around. Then an African American man and woman walk in together and order drinks, diffusing the uncomfortable tension. Vague tendrils linger in the air like cigarette smoke. Thoughts go unspoken about students from poverty, the challenges of class systems, the barriers within social structures of schools--and even neighborhood bars. Topics drift. Some care is taken to keep the mood light, and festive.

Conversation becomes more relaxed, as people talk about what songs they will sing for karaoke. Somebody suggests a game of darts, someone else starts dancing around.

Anna muses, “I might keep liking my job since y’all are so fun and we do stuff like this outside of school! I mean, I love the kids, but the rest of the stuff is making me crazy.”

Talk moves around to teaching. The teachers form a circle. (Non-teacher guests move to the side and talk about politics and sports.) Someone tells a story about something funny that happened that day at school. Someone tells about the excitement when they blew something up in the chemistry lab that day. Another teacher complains about the lack of discipline. Someone else talks about a project they want to do. Then everyone pitches in ideas about how they might be able to do the project together, with multiple classes, how it could work, why it could be better.
Somebody laughs and pours more drinks and says, “Honey-mustard (a light-hearted term I introduced with friends as a tool for changing the subject), I call a one-hour hiatus on work talk!”

Within fifteen minutes—not the requested minimum one-hour break from teacher talk--Kristi says: “Do y’all really do this all the time? Hang out at bars and talk about teaching?”

Lauren: “Well, not all the time, but pretty often. We’re nerds, we like it.”

Anna says with a laugh: “We might be nerds, but we’re way cool. It’s effin’ hilarious how pissed everybody else is that we always got each other’s backs. I love how everybody freaks out when we trade students around and go into each other’s rooms all the time. Damn, Kristi, you need to come on down and join us in the science hall!”

Conversation turns to the dance team, the “haters,” politics, and a contest to see who has the funniest story of the week.

Community Teaching from Anna to Ria

These are Anna’s words, as written in an email to me. At her request, I corrected spelling or accidental grammatical errors. Otherwise I chose to let her own voice be maximized.

In my experiences as a first year teacher, I have noticed myself engaging in community learning more and more as they days go by. As many might imagine, if you do not have a strong support system with your co-workers, especially as a first year teacher, you are going to spend many unnecessary hours doing things that probably have already been done by someone on your hall. What I have noticed in schools is many veteran teachers are becoming more territorial over their lesson plans, lab write ups, and even tests that they are scared to death to share with anyone else in fear of not getting full credit or praise for their efforts. What is lost here is a sense of why
we are all here in the first place; why we have become teachers, and that is for making students more knowledgeable and better people.

My name is Anna Schwartz, and I am a chemistry and standard level biology teacher at Northridge High School in Tuscaloosa, AL. When I first started here, I was overwhelmed with the help I was given by a select few of my co-workers in my science department. When I found out that I was teaching standard biology, a fellow biology teacher said to me, “Give me your jump drive.” I went to go get it and came back into her room promptly hoping she was about to do what I thought she was. She stuck that thing in and copied her ENTIRE biology folder from the previous 5 years that she has taught it onto my jump drive. Included were Power Points, lesson plans, warm-ups, work sheets, etc. all organized by state standard that they covered. I was so incredibly grateful, but in her eyes, she thought it would be silly for me to spend just as much time doing almost the exact same things getting prepared for this class. Now that I have these resources, I can concentrate more on my students, being caught up on grades, getting in touch with parents among other things. Also, now I may expand on the items she gave me, and we can keep adding to the folder and make it a shared effort. In this sense, community teaching benefits all parties involved and not just the teacher who “needs” something.

One other instance that comes to mind when thinking about community teaching is not only sharing of resources, but increased classroom management. Something that my co-workers and I have adopted is when a student is being problematic and distracting to other in the class, we do not IMMEDIATELY call security to have them escorted to the office. If we were to do this every time necessary, the front offices would be overflowed on a daily basis. Instead we send that student with their work to another classroom: away from other distractions, with another teacher, in a different environment. Sometimes all it takes to get a student to learn is to
simply remove the student into another classroom. This is especially helpful with my standard biology students because the teachers I usually send them to are the physical science teachers: the next science course these kids will be taking. Once they get to know them and understand that they WILL have them again, the students tend to settle down and do their work. One time during an activity, I had 4 students in Ms. Evans’ class, and 2 in Ms. Spencer’s class. With these students elsewhere, still doing their work, the remaining students were able to interact and engage more than I have ever seen them before. They were excited about learning because they actually had a chance to participate and ask questions without the noise level and disruptions which they have sadly become accustomed.

War Damn Community Teaching – Email from Anna to Ria

*Again, I chose here to include Anna’s narrative in her own words, from an email to me.*

Hello Long Lost Co-worker/SAVIOR DURING 1B BLOCK TODAY:

First things first -- PLEASE use my real name in your writing! I don't mind one bit!

Using a real name puts some validity to it. Okay also -- Shaunteria was supposed to be in ISI today. I told Shaunteria she would not be allowed to attend class today because of her behavior. As usual, she got an attitude, but she ended going to ISI without me having to call security to escort her away. I am SO glad KyAunte came back because he is SO disruptive in class (even though a sweet kid).. He is one of those border liners that I am definitely trying to help bring to the brighter side of things.

Students in your room this morning and why:

Terrell -- excessive behavior during DNA Extraction lab with strawberries, rough housing in lab, can NOT keep his hands to himself.
Vern -- talking during a quiz, talking back to me after asked to be quiet, I said, "Don’t talk back. All you have to say is yes ma'am and close your mouth." I am, by the way, fully aware I should have just said for him to get out then and there... but first year teacher tries to appeal to the rational region of the teenage brain... anyway his response, "AWWW I ain't ABOUT to do that!!" BIG ego kid. bad attitude. had enough.

Tyler-- talking about a kid getting HEAD at track practice. Loud distraction.... threw the ENTIRE class off task... roars of laughter.

KyAunte-- excessive... excessive... excessive talking. can NOT keep his mouth shut. Didn’t know what else to do with him!

Students saw a co-worker and myself take action. I really feel like they were relieved. They learned. Students who NEVER talk or rarely complete work got the attention they needed. Questions were answered. The kids in here today got the insane concepts of translation and transcription down to a T (THEY GOT IT). It was the best thing I have experienced as a teacher. The differences between the class I had that morning and the class I had after some students were removed were as different as night and day. The students were able to ask me questions AND I WAS ABLE TO ANSWER THEM. The whole class dynamic was amazing! We remembered previous material, discussed how to decode RNA to find amino acids (HUGE LEARNING HAPPENED TODAY.) It was moving. And the good thing about it is, once the problem kids get their act together, that is after the intervention is over they will be able to come back to class and have some huge learning themselves.

TODAY IS WHY I LOVE COMING TO WORK. WAR DAMN COMMUNITY TEACHING. [Anna is an Auburn fan, and is drawing on the sports cry, War Damn Eagle.]

Thank you and good night!
Sharing Interpretive Insights

**Power to succeed.** In the first story on her wall, Anna challenges us to look at why she might actually consider leaving the teaching profession to return to waiting tables in a restaurant. This begs a look at research question 2, one of agency. Being a waitress is straightforward, expectations are clear. Power to "be good" at it is accessible. You are constantly working in community with other people, sharing jobs, taking care of customers and duties. Teaching is vastly more complex. Power to "be good" at it is NOT always accessible.

In the second portrait on this wall, we hear that Kristy—a dynamic math teacher with a heart for all students—is going to school to get her master’s in accounting. She enjoys teaching and coaching, but is tired of the isolation, petty politics, back-biting, and lack of support. There is a big impact on low performing students when their teachers leave the profession. I have collected much data that points to the possibility that teachers in PLCs remain in teaching longer than they would have if teaching in isolation. This is connected to the impact on students in regular classes when they do or do not have the benefit of an experienced teacher.

**Space and agency.** One notion of agency is having the power to shape a space for your own use. Much physical, emotional, and mental space is spent on matters of education--from issues of national politics, to individual children. When teachers invest in being together in community--both inside and outside of school--we are claiming agency by shaping the spaces for our own needs and use. What is sacrificed in terms of completely individualistic autonomy and focus is more than gained in shared power, support, and vision. This is critical for teachers learning to live well in the places of public education.
Themes from research question 3 about space come into play in the analysis of the first story as well. There is pressure to shut the door and be the lone adult in the room for 20 years and do the best you can by yourself. Closed classroom doors are both a physical boundary and a message that a teacher is in her domain, in control, in charge—and no one else can challenge what is happening within. For many teachers in advanced classes, it is considered a perk to be a self-contained entity. Quite honestly, in my AP physics class, the 16 of us work so easily together, at such a consistently high level, I feel no need to work in community with other teachers regarding that class. No other teachers have expressed interest in working with me in there, either.

That is a whole other area for study.

At any rate, doorways—and closed doors in particular—are themes that have come up repeatedly in data collection and discussion.

It is interesting to notice the sign to the left of this classroom doorway. The sign advertises a beauty pageant, “Miss NHS.” Supposedly this is acceptable and non-problematic. All students are invited to participate as long as: 1) They are physically beauty pageant material, 2) They can afford to participate—to pay $25 to enter, then buy the “right” dresses, etc., 3) They
can arrange transportation to meetings, practices, and the pageant, 4) They are female (males are not allowed to enter, and there is no comparable beauty contest for males), and 5) They have the skill set to read the sign, procure an application, fill out the application correctly, and get it turned in on time. The sign represents one of numerous doors, literal and metaphorical—accepted as normal—that are closed to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

**Teaching differently.** In the opening piece for this collection, Anna also reveals some of her views about working as a member of our professional learning community (e.g. research question 1). She experiences being a member of our professional learning community as a saving thing, a way to live in the world as a teacher without quitting in despair. She expresses her belief that it is an impossible profession—especially if working in isolation and teaching regular classes—in which to thrive. She remarks that she does not see how most teachers do it, and guesses it is the source of some “bitterness,” a life spent struggling to merely survive and cope. This points at a teacher’s agency, and the interconnected nature of feeling differently and teaching differently. Although "success" is often a vague and relative term, most people would agree that they need to "feel" successful in some ways in their jobs. For Anna, as a member of this PLC, working in community with others in the group gives her the support and power to teach "differently.” This prompts further questioning about what she meant by "differently," but it can be inferred that she perceived it to mean "better." Creating ways to live better in the profession seems to translate into being more "successful" in the business of educating students. This is something ignored and down-played to an absurd degree in the school where we work, as we have discussed many times.
Anna is candid about the importance to her of interacting away from school, and working together as teachers. These are not disconnected things. This picture shows Lauren and Anna with some of our other friends in the neighborhood at Ellen’s house, celebrating someone’s birthday. Much of the talk away from school is actually about teaching, since that is how we spend a great deal of our time and energy. It is something we are passionate about.

Facebook, Feb. 10, 2012

“Looking at protists through a microscope is so soothing.”

Anna McEntire Schwartz

I love this recent post from Anna on Facebook. It adds to her portraiture wall, showing a sense of humor and an ability to immerse herself in teaching science. The implication is that her students probably caught her enthusiasm about the activity. It also hints at an open vulnerability, and a desire to get lost and find comfort. Of the curious and safe spaces of science exploration, being with a world of protists through a microscope is one of the best examples I can imagine.

We now move into the last part of the gallery, the one I was the most hesitant to include, Ria’s Portraiture Wall…
Jallin

A new science teacher, Jallin, was hired at the high school where I used to work. She was energetic, smart, and had done many jobs in her life—including tour guide and jeweler. She was excited about having the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of high school students.

Jallin: “I’ve always wanted to work with high school kids, I’ve been around the world and think I have a lot to offer. I think I can learn a lot from them, too. I just hope I can help them be interested in the things that I am, I have been so blessed.” She shook her red hair, and a furrow ran through the smooth brown skin on her forehead. Her brown eyes looked anxious, intense, excited.

I was in my twenties and had only been teaching for a few years. We had the traditional set-up where every teacher closed the door and taught in isolation. We also had the traditional seniority set-up where the teachers with the most experience got to teach the upper level classes. This meant the newest teachers usually taught all regular level classes. This also meant the
newest teachers had a schedule full of the most challenging classes; these classes were populated with students from poverty who needed tremendous amounts of attention, energy, and strategies to help them create a path to take advantage of educational opportunities. Many of these students could be frightening when prone to violence and chaos.

Ria to Jallin: “Well come in and use any of my teaching materials, we’re so glad to have you on board here at C-High! It’s hard sometimes, but I really do like teaching here. Please let me know if you need anything!”

We went and had coffee together once, and talked a bit about our lives, but never got to know each other well. We were friendly, and spoke in the hallway most days.

I noticed Jallin seemed withdrawn, and not as friendly after the first couple of weeks. In the hectic pace of school life, we rarely saw each other or had a chance to talk.

Then a while later I saw her crying in the hall, but she didn’t want to talk about it. The following day—after only a month working as a teacher—she did not come back.

The administration scrambled around and found a substitute. Nobody had any answers about where she was or why she was not coming back to work. After a couple of days, the school secretary said, “Jallin called in and said she isn’t coming back. She said she had to take care of some personal business out of town, something about her family, I think she said she was moving, but she was really vague and in a big hurry, and didn’t really give much in the way of any explanation. Then she just hung up!”

When I tried to call Jallin, she did not return my calls.

I ran into a mutual friend, who said Jallin “just couldn’t take it” so she quit and moved to a different state. There was an awkward moment when this person said, “I don’t think she got
much help from anybody. And even though she's black herself, it sounded like a lot of those kids were so rough...”

In the weeks Jallin was there, it never once occurred to me to go in and help her teach, or to trade out students or duties, or to invite her into my room to collaborate. The extent of what I offered was access to teaching resources, and a friendly “let me know if you need anything!” I never spoke with her after that, and never learned what happened to her. I sometimes wonder if she ever tried teaching again.

**Carmen Cane and the Screaming Day**

Ms. Cane is a math teacher at the school where I work. She is a tiny, hard-working white woman, around 40 years of age. She spends long hours after school to plan lessons, offer tutoring, and to sponsor an extracurricular club. She is married with several young children of her own. Carmen is friendly and easy-going, and sometimes joins other teachers for drinks after school. Carmen Cane always has a kind word or story to share.

On this particular Tuesday, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. I had just arranged for Jack—a university methods student under my supervision for fall semester—to work with Ms. Spencer and Ms. Schwartz that day in chemistry classes. It was 2nd block during my preparation period, around 10am. I had music playing through the speakers I had mounted on my ceiling; I was humming, arranging papers, and getting materials set up for a lab.

In one instant my calm turned to terror, heart turned from humming to pounding. I jerked around to face the door, froze, and dropped the stack of papers in my hand. The papers scattered as they fell, devoid of emotion, coming to rest on the floor. A piercing noise—**SCREAMING**—from the hallway pulsed through the walls into my classroom. My first thought was, “**Oh no, oh**
**God, I wonder if somebody has been shot.**” My brain quickly processed the near certainty that I had not heard gun fire, leading to a hopeful doubt that I had just imagined the dreadful screaming. Then another wave of punctuated, pained screeching came in when I flung open the door. For a moment I wondered if it could be another tortured little potbelly pig in Ms. Shaw’s zoology class, screaming like the last one—terrified while being shoved into a small cage amidst amused laughter. I looked up and down the hall, expecting to see people running in an excited mob if there was a fight. But I heard no feet pounding, nor any chant of “**Fight, Fight, Fight!**” The halls were eerily empty.

Then suddenly I realized the screaming was coming from Ms. Cane’s room. This photograph shows the path from my doorway, past Paige Spencer’s on the left, to Ms. Cane’s room—the second door on the right. The terrible sound made a clear path from her doorway to my ears, then echoed through the hall. I saw no other people near her room—no students running to investigate, no adults running to help. So I steeled myself and walked quickly two doors up the hall to her room. I thought to myself at the time, “Before all this PLC stuff, I probably would have just stayed in my room with the door closed like all these other people…hmm. I wonder if I had better sense back then.” But
I kept walking towards the source, feeling like ice water was running through my veins. As soon as I reached her doorway, I saw that the source of this agonized noise was—unbelievably—Ms. Cane herself. She was screaming much louder than I would ever have thought was possible.

As I approached, she turned around and faced me, students wide-eyed behind her. Carmen was still yelling, although not quite as loud and piercing as before; my odd science brain shuffled curiously through comparisons of decibels from a jack hammer, to a jet airplane, to a rock concert. Something pulsed in my neck, and a whooshing like ocean waves rushed through my ears like background noise, lending a strange feeling of calm to the bizarre setting. Carmen twisted towards me and yelled: “I HATE these damn kids, they are just ASSHOLES, I cannot take it!!” She turned and faced the class, shouting, “YES, you heard me right!” Then she turned back to me, red-faced, “They won’t do anything I ask, it doesn’t matter how hard I try or how many times I ask!”

Most students sat perfectly still, paralyzed, not sure what to do. A few students snickered or laughed out loud. Two students said, “We didn’t do anything!”

Then Ms. Cane said, “You all ARE going to pick up all those paper wads you have been throwing all over the room!”

During this time, a math teacher from right across the hall, Ms. Georgette Whitman, calmly walked over and stood in silent support by the doorway with me. Ms. Whitman is African American, in her forties, married with children. She is very professional and experienced, positive, friendly, and wise. She said softly to Carmen and me, “It’s hard not to let them get to you.” Then she was quiet again, standing very straight and still near Carmen. I was silently thankful for Georgette, thinking to myself: This is what people mean when they say someone is a pillar.
I said, “Why don’t you take Ms. Cane for a little walk to cool off and chat. I’ll take her class.”

Ms. Whitman said, “Are you sure? I don’t mind staying with them.” Her head gave a nod towards the students in Carmen’s classroom.

My head thought: Thank heavens, great, what a relief! You go in there and take care of this, I’m off the hook! But my mouth said, “No, that’s okay, you and Carmen go take a walk, we’ll be fine.” I turned to Carmen and said, “It’s okay, really, everything will be alright. I have to go off sometimes too, and I definitely have to drink a lot.” I smiled and added, “We are overdue for a Mr. Roger’s Fuzzy Yellow Sweater shot at the Alcove. You just go take a break for a bit.” Neither of them said anything else, and just walked away, slowly. Ms. Whitman briefly patted Ms. Cane’s arm as they walked.

I took a deep breath, and thought about the times I had observed Paige Spencer interacting with really challenging students, sometimes in very difficult, emotionally charged situations. I tried to channel Paige with her Zen ways, so I walked in and spoke in a soft voice. I stifled a chuckle tickling in my brain at the silly thought that I could make little plastic bracelets that would read: WWPD? or WWMSD? (What Would Paige Do? or What Would Ms. Spencer Do?) … Apple-wear accessories, a must for every educator...

I tried to be calm and reassuring, “Okay y’all, let’s just settle down, everything’s okay, no problem.”

“SHE CALLED ME AN ASSHOLE!!”

“I need to go to the office!”

“I need to go call my mom.”

“She’s crazy! We didn’t even do nothin’!”
I sighed and sat down, and spoke to the couple of students who were up running around the room—obviously excited, agitated, scared, or angry. “Hey guys, please just take a seat. Do you want to tell me what happened, what’s going on in here?”

I was amazed at the good response. Almost all students sat down and everyone stopped blurring out indignant comments. Only one student was still scurrying around, and he was picking up paper wads and muttering to himself as he tossed them into the trash can. One other student remained standing with his arms crossed, speaking with a classmate in hushed tones. A couple of students had their heads down, and one listened to an IPod through white wired ear buds. Most sat up straight, alert, curious about what would happen next.

One tall white boy wearing big brown leather boots said: “We weren’t doing nothing. She just started yellin’ for no reason. Even my daddy don’t talk to me like that!”

Rumbles of agreement erupted, “I know that’s right!” “Umm hmm. “ “My momma neither!”

Someone mumbled, “Fuck that shit.” I wondered what exactly they meant by that, but did not ask.

I replied, still trying to use an NPR voice, still attempting to channel Paige’s Zen spirit, “Okay, it’s alright, everybody has bad days. I know I do. I know everybody does if they admit it. Sometimes it’s just all more than you can take, you know? Ms. Cane spends so much time here, trying to help you all reach your goals...”

A thin black female student, wearing glasses, spoke up: “They were acting like idiots. They know they were running around throwing big paper wads and spit balls, and one of them hit Ms. Cane in the face. They started laughing, and hollering, that’s when she really got mad. They just play and play and don’t know when to stop.”
This had the effect of causing a few students to shake their heads and deny any part in this, “Nuh uh, that wasn’t me!” Someone told the girl to “shut up.” A few other students just became silent or put their heads down. Two or three snickered, trying to hide behind their own hands or behind the head of a classmate.

At that point, the principal came in, bright cartoon tie swinging under his suit, his face bright red like he had just run a mile in August in Alabama. He looked very uncomfortable with the fact that I was in the classroom. He looked around to test the climate, to assess the damage, and to contain the fallout as much as possible. All he said was “I'll handle it from here Ms. Evans, you can go ahead back to your room and have your prep now.” He looked at the door as if to dismiss me quickly. I smiled at him, thinking it had been quite a while since I had been sent to my room.

I turned and gave a slight nod and wave to the class, then walked back towards my room. I decided to go in Paige’s room next door to mine to see how the chemistry activities were going with Jack (our methods student intern), Paige Spencer, and Anna Schwartz. Students were in motion, engaged in the laboratory activity. The three teachers were milling around helping or watching, and migrated towards me. Anna said, “What in the world was all that racket in the hall, was there a fight?” Paige said she didn’t hear anything at all, she must have been teaching or the classroom was noisy at the time, and Jack said he thought he heard something, but didn’t know it was a person screaming. Their eyes all got huge when I confirmed that screaming is exactly what it was. They leaned in towards me. I gave them a quick run-down of events, and we all talked about the importance of teachers helping each other in these situations. I told Jack I sort of wish he had been with me, it would have been a big learning experience.
After school, Paige, Anna, and I continued the conversation with Lauren over beer on my front porch. We talked about scenarios we had experienced as teachers, and as students. Most of our prior experiences were in settings where a teacher was completely on his or her own, isolated from a community that could lend support and diffuse a situation before it got completely unmanageable. Lauren pointed out that one of the most difficult things about teaching is the unrelenting high pressure requirement to be “constantly on,” without the possibility of retreating to an office. Anna said even if you are waiting tables you can take a break and walk outside or go out to your car if you need a minute to “have a smoke or make a call to vent.” We reflected a great deal about the fact that our consciousness had been altered through consistently working as a PLC rather than as individuals with completely disconnected classrooms, courses, students, and duties.

I pointed out, “Until 2007, the year I became interested in all this PLC stuff, it probably would not have occurred to me to open my door if I heard loud noises. In fact, I might have walked the other way!” They laughed. “It certainly would not have entered my world view to walk up, investigate, and get all involved. Now it seems not only normal, but the only ethical choice. Kinda weird, but good.”

The next day, Carmen came down to my classroom to thank me. It was a slightly awkward conversation--she apologized and groaned that she was “ridiculously embarrassed”--but like many awkward conversations, it was well worth the effort. We both laughed, and I appreciated her acknowledgment. She said, “Well, thank heavens you came down to save me when I had a nervous break-down in front of my class! I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t shown up.” I denied that it was any big deal, and told her that I honestly could not

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survive anymore without being a community teacher. Now she comes down the hall to chat and share stories every few days with the PLC science chicks.

**Kierra**

Near the end of the fall semester, my toughest class—4th period, the last of each day—was going to the “computer lab”. I wanted those students to have the chance to do an online activity on electricity, including building simulated circuits. I also wanted them to experience getting out of the classroom, while being expected to engage in academic activities.

Most of the 29 students in this class have no Internet or computer at home. Most of these students ride busses 30 minutes one way each day—a result of restructuring to have “neighborhood schools”—and have no alternate means of transportation, so they do not have the luxury of coming to school early or leaving late in order to use the library computers outside of class time. Many of them also have no reliable way to get to the public library.

The only computer lab accessible to us—at a high school of 1300 students—is actually a section of the library which has recently been equipped with drywall to partition it from the rest of the library. This partition is an attempt to diminish the decidedly un-library like roar when everyone is packing in to have any computer use. There are 20 computers in there, and 15 of them are actually working.

We no longer have access to any other actual computer labs in the building. The academic computer lab is now used exclusively for credit recovery; that is, only students who have failed classes are allowed to use those computers. Credit recovery classes are conducted every day as students attempt to master objectives they did not master when they were in class. We also are not allowed to use the business technology computers—even if they are not being
used at least one full period (98 minutes) per day for each teacher’s preparation period—supposedly because those computers were bought with business tech funds. The mobile lab does not work, and has not worked properly in 3 years. The wireless network does not work reliably at all, so even if I borrow laptop computers from the University, there is an excellent chance that it will not work unless you are the lucky person sitting within 1 meter of the router.

Paige Spencer kept half my students in her room for an extra 10-15 minutes until I could get the other half settled and working on the computers. This is one of many strategies that allows us to take even challenging groups to the library, outside to do labs and activities, and to other places on and near campus.

As I walked up the hall with “my” half of the students (this class is assigned to only me, and this is Ms. Spencer’s preparation period), Mr. Johnson—a friend and teacher of all advanced classes—said with a chuckle and glance at the students walking through the library doors, “You are brave taking that bunch to the library, Evans.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, that’s me, super brave warrior chick,” I replied with a smile.

It took at least 20 minutes for these 14 students to get logged in to the computers and start working. At least 6 could not remember their logins or passwords, and had to get help with that from the librarians.

Somewhat flustered with the chaos and wasted time, I asked, “Do you all not ever use the computers at school? Why don’t you know your logins and passwords that you got the first week of school? I know I’ve brought you in here before, and I had you write them down in the front of your planners!”
Kierra is a student who has probably not said 5 words directly to me all semester. She is African American, very intelligent, intense, and classically beautiful. She often puts her head down or misses class, and is erratic with her work efforts.

Kierra said, “Ms. Evans, you know nobody but y’all brings us to the computer lab. Why we gonna remember logins and passwords if we never use them? And we lost that planner, we never use that either.”

I was speechless for a moment, then hurried to fill the awkwardly silent verbal space, “Well, that’s kind of terrible. You need to use computers for heaven’s sake. And most of you have gotten really good about having appropriate behavior, so we can do things!”

I tried to change the subject, and went around helping students. By this time there was the extra distraction of Ms. Spencer bringing in the other students and helping them get started on computers on the other side of the library. A few more minutes were spent deflecting undesirable behavior so we could “do school,” as we say.

David had his phone out and was plugging in earphones to listen to music. I said, “David, please put that up, you know you are supposed to keep electronics off and put away during class.”

He argued, “The phone is in the off position!” I tried to stay calm even though many hands were raised—students needing help getting simulations to run, or figuring out how to work them.

So I replied, “David, just put it up, we don’t have long for you to work in here and that’s a distraction for everybody.”

He huffed, “You’re the ONLY one who even SAYS anything about it, I have it on all the time whenever I want!”
At this point he had to go sit at a table in the middle of the library. This is partly as a
time-out for him, but mostly it is necessary to cut off situations like this, or no instruction can
happen with students in class who want to learn, and who are trying to do their work.

When I came back around to Kierra again, I was astonished that she was again talking to
me, more than she had in the previous 3 months combined. I made a mental note about how it
takes from one half to a whole semester for many of these students to trust me at all, or to believe
that multiple adults are taking an interest in them as people with goals, and with the ability to
reach those goals.

Kierra said with a big smile on her face, “Ms. Evans, I took the PSAT and my score on
the science part was REALLY high! I felt so smart on that part. You know it’s because you and
Ms. Spencer do all those bellringers, and we talk about things that are on those tests.”

There was a slight pause, then she added—in a very matter of fact, unsentimental way:
“Y’all are the only ones who even make us listen or even teach us anything at all. For real.”
Then she turned around and faced her computer and went back to work.

One student teased her for being nice and “sucking up.”

Kierra just shrugged and said quietly, “I don’t care about that. I was just telling her. You
know how it is so shut up anyway.”

Her friend said, “Yeah.”

I replied, “Well Kierra, my goodness, thank you. I can’t tell you how much it means to
hear that. It’s just nice to think we are making a difference sometimes...especially because, you
know, it’s difficult and sometimes it seems like students don’t notice how hard we are trying to
help you learn and reach your own goals for your life…” I secretly wished a hand would
materialize that could make my mouth close so I could not keep talking.
But I kept on a little longer, “You know if you can do that well on the science part, you can do well on the other parts, too. Sugar (why did I call her sugar?!), I’m so sorry you’re not learning a lot every day in all your classes, but at least you know you CAN do it now, right?” Kierra glanced at me for only a second with a wise smile, revealing an old soul, far-beyond-her-age understanding of the world with all its blockades and mazes and chances for missteps.

But she was merciful and granted me a nod, and even a “Yes, ma’am, I know I can.”

Malcolm

One day when I was scrambling around trying to finish preparing for my next class during my planning period, there was a knock at my door. This was the fifth time someone had knocked on the door thus far during the hour and a half sliver of time…time that passed at warp speed, like the few grains of sand pouring down through one minute in an egg timing glass. I sat down a stack of papers and a lab balance, looked at the clock with some anxiety, and went to open the door—again. Then I could see Paige Spencer grinning through the window. Although she teaches right next door, and we work together often, this was a very odd occurrence. Since she taught advanced chemistry during that block, I normally did not see her or work with her during that time, and rarely had a surprise visit like this; for the first time that day, an interruption was welcome.

When I opened the door, I saw a tall young man standing beside her. He had a familiar face, and it took only a moment to realize he was a student from a regular level physical science class I had taught the previous year. As his name came into focus in my brain, I was trying to remember details so I could guess why he might be standing outside my door with Ms. Spencer. Then she solved the mystery for me.
She said, “Ms. Evans, I just had to bring Malcolm over here because I knew you would be just as proud as I am that he made the highest grade on the advanced chemistry test! A lot of the other students were kind of mad that it wasn’t one of them, especially when they know Malcolm hasn’t been in other classes with them until now.” This is one of the unusual things about Ms. Spencer—she calls it like she sees it. That is, she is much more open and honest about the politics and realities of school, preferring to “shine a light” on what is there, rather than to hide things in shadow for the sake of illusion. Refusing to go along with the illusion—as with denying the Emperor’s New Clothes—can be highly unpopular with those in power desiring to maintain the status quo.

At first Malcolm stood still and straight, without any expression, slightly behind Ms. Spencer. Then when I became excited and congratulated him, and asked if he was glad he had moved up into an advanced class, he nodded and smiled a little. He looked down for a second, and then back over his shoulder—as if to make sure nobody was watching. Then his smile spread wide across his face, revealing straight white teeth and a joyful expression of victory. I asked a few more questions, prompting him to tell me more about his success and his future plans. He replied “Yes ma’am,” or “I’m not sure” to most of my questions, but seemed happy to be asked.

Ms. Spencer said, “Well alright then, we’ll be getting back next door, I just had to bring him right over so you could congratulate him yourself!” She smiled and nodded, and touched Malcolm on the arm. They walked back into the room of chemistry students next door.

Sharing Interpretive Insights

The stories collected on my wall show a progression from almost two decades ago, to the present time. In that span of time, the spaces of teaching have shifted dramatically for me. In 20
years as an educator, my professional development has been exponential since the summer of 2007 with my introduction to PLCs. This collection starts with Jallin—and with me—working in a traditional format of isolated teaching, almost devoid of community. The other three stories are all from last semester—fall of 2012. They include the incident of Carmen Cane and the Screaming Day, where I got out of my comfort zone and reached out to another teacher in crisis—an action I am embarrassed to admit would not have happened five years ago. This story especially, along with the transformation shown through the progression of these stories in time, reveals themes from research question 1. The wall also includes stories about two students who have benefitted directly from my participation in our PLC.

Malcolm. Taking a close look at the story Malcolm lends a number of insights, especially with regard to research question 2. Ms. Spencer and I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on this particular chemistry class—in which Malcolm is currently a student—and its unusual make-up. The most surprising thing at first glance is the small class size—only 15 students. We rarely have a class with so few people, except for AP (Advanced Placement) classes. Most regular as well as advanced level courses have more than 30 students. Ms. Spencer’s chemistry class in this story meets first block on “B days,” which means every other school day for the whole year. In this small advanced class of 15 chemistry students, nine people are white, and six are black. So 3/5 (60%) of the class is white, and 2/5 (40%) is black. This is unusual, as there is rarely so close to an even mix of black and white students in an advanced class here. In this school that is 60% black, most advanced classes are at least 75% white. AP classes are usually at least 90% non-black.
The most interesting thing to note, a fact we have discussed repeatedly, is the fact that five out of six of the black students in this chemistry class are students that either Ms. Spencer or I taught previously in regular physical science. We teach that course very collaboratively, and have a shared mission to push as many of those 10th graders into advanced classes as possible.

This is one of our physical science classes, with Ms. Julie Covin—the physics specialist with Alabama Science in Motion—collaborating on a science lesson.

Students in physical science are, for the most part, students who have never before taken an advanced course—whether or not they claim to have college as a personal goal.

**Bridging from regular to advanced classes for academic success.** As far as I am able to discern, the four of us working together in our PLC are the only teachers in the whole school taking an active role in pulling “regular” students up into the college-preparatory “track” of advanced classes. All five of these students under discussion in Malcolm’s chemistry class are succeeding in advanced chemistry. Four of them are performing at high academic levels without any extra help or accommodations, achieving A’s and B’s. The other one of the five students in this group, Dieja, is also doing well, but comes for tutoring each week, and often takes the after
school “re-test.” This is not an example of one student breaking away from the confinement of a lower track. These are students compiling fully one third of an advanced chemistry class, and thriving academically, although none of them had considered moving from regular into advanced classes until one year ago.

**Opportunities.** The “re-test” is an option introduced by Ms. Spencer to give students a chance who have not benefitted from years of high expectations and preparation in advanced classes. It gives students a chance to re-group, organize, study, and take an extra evaluation. The re-test has fewer questions, and is not multiple choice. Students have to stay after they finish to participate one-on-one with the teacher in evaluating their own tests; this includes communicating with the teacher about what they did (and did not) do to prepare, and what they think their grades should be. The other three of us in the PLC have followed Ms. Spencer’s lead in offering re-tests to our students. We often lament the fact that more students do not take advantage of this opportunity; a very small number of students actually come on any given Wednesday after school. However, we choose to focus on the students who are able to experience academic achievement—many for the first time in their lives—and who are able to build their skills and confidence through their own achievement in an advanced course.

**Challenging assumptions of privilege.** Malcolm is an excellent example of this phenomenon, as he has never taken an advanced course before now. The nine white students in this chemistry class have been forced to confront their own assumption that one of them would have the highest academic performance on any evaluation. Ms. Spencer was very specific in her amused description of the shocked expressions on all the white students’ faces when Malcolm’s name got put at the top of the Jaguar Wall of Fame. Paige said most of the white students are wealthy, wearing expensive clothes, speaking proudly about expensive experiences. When she
called Malcolm’s name and put it on the wall for making the highest grade, they turned and looked at him with questioning, “indignant” doubt. Ms. Spencer said it seemed they were asking each other, “Who is that? How did he make a higher grade than I did?” In the resulting dialogue, Paige discussed the fact that Malcolm wears only a few different solid color T-shirts and jeans to school every day, rides the bus, and lives in a housing project across town. Nobody in his family has been to college. In fact, of the five students in this advanced chemistry class who moved up this year from regular level physical science, all are from poverty, and none have parents who completed college. Only one has a parent who took advanced chemistry in high school.

**Thirdspace.** I submit that there is a realm created between the place of regular physical science, and the place of advanced chemistry—a realm I can confidently call *thirdspace*. In this area, different cultures and backgrounds meet, they clash, and in some space—the *thirdspace*—something new is created. It is a space of multiple voices and stories, a hybrid area where things are not predetermined by money, apparel, tradition, neighborhood, language, class, or family. Teachers and students are shifting our thinking, fighting assumptions, and being activists for shared goals—even though we are people who might not otherwise come together and interact in ways meaningful to any of us. Students are choosing to get outside their comfort zones, moving from familiar spaces filled with people they know, into spaces with people they have never seen outside the halls of Northridge High School. Rarely do we see students moving up into the “advanced” track after 10^{th} grade. Interestingly, in the science department, I have never once heard any teacher join our frequent discussions about this topic except for the four of us working together in the PLC. The story of Kierra reveals insight into possibility for building a bridge.
Professional growth through collaboration. All four of us discuss students who should move up, and who we will try to push towards registering for advanced classes. We all four also make frequent checks with each other about how our former students from regular classes are doing in the new, dramatically different environment of an advanced class. Due to our collaboration as a PLC teaching science, Ms. Spencer and I have shared investments of time into all students in both of our physical science classes. We create lessons together, and both give the same tests to students for analysis, comparison, and adjustments to our teaching. We cooperate on student projects, occasionally combine classes, move students from one room to the other to better meet student needs, share labs, collaborate through wikispaces websites, and observe each other’s teaching. We constantly reflect, discuss, learn, adapt, and develop strategies. There is continual professional growth.

Channels. Most importantly to me, we move among the learning spaces as through fluid, dynamic channels both in and out of school; these spaces we perceive to be more like rivers than like isolated, disconnected ponds. Barriers between the two different classrooms and separate rosters largely disintegrate. Students benefit in myriad ways when immersed in the rare situation where multiple adults are putting energy into helping them learn to navigate their own channels, through and beyond the complicated systems of schools.

Reflections from Jallin. It is complicated and difficult to explain such a dramatic shift in the past five years of my 20 year career. This is partly revealed from the first story I elected to include in my collection: Jallin. Clearly, the progression I have experienced through learning as a member of a community of teachers is evidence of deep professional growth. I no longer view each classroom and teacher as separate, disconnected entities. I view us all as people connected physically—through halls, doorways, and other shared spaces—as well as emotionally and
philosophically. The picture shown here is my home, the space for many *front porch talks* of our PLC teachers. My role is often to provide space for gatherings, and to encourage the other three women in the PLC in their pursuits of ballet, yoga, and hip hop dance. I get to hear the funny stories of their attempts to some workout called “Urban Heat.” Although there is no way I would join them, I do enjoy making drinks afterwards.

The events told in the story *Jallin* had a big impact on me, and are relevant to both research questions 1 and 2. Relating to research question 1, it was the absence of being in community that—in retrospect—probably had the most compelling force to push Jallin out of teaching in our school so many years ago. For someone who had traveled extensively, and worked in various professions with diverse people, I believe the shock of isolation was probably like throwing someone into solitary confinement. The themes of isolation and shock have come up repeatedly.

In relation to research question 2, I think this first story in my own portraiture collection is a good example of the lack of agency we feel when teaching alone. When I think of my recent experiences teaching science as part of a PLC, as compared with the days I felt utterly
unsupported, alone, depressed, and sometimes afraid—as I am sure Jallin did—it is almost impossible to overstate the dramatic increase in agency I have experienced working in community. This is also true with regard to working with groups of low performing students. That is, my ability to impact learning is—from my perspective—enhanced by orders of magnitude as part of a team of teachers learning and working in community with shared goals. I cannot help but ponder the impact on those students after Jallin left. Certainly I heard students laugh about it and say, "We scared her off! She just quit and never came back! Then we got a sub and never had to do any work!" I can only imagine all the things those students learned, absorbed, and embraced about themselves by experiencing that particular series of events.

**Responsibility of community.** I have increasingly come to believe we are responsible for each other. Working in community has different challenges from working alone. Trust, reliability, loyalty, and planning are crucial. All people in the PLC must negotiate shared spaces and interactions, and must live up to myriad standards as if they are exactly what they are—contractual agreements. This is true in all relationships. If there are not clear expectations strongly honored by all members, the group—as any group—falls apart. This leads to a swift retreat to the relative comfort of isolation, where only one person’s needs must be met. This is why many people choose not to work as a member in a PLC, and why some PLCs are not sustained over time. It is also a primary reason I am strongly opposed to upholding PLCs as THE answer, or a model to be followed by all teachers. I certainly am opposed to any mandated PLCs. I think a professional learning community must by nature be born out of the need for increased agency, support, productivity, and success—including the strong desire to help increase student learning. It can be a highly functioning, strategic social body, but is deeply dependent not only on need, but on individual personalities and worldviews.
Through our PLC I have much more ownership over how people are living their lives as teachers in the place where we work. I am much more invested in the success of all students—NOT just “my” students. I see spaces in far more complex, dynamic terms—as I have tried to show in this image. It is hard to remember why I ever thought there was a boundary at my classroom door, and one at the end of my class roster, which should determine my responsibilities and interests regarding interactions with colleagues. Mother Teresa’s words resonate: “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

Now we move into a closing story, to be seen as the beginning of a hallway that will lead to another portrait wall, one which is just beginning its collection…
Tyler’s Snapshot

This story is adapted from a letter Tyler sent me by email. This was in response to my questions requesting that he have input regarding my research. I communicated to Tyler that he has a very unique perspective and ability to give his own valuable insights—which I would otherwise have no way of knowing. As previously explained, Tyler was a university student doing a science methods class placement with me at Northridge High School when he became a peripheral member of our PLC. During the time he was there, he became a very active, integral member; this was only temporary due to time, opportunity, and the situational context of his placement. It was an energy-intensive experience for all of us, but a transformative one. I have re-presented his narrative here word for word, to give him voice. It is, after all, his story.
Tyler

When I began my practicum placement at Northridge High School, I had a very narrowed view of how a school should be. That perspective came from my own typical high school experience: the “honors kids” are taught with high expectations and the “regular kids” are taught with lower expectations. But like everything in life, nothing is just black and white. There are honors classes that have students that get it and other students are unable to keep up. Then there are regular classes where some students are struggling while others get it and are ready to move on to something more challenging. What is a teacher supposed to do in this situation? I have found from my experience at Northridge High School that the best solution is to collaborate with other teachers in that area.

Ria Evans was assigned to be my cooperating teacher and I learned so much from her. But I also learned so much from Paige Spencer, the teacher next door that Ria would frequently collaborate with. From a future teacher’s perspective, it is so much more beneficial to observe multiple teachers “work their magic” with different classes. Expanding what one can see during their placement will only make you a more confident beginning teacher. I was able to compare Ria’s teaching styles with Paige’s teaching styles and take something away from each of them—whether that is how to handle a discipline problem or approach a challenging lesson.

While most practicum students only saw their one teacher teach the same way every time, I got to see two teachers each display their teaching styles. Because of that, student teaching was so much easier. I felt so much more confident entering my final placement thanks to my experiences working with both Ria and Paige. Most of the education classes did not help me much with my student teaching, but my experience at Northridge did. It was challenging yet rewarding and I learned something new each day.
For the students, having teachers that are able to collaborate only helps them. Ria told me that during testing time, she could take all of Paige’s struggling students and combine them with her struggling students. Then Paige could take Ria’s higher-performing students and combine them with her higher-performing students. This is such a brilliant strategy that tackles the tough issue of teaching a diverse class of learners. In addition, they could rely on each other for discipline problems. Just like it was for me, students can take away something different from two teachers during one class. One student may work better with one teacher and vice versa. This “out of the box” thinking is exactly what needs to be done to help improve schools and I was incredibly lucky to be placed at Northridge, which practices this. As a new teacher, I can only hope that my school will allow collaboration with other teachers that are interested in it as I am.

**Sharing Interpretive Insights**

This last story is a snapshot from one future teacher, Tyler. It was through much agony—and I do not use that term lightly—that I decided to leave out many other stories collected from people who are peripheral members of our professional learning community. That is, teachers who have interacted with us in meaningful ways, yet for various reasons are not in the day to day workings of our core group. Those stories will have to be shared in a later venue.

I decided to include Tyler’s portrait as a glimpse into the possible impacts of community teaching for future teachers. His story sheds light on the crucial nature of placements within colleges of education. It is most often authentic experiences in schools—in physical spaces with teachers and students—that predominately shape a teacher’s practice before entering the
profession, and determine whether or not they are able to enter with a great chance of success.
This of course has everything to do with whether or not a new teacher is prepared to work with extremely diverse students in challenging classes. It is therefore ultimately tied to the new teacher’s ability to remain in the profession, to thrive, and to advocate for equal educational opportunities for children in all groups.

Agency and making meaning. Tyler is making meaning of difficult situations—often ignored and undiscussed—through his experience collaborating within the PLC at our school. Themes in his narrative speak to both research questions 1 and 2. He describes his own transformation in the experience of teaching in community, and learning to better navigate classes full of diverse students. Tyler refers to his own agency here—a recurring theme in research question 2—feeling “so much more confident” in student teaching after his experience with us during methods. This is something I have rarely heard in my 20 years as a teacher—that a methods placement (or anything else) made “student teaching so much easier,” or that entering a final placement, a student felt this confident.

Again, Tyler experiences a direct impact on student learning through the PLC. He suggests there should be systemic change to provide for this sort of collaboration and interaction “to help improve schools.” Tyler said he “was incredibly lucky” to be placed at our school, due to collaboration and teachers working as a PLC. This implies a belief that his own agency and professional ability was enhanced through his experience. He also says he hopes any school where he works will be open to teacher collaboration. At first glance this statement may seem a lack of his own empowerment. However, I see it as an honest, realistic stance based on years of observation about the ways schools work.
Tyler’s response speaks to both agency as a teacher, and providing individual students with what they need. There is a great deal of rhetoric in educational settings about individualized education, but in real situations this is often impractical and difficult at best. Yet there is great resistance in trying the strategies Tyler is referring to. Possibly this is due—at least in part—to the perceived loss of control and autonomy for individual teachers. On a larger scale, there is often little systemic support for methods seen as risky and unpredictable, especially if these methods are perceived to usurp power, authority, and control from centralized administration. This is exacerbated further if there is the perception that non-conventional teaching explorations will result in the extra expenditure of energy for things like scheduling. I cannot overstate the bizarre, illogical disasters of scheduling at our school. I also cannot overstate the dramatic increases in student learning that would occur if scheduling were done as teachers recommend. Our schedule is currently completely driven by the A+ College Readiness grant, a grant targeting only AP (Advanced Placement) classes, concerning roughly 10% of our students.

**Placements.** An entire dissertation could be written on the notion of *placements* alone. Tyler’s narrative reveals many kernels of interest and insight. In the nearly five years I have been working with the PLC, the vast majority of placements in our school have been with teachers who teach only advanced and AP classes. I can only wonder about the systems which place future teachers into situations that cannot possibly prepare them for what they will need to do. Hopefully this work might shed some light for people in powerful positions, to make decisions about placements as some of the most important factors in those students’ chances to succeed in the teaching profession.
I am certainly not suggesting that all secondary science education students in the University of Alabama College of Education be placed with our PLC! We are frankly a group of very busy, rather high-strung people, who demand a great deal from ourselves and others. I personally do not have the energy to constantly, every semester, involve a pre-service teacher in the intensive ways it should be done. I would request, in fact, that any student (pre-service teacher) I am asked to work with will have been chosen carefully, and will already have expressed the desire to immerse themselves into co-teaching with very diverse groups of students.

**Observation.** I see no reason for any education student in their junior or senior years of college to be doing more than a day or two of observation in any one place. Their entire lives have been spent observing teachers in educational settings. Observation is, to me, a tiny and short-lived first step in the process of any meaningful placement. Outside “observers” are usually an intrusion to be tolerated (or not); in contrast, a person jumping in and collaborating in community—experimenting with methods, offering new knowledge and suggestions, learning along with us—is more than welcome. In our PLC, we will embrace a person who shares our vision for a more just world, and we will do everything possible to bring that person along in our spirit of community.

I do very strongly believe that every placement should be made with the utmost care and attention to fairly preparing that person to work with diverse students in challenging classes. Every effort should be made to seek out every teacher in a school system who is successful with students in regular classes. Getting recommendations only from principals is counter to the purpose. If you really want to know who is doing what, and where the best placements would be—ASK THE TEACHERS. Send an email to all teachers in the department of a school in
which placements are made. Ask every teacher in the department who he or she thinks are the
teachers most able to succeed, thrive, and help students achieve at high levels in standard level
classes. You will probably get the SAME list of one or two teachers from everyone in the
department. You might get the same list of three or four teachers from everyone in the WHOLE
SCHOOL.

In the case of science teaching, consult the Alabama Science in Motion (ASIM)
specialists. They are a gold mine, as they know—and have records to show—exactly which
teachers are doing what labs with which classes. Julie Covin, the ASIM physics specialist, told
me recently that almost NONE of the teachers she serves—all over West Alabama—have her
bring labs to do with regular classes. She said her teachers say, “Oh no, you don’t need my
numbers or rosters for those classes, I’m not doing any labs with my physical science classes!”
This saddens me, as it took three years after I started writing letters about equity, requesting to
have the lab materials made accessible to students not only in advanced chemistry and physics,
but also in regular physical science. And yet, we cannot give up. My greatest successes in 20
years have been with physical science students, through working with other teachers in our PLC.
These experiences have been within the past five years. So we continue to learn, to keep trying.
I continue to believe that the effort is worth it. When I think of Malcolm, and Kierra, and so
many other students, I know it is. When I think of Paige, Lauren, Anna, Tyler, and myself, I am
bolstered to move forward.

Moving Into Chapter 5

This leads us into Chapter 5, not so much filled with conclusions, as with ideas and more
questions. Much of this work leads me to want to share hope and inspiration we have
experienced through being in our PLC. I also wish to share possibilities for teachers who are
considering leaving the profession, and for pre-service teachers who might never make it to their first full year of active service. I hope that will be done through the narratives, through later formats, and through some people—like Tyler—who share the physical space with us for a while, and then pass it forward.

In Chapter 5, I try on the possibility of sharing some insights from our work through a *traveling exhibit*...
Chapter 5: Looking Ahead: A Traveling Exhibit for Concluding Discussion

With community teaching, we know kids who otherwise might “fall through the cracks.” More truthfully, they might fall through the gaping chasms if they do not learn to build their own bridges. As teachers of these kids, it is our responsibility to help them learn to build those bridges. Within our PLC, most regular students will have one of us for biology in the 9th grade, and will definitely have either Paige or myself for physical science in the 10th grade. Then we are a force together pushing many students into advanced classes for 11th and 12th grade. We know our students, and know what to watch for as they navigate new ways with greater academic achievement. We plan together, evaluate together, and implement new strategies together. Without the community approach of the PLC, it is likely that adequate nets and bridges would not be in place. The tasks are far too demanding, confusing, overwhelming, and exhausting to be done well in isolation for most teachers in my experience.

At this point, I have wondered what needs to happen—narrative insights have been provided in Chapter 4. How should I now step back and speak of my original research questions and make interpretive commentary and conclusive remarks? I cannot make a turn to reduce the insights to thematic analyses—pointing out conclusive bits and pieces. What point would it serve to do so? Would we then try to control for these things?

I anticipated this issue might arise in my study, which was one reason I crafted research question 4. At this point, I shift from the research re-presented in the portraiture of Chapter 4 in my work to address in Chapter 5 matters of research methodology and application, considering
two main questions at this point: 1) How might others be able to learn from our PLC knowledge and ways of knowing? 2) How might portraiture serve as a research practice that might help others research PLC teacher learning?

**An Experimental Discussion**

I not only teach at Northridge high school, but for nearly 8 years, I have been involved in ongoing conversations with Dr. Sherry Nichols in the university science teacher education program. She has expressed her desire to teach future secondary science teachers why and how they should embrace teaching regular science. We have discussed some issues that will undoubtedly arise, since they already do. She understands this teacher preparation will likely challenge embodiment issues, as most of her participants would likely prefer NOT to not enter the space of teaching in regular science classrooms altogether. This is an honest admission on her part, and one that is rarely openly discussed. Sherry is well aware of this dissertation and is entertaining the notion of creating teacher learning “studios,” at our campus and elsewhere. She believes that prospective teachers must sometimes get out of the safe familiarity of university classrooms, to be in other spaces. These should be spaces where prospective teachers can immerse themselves in authentic contexts where punctuated learning experiences can occur. These experiences, if carefully considered and well-planned, can better prepare prospective teachers for the challenges they will face.

Drs. Nichols and Sundberg are considering various studio concepts and locations. The physics department at the university has integrated its lab and lecture for a number of years; they call this *Studio Physics*. Their enrollment in physics has increased dramatically through Studio Physics. Computer simulations and other technology are a constant in this course. The idea to use the studio concept is, in my opinion, an excellent one—if it is done with great care, planning,
and organization. One of their ideas is to create a studio in a school campus which borders a swamp, to help future life science teachers draw on the space of plants and animals in a natural habitat to inspire their notions of being life science learners. The Sipsey Swamp is quite unlike the laboratory settings where they more likely learned to approach plants and animals as named parts and pieces, understood through the lifeless context of dissection trays. This makes a tremendous amount of sense, and I do not know why most educational undertakings are not done with careful attention to place. Possibly there are too many logistical barriers in many instances.

Yet surely the most valuable learning often happens in studios of different sorts, where the learning subject is integrated with place. Surely the most valuable learning to be an artist happens in the spaces of art studios where students are making art, most valuable learning about horseback riding occurs while riding a horse, and most valuable learning about playing basketball happens on a basketball court. At the same time, I do believe there should be constant feedback, coaching, and guidance for students to hone their craft and progress to greater mastery, whatever the setting. That is, after all, the basis of education. The notion of apprenticeship is appropriate here. It is not difficult to discern that the level of mastery reached by a student will most often be limited by the expertise of the “mentor” and experiences offered in an apprenticeship. This is true whether the apprenticeship is one where a learner desires to be a plumber, an artist, a pianist, a surgeon, or a teacher. In all cases, the apprenticeship ideally graduates from a relationship of mentor/coach to collaborative partner. I believe the goal in teacher education should be to have students prepared to be fully collaborative partners by the time they reach their student teaching internship. In addition to the Sipsey Swamp Studio venture, other education studios could be created in various venues. This could happen
anywhere that learning to be teachers could be integrated into an authentic context—the more unfamiliar and diverse the context, the better.

In light of our PLC, prospective teachers could come to our Northridge Science Studio (this is merely hypothetical at this point) to join with teachers—learning about what it means to be teachers working in community in regular level classes. Intense, prolonged interaction alongside other teachers in regular classes is the only thing I have seen that comes close to preparing education students for being teachers in diverse—sometimes shocking, scary, and volatile—environments with “real” kids. These classes can also be intensely enjoyable, funny, and rewarding. The climate can change from day to day, depending on myriad factors, and begs great patience and flexibility. (For example, my third period students once explained to me that what they had for LUNCH primarily determined their mood, and whether or not they were going to do any work in my class after lunch. As astonishing as this was for me, it at least partly explained the mysteriously erratic performance of many students in that class.) I am by no means suggesting that prospective teachers be placed into the toughest situations, where they would be in physical danger and would likely quit. Northridge High School is in an affluent part of town, is clean and well-staffed, and has a student demographic that largely reflects the overall make-up of the city. Also, I can attest that Ms. Spencer and I believe that placements—like other educational endeavors—are almost worthless without regular, intense feedback, reflection, and debriefing (between the prospective teacher and ourselves), in addition to collaborative planning and teaching. There surely must be other schools in the city and county where good things are happening with regular classes, too. Maybe there other groups of science teachers working together in a PLC, but if there are I do not know of them.
**Considerations for NHS studio.** Immersion in an environment is a start. But it must be much more than university students simply “placing” themselves on site—they must learn about our notions of BEING a community of teacher learners. They must also come with the energetic desire to work with us, as we frankly do not have much time for “observers” who take up space and time—and want to have dialogue or interview us—but prefer to sit quietly at the back of a classroom and simply critique what they have seen. I have also been part of a university class—as has Ms. Spencer—that met in a classroom at Central High School. Once the door was closed and class was in session, it really did not matter that we were in a high school. The space was basically no different from a college classroom, since there was no interaction with high school students or teachers.

Lastly, we have to respect that five out of nine members of our science department do not work with our PLC, and do not work as community teachers in any group—even though the whole department gathers in my room each day for about 20 minutes to eat lunch and visit. Three of the nine science educators in our department teach only advanced and AP classes. The tiny “science teamroom” houses the one bathroom shared by all nine of us in the department, and is the only space to make phone calls, or have a quiet moment away from students when needed. Therefore, it would be unacceptable for any visitors to move into that space on a regular basis during the school day.

That being said, those of us in the PLC are eager and willing to help arrange experiences we feel could strongly further the causes of social justice; at the core of this notion is preparing prospective teachers to work in an educational system that helps ALL students move towards their own goals. For any prospective teachers really wanting to work with us—we would love to help negotiate what an *NHS Science Studio* might be.
PieLab example of studio. One example of a studio concept, that may be helpful for clarification, is PieLab in nearby Greensboro, Alabama. The following explanation and picture are from their website:

Founded in Spring 2009, through a partnership between the local non-profit of Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization, Inc. (HERO) and a design collective known as Project M, PieLab came to life as a combination pop-up cafe, design studio and civic clubhouse with the mission of:

‘Pie + Ideas = Conversation.
Conversation + Design = Social Change.’

PieLab uses locally grown fruit and produce in its innovative recipes. …
Behind the scenes, Pie Lab also serves as a classroom to instruct local out-of-school youth on small business development and culinary arts, and as a community space to enjoy events. Pie Lab started as a small seed, but is now an acclaimed ALABAMA STAPLE.

Layered narrative for social change. So, at Dr. Nichols’ request, I decided to experiment with a way to use the portraiture of Chapter 4 as a sort of knowledge base to help her explore possibilities of creating a PLC approach to prospective science teacher education. Accordingly, I created an exhibition to engage her and her colleagues in developing their visions for better preparing future science teachers to teach traditionally marginalized (and avoided, dismissed, ignored) “regular science” classes. In community-based research Dr. Nichols
conducted in the Philippines with a collaborative team of science teacher researchers (Arellano, Barcenal, Bilbao, Castellano, Nichols, & Tippins, 2001), the researchers challenge us to explore new possibilities for case studies with “layered narrative.”

As a first “layer” in this narrative inquiry, teachers’ case experiences were examined to see how the cases were woven into the teachers’ past and future lives. This informs my own work, where I take a holistic look at everyday happenings as inextricable from the teachers’ whole life stories. The way we experience life at the school where we work is our life. We cannot separate and compartmentalize to extract our “school-self” from our “away-from-school-self.” This awareness is part of what drives us to create and sustain our PLC, a community that does not have borders at the entrance to Northridge High School. I submit the prevalent attempts to fragment, compartmentalize, and separate ourselves from our lived environments—thereby denying the need for connectedness to place and community—is one of the most pervasive plagues of our time.

The second layer in the “layered narrative” of the aforementioned study looks at situations and tensions surrounding the teachers’ case studies. The third layer informs the next step of my study—the exhibit and concluding reflections. In the collaborative inquiry in the Philippines, Dr. Nichols and her colleagues were able to critically reflect—in the context of community—on the case experiences shared by prospective and practicing teachers. That study suggests that narrative inquiry can spark dialogue and reflection among teacher educators, to learn about, re-imagine, and possibly re-invent the pathways of becoming a science teacher. We carried this conception forward into my work, exploring the possibilities of joining prospective science teachers into our PLC, and into other studio science learning communities. This was done through an exhibit designed to prompt ideas and conversation with narratives and
The photographs I collected for this work.

**The Exhibit**

The exhibit is a *Powerpoint* featuring many images, main ideas, and just a few stories—those I felt would be most compelling to show what we are doing in our PLC and why we are doing it. I tried to select stories that would stay true to our lived experience as teachers in regular classes, but would avoid isolating teachers from each other. It is important to be mindful that class groups change in the presence of a group of teachers, or with the introduction of any other outside people. My main point is to help convey the ways teachers grow and learn through being together in community in various ways.

**Setting and background.** The setting to meet is my dining room table, where again we are reminded of the importance of space—and doorways. We are not distinctly separate from our physical surroundings. The open double doorway, French doors swung in on the other side, seems to beckon with possibilities.

**Goal.** The goal was to reach across and find ways to expand our community, to share knowledge of this research outside the walls of our school into the larger community. I talked with the science teacher educators about how the exhibit might help them think through ideas as they anticipate the possibility of joining with our school next fall. My explicit goal was to be able to incorporate
this conversation and others into my dissertation, and to find specific ways within our
discussions to do so. I had a digital voice recorder ready, and recorded approximately 4 hours of
our interactions. Approximately 2 hours of this time was spent with people sharing different
stories, revealing the probability that hearing one narrative sparks other people to tell their own.
This is part of the power of narrative, and evidence that everything we do as humans is *storied*—
in the context of some space, time, characters, themes, and sequence...*storied* even in terms of
conflict and resolution. I provided many sizes and colors of post-it notes as a way for
participants to reflect during the exhibit introduction, presentation, and dialogue. This was likely
to open up opportunities for the science educators to explore and organize ideas. Closure was
planned to help them explicitly see ideas and provide feedback about the session. The following
image shows the agenda.
Agenda

- **Exhibit Agenda**

- Welcome and Orientation to process: Goals, dialogue, post-it note comments

- Purpose: To help us work through concerns we have about bringing prospective teachers on board a PLC as a “studio model”.

- Interactive Power Point presentation with images, stories, and voice-over narration to give insights into the specific places, spaces, people, struggles, successes, and goals of our particular PLC. Discuss reasons this could benefit UA students.

- Concerns:
  - We are using the language of “creating a teacher learning studios”—why studio?
  - How many can we bring on board without too much disruption?
  - What are reasons to put great emphasis on physical space, as in studio concept?
  - What resources are we needing to span from university to the school site?
  - How do we get the notion across about learning “be” teachers, in conjunction with learning strategies for teaching?
  - Since this will accentuate that some teachers are in the PLC, yet others are not, how should we plan to navigate the spaces and politics of the science department?

- Closure: Take 10 minutes to pull from your sticky notes to create a central area of ideas you feel have been important to consider tonight.

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Science Teacher Educators’ Responses to the Exhibit (Themes)

In this section, I have organized their responses with respect to several questions:

1) How might such an exhibit help others as they craft a PLC approach for preparing others to become educators in “regular science” classrooms? (Others referring to prospective teacher, university science partners, etc.)

2) How might their interaction with the exhibit help them justify moving toward PLC approaches for science teacher learning?

3) What sorts of resources might they need to consider to support their PLC work through their interaction with the exhibit?
The next two photographs show the dining room table with the post-it notes after our session with the exhibit. In the first picture, the notes are stuck randomly, as four people were freely putting their thoughts onto this micro-media as the exhibit progressed. In the second picture, notes have been ordered into categories and themes.

Of all the ideas and themes discussed, two stood out as the most significant to me. I will introduce these two things briefly.

**Uncomfortable spaces.** The looming specter of discomfort in places of regular classrooms, where student behaviors can be risky and unpredictable, cannot be ignored as a major wedge in the promise of public education. This is one of the many topics almost always kept hushed and covered, as if pretending it is not a factor will make it less so. If it is discussed, it is usually in unproductive veins such as “that school is really, seriously rough.” Or “I will retire if I have to teach regular classes.” Or downright disturbing, “How can you stand taking those animals to the library, they are a waste of oxygen and cells.” Or “I would never have gone into teaching if I had to take a job babysitting *those* people.” For our exhibit conference, we opened up the conversation about difference and unfamiliarity, and how to bridge everyone’s acceptance and tolerance of wide diversity.
**Tolerant zones.** The truth is, everyone involved has to adjust and shift their assumptions. The willingness to step out of a “comfort zone,” and into an unknown place where new cultures can be negotiated and built, is a requisite for teachers working with students who are very different from themselves. One of the post-it notes from our evening exposition says, “*Kids I want to feel comfortable with…but not really.*” This is an honest admission, and an important starting point. Other sticky notes quoted profane language from the narratives (e.g. “motha fucka”), and alien situations (e.g. *Hands in the Pants*), various behaviors repellent to most middle-class people from privilege and academia. This strikes at the heart of why so many adults—teachers, teacher educators, prospective teachers, and others—avoid situations where they are forced to interact with “undesirables” (I heard a teacher at my school refer to students in my class with that term this very week). Another example of this overt oppression can be seen in this review of Northridge High School, posted on the *Great Schools* website (retrieved Feb. 07, 2012):

> **This was supposed to be the great new school** -- to divide from central and create the rich kid perfect school away from "undesirables." Major F.A.I.L. If you have relocated to Tuscaloosa, consider living in Hoover, Vestavia HIlls or other Bham areas where education matters. A 5 of out 10 in a great college town -- the rich, white area! A disgrace! —Submitted by a parent (October 29, 2010).

Of course the implication is that anyone and anything different from themselves and their familiar alleyways might be considered *undesirable*.

Let me be clear that I still have daily struggles in accepting some behaviors and language in the halls and in regular classes. I certainly do not always respond well to uncomfortable situations, nor am I always “sweet and nice.” I am still shocked by some things, such as the picture on this student’s phone of the guns and ammunition clips on his living room carpet. This
is not a smart phone with Internet access or Bluetooth capabilities. It is an old phone that makes calls and takes pictures. Maybe they are not his guns. But he was proudly showing the picture to his friends, bragging about the arsenal at his house. I must add that he was as horrified as I was when I took up his phone. He was embarrassed and begged me not to take up his phone. I took it up anyway, and then we learned about atoms or something.

In one recent evaluation, a student told me: “Ms. Evans you sure are hard and sometimes you gone buck and go ham, but you don’t play and we know we have to work in your class.” One said, “Sometimes it was boring but sometimes it was fun with all the hands-on stuff and talks we had. Keep on making your students learn and keeping it real!” Another said, “Thanks for being fair, even though it made me mad when you sent me out.” And another, “I wish you would send out more students when they won’t act right so we could learn more.” The other three teachers in the PLC express the same sentiments—frustration with ongoing behaviors that sometimes feel unbearable. I am trying to make the point that working collaboratively in community offers the very supports to help make these struggles easier. Usually Paige can find a way to bring out the humor in a situation, making the rest of us laugh at what might have seemed—just moments before—a truly traumatic event. Of course we are always offering each other suggestions, and trying new strategies to combat the discomfort. I will say it gets easier over time, but I cannot imagine ever
really getting “used” to many of these uncomfortable things that are so alien to my personal experience in the world.

**Shifting to meet expectations.** I would also like to make it clear that a large part of what we do in regular classes is helping students understand how to shift their language and behaviors to those appropriate and acceptable in classrooms and workplaces. We do this every day, **while** teaching high level science. No, it is not easy. But I am positively giddy at the end of a semester when I can see my students milling about with high-tech lab equipment, printing out graphs—as shown in the photograph above—and discussing physics concepts with their group members like they have behaved this way all their lives. Nobody believes they can perform at these high levels unless they see it for themselves, in which case they are often astonished that I do not even have to ask the class to be quiet; along with other skills, they have learned to modulate the noise. I am not saying I feel “successful” with every student, or even with every class, because I do not. Some days I feel like a total failure. But there are successful days in every class, successful stories from every group. And if we make it through a whole class period where I do not have to hear any derivative of the word “fuck,” nor see anyone putting their hands on another person, nor hear any talk of drugs, shootings, fights, gangs, or sex—we have a mini celebration. Students get very
amused at my excitement, and very happy about my progressively relaxed demeanor, as they begin to meet my expectations for both behavior and academics.

Some students even begin to see the connection between their choices for behavior and their academic achievement. They shift from believing they are at the chaotic mercy of fate—an infuriating, frightening belief based in a great deal of life experience—to realizing they can make things happen, they can affect their own opportunities, they have power to work towards their goals. This is a painful, long, drawn out process, and some students never make this shift while I know them. But it is a joy to be part of the process for kids who are able to take advantage of their time spent in schools—time tragically wasted in many regular classes—to learn, grow, and achieve. Students in this picture are testing their egg drop landers from the bleachers at the football field.

**Praxis.** What never ceases to surprise me—the real reward—is the way so many (but admittedly not all) students realize how the world has opened up to them through their achievement. That is high academic achievement, new science knowledge, and new behaviors and skills to help them navigate the middle-class world which is dominated by complicated power dynamics and silent expectations. It is this realization that helps students have choices, make decisions, and take advantage of opportunities such as advanced classes and extracurricular programs. This is, to me, the only real, sustainable source of self-esteem...an individual’s
awakening to the power they have to impact their own lives through their choices, hard work, and willingness to negotiate spaces and goals with others in community. This is praxis. It is an un-narrowing of spaces both physical and metaphorical. I truly desire to follow some of my students after they leave high school, hopefully in future research I would like to produce as a documentary film, or maybe in a book. This is somewhat daunting and risky, as I have no idea what I might find.

**Narratives left out.** It should be noted that some stories gathered through this inquiry were actually left out of the current work due to their recollections of more violent episodes, in hopes to avoid creating a negative skew. As with many mysteries in our culture—such as the so-called “news”—there is the tendency to over-share and exaggerate the negative for its sensationalist effects, giving a warped, imbalanced shape to the spaces within schools. Equally imbalanced and unfair is the notion to disallow all narratives which reveal uncomfortable—or even threatening—contexts, as there are conditions which desperately need to be addressed in our schools. Northridge High School is as safe as any other building where 1300 humans, comprising a cross-section of society and heavily weighted with teenagers, are joined under one roof with the commissioned task of not only getting along—but thriving. In the midst of being called to provide students with what they need to have access to life opportunities through educational achievement, many teachers face the realization that they must also find ways to thrive themselves in order to remain in the profession. The intersection of these deeply felt goals is the foundation of our small, highly functioning PLC of science teachers. Of course there is inherent bias in choosing which stories to tell, and which to leave out—just as there is inherent bias in choosing which issues to research in any context. Narratives selected for the collections in this work were those giving the most balanced voice possible from my perspective.
Of critical importance to me is being able to garner understanding that we are talking about half the student population in our school when we speak of “regular” classes. Issues of justice and fairness are at stake for all of these children, most who will grow up and live in this community. There are far-reaching consequences to persistently hiding the truth. We cannot pretend through perpetuity that we do not see how schools—and educators—are a very real part of the “school to prison pipeline” (Raimist, 2010). This is true even if we do nothing, as inaction is also a decision.

**Inspiring research.** The other theme found in post-it note comments that resonates with the purpose of this work is “Research that inspires.” We need to hear about small victories, and we need to listen to teachers’ stories. We want to feel inspired, and share a passionate message of belief in the promise of education. We do not want to give up. We want to pass the torch of social justice and equal educational opportunities to new and prospective teachers. There is strong desire to rekindle positive possibilities for veteran teachers who have lost heart in their profession, and in their ability to be successful. We are responsible for doing what we can to interrupt the school-to-prison-pipeline (Raimist, 2010), and to join forces as community activists to shift spaces in schools for all kinds of students to find access and opportunity through education. It is not enough to search for hope; we must create the conditions for it. As one of the post-it notes in this category proclaims—on a small rectangle of fluorescent orange or pink—
“We make things happen.” If prospective teachers do not learn to navigate spaces with these students, our entire system of public education is doomed to failure.

Concerns Addressed

*Why a simpler “case study” N=1 was not going to be right.* In my mind, this research was an N of 1—1 core group of teachers being and learning together as a professional group. The notion of PLC requires community, which necessitates multiple people making meaning through their interactions. Without relationships both inside and outside of school, our PLC would not function in the way that it does. That is, we have moments and spaces of thriving, of living well as teachers and neighbors, and tremendously enhanced agency through our collaborations. Our efforts have moved us towards high expectations and academic achievement for students in our standard level classes. I needed to look at least at the four of us in our core group, otherwise it does not make sense in the authentic context of lived experience I have strived for in this work. I did, however, cut out all the data and stories collected from peripheral members—except for one story kept from Tyler which closed the gallery. I also cut out a number of other stories, in the interest of keeping the data, findings, and analysis to a manageable mountain.

*Why it is not essentially narrative analysis or analysis of narratives—it is narrative inquiry.* This work is an exploration, an inquiry, a hope to reveal insights through teacher narratives. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the narrative inquirer writes about life in its landscape, in *three-dimensional inquiry space,* stories from those in the landscape—and stories from the researcher who is there as well. Along with stories, the narrative inquirer “often records actions, doings, and happenings, all of which are narrative expressions. This is the stuff of narrative inquiry for the researcher in for the long haul and concerned with intimacy” (p. 77).
As Abt-Perkins stated in the forward to Scherff and Spector’s edited volume, *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Clashes and Confrontations* (2011): “Context-specific inquiry processes are at the center of culturally responsive pedagogy. Culture is created within situations, among people, and through interaction. As such, it is always in motion and open to new interpretation and fresh responses” (p. vi). In these works and many others, there is a call for research to open up to new paradigms, and to listen to multiple voices. In their introduction to that volume, Scherff and Spector (2011) discuss their frustration during a literacy research project where 9th grade students here in Tuscaloosa were asked to write autobiographical accounts: “We soon realized that many of our pedagogical practices did not work so well with this particular set of Southern, Black students, most living in poverty” (p. 2). I am nonetheless confident that students grew from this experience, and that the researchers gained valuable insights into multiple facets in the struggle for justice in education. Every group is a “particular” set of students, every place is specific, and the currency of time is contextual as well. Yet the inquiry offers insights into the whole landscape, something bigger than just an analysis of narratives written, bigger than any analysis.

My research has thus been attentive to the importance of space, artography, and giving people voice who are marginalized, ignored, and silenced. These are the teachers in “regular” classes, in their landscape, as they attempt—through their PLC—to create culturally responsive teaching and spaces to thrive. As stated beautifully on the *Artography: Arts in a Changing America* website (n.d.):

Now, more than ever, the obligation to broaden the discussion of diverse artistic practices and how they are transforming our understanding of culture is incumbent upon us all. ARTOGRAPHY reinforces this dedication to fostering discourse, ongoing learning, and artistic practices that address our ever-evolving society.
The purpose has not been to analyze—or break down into the smallest possible pieces—the words people have spoken. I have resisted that deconstructivist approach, and posit that we need not subject someone’s words to our dissecting pan just because they have granted us the honor of an interview. The dismembered parts left to view in the microscope may bear little resemblance to the whole story. I appreciate John Schostak’s take in Interviewing and Representation in Qualitative Research (2006) of the interview as being a view into the interspaces, the place between worlds:

Without the `inter-view' no dialogue and no alternatives as a basis for difference, change, and development would be possible. The inter-view as conceived … is fundamental to qualitative research as an emancipatory project. (p. 15)

That is what I hope my own work is: An emancipatory project, moving forward the chances for teachers—and ultimately students—to claim praxis and voice. As Walker Evans entreated us with his words on the glass doorway in the photograph introducing Chapter 4—my desire has been to stare, to listen, to pay attention, to learn something while we are alive. That is what I mean by inquiry. I also hope that maybe I have added something, in some small way, to the body of knowledge through this narrative inquiry into educational spaces.

Why I was not “scientific” and do not have hypotheses in the conventional sense.

Studying natural phenomena is not the same as studying human beings. The “behavior” of cells in a microscope, light from a star, or chemicals in a beaker cannot possibly be compared with the behavior of agentic, unpredictable people in dynamic, uncontrollable places. The issues in education are complex, tangled, and deep. The purpose here is to listen, to invent, to share:

Indeed, there are no data that show a cause and effect relationship or even a correlational relationship between any particular culturally relevant practice and student achievement,
engagement, or school success…each teacher must invent his or her own rendition…It is crucial that we share these inventions with one another to build a community of practice… (Abt-Perkins, 2011, p. vii)

**Hypotheses.** I did, however attempt to address this concern, by trying to put the study into a simplified scientific format in my earlier discussions. I hypothesize that educators might gain insights and inspiration through the experiences of our PLC teachers as shared through narratives. The greater hope is that insights and inspiration gained will spark interest in creating ways to be in community for other active and prospective teachers, toward the transformative goals of social justice, science literacy, and learning to live well in a place. I would like to compare this with Dr. Chopra’s community outreach, illustrated in this picture of Paige, Nitin, and myself at the McWane Center in Birmingham, Alabama. This photograph is from Dr. Chopra’s Nanomaterials Processing Group (NPG)—Outreach and Community webpage (Chopra, 2010). We are shown in the photograph sharing collaborative projects on nanoscience from our experience in the University of Alabama VISTA program. Although there is probably not a clear hypothesis when embarking on such a multi-level project, one could be created by continuing the headline at the top of the web page: “Bringing nanoscience and nanotechnology to high schools and our community” ... *will result in greater interest in nanoscience majors and careers, an increased awareness of possibilities in materials engineering, and will spark excitement about*
cutting edge research happening at the University of Alabama. It may be impossible to prove a positive cause and effect, or even correlation regarding this effort. Yet we are confident there will be far-reaching outcomes that we cannot possibly predict or know for sure—now or ever.

The community-based collaboration resonates with a collective knowledge that schools, science teachers, high school students, college students, professors, scientists, and engineers should indeed be closely connected to further science education. Everyone has a stake in increasing science literacy, and in attracting students into high-tech current (and future) science research. (See Appendix 8: Obama Announces Education Initiatives at White House Science Fair, 2012). This is obviously tied to the agenda of adequately preparing students for the rigorous challenges of high level STEM (Science Technology Engineering Math) careers. Even giant powerhouses like NSF (National Science Foundation)—being responsible in part for funding our summer nanoscience project—are increasingly convinced of the value of forming strong partnerships across a community to further science education and research. Although not typical science research, there is the expectation of results. In this same spirit, I submit there is an intrinsic, critical importance in building professional learning communities of teachers in schools, in the interest of literacy and increased life chances for all students. As enthusiasm in nanoscience can be spread with exhibits of amazing ferrofluids and futuristic materials, I believe enthusiasm in the promise of community education can be spread through exhibits of teacher narratives—in stories, film, photographs, front porch talks, and even post-it note comments from a dining room consortium of science teacher educators.

**Being teachers.** In the vast inquiry into ways of being teachers, Feldman (2002) gave us horizon as a metaphor. He wrote that a certain science teacher’s “immersion in his educational situation had a horizon to it—edges that shifted as his intentions changed and he acted within
that situation” (p. 1049). We are constantly making meaning, and constantly changing within our lived contexts. Feldman argued that the sociocultural perspective is deeply complex, powerful beyond simpler constructions such as knowledge and reason. He said that participants in a group affect collective intentionality, suggesting the impossibility of extracting an individual from community, as everything is mediated in terms of relationships with other people. This article tied teacher agency to teacher change—something strongly echoed in my own inquiry. Feldman confidently stated that “to evoke teacher change we must find ways that allow teachers to see themselves as negotiators of curriculum and to provide them with the resources to do so in an explicit manner” (p. 1049). I submit that every plan for teacher professional development should pay careful attention to that basic tenet.

If consideration of that one principle would drive and undergird all professional development, there would be dramatically less money and time wasted, and dramatically more enhancements to the educational landscape through meaningful professional growth. This would undoubtedly translate into better teacher morale, improved school climate, and increased student learning. In every medium and venue, the possibilities for re-negotiating spaces and inter-spaces are enhanced through being in community. In hybrid spaces, we can negotiate new cultures and power dynamics in addition to curriculum.

How thirdspace goes beyond critical notions of place and space Thirdspace from a critical geography perspective draws attention to the politics of knowing. This would be consistent with the critical theorizing underpinning this arena of scholarship. Criticism has been raised of modernist and post-structuralist/post-modernist practices noting the central place of rationality from both sides—where the mind is key to making sense of thought and action (Wexler, 2000). The notion of thirdspace in this study recognizes the metaphysical sense—that
we are not just individual humans, and furthermore are interconnected with the world around us in a much larger sense—beyond that which we may be aware. The double-slit experiment and *Las Meninas* painting (Velasquez, 1656, shown here) were introduced in Chapter 2 to remind us to doubt that we ever really know—encouraging us to be, in present moment, inspired that there is an endless source of living and learning to experience.

*Figure 9. Las Meninas* (Velasquez, 1656).
Transformation. The ultimate hope is to create spaces of transformation. According to Erevelles (2005), “transformation occurs through the act of re-interpretation” (p. 422). We have opportunities, limited only by time, space, and imagination—to re-present and re-interpret. Erevelles encourages us to examine the “historical, social, and economic conditions that produce distances and inter-relationships” between different worlds. Although she is speaking in the context of disability, I believe the concepts are applicable in other inter-spaces such as those between regular and advanced classes. I submit that many people of privilege and power in the high school where I work very much consider students in regular classes to be disabled—to be intellectually, socially, behaviorally, and culturally unable and unwelcome to move within privileged places. They are seen as less than. They sense the lack of acceptance and unfair treatment, but do not truly know the reasons.

As I have attempted to convey, these students are ignored, invisible, and forgotten—language I have also heard in my admittedly ultra-brief forays into disability studies. I give full respect to disability studies as a unique area, and I do not wish to detract from that. On the contrary, I wish to join forces, and to gather support for the different world of regular classes which has few—zero as far as I can see—outside activists to advocate for change. (The only “action” I observe is one by parents and administrators to keep teachers from writing discipline referrals—a horribly misguided, narrow pressure that further degrades the learning opportunities for the vast majority of children in regular level classes.)

This notion of intersecting spheres is supported in another article, where Watts and Erevelles (2004) posed an intersection between disability studies and critical race theory: *These Deadly Times: Reconceptualizing School Violence by Using Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies*. We are challenged to see the connection between students’ anger and
resistance, and the larger oppressive structural violence of social systems. In conjunction, almost all special education students with IEPs (individualized education plans) are mainstreamed into regular level classes. There are science inclusion classes which are team taught by one of the nine people in our department along with a special education teacher, an arrangement that usually works out well. (It would, however, work out MUCH better if team-teachers were given common planning time.) I think it is important to note that almost all accommodations we (teachers in the PLC) make for special education students, we also make for the other students in our regular classes, to maximize their chances to learn and succeed. There is certainly a call for more research in those classes, with the different worlds of special education students and regular (not advanced) education students charged with negotiating classrooms, assumptions, and stereotypes.

At some risk, I feel it is relevant and must be said that these two worlds diverge at a point where students in regular classes, often unfairly considered “deviant,” are expected to make choices to change some behaviors if they truly want to pursue certain paths (such as college) in the middle-class world. This does not mean I should hope to clone the middle-class white version of “the good student,” or attempt to erase difference. However, I can fairly expect students to stop masturbating and abusing aerosol inhalants in my classroom. I can even expect them to refrain from fighting, using the “f” word, and being abusive to women and homosexuals. I cannot, however, in any sense expect my friend who is deaf to hear, nor can I expect my student in a wheelchair to get up and walk. My point is that there are critically important intersections in the fight for justice and equal educational opportunities; yet there are undeniable differences. In every case with every child, we should create educational environments that allow that young person to learn and achieve at the highest level they can, in the most
meaningful ways possible, to improve their life chances. Community teaching in our PLC has helped me approach that more than any course, book, lesson, college degree, experience, conference, conversation, or other professional development ever has.

**Fear.** I believe many of us are far too driven by fear to effect any real change. We are afraid of being fired, afraid of being cast out, afraid of speaking up. Teachers who do speak up are often punished with extra duties and courses, and with the threat of being moved against their will to another school. These teachers are seen as problem employees “stirring things up,” even if we are just trying to have a conversation about racism in our local schools. However, we must remember that we are part of the problem, and choosing to do nothing is still a choice. This is a major reason that community is so important. There is some safety and privilege—although certainly not absolute—in numbers, in seniority, and in reputation as outstanding teachers.

Students are also often driven by fear. Fear from their prior experiences of oppression, fear that they will be labeled because of where they live, fear that they will be hated because of their color or language. This very real fear—based in logic and experience and observation—has to be unpacked, examined, and worked through as do all fears if they are to be overcome. Herein lies another deep importance of community, of honest dialogue, and helping students to build bridges and skill sets to clearly communicate about their lives. In moving through the fear, we get past some of it, and learn to live with some of it. Then students and teachers can move forward to make informed choices, to work towards specific goals, and to become activists for change.
My hope for the university research community as a PLC.

- My hope is for some education classes, community-based service learning time, and placements in high schools be intricately intertwined. This is my understanding of the science teacher educators notion of *studio*.

- I would hope for a focus on intense, prolonged immersion into unfamiliar, diverse settings. That is, have prospective teachers “jumping in” and working with students who are very different from themselves as soon as possible in their College of Education curriculum.

  - The relative success of this approach is utterly dependent on identifying teachers who are experiencing high levels of success with traditionally marginalized students. It is also dependent on placing university education students with teachers who believe in collaboration, feedback, and clearly communicated expectations.

  - I would hope for a complete re-thinking of the notion of *placements*, as those are the most crucial experiences in determining a future teacher’s preparation to deal with difficult situations in challenging classes. This ultimately weighs strongly in the probability that a new teacher will make it or not make it in the profession. I will now briefly debunk the conventional notions of *observation* and *placement* from my point of view.

**Observation and placements.** I see no reason for any education student in their junior or senior years of college to be doing more than a day or two of *observation* in any one place. Their entire lives have been spent observing teachers in educational settings. Observation is, to me, a tiny, passive, and short-lived first step in the process of any meaningful placement.
Outside “observers” are usually an intrusion to be tolerated (or not); in contrast, a person jumping in and collaborating in community—experimenting with methods, offering new knowledge and suggestions, learning along with us—is more than welcome. In our PLC, we will embrace a person who shares our vision for a more just world, and we will do everything possible to bring that person along in our spirit of community.

I very strongly believe that every placement should be made with the utmost care and attention to fairly preparing that person to work with diverse students in challenging classes. Every effort should be made to seek out every teacher in a school system who is successful with students in regular classes. Getting recommendations only from principals is counter to the purpose. If you really want to know who is doing what, and where the best placements would be—ASK THE TEACHERS AT THAT SCHOOL.

**Ask teachers.** Send an email to all teachers in the department of a school in which placements are made. Ask every teacher in the department who he or she thinks are the teachers most able to succeed, thrive, and help students achieve at high levels in standard level classes. You will probably get the SAME list of one or two teachers from everyone in the department. You might get the same list of three or four teachers from everyone in the WHOLE SCHOOL. This is not divisive or insulting, as most teachers I know loudly, frequently proclaim their disability in working with “regular kids,” and will not see it as detracting from their own egos to recommend other teachers in this way. In the hierarchical stratifications of public education, these teachers are near the bottom. (AP teachers are at the top, which gives me a unique view in teaching AP physics in addition to my many regular physical science classes!)

**Ask other educators who have extensive experience with possible cooperating teachers.** For example, in the case of science teaching, consult the Alabama Science in Motion (ASIM)
specialists. This is something I have suggested for several years, and I believe is now already being done to some extent. They are a gold mine, as they know—and have records to show—exactly which teachers are doing what labs with which classes. Julie Covin, the ASIM physics specialist, told me a few years ago that one teacher educator asked her: “Do you really expect us to personally know about every teacher where we place students?” We had a long conversation about this, as we could not fathom that a prospective teacher would be placed anywhere unless there was strong evidence that the cooperating teacher would provide the best possible environment in which a new teacher could grow; specifically called for is placement into a diverse environment that will help the prospective teacher become prepared to move forward, to feel capable of offering high educational opportunities to all groups of students in their possible future classrooms. If we place future teachers with someone teaching a single advanced course all day, or all AP classes, we are destroying their chances to learn strategies and ways of being in community that would help them be able to thrive in more difficult circumstances.

That being said, I think more short placements early on, before the semester-long student-teaching internship, could be an advantage. That is, have education students go in for an intense two or three week placement at each of several different schools. Have them observe for only the first one or two days. After that, the expectations should include collaborating and helping with all aspects of teaching. If long placements are to continue, encourage cooperating teachers to have university students move around among different classrooms of all willing teachers in the department—to spend at least a class period or a whole day in each teacher’s room if possible.

The Notion of Professional Development

In my experience, professional development is mostly a forced agenda of disconnected activities without any authentic context, designed to fill the space and time of mandated meeting
days. Teachers rarely have a choice in their own “development,” and are often held hostage to the most currently popular trends for workshops and new methods. They are told the new steps they must take—and must document—in order to improve student learning. If only it were that simple. Teachers who could share what is really working for them professionally rarely get a chance to do so. I do not mean this in a simplistic “best practices” sense, although that is not without merit. I envision teachers sharing in a reflective, reflexive dialogue their stories about interacting with each other and with real students, taking a holistic look at the expanse of space and time where we live and work together, engaging in an ongoing, open, fearless discussion about teachers knowing and being and learning. Almost never are there provided opportunities—again of space and time—for teachers to collaborate and learn in the context of classrooms. Rather, there is the capitalistic compulsion of infinite growth—as might be mandated by a foreman on a production line—that is quite literally impossible to sustain.

**One Professional Learning Approach**

My vision for teachers’ learning in this study is from one vantage point interpreted from a multiplicity of possibly effective approaches; by *effective*, I mean to enhance the human condition for one or more people, in one or more situations, on a micro- or a macro-scale. Teachers would have wide latitude to choose the particular combination of pursuits that would meet their own professional goals, as well as the continuing needs of their student learners. This would include efficient avenues for allowing teachers to attend academic conferences and take university courses if they chose to do so. It would also involve an easy process for opting out of whole school- and whole-system based workshops and training sessions in favor of alternate continuing education activities. The main aspect I am drawing attention to is this: In effect,
teachers—both pre- and active-service—need to be provided space, time, and other resources to learn together in professional learning communities.

**Professional Learning Communities as Professional Growth and Development**

Teachers in PLCs would navigate their own development according to their situated contexts, as do people in other careers who are considered to be “professionals,” including attorneys, physicians, therapists, and professors. A hallmark of PLC is creating space where teachers are making choices. These choices might include observing each other, sharing great lessons, and cooperatively grading student work. They might include collaborating on lesson studies for improved student learning, team-teaching to complement each others’ strengths, and shifting students among team teachers depending on student needs. In my experience, being involved in a PLC means experiencing a great deal of enhanced empowerment. The traditional discourse of teaching in isolation is dramatically altered, changing the landscape to one with increased chances for teachers to feel more happy, successful, and productive. Viewed in a sense of whole people being together in a learning environment, this is undeniably linked to how students feel, perform, learn, and move within the spaces of schools as well.

These small teams of teachers would make their own action plans for professional development, which might include a great deal of observing each other’s classes—even videotaping or audiotaping them—and more importantly, meeting to reflect and discuss afterward. I would encourage the reflection and dialogue meetings to be away from school or campus, as space and place are critical components of a holistic approach which aims to help teachers and students live happier lives. Teachers in PLCs would have funds allocated toward their learning if they chose to take a university course, or attend workshops, technology training, and conferences. This plan for development gives teachers the space to cyclically analyze, plan,
and revise; in other words, to respond to the teaching and learning environment. Professional
development is not meant in a linear sense here, rather it is a connotation for growing with
respect to a critical sense of place, as in Gruenewald’s work (2003a; 2003b).

My professional development picture includes several other critical realms of
collaboration which are absent from most models I have seen: 1) It is crucial to involve pre-
service teachers in PLCs, and 2) to have a strong service learning component in their preparation.
Instead of taking for granted that preservice teachers can figure it out for themselves, we should
do as Leatham and Peterson (2010) suggested, and provide opportunities to put into practice
what educational theory and research shows: Teachers teach as they have been taught, and we as
humans will not (or cannot) do what we have not seen modeled. If teachers practice in the
“wrong” ways—with purely traditional methods in spaces devoid of diversity—they cannot
possibly be expected to figure out how to resolve this on their own. 3) I also think it is critical to
include university faculty—especially in colleges of education—as active members of these
collaborative learning communities. 4) Involving parents and other community members widens
the possibilities even further.

Incorporating Aspects of Professional Development Models

As I have explained, I do not believe there is or ever can be a correct model, as in a recipe
to follow, for something as complex as teacher learning. However, there is good reason—as
discussed in Chapter 1—to look for every way possible to improve students’ learning, if in so
doing we also stand to improve the quality of life for students and for adults moving through
school spaces. I would pay close attention to incorporating what Reeves (2003) identified as five
things in common being done in schools that belong to the “90/90/90” group. This refers to
schools where 90% of students receive free or reduced lunch, 90% of students identify as
belonging to an ethnic minority, and 90% of students are achieving at high levels as set by state and national standards. I think much of what is being done in those schools has more to do with the power structures, schedules, and flexibility within the schools—which might be called school development—than it has to do with teacher professional development. I would actually take the last of the five areas he listed—collaboration—as a central focal point, and broaden it to create a malleable vision for professional growth that incorporates other ideas and focal points, and is open to change based on individuals and context.

One example of another focal point would be including a strong service learning component—especially in pre-service teacher education programs. Another would be providing opportunities for teachers to observe other teachers involved in culturally responsive teaching—such as exchanging some lessons on traditionally famous white scientists for study of highly accomplished minority scientists—followed by open dialogue and writing about related issues, meaning, politics, and emotion. Another would be providing the chance for teachers to discuss with other teachers specific ways to incorporate youth-privileged literacies—such as digital media—that can bridge learning from home to school, and can connect and blend visual images with textual literacies. The collaborative model of professional development I propose would be professional learning communities (PLCs) created in the spirit of third space, which will be explored later in this chapter.

One of the main benefits I see in my approach is the chance for continuing teacher education to model what could be happening in classrooms. As Leatham and Peterson (2010) suggested, we should provide opportunities to put into practice what educational theory and research shows. The whole idea of collaboration within third spaces can be applied to learning communities of students, and to learning communities of teachers and students working together.
I have found it especially productive in working with teacher interns to use a collaborative approach. Teacher educators play “critical roles in developing and fostering interactions that could move the student teaching context from one of cooperation...to one of collaboration” where all work together for shared goals (Martin, Snow, & Torrez, 2011, p. 308). There are many technologies, literacies, spaces, and reform methods I would encourage in the PLC professional learning spaces, as teachers tend to teach in the manner in which we have learned.

**Digital technologies.** One notable, vast area opening up to us in contemporary times is the use of digital technologies—including video sharing (such as YouTube and Vimeo), photography, second life, social networking (such as Facebook and Edmodo), collaborative web sites (such as Wikispaces)—and of course the now very familiar email, blogs, and discussion boards. Werner (2004) spoke of the intertextuality of visual images, and Williams (2008) prompted us to nurture identity formation with inclusion of multiple literacies relevant to contemporary society. Sarroub (2008) pointed out that traditionally accepted characteristics of effective schools “do not account for the ways in which youth resist school literacies as they navigate their glocal identities in and out of school” (p. 63). She further discussed that teachers should find multiple literacies that youth privilege, since literacy in its historical meaning has been used to discriminate against children from poverty and other groups. I submit that we should take that logic a step further, and find multiple methods, models, and formats that youth privilege as well. I strongly suspect this is at the heart of some of the PLC teachers’ successes.

As there is concern for the empowerment of youth, this study highlights concerns to rethink literacy needs of teachers as multidimensional. As the world shifts and technology becomes more intertwined in students’ existence, it becomes more intertwined in teachers’ existence as
well. PLCs heighten the chances for teachers to share ways to utilize technologies for teachers constantly learning and growing in the profession.

**Research question #4.** This is tied to my last research question, #4, the question I have neglected almost unto its disappearance. However, I cannot abandon it completely, as I think the work has spoken to it in part. I certainly hope to return to it in the future, as I deeply desire to further explore the use of film and narratives, possibly through making a documentary. The question was as follows:

- Research Question 4: How can I—as a participant observer using a narrative research methodology and digital media in addition to text—tell these teachers’ stories about what they are learning and doing in a way that is approachable and meaningful to a wide audience of practitioners and educational researchers?

I believe I can say with confidence that yes, the digital images included in this work fill out the portraiture walls of the art gallery to a great degree. If not limited by time, I would include even more images. I think the photographs came to be an integral part of the voices heard, even more than I predicted. They added context, authenticity, and visual texture to the artographal re-presentations. The pictures deeply added to the interpretations of space. I believe the last part of question 4 can also be answered with a resounding yes. Based on input I have received from peer debriefers, the images make this work
easily accessible to a wide range of practitioners as well as researchers. I certainly find the images to add depth and meaning to this inquiry. The image shown here is a photograph I took while walking through an eclectic area—mixed residential and commercial, rich and poor, archaic and contemporary—in New Orleans, Louisiana. The textures, colors, and integrated art change the space to allow expression and movement of difference, creating a more inclusive, welcoming neighborhood. Schools, universities, and research itself can make use of these notions.

**Limitations of the Study**

The major limitations of this study come from trying to do too much. Yet, that has been a double-edged sword, as it is the complex intersections of topics and spaces that has interested me deeply enough to write this $10,000 study! I have gazed at, pondered, researched, and inquired about space on multiple levels—both physical and metaphorical. I have looked deeply into the literature on professional development, as well as PLCs. Then I have attempted to merge these spheres into my own arts-based re-presentation through narrative inquiry and visual images collected on portraiture walls in an art gallery. Although I am proud of the rich, deep nature of much of this work, I wish I had found ways to simplify it without losing the interest inherent for me in the complexities.

There are certainly times when I wish I had undertaken a survey, such as the one sent to me (and all teachers at my school) recently by Amanda Cassity for her own doctoral research on PLCs. Amanda is the Director of Secondary Education in the Tuscaloosa County School System. I have worked with her in the past, and I respect her as an educator and most effective principal. For the sake of comparison and discussion, I have included that survey in its
entirety—along with the associated emails—in Appendix 5. This particular survey has over 50 questions, so I will include just a few questions here as a sample.
PLC survey sample (A. Cassity, personal communication, February 07, 2012).

If a child doesn't want to learn, teachers here give up.

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Teachers here don't have the skills needed to produce meaningful results.

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Teachers in this school believe that every child can learn.

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These students come to school ready to learn.

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Home life provides many advantages that students are bound to learn.

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Students here just aren't motivated to learn.

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Teachers in this school do not have the skills to deal with student disciplinary problems.

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The opportunities in this community help ensure that these students will learn.

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2c. The staff shares visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and these visions are consistently referenced in the staff's work.

- ☐ 1. Visions for improvement do not include concerns about the quality of learning experiences.
- ☐ 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
- ☐ 3. Visions for improvement address quality learning experiences in terms of students' abilities.
- ☐ 4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
- ☐ 5. Visions for improvement target high-quality learning experiences for all students.

3a. The staff's collective learning and application of the learnings (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.

- ☐ 1. Individuals randomly discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.
- ☐ 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
- ☐ 3. Subgroups of the staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.
- ☐ 4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
- ☐ 5. The entire staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.

I beg you take a closer look in Appendix 5, as I cannot begin to imagine how such an instrument can shed light on community teaching in the spirit I have experienced and attempted to share. I am sure it will, however, add to the overall body of knowledge in education, as a number of the questions are bravely pointed and honest.
To clarify, I am not saying that surveys are always uncalled for; nor am I saying that this is a bad survey, or that these are necessarily bad questions. I merely believe that most of the questions cannot be answered truthfully in ANY simple multiple choice format. Of course this is a tremendous limitation of any survey attempting to produce meaningful qualitative data and understanding of incredibly complex issues. For example, in looking at question (3a) I have shown above in the sample, I realize that almost no teachers in our school would have any idea that our PLC exists. So I feel confident that most teachers at our school would answer choice “1” or “2” for that question, unless they consider monthly faculty meetings to be applicable, in which case they might bubble in answer “5.”

It is very problematic from my perspective that teachers of all advanced classes will answer the questions very differently from teachers of all regular classes. I suggest that surveys used here for future research should have a way to measure some of those differences for each person answering the questions. I fear results from instruments like this survey can cloak the isolation and lack of community I see pervading our schools, especially with regard to these marginalized, underserved groups. I hope to see the results at the end of Ms. Cassity’s study, especially the analysis and conclusions drawn from those results.

Suggestions for Future Research

The possibilities to me for future research are tremendously broad. First of all, I personally hope to do one or more documentaries, to capture the voices and images of teachers and students who have found ways to thrive by living in community, and by creating hybrid spaces—thirdspace— with room for new cultures, risks, and multiplicities. I believe there is a need to open up the spaces of research from a strictly linear, text-based model towards more arts-based inquiries and creative formats that invite multiple technologies. We should take the rigor
and high expectations of traditional academia and apply them in a shift concordant with the possibilities of the times. Knowledge is expanding, and there is infinite, immediate free access to information and sources that was not possible 15 years ago. If we believe in difference, in multiplicities, and in making knowledge accessible to those outside the elite arenas of academic research, we should look to the technologies privileged by people outside those circles.

I also suggest there is a call for future research in every educational setting possible where traditionally marginalized students are performing at increasingly high academic levels. We should seek out those places, and invite those teachers to tell us their stories, beseeching them to allow us a glimpse into what they are doing. Getting teachers themselves involved will be critical, as no outside researcher-observer will have access to the inner workings on their own.

Little has been said in the literature about my own ideas of PLCs as thirdspace, as hybrid zones to generate learning for teacher professional growth. I also believe there is a connected increase in student learning, which suggests the attention of future research. I therefore hope that researchers find ways to look further into conceptions of space in schools, and how those conceptions might help to discover new ways of being in those places. I know that I have delighted in being changed myself through thinking, talking, and writing about these things.

**Science department focus group.** I would like to revisit this in the future, to informally interview all members in our department—and possibly science departments in other schools—to hear those teachers’ perspectives on PLCs. Prompts change and vary depending on the situation. But some I might ask in future research with the whole science department focus group would be:

1) What are your impressions of the collaborative efforts of colleagues teaching regular classes?
2) Do you prefer teaching alone, and if so, why?
3) What are your thoughts about striations and disparity between advanced and regular classes?

4) Who in the science department do you think has shown the greatest professional improvement in the past few years, and why?

5) Who in the science department do you think is the happiest in their position, and why?

6) Do you think there are any advantages to teaching collaboratively, or do you personally find the traditional individual mode works just as well in contemporary learning spaces?

7) What changes would you make in your teaching—if any—if you were assigned to teach all standard level courses?

8) Do you think the science department functions in fairness as a democratic body, where each person has equal voice, equal consideration, equal power, and equal professional responsibilities for equal pay? What are your thoughts and reflections?

Conclusions

In closing, I offer up my best conclusive summary that PLCs hold great possibilities for teachers and students—especially those in standard level classes—trying to thrive in a complicated world. PLCs can provide a supportive environment for teachers to escape the isolation of the profession, rather than being compelled to escape the profession itself. They might even provide support systems to help teachers resist the “normal” impulse to escape the challenges inherent in teaching “regular” classes—classes where students are often pathologized, ignored, silenced, marginalized, and treated as undeserving of a high quality education. PLCs can also provide pathways to non-traditional pedagogies, and can become tools to claim praxis, and to resist persistent power dichotomies. I furthermore argue that PLCs are a best hope for designing science teacher education experiences to improve the science education of “regular science” students.
Not surprisingly, there are more questions created than “answers.” I suggest we look hard and listen more, and become activists in a world where the gap between rich and poor widens (See Appendix 13). I suggest that citizens interested in justice and education become immersed in the spaces of schools where kids and teachers are living, struggling to thrive. As I have stated more than once in this work, I do not argue that PLC is The Answer, nor do I believe it can happen in every context. A PLC from my experience is very situational, born of deep need, and is utterly dependent on the reciprocal give and take of its members. That is to say, our functioning community of teachers working and learning together is built—and constantly maintained—by people with personalities geared to hard work, organization, reliability, clear communication, reciprocity, and shared standards. *Any murmurings to mandate PLCs should be squashed with fervor.* The language of “policy” usually clashes with the language of “community.” Any desires to explore community teaching should be nurtured, encouraged, and supported with resources, especially with that most valuable commodity—time. This is the resource most denied to us in public schools. Being in a PLC is time-intensive, as is anything worthwhile. For the four of us in our PLC, we agree that there is no substitute for time spent in the same physical place to plan, to teach together, to offer suggestions, to discuss, and to debrief. Then to do more planning and evaluating, as that work is never finished. It is a continual process of learning, growing, and being.

**Arts-informed narrative inquiry.** The ideas of arts-based research have helped round out my study, as it would have seemed flat with only literature reviews and stories. Having the opportunity to re-present my findings as narratives was one of great freedom and growth for me, a cathartic experience I did not predict. The constant silencing of our voices—voices specifically of teachers in “regular” classes—is maddening. Through this study, the silence has
been diminished—a very empowering effect. Listening, collecting, conversing, and writing the stories were all therapy of sorts, while still being intensely challenging and intellectually stimulating. The collective effect of the other PLC teachers being so happy that I was sharing our stories heightened the positive in a sometimes disheartening, discouraging, isolating process of unknowns. Still, this process gave me a bit of insight into how many of my students undoubtedly feel on a frequent basis when trying to navigate the ways and places of Northridge High School.

Even though the narratives stand on their own to a large extent, they are hugely enhanced with the visual images. The entire idea of community resonates with an art gallery, where different works on different walls by different people are connected through common themes, styles, and meanings. An art gallery or museum has as its overarching purpose to enlighten and inspire, and sometimes to shake up the status quo. That is not so different for our band of community teachers. As shown by Nichols and Tippins (2000) in their article *Prospective Elementary Science Teachers and Biomythographies: An Exploratory Approach to Autobiographical Research*, photo essays can lend multiple dimensions to narratives, and can help resist mythologies of universal characters—including the myths involved with science teaching and learning. These science teacher educators suggest that allowing for personal, specific stories—as in my own research—could help us better understand some forces that either bolster or undermine students along their way to becoming future science teachers. The conception of *biomythography* helps us further apprehend the need for alternative research approaches, as it questions the paradigms of familiar constructions such as autobiography, parable, and case study.
Communities in the sense of our PLC are embodied and contextual, where shared physical presence is the hallmark of what we do. People and communities are in space and time, and are dynamic—constant!y shifting in response to interactions and myriad factors. Thus arts-informed inquiry lends itself as an excellent match to my study, since art is also physical, textural, and visual. It shifts and changes in response to place and time. Humans respond to aesthetics, and care a great deal about spaces. Consider, for example, the broad fields of architecture, design, and engineering in addition to conventional arts as seen in art shows and museums.

This picture shows a collage made by 3rd graders at Gordo Elementary School in nearby Gordo, Alabama, where Paige herself attended school. Although Paige is shown smiling in front, we are strongly drawn to the children’s artistic renderings in an almost inexplicable way. I cannot help but wonder at this portraiture, at how the children see themselves, and communicate a view of the world—telling stories through their art. We are drawn in by pictures, even by colors and textures. I cannot at this point imagine being interested in a purely linear, flat, text-based study, when I have been immersed into a multi-media, multi-dimensional, multi-focus, heterotopia of multiplicities.
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Appendix 1: Digital Photostory For Conference Presentation

Project Introduction
When given the assignment in class during spring 2005, it did not take long for me to devise a rough plan for my project. At the high school where I teach science, every day is awash with images that stick in my mind, and these are accompanied by things I have heard—comments from teachers, questions from students, songs students have shared, and so on. I am fascinated by the notion of culture, and have tried through this project to piece together in some small way just what that might mean. I want to understand what culture means in the context of my world, and how this can be so different for many other people moving through my world. I would like to argue that photographs and music were the most natural way to present the chaos that I attempted to order. When someone sees a photo essay, they might wonder “Where is the text?” or we might ask “Why go beyond the written word?” The essence of this is almost difficult to verbalize, but there have been many articles and books written on the subject of using the visual.

Research Interpretation of Visual Imagery
Images are “inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures and societies, as well as with definitions of history, space and truth” (Pink, 2001, p. 19). There are so many ideas and thoughts that cannot be adequately simplified into writing. The visual has always been there—we use a tremendous amount of our brains to constantly process visual input—yet it has only been possible in the past hundred years or so to capture images on film. In the past few decades, we have been able to record and study visual images like never before—especially now with the ease of digital recording. Certainly we can say that images are still interpreted and therefore still not “objective”; however, we can also say that there are layers of meaning in and response to images which are different from the written word. “The most one can expect is that observation and images will allow one only to interpret that which is visible” (Pink, 2001, p. 24). All you have to do is look at the history of photography, movies, television, and the Internet to be overwhelmed by the impact of visual media on individuals and on our culture. “As signs, words re-present. They are mere stand-ins for the real thing, pointers to somewhere else. As images, the real thing presents itself” (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2003, p. 42).

Berger and Mohr (1982, p. 133) point out that there is not a single correct way to perceive and interpret images; rather viewers are inventing their own unique storylines. Of course we do this with the written word as well, but it is not as overt nor is it as inviting. Using the visual we are invited to participate in the interpretation. This is, to me, the power behind the photo essay in question. The viewer is subjected to many images—some present, some past. These images overlap in a disturbingly familiar way, so that they “require something of us” (Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2003, p. 42).

Background
In the context of effectively re-segregating our high schools in this system, many conflicts have surfaced. From 1979 when the court forced integration of the school system until 2003, all students in the entire city system attended one high school. Beginning in 2003, students were split into three groups and zoned for one of three new, smaller “neighborhood” high schools. This action has a number of glaring problems. Communities are still amazingly segregated here in
the South. One of the high schools is 99% black, while only 10 minutes away another school is 60% black and 40% white and fairly evenly mixed with regard to income and geographic location. The third school—where I teach—is still about 60% black and 40% white, but almost all the black students are bused in from across town. The white students at this school almost all live in very affluent neighborhoods within blocks of the new school. They come from upper middle class, highly educated, professional families. Almost all of the black students are poor, live in low rent housing projects many miles from the new school, come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and have uneducated families. Certainly there are exceptions, but they are few. The school truly has this bipolar set up, which I believe adds new barriers and exacerbates the old ones. Students without the stunning privileges are wrenched further apart from opportunities as the gap widens. The story is not new—it is just more awful in context of the second millennium, the digital age when we have supposedly evolved into such sensitive, politically correct humanity. Some have argued that schools serve the purpose of actually promoting the inequalities that benefit capitalist aims (Bowls & Gintis, 1977). As one who has spent 14 years working as a teacher in public education, I simply cannot fathom an Orwellian situation that purposefully undermines equal access to knowledge for all students. And yet it is irrefutable that the equal access is just not happening. Thus my project is one micro-attempt to see through a cloudy window, to look for the reasons. As it happens, I found (found rather than concluded) that there are layers of reasons, none of them easy to single out or define or delete. Through the narratives of image and music which compose this photoessay, I move beyond the two dimensional constraints of a print-based format to re-present challenges of teaching and learning science in the midst of re-segregation journeys in the Deep South.

The Project Methodology and Themes

As Dr. Walsh has explained, the project was very open-ended. This made it intensely interesting for me, as I was able to take my questions and spin them through images and music to create something that not necessarily answered my questions or solved my problems—but allowed me to work through untangling some of the web of issues in my mind.

I spent a couple of weeks taking digital photographs of students, trying to capture images which persist in disturbing my thoughts. Van Manen (1990) points out that phenomenological research is the attempt “to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence” while “establishing a renewed contact with original experience” (p. 31). The overarching theme of the project is “barriers,” yet this is always elusive. The initial problem for me was: “Why are so few black students taking advanced math and science courses?” The accompanying question becomes “Why are so few black students taking advantage of opportunities that would probably offer them an increase in their quality of life?” This begins to branch off. “What barriers are there to these students taking advantage of these opportunities?” It seems that the black students in our area by and large must have some mixture of views on the topic: a) they do not see higher education as a real and valuable option, or b) they do not care about or even consider higher education and have other plans for their lives, or c) do not think it is realistically possible for them to integrate into the dominant power structure, or d) have no idea how to break into the mainstream middle class American world. There are many accompanying issues such as these students’ constant hostility; many of them ride almost an hour (on buses with no white people) through wealthy neighborhoods (with no black people) to attend a school where they feel no sense of belonging, power, or ownership. Willis (1977) suggests that rebellion against schools

270
and learning is representative of a much larger rebellion against the status quo in its systematic resistance to authority.

Once I got involved in developing the project, it became clear that historical images would be part of the presentation. It took on a life of its own and grew in this direction; it was impossible for that not to happen, it seems to me. I have kept a notebook and jotted down comments and questions from students and teachers over the past couple of years, and these were a driving force in putting together the pieces I had collected. Along with the photographs I took and the quotes I had collected, I spent many hours searching the Internet for photographs from historic archives that illustrate the brutality towards African American people in this country from slavery to the present.

I knew I wanted to include music, as there is no denying that music literally resonates with something deeper and more primitive in us all. Music opens us up and connects us. Almost immediately I decided to use songs by Akon. Akon is from Senegal on the African continent, and his debut album *Trouble* (2004) is amazing. I first heard the song “Ghetto” when watching the video on music television, and I was blown away by the power of the music and images. This was the first song I knew I wanted to put into the project, and there were several others I wanted to add. My partner Anne-Laura took the creation to the next level when she edited out many images to keep the presentation to a manageable length, and helped me make the decision to use just three songs (all by Akon): *Ghetto*, *Locked Up*, and *Journey*. Most importantly she rearranged the order of many of the images to match them with phrases or beats in the songs, and even set up the power point so the pictures were timed to best fit the rhythm and sequence of the music. This dramatically added to the power of the slide show, and the collaborative effort made it a more rich experience for me.

**Closing thoughts**

Rosemary Sullivan wrote, “Looked back at, there are only a few memories that cohere to anchor us, but these will be repeated again and again in the depths of our unconscious throughout our lives” (1995, p. 131). So I ask—what barriers are maintained again and again in the depths of the unconscious as well as the conscious throughout the lives of many people in our society? What images and history and suffering continue to oppress children of color in our schools? What part do I play in that?

The oppression of racism takes on a particularly personal sting to me as an Alabamian when you look at the fight for civil rights here in the south just 40 years ago; herein lie many of the images in the photo essay. From a Buddhist interpretation, all things are interrelated—thus, you cannot justifiably separate the current educational achievement gap now from slavery, civil rights, and racism ingrained within the culture. But how hard is it to unwind a ball of string that is buried under a quagmire of quicksand and sitting atop a land mine?

So why ask the questions? Why create a work which causes distress? Why look so closely, especially when you discern that there might not be “solutions” in the traditional sense of solving a problem to a satisfactory closure? Certainly my background in physics and the “modern” world and our ability to quantify and conquer all does not equip me well to work out the complexities of social issues in education. Yet, as Gadamer (1987) stated, “What man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but insights into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine” (p. 357). And furthermore, we “must accept the fact that future generations will understand differently” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 340). There has to be value in seeing and in letting other people see. There even has to be value in allowing ourselves to feel. There also has to be hope in our ability to
evolve—even if we have to force the punctuated equilibrium that allows us to move forward in a positive way within the buzzing circle of humanity on our tiny sphere.
Appendix 2: Activity Theory

Activity Theory Path. Tools acquired and the context of community can change every step in the dynamic path (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 1997).

Activity theory table follows on next page.
### Activity Theory (Tan, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operation-level support</th>
<th>Action-level support</th>
<th>Activity-level support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tool, instrument</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automating routines</td>
<td>Supporting transformative and manipulative actions Making tools and procedures visible and comprehensible</td>
<td>Enabling the automation of a new routine or construction of a new tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Object</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing data about an object</td>
<td>Making an object manipulable</td>
<td>Enabling something to become a common object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggering predeter- mined responses</td>
<td>Supporting sense-making actions within an activity</td>
<td>Supporting learning and reflection with respect to the whole object and activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rules</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedding and imposing a certain set of rules</td>
<td>Making the set of rules visible and comprehensible</td>
<td>Enabling the negotiation of new rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating an implicit community by linking work tasks of several people together</td>
<td>Supporting communicative actions Making the network of actors visible</td>
<td>Enabling the formation of a new community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Division of labor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedding and imposing a certain division of labor</td>
<td>Making the work organization visible and comprehensible</td>
<td>Enabling the reorganization of the division of labor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Tuscaloosa Crime Rates

These are relevant Tuscaloosa demographics as retrieved February 04, 2012 from CLR search (real estate search) http://www.clrsearch.com/Tuscaloosa_Demographics/AL/
Tuscaloosa Demographics Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2010 Crime Rate Indexes</th>
<th>Tuscaloosa, AL</th>
<th>Alabama</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Crime Risk Index</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder Risk Index</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape Risk Index</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery Risk Index</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault Risk Index</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary Risk Index</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny Risk Index</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor Vehicle Theft Risk Index</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Crime Risk Index (100 = National Average): Index score for an area is compared to the national average of 100. A score of 200 indicates twice the national average total crime risk, while 50 indicates half the national risk. We encourage you to consult with a knowledgeable local real estate agent or contact the local police department for any additional information. Information is deemed reliable but not guaranteed. Demographic Information FAQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2010 Highest Education Level Attained (Population Age 25+)</th>
<th>Tuscaloosa, AL</th>
<th>Alabama</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did Not Complete High School</td>
<td>16.02%</td>
<td>19.20%</td>
<td>15.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed High School</td>
<td>27.11%</td>
<td>31.79%</td>
<td>29.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>20.14%</td>
<td>20.33%</td>
<td>20.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed Associate Degree</td>
<td>5.98%</td>
<td>6.54%</td>
<td>7.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed Bachelors Degree</td>
<td>18.04%</td>
<td>14.20%</td>
<td>17.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed Graduate Degree</td>
<td>12.71%</td>
<td>7.95%</td>
<td>9.84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2010 Education Enrollment (Population Age 3+)</th>
<th>Tuscaloosa, AL</th>
<th>Alabama</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Index</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 2010 Highest Education Level Attained (Population Age 25+)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Tuscaloosa, AL</th>
<th>Alabama</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Preprimary</td>
<td>0.99%</td>
<td>0.70%</td>
<td>0.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Preprimary</td>
<td>0.64%</td>
<td>1.05%</td>
<td>1.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public School</td>
<td>14.61%</td>
<td>16.87%</td>
<td>17.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private School</td>
<td>1.68%</td>
<td>2.06%</td>
<td>2.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public College</td>
<td>16.52%</td>
<td>5.35%</td>
<td>5.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private College</td>
<td>1.57%</td>
<td>0.90%</td>
<td>1.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Enrolled in School</td>
<td>63.99%</td>
<td>73.06%</td>
<td>71.64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Highest Education Level Attained (Populations Age 25+):** The data represents the percentage of people in the area over age 25 who have attained a particular education level.

**Education Index:** The Education Index for Zip Codes and places are comprised of a combination of socio-demographic characteristics. These index scores are not based statistically upon the performance of specific schools, programs or colleges located in these areas.

**Education Enrollment (Population Age 3+):** The data represents the percentage of people in the area over age 3 who are currently enrolled at each type of learning institution.

**Index score:** (100 = National Average) for an area is compared to the national average of 100. A score of 200 indicates twice the national average, while 50 indicates half the national average. Information is deemed reliable but not guaranteed. [Demographic Information FAQ](#)

### 2010 Quality of Life Indexes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Tuscaloosa, AL</th>
<th>Alabama</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Life Index</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amusement Index</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Index</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthquake Index</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Index</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Index</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortality Index (All Causes)</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion Index</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant Index</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quality of Life Index: Based on the results of a study group, this index is calculated based on what variables affect individuals as they search for a new home, how much they would enjoy living in a place and the impact of each selected variable. For example, the crime index affects the total quality of life index negatively and the amusement index affects it positively.

Positive Variables Weighted for Quality of Life Index: Amusement, Culture, Education, Medical, Religion, Restaurants and Weather

Negative Variables Weighted for Quality of Life Index: Crime, Earthquake and Mortality

Index score: (100 = National Average) for an area is compared to the national average of 100. A score of 200 indicates twice the national average, while 50 indicates half the national average. Information is deemed reliable but not guaranteed. Demographic Information FAQ
ABOUT TUSCALOOSA CRIME RATES

With a crime rate of 64 per one thousand residents, Tuscaloosa has one of the highest crime rates in America compared to all communities of all sizes - from the smallest towns to the very largest cities. One's chance of becoming a victim of either violent or property crime here is one in 16. Within Alabama, more than 94% of the communities have a lower crime rate than Tuscaloosa. Separately, it is always interesting and important to compare a city's crime rate with those of similarly sized communities - a fair comparison as larger cities tend to have more crime. NeighborhoodScout has done just that. With a population of 90,468, Tuscaloosa has a combined rate of violent and property crime that is very high compared to other places of similar population size. Regardless of whether Tuscaloosa does well or poorly compared to all other cities and towns in the US of all sizes, compared to places with a similar population, it fares badly. Few other communities of this size have a crime rate as high as Tuscaloosa.

The crime data that NeighborhoodScout used for this analysis are the seven offenses from the uniform crime reports, collected by the FBI from 17,000 local law enforcement agencies, and include both violent and property crimes, combined.

Now let us turn to take a look at how Tuscaloosa does for violent crimes specifically, and then how it does for property crimes. This is important because the overall crime rate can be further illuminated by understanding if violent crime or property crimes (or both) are the major contributors to the general rate of crime in Tuscaloosa.

From our analysis, we discovered that violent crime in Tuscaloosa occurs at a rate higher than in most communities of all population sizes in America. The chance that a person will become a victim of a violent crime in Tuscaloosa; such as armed robbery, aggravated assault, rape or murder; is 1 in 195. This equates to a rate of 5 per one thousand inhabitants.

In addition, NeighborhoodScout found that a lot of the crime that takes place in Tuscaloosa is property crime. Property crimes that are tracked for this analysis are burglary, larceny over fifty dollars, motor vehicle theft, and arson. In Tuscaloosa, your chance of becoming a victim of a property crime is one in 17, which is a rate of 58 per one thousand population.
Appendix 4: Survey On PLCs

Survey on PLCs for Amanda Cassity’s Doctoral Research, with Associated Emails
Sent to and retrieved from my school email, February 07, 2012

PLC survey
Victoria Evans VEvans@tusc.k12.al.us

From the principal to all teachers at our school:

>>> Isaac Espy 2/7/2012 9:07 AM >>>

Teachers,

I am requesting that you assist Amanda Cassity with her dissertation research on Professional Learning Communities by completing an online survey.

Please refer to her narrative below, and the link at the bottom of the page. Thank you very much for doing this.

Isaac Espy

From the doctoral student, Amanda Cassity, director of Secondary Instruction in the Tuscaloosa County Schools, to all teachers at our school:

>>> Amanda Cassity <acassity@tcss.net> 2/7/2012 7:53 AM >>>

Thank you so much for participating in this research project. I greatly appreciate your assistance.

All participation is strictly voluntary. Participants are guaranteed complete confidentiality and anonymity. Survey results will only be used to test the hypotheses of this study. Only aggregate data for the school will be used, and no attempt will be made to link responses to a specific teacher or group of teachers in a particular school. Individual school data will not be released to anyone. Also, the school data will not be identifiable in the research report.

Again, I am extremely appreciative of your willingness to assist me in this research effort. If you have any questions or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me (ahcassity@crimson.ua.edu or acassity@tcss.net).

Amanda Cassity

Please click on the link below to access the survey:

http://bamaesprmc.us2.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_3n3p8fu1BoYShbS
Dear Colleague:

My name is Amanda Cassity, and I am Director of Secondary Instruction for the Tuscaloosa County School System. Having completed all requirements for doctoral coursework in Educational Administration at The University of Alabama, I am in the dissertation stage and seeking assistance from Alabama public middle and high schools to complete my research.

As the principal investigator from the University of Alabama, I am conducting a research study called Relationships among Professional Learning Communities, School Academic Optimism, and Student Achievement in Alabama Middle and High Schools. I want to find out if there are relationships among professional learning communities (PLCs), the level of academic optimism, and student achievement in public secondary schools in order to help school leaders identify variables that can improve achievement.

Taking part in this study involves completing a web survey that will take about 15 minutes. This survey contains questions about professional learning communities and academic optimism.

We will protect your confidentiality by using QualtricsTM online software program. The survey is anonymous, and you will not be asked for your name or any personally identifiable information. Only Daisy Arredondo Rucinski and I will have access to the data. The data are password protected via QualtricsTM. Only summarized data will be presented at meetings or in publications.

Although there will be no direct benefits to you, the findings will be useful to school leaders and educational researchers for determining methods of improving professional learning community implementation, school academic optimism and student achievement. (Emphasis added, not in original communication.)

The chief risk is that you may be hesitant to respond to some questions. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer. Please do not include your name or any identifying information on the survey.
If you have questions about this study, please contact me at 205-342-2899 or by email at ahcassity@crimson.ua.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant contact Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University at (205) 348-8461 or toll free number: 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make a suggestion, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html. After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants, which is online there, or you may ask me for a copy of it. You may also email IRB Outreach at participantoutreacher@bama.ua.edu.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS COMPLETELY VOLUNTARY. You are free not to participate or stop participating any time before you submit your answers.

If you understand the statements above, are at least 19 years old, and freely consent to be in this study, please click on the I CONSENT button to begin.

I am extremely appreciative of your assistance and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Amanda H. Cassity
Doctoral Candidate
The University of Alabama

The Consent and Survey, Taken and Compiled Online
Survey is over 9 pages on 8” x11” paper, more online; 52 Questions:

By completing this survey I am consenting to participate in this research study. Confidentiality will be strictly maintained.

☐ I consent to participate in this research study.

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about your school from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Your answers are confidential.

Teachers in this school are able to get through to the most difficult students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers here are confident they will be able to motivate their students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If a child doesn't want to learn, teachers here give up.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers here don't have the skills needed to produce meaningful results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

Teachers in this school believe that every child can learn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>☐</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These students come to school ready to learn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<td>☐</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Home life provides many advantages that students are bound to learn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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</table>

Students here just aren't motivated to learn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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Teachers in this school do not have the skills to deal with student disciplinary problems.

283
The opportunities in this community help ensure that these students will learn.

Learning is more difficult at this school because students are worried about their safety.

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about your school from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Your answers are confidential.

Drug and alcohol abuse in the community make learning difficult for students here.

Teachers in this school trust their students.

Teachers in this school trust the parents.

Students in this school care about each other.

Parents in this school are reliable in their commitments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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Students in this school can be counted upon to do their work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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</table>

Teachers can count upon parental support.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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Teachers here believe that students are competent learners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Teachers here believe that most of the parents do a good job.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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</table>

Teachers can believe what parents tell them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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Students here are secretive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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Please indicate the degree to which the following statements characterize your school from **Rarely Occurs** to **Very Often Occurs**. Your answers are confidential.

The school sets high standards for performance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely Occurs</th>
<th>Sometimes Occurs</th>
<th>Often Occurs</th>
<th>Very Often Occurs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</table>

Students respect others who get good grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely Occurs</th>
<th>Sometimes Occurs</th>
<th>Often Occurs</th>
<th>Very Often Occurs</th>
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</table>

Students seek extra work so they can get good grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely Occurs</th>
<th>Sometimes Occurs</th>
<th>Often Occurs</th>
<th>Very Often Occurs</th>
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Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely Occurs</th>
<th>Sometimes Occurs</th>
<th>Often Occurs</th>
<th>Very Often Occurs</th>
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Students try hard to improve on previous work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely Occurs</th>
<th>Sometimes Occurs</th>
<th>Often Occurs</th>
<th>Very Often Occurs</th>
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</table>

The learning environment is orderly and serious.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely Occurs</th>
<th>Sometimes Occurs</th>
<th>Often Occurs</th>
<th>Very Often Occurs</th>
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The students in this school can achieve the goals that have been set for them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely Occurs</th>
<th>Sometimes Occurs</th>
<th>Often Occurs</th>
<th>Very Often Occurs</th>
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Teachers in this school believe that their students have the ability to achieve academically.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rarely Occurs</th>
<th>Sometimes Occurs</th>
<th>Often Occurs</th>
<th>Very Often Occurs</th>
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**Directions:** This questionnaire concerns your perceptions about your school staff as a learning organization. There are no right or wrong responses. Please consider where you believe your school is in its development of each of the five descriptors shown in bold-faced type. Each sub-item has a five-point scale. On each scale, select the number that best represents the degree to which you feel your school has developed.

**1a. School administrators participate democratically with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision making.**
1. Administrators never share information with the staff nor provide opportunities to be involved in decision making.

2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)

3. Administrators invite advice and counsel from staff and then make decisions themselves.

4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)

5. Although there are some legal and fiscal decisions required of the principal, school administrators consistently involve the staff in discussing and making decisions about school issues.

1b. School administrators participate democratically with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision making.

1. Administrators do not involve any staff.

2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)

3. Administrators involve a small committee, council, or team of staff.

4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)

5. Administrators involve the entire staff.

2a. The staff shares visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and these visions are consistently referenced in the staff's work.

1. Visions for improvement held by the staff members are widely divergent.

2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)

3. Visions for improvement are not thoroughly explored; some staff members agree and others do not.

4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)

5. Visions for improvement are discussed by the entire staff such that consensus and a shared vision result.

2b. The staff shares visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and these visions are consistently referenced in the staff’s work.

1. Visions for improvement do not target students, teaching, and learning.

2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)

3. Visions for improvement are sometimes focused on students, teaching, and learning.

4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)

5. Visions for improvement are always focused on students, teaching, and learning.

2c. The staff shares visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and these visions are consistently referenced in the staff's work.
1. Visions for improvement do not include concerns about the quality of learning experiences.

2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)

3. Visions for improvement address quality learning experiences in terms of students' abilities.

4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)

5. Visions for improvement target high-quality learning experiences for all students.

3a. The staff's collective learning and application of the learnings (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.

1. Individuals randomly discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.

2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)

3. Subgroups of the staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.

4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)

5. The entire staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.

3b. The staff's collective learning and application of the learnings (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.

1. The staff never meet to consider substantive educational issues.

2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)

3. The staff meet occasionally on substantive student-centered educational issues.

4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)

5. The staff meet regularly and frequently on substantive student-centered educational issues.

3c. The staff's collective learning and application of the learnings (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.

1. The staff basically discuss non-teaching and non-learning issues.

2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)

3. The staff does not often discuss their instructional practices nor its influence on student learning.

4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)

5. The staff discuss the quality of their teaching and students' learning.
3d. The staff's collective learning and application of the learnings (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.

☐ 1. The staff do not act on their learnings.
☐ 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
☐ 3. The staff occasionally act on their learnings and make and implement plans to improve teaching and learning.
☐ 4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
☐ 5. The staff, based on their learnings, make and implement plans that address students' needs, more effective teaching, and more successful student learning.

3e. The staff's collective learning and application of the learnings (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.

☐ 1. The staff do not assess their work.
☐ 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
☐ 3. The staff infrequently assess their actions and seldom make revisions based on the results.
☐ 4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
☐ 5. The staff debrief and assess the impact of their actions and make revisions.

4a. Peers review and give feedback based on observing one another's classroom behaviors in order to increase individual and organizational capacity.

☐ 1. Staff members never visit their peers' classrooms.
☐ 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
☐ 3. Staff members occasionally visit and observe one another's teaching.
☐ 4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
☐ 5. Staff members regularly and frequently visit and observe one another's classroom teaching.

4b. Peers review and give feedback based on observing one another's classroom behaviors in order to increase individual and organizational capacity.

☐ 1. Staff members do not interact after classroom observations.
☐ 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
☐ 3. Staff members discuss non-teaching issues after classroom observations.
☐ 4. (Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
☐ 5. Staff members provide feedback to one another about teaching and learning based on their classroom observations.
5a. School conditions and capacities support the staff’s arrangement as a professional learning organization.
- 1. Staff cannot arrange time for interacting.
- 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
- 3. Time is arranged but frequently the staff fail to meet.
- 4. Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
- 5. Time is arranged and committed for whole staff interactions.

5b. School conditions and capacities support the staff’s arrangement as a professional learning organization.
- 1. The staff take no action to manage the facility and personnel for interaction.
- 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
- 3. Considering the size, structure, and arrangements of the school, the staff are working to maximize interaction.
- 4. Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
- 5. The size, structure, and arrangements of the school facilitate staff proximity and interaction.

5c. School conditions and capacities support the staff’s arrangement as a professional learning organization.
- 1. Communication devices are not given attention.
- 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
- 3. A single communication method exists and is sometimes used to share information.
- 4. Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
- 5. A variety of processes and procedures are used to encourage staff communication.

5d. School conditions and capacities support the staff’s arrangement as a professional learning organization.
- 1. Trust and openness do not exist among the staff members.
- 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
- 3. Some of the staff members are trusting and open.
- 4. Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
- 5. Trust and openness characterize all of the staff members.
5e. School conditions and capacities support the staff's arrangement as a professional learning organization.

☐ 1. Staff members are isolated and work alone at their tasks.
☐ 2. (Answer falls between 1 and 3.)
☐ 3. Caring and collaboration are inconsistently demonstrated among the staff members.
☐ 4. Answer falls between 3 and 5.)
☐ 5. Caring, collaborative, and productive relationships exist among all staff members.

What is your total number of years of experience?
☐ 0-5 years
☐ 6-10 years
☐ 11-15 years
☐ 16-20 years
☐ 20 or more years

How many years have you worked in this school?
☐ 0-5 years
☐ 6-10 years
☐ 11-15 years
☐ 16-20 years
☐ 20 or more years

What is your gender?
☐ Male
☐ Female
What is your ethnicity?
☐ African American
☐ Asian
☐ Hispanic
☐ Native American
☐ White
☐ Other

What is your highest degree earned?
☐ Bachelors
☐ Masters
☐ Education Specialist
☐ Ed.D. or Ph.D.
Appendix 5: Reviews Of Northridge High School

Reviews of Northridge High School, retrieved Feb. 07, 2012 from Great Schools online at http://www.greatschools.org/alabama/tuscaloosa/2112-Northridge-High-School/

These are all 6 reviews posted about NHS as of February 07, 2012:

Sort by: Date: new est to oldest ▼

Show reviews by: □ Parents □ Students

Posted May 16, 2011
Report it

Northridge High School is a great school! My son is a 2011 graduate and my daughter was a 2009 graduate. The kids have attended several schools in many states / areas during their educational endeavors. They actually transferred from a private high school and found Northridge to be preferred. The administration is WONDERFUL! Sure, every school system has their "problems" but Northridge handles the situations effectively. The teachers make learning FUN & most become lifelong friends with their students. This alone says something! The 2011 graduating class was awarded over $10 million dollars in scholarships AND Northridge has a total 5 NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARS.....compare THAT to many other schools!!!!! Thank you, Northridge administration, faculty & staff for providing these kids an EXCELLENT beginning to their future and the rest of their lives! Dr. Espy takes great pride in his school and that pride & dedication shows! The counselors, Ms. Hudgins, Ms. Drane, Ms. Tiley, & Ms. Colvin are the BEST! They are SUPERIOR in their jobs!! The athletic staff are INCREDIBLE - Ms. Reed, Ms. Shuttlesworth, Mr. McBride, Ms Shaw, Coach Bowling, Coach Brantley..etc. GREAT! GOJAGS
—Submitted by a parent

Write your own review

-----------------------------------------------------------

Posted February 24, 2011
Report it

iLove This School.! It Is Soo Awesome..It Gives Kids Freedom And A Great Education..It Is Mixed Racial So Some People Can Learn About Other Cultures...
—Submitted by a student

Write your own review

-----------------------------------------------------------

Posted October 29, 2010
Report it

This was supposed to be the great new school -- to divide from central and create the rich kid perfect school away from "undesirables." Major F.A.I.L. If you have relocated to Tuscaloosa, consider living in Hoover, Vestavia HIlls or other Bham
areas where education matters. A 5 of out 10 in a great college town -- the rich, white area! A disgrace!
—Submitted by a parent

This is the greatest school ever...class of 2011!
—Submitted by a student

It's hard to come up with anything that stands out too much about Northridge, other than the fact that there are a few teachers there who really know their stuff, and are very gifted at what they do, and after some restructuring the administration became more helpful. However, where Northridge does have a few shining points in its academia, it lacks in its breadth. Essentially, there is one route you can take in your classes to ensure that you're really getting a good deal in your education. Soon, however, it will lose a few really good teachers to retirement in its foreign language and science departments, and unless Alabama's public education system and the Tuscaloosa City Board of Education can step teacher recruitment up a notch, Northridge could hit a large slump.
—Submitted by a former student

Great teachers. Great parent involvement. Difficult administration.
—Submitted by a parent
## Appendix 6: Graduation Exam Results

Northridge High School Graduation Exam Results for Grade 11, 2010 according to the Alabama State Department of Education, retrieved February 07, 2012 from [http://www.greatschools.org/modperl/achievement/al/2112#from..HeaderLink](http://www.greatschools.org/modperl/achievement/al/2112#from..HeaderLink).

### AHSGE Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale: % passing</th>
<th>Grade 11</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74% (2010)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>77% (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>81% (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>82% (2007)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The state average for Reading was 82% in 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>67% (2010)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>73% (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>66% (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74% (2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The state average for Social Studies was 73% in 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biology I</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>93% (2010)</td>
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</table>

The state average for Biology I was 93% in 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>72% (2010)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>76% (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74% (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>84% (2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The state average for Language was 78% in 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Math</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74% (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80% (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>84% (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80% (2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The state average for Math was 84% in 2010.

Source: AL Dept. of Education, 2009-2010
Triggering in the
unseen

Appendix 7: Education Initiatives

The New York Times
Monday, February 13, 2012

The Caucus, Politics and Government blog of the New York Times

February 7, 2012, 2:06 PM
Obama Announces Education Initiatives at White House Science Fair
By JACKIE CALMES

Stephen Crowley/The New York Times
President Obama watched as Joey Hudy, 14, launched a marshmallow from his “Extreme Marshmallow Cannon” in the White House State Dining Room on Tuesday.
President Obama for a second time converted the White House public rooms into a science fair on Tuesday, and announced new federal and private-sector initiatives to encourage “a nation of tinkerers and dreamers” in so-called STEM education in science, technology, engineering and math.
After Mr. Obama had wandered like a judge among the science projects assembled in the Grand Foyer and State, Red and Blue rooms, absorbing explanations from each award-winning student, he said he was reminded of his own experience as a science student and added, “Basically, you guys put me to shame.”

According to a White House summary, in his annual federal budget request next week, Mr. Obama will seek to dedicate $80 million for the Education Department to a $100 million competition – more than $20 million will come
from corporations and foundations led by Carnegie Corporation – to support programs to prepare teachers in science, technology, engineering and math, including programs allowing students to simultaneously earn a degree in their subject and a teaching certificate.

The administration had previously set a goal of 100,000 additional math and science teachers and one million more graduates over the next decade. “This is a goal we can achieve,” Mr. Obama said in remarks to the audience of more than 100 students from 45 states, business leaders and science educators, including “Bill Nye the Science Guy,” former host of a popular program on educational television.

A presidential advisory council, in a report also released on Tuesday, said one million additional graduates were needed to fill the expected jobs requiring math and science skills in the next decade. According to the report, fewer than 40 percent of students who major in math and science in college complete their education to earn a degree. Raising that to 50 percent would produce about three-quarters of the needed graduates.

The White House said the National Science Foundation would invest more than $100 million to improve undergraduate instruction practices, including in community colleges and heavily minority institutions. The foundation and the Education Department will each contribute $30 million toward incentives for math education in elementary and high schools. (Emphasis added, not in original.)

As for private-sector efforts, a year after Mr. Obama announced a “Change the Equation” initiative to enlist corporate executives to get involved, the White House said more than 100 executives were investing and participating in 130 programs nationwide, more than half of them in low-income communities, serving an estimated 40,000 students. And the White House highlighted a joint initiative of Time Warner Cable, which it said committed more than $100 million, and the entertainer Will.i.am to challenge young students to invent things with practical applications to their lives and send the ideas to Wouldn'tItBeCoolif.com.

The Science Fair had nearly twice as many winners of various competitions nationwide as the initial White House event in late 2010.

Mr. Obama tested one project, pumping a compressor to propel a marshmallow that hit a wall of the State Dining Room, to the amusement of the students. He pronounced another project as “Skype on wheels” – a trash can-turned-robot intended by its young inventor to wheel about a nursing home to patients who wanted to make phone calls. He told a student her dissolvable sugar packets, to reduce waste, could be used by Starbucks, and added, “Tell me when I can buy stock.” And in his remarks, he singled out three girls who had brought their rocket project from a school in Texas’s fourth poorest district, with help from teachers who held a bake sale at church. Mr. Obama told the few reporters present to “give this some attention” because what the students were doing would “make a bigger difference over the life of our country than just about anything.”
Appendix 8: Social Media For Social Justice

Social Media for Social Justice

Original post retrieved Feb. 13, 2012 from
https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.346225668741615.84405.255079767856206&type=3

I hope that this image travels the world . . .

"While newspapers and television talk about the lives of celebrities, the chief of the Kayapo tribe received the worst news of his life: Dilma, "The new president of Brazil, has given approval to build a huge hydroelectric plant (the third largest in the world).

It is the death sentence for all the people near the river because the dam will flood 400,000 hectares of forest. More than 40,000 Indigenous Indians will have to find another place to live. The natural habitat destruction, deforestation and the disappearance of many species is a fact."

What moves me in my very bowels, making me ashamed of being part of Western culture, is the reaction of the chief of the Kayapo community when he learned of the decision—his gesture of dignity and helplessness before the advance of capitalist progress, modern predatory civilization
that does not respect the differences . . .

But we know that a picture is worth a thousand words, showing the reality of the true price of our bourgeois "quality of life".

Sign the AVAAZ Petition to stop the dam here: http://www.avaaz.org/en/amazon_under_threat/

Here is the link to "Earth. We are one." Official Facebook page:https://www.facebook.com-pages/Earth-We-are-one/149658285050501

It's time to wake up. By: Kevin
Top of Form
Like · · Share · Monday at 7:01am

Record of a few comments after I re-posted (shared) this:
Ria Evans
The whole world has lost its mind, and we have forgotten the necessity to have room for small groups of people in specific places. It seems as if "civilization" will try to delete all but the most powerful, like a plague.
Linda Cholewinski Mills, Sylvia Price Carmichael and Sandy Harpole like this.

2 shares
People Who Shared This

Laura Hunter
This is so dreadful. What ever happened to our respecting our fellowman?
Top of Form
Like · · Monday at 5:11pm ·

Joe Hudson likes this.

Joe Hudson ...Although I honestly can't say I "like" this.
Monday at 5:17pm · Like
Bottom of Form

Lea Davis
Try explaining this picture to your 6 year old without crying. It doesn't happen.
Top of Form
Unlike · · Monday at 9:25am ·

You like this.

Margo Greenlaw That's horrifying! Do you think there's anything anybody can do to stop that dam from being built?
Monday at 9:33am · Unlike · 1

Lea Davis I don't know. We signed petitions but it didn't seem to do much. Do you or any of you documentarian fronds have connections in Brazil? I'm not sure what kind of film coverage it's received.
Monday at 10:41am · Unlike · 1

Petra Redinger This is awful... It makes me furious!!!
Monday at 11:58am · Unlike · 1

Margo Greenlaw You know, Tad is also friends with Daniel Wildberger and Isabel Machado. They're both living in Alabama but are from Brazil, and Isabel is a filmmaker. We should check with them!
Monday at 12:44pm · Unlike · 1

Ria Evans The hope of the world lies in the hands of true activists. When I see people posting about DOING something, it shifts everything. I feel like I can breathe. Lea, I'm sure you make that a big part of any conversations with your 6yr old!!
18 hours ago · Like

Lea Davis we try... brigid did add her name to the petition and she said "If I ever see that government I'm going to do this! (middle finger up)". Margo, that's a good idea. I think I only met them once but maybe Tad would check in with them and see if they're aware of any projects being done on this issue.
12 hours ago · Like · 1

Hammer or Nail
Lea Davis
The question I pose to you, is "would you rather be the hammer or the nail"? The knee-jerk response to this question is usually "the hammer" (also according to Simon and Garfunkle). But I'd like to make a pitch for being the nail. This is related to the previous post about the powerful and the powerless otherwise frequently known as the oppressed and the oppressor in broader historical terms. Consider the two positions... the hammers are the ones with comfort, convenience, wealth, beauty, access, power. The nails are the ones who struggle for existence, the hungry, the sick, the ugly, the tired, the powerless. When you think about this dichotomy in broader historical terms, it becomes more obvious that the hammers have their power BECAUSE they have nails to pound on. After all, a hammer without a nail is above nothing, it's just a hammer. So the real difference between the hammers and the nails is not one of circumstances, it is one of morality. To be a hammer you have to be willing to pound on a nail. The nail may be right in front of you, your employee, your child, the waiter, anyone that you CAN exercise power over. Or the nail may be someone you will never meet, thousands of miles away in a factory working for slave wages. Is the comfort and convince of being a hammer, worth the loss? Religious people have promised the comforts of heaven to the nails of the world and the flames of hell to the worst of the hammers. As an atheist, this is something I clearly don't believe. I would argue that walking this earth as a human being with the moral bankruptcy required to be a true hammer IS hell. So, yes, there are things one would give up by CHOOSING to be a nail, but none as dear as what one looses by choosing to be a hammer.

Unlike · · Unfollow Post · 4 hours ago ·

You like this.

Amy Jones Librant I choose option 3: The wood the nail's being driven into. It supports the nail and meets the hammer with resistance. ;)
2 hours ago · Unlike · 2

Lea Davis oooh. i like that! excellent option :)
40 minutes ago · Unlike · 1

Ria Evans Lea, I think Mother Teresa and other activist advocates for the poor--both religious and not religious--would agree with you. I like your comparison of hammer and nail. Amy, funny, I too thought of wood, the chance to both support and be shaped. I like the idea that it can also resist--I didn't think of that--but is not impervious to impact.
29 minutes ago · Like · 1

Lea Davis
well shhiiiiittt, you know me, i'm a regular mother teresa, yo. hehe...ok, just trying to lighten myself up a little. but yes, these are things that i think pretty much everyone knows down deep. i think they are very natural and why injustice disturbs civilization. but it's become extremely unfashionable to talk about things in anything other than economic terms. i feel like Howard Beale from Network (aside from the hearing voices bit). What i'd like to do is open the window and yell "have we all lost our fucking minds??" ... but the village of Riverside probably wouldn't be happy about that and i doubt it would have much effect. Sometimes writing these things on facebook seems like a trivial use of time but in some ways it fulfills that need and hearing from friends like you and Amy helps us to feel less alone in a crazy world! By the way, Amy is one of the most loving and wonderfully supportive mothers I have ever known. So I am not surprised she thought to be the wood. :)
12 minutes ago · Unlike · 1

Ria Evans It is absolutely a saving thing to participate in the spirit of community, in whatever ways we can. Yes, it helps us to feel less alone in a crazy world. That is NOT a waste of time, I am sure of that!! :-) I'm pretty sure it's one of the best uses of time, and one of the things which we have forgotten about as we fill our spaces with hype, commercial goods, and over-stimulation of noise and visual chaos. We have forgotten to slow down, be still, share stories, and think. As a culture, we have certainly forgotten that we are responsible for each other.

a few seconds ago · Like
Appendix 9: Fourth Graders Change The World

Fourth Graders Change the World with the Internet

Take Ted Wells’s fourth-grade class in Brookline, Mass. The kids read the Dr. Seuss story “The Lorax” and admired its emphasis on protecting nature, so they were delighted to hear that Universal Studios would be releasing a movie version in March. But when the kids went to the movie’s Web site, they were crushed that the site seemed to ignore the environmental themes. So last month they started a petition on Change.org, the go-to site for Web uprisings. They demanded that Universal Studios “let the Lorax speak for the trees.” The petition went viral, quickly gathering more than 57,000 signatures, and the studio updated the movie site with the environmental message that the kids had dictated.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/kristof-after-recess-change-the-world.html?_r=1
Appendix 10: Waivers From Education Law

New York Times, Education section
10 States Are Given Waivers From Education Law
By WINNIE HU
Published: February 9, 2012

A decade after the No Child Left Behind law rewrote the nation’s education policies, President Obama freed 10 states from some of its crucial provisions on Thursday, including a deadline for bringing all students to proficiency in reading and math by 2014.

A version of this article appeared in print on February 10, 2012, on page A13 of the New York edition with the headline: 10 States Are Given Waivers From Education Law.

Gains and Gaps: Changing Inequality in U.S. College Entry and Completion

Online access to NBER Working Papers denied, you have no subscription

Martha J. Bailey, Susan M. Dynarski
NBER Working Paper No. 17633
Issued in December 2011

We describe changes over time in inequality in postsecondary education using nearly seventy years of data from the U.S. Census and the 1979 and 1997 National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth. We find growing gaps between children from high- and low-income families in college entry, persistence, and graduation. Rates of college completion increased by only four percentage points for low-income cohorts born around 1980 relative to cohorts born in the early 1960s, but by 18 percentage points for corresponding cohorts who grew up in high-income families. Among men, inequality in educational attainment has increased slightly since the early 1980s. But among women, inequality in educational attainment has risen sharply, driven by increases in the education of the daughters of high-income parents. Sex differences in educational attainment, which were small or nonexistent thirty years ago, are now substantial, with women outpacing men in every demographic group. The female advantage in educational attainment is largest in the top quartile of the income distribution. These sex differences present a formidable challenge to standard explanations for rising inequality in educational attainment.

Appendix 12: Education Gap Grows

Education Gap Grows Between Rich and Poor, Studies Say

By SABRINA TAVERNISE
Published: February 9, 2012

WASHINGTON — Education was historically considered a great equalizer in American society, capable of lifting less advantaged children and improving their chances for success as adults. But a body of recently published scholarship suggests that the achievement gap between rich and poor children is widening, a development that threatens to dilute education’s leveling effects.


http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/10/education/education-gap-grows-between-rich-and-poor-studies-show.html?_r=1