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I, Dorothy Reynolds, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

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Teachers’ Responses to Using a Small-Group Delivery Method during Reading Instruction: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract
The purpose of this research was to examine teachers’ perspectives on transitioning from a predominately whole to small-group delivery method during reading instruction. This study used a qualitative approach and nested itself in an epistemology of constructivism. The research operated under the umbrella of practice ethnography as it closely examined a reading framework that incorporated small-group instruction. Research was conducted in a large urban school district. There were four teachers who participated in the study. All four teachers were implementing a small-group delivery method. Pre-observational surveys, classroom observations and post-observational interviews were used to gain insight into their practice. Using a theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, the researcher presented case studies to reveal each teacher’s reaction as she transitioned from a whole to small-group delivery method. A cross-case analysis was conducted to capture their responses regarding the challenges and benefits of implementing this type of delivery method. The researcher found that although teachers felt that the theory of using a small-group delivery method is pedagogically sound, the process of implementation may be overwhelming. The study found that this delivery method promoted students’ discourse, social skill development, student-teacher relationships and increased the opportunities for students to respond and actively engage in the learning process. The study also found that one key benefit to using a small-group delivery method is that teachers are able to provide differentiated and individualized instruction according to students’ academic needs. A list of clearly-identified patterns of effective classroom management strategies and behaviors that are needed when utilizing this delivery method emerged from the study. A primary conclusion from the study is that using a small-group delivery method is not only an academically sound practice for urban schools, but students enjoy and benefit from this
Another conclusion is that support and training are critical factors in sustaining teachers in their transition from a predominately whole to small-group delivery method. Specific implications for the field of education include teacher training, coaching support throughout the transitional phase, and identifying additional effective classroom management strategies. Training of preservice teachers at the university level is also recommended. An appeal for further research on the process of small-group implementation is discussed. There are three areas that are in need of further exploration: 1) the instruction that is delivered at the teaching station, 2) identification of additional effective classroom management strategies using this delivery method and 3) sociological and psychological effect on students.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Dorothy M. Valentine, who taught me many lessons through her life and death. Her faithfulness in God demonstrated to me the importance of relying on Him. As my first teacher, she encouraged and believed in me long before I was aware of my own abilities. She will be greatly missed and lives in my heart forever.
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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW

Where Do We Go From Here?

Coach: Hello, how are you today?

Teacher: Well, you know: A million things to do and not enough time to do it.

Coach: I understand that. How are you doing with the Reading Framework?

Teacher: [pauses and takes a deep sigh] I kind of started. I mean, [slows down] I read the materials but I am not sure if my students are ready for that. I mean I have students with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Severe Emotionally Disturbed (SED), Autism and those that are two to three grade levels behind in their reading. My students are not able to work in groups. I have to watch them every second to keep a fight from breaking out. To be quite honest, I haven’t started it at all. [Tears well up in teacher’s eyes]

Coach: It’s okay. I know that it is difficult to do something new with all the other things that you have to do. I also know that you have a wide range of abilities in your class and that it must be very hard for you to teach to all of those different levels plus social skills at the same time.

Teacher: You bet. I am beat by the time that I go home every day.

Coach: Have you considered working with one group while the other group is working on something that they are able to do independently?

Teacher: Their skills are so low. [Pauses and looks as though she is thinking.] Well, they do like to work on the computers and they can stay on there forever if I let them.

Coach: How about having one group work on the computer on a reading program for a period of time while you work with another group on another reading skill. Then you can have them switch after twenty minutes or so. That would allow you to work with a smaller group of students. This way you are not trying to control the entire class while you are teaching. This is slowly implementing the framework but at least it is a start. Are you willing to try?
Teacher: You don’t know my kids. They can’t work together.

Coach: Remember, I worked here for two years and I do know your kids. I know that it will take a lot of practice and working on social skills. They can do it. How about if you start out teaching them how to work in small groups while you rotate from one group to another? Then, once they are comfortable with that we will move into starting a teaching station. Again, this is slowly implementing the framework but it’s a start. Are you willing to try?

Teacher: I never thought of that. [Reluctantly] I guess I’ll try.

**Statement of the Problem**

My interest in the pedagogical practice of using small groups during reading instruction began when I was a literacy coach in a large urban public school district. As a district coach, my primary duties were to train, monitor, and assist teachers with their implementation of small groups during the reading block. The above stated vignette is typical of the many meetings that I have had with teachers who were required to implement a new Reading Framework. The framework required a large majority of teachers to change their primary delivery method from whole group to small group during their reading period. In many cases, teachers were not adequately trained or did not feel comfortable in implementing a small-group structure within their classrooms and this teacher was no exception. She felt she had to use a whole-group delivery method in order to control her classroom. She struggled with having a variety of reading levels in her class and felt overwhelmed by the academic gaps and wide range of abilities. Using a whole-group delivery method seemed most comfortable for her and she was reluctant to try small groups without coaxing, encouragement and support.

School districts across the country continue to look for ways to make small-group instruction more effective and manageable for teachers. Florida’s Reading program trained teachers on
using small groups in their Reading First Schools. This framework provided teachers with a structure to use small groups incorporating differentiated instruction. In the summary report from the Florida Center for Reading Research, Crawford and Torgesen (2006) stated that “We must increase the quality, consistency, and reach [author’s emphasis] of classroom instruction by providing systematic and explicit initial instruction, and by providing differentiated instruction delivered individually or in small groups” (p. 1). Differentiating instruction allows teachers to provide instruction to students needing reteaching, practice or enrichment. The Alabama Reading Initiative is another example of a district encouraging teachers to adopt an alternative lesson structure and utilize a small-group delivery method. In her 2005 evaluation of the Alabama Reading Initiative, Moscovitch (2006) stated “The same model of frequent assessment, differentiated, small-group instruction, and research based interventions that has served so well in primary grades will clearly improve instruction in fourth and fifth grades as well” (p. 12). Using a small-group delivery method during reading is a resourceful tool that many educators have found to be helpful when used effectively. However, successfully using small groups during reading, particularly in urban environments, is an area where many teachers continue to struggle. This was the springboard for the focus area of this dissertation. The research was guided by two questions: 1) How do teachers adapt their instruction when transitioning from a whole- to small-group delivery method during reading instruction? and 2) What are the benefits and challenges encountered by teachers when using a small-group delivery method within a reading framework?

Context

There is a national trend of low reading scores and Reis et al. (2007) reported “The 2002 Nation’s Report Card on Reading, issued by the National Assessment of Educational Progress
(NAEP, 2002), indicated that 36% of U.S. fourth graders and 25% of U.S. eighth graders read below a basic level…” (p. 4). Reis et al. (2007) also reported research conducted by Education Trust and stated “…only 12% of fourth-grade African American students read at a proficient or advanced level, and 61% read below a basic level” (p. 5). The National Reading Panel (NRP) also indicates that there are dismal scores in reading achievement across the nation. These statistics sound an alarm that improving reading scores across the nation is critical. One of the many factors of students’ success in reading is the way that they are taught and the delivery method used during reading instruction.

There are numerous reading programs that use small-group instruction as a primary delivery method. Reading programs such as Success for All, Harcourt Trophies, Voyager Universal Literacy and Voyager Passport programs all boast of having success in their programs. A common denominator in these programs, in particular those used for intervention, is the use of a small-group delivery method of instruction. Rashotte, MacPhee and Torgesen (2001) conducted a research study on the effectiveness of a group reading instruction program and reported “The results of the present study indicate that a phonologically based reading instruction program delivered in small groups (3-5) can significantly impact the phonetic and word-level reading skills as well as the reading comprehension skills of deficient readers in first through sixth grade” (p.130). Working with students in close proximity allows teachers to assess students’ understanding and provide corrective feedback. It also provides an opportunity for increased student response. Lou, Abrami and Spence (2000) listed five distinct advantages for using small groups:

There are several reasons for using small-group instruction. First, the emphasis on peer learning means that the teacher may have more time to provide either remedial assistance to
students experiencing difficulties or enrichment activities to students who have already mastered prescribed content. Second, using within-class grouping means that teachers may have greater flexibility in adjusting the learning objectives and the pace of instruction to meet individual learning needs. Third, students in small groups may rehearse material orally, explain it to others, discover solutions, debate, and discuss content and procedural issues, and so forth. Fourth, students who learn together in small groups may be motivated by cooperative, as opposed to competitive, incentive structures. Fifth, small-group instruction means that students may have the opportunity to develop social and communication skills because of the need and opportunity to work with others to learn. (p. 102)

Many of these advantages are limited or absent in a whole-group structure. Although there are many debates on the effectiveness of whole-group versus small-group instruction, there is substantial research and support for using a small-group delivery method.

Lou et al. (1996) conducted a meta-analysis on within-class groupings and reported “On average, students learning in small groups within classrooms achieved significantly more than students not learning in small groups” (p. 439). Small-group instruction is beneficial for students in urban schools. In a study conducted by Rashotte, MacPhee, and Torgesen (2001) they reported “One of the implications of the results of the present study is that a group-delivered instructional program can be successful in a low economic school environment with many reading impaired students” (p. 132). More importantly, teachers are able to provide individual instruction on explicit skills within small-group instruction.

Slavin (1987) used a best-evidence synthesis when he extrapolated and compared features from meta-analytic and narrative reviews to examine ability grouping in elementary schools. He reported:
…analysis of effects of alternative grouping methods suggests that ability grouping is maximally effective when done for only one or two subjects, with students remaining in heterogeneous classes most of the day; when it greatly reduces student heterogeneity in a specific skill; when group assignments are frequently reassessed; and when teachers vary the level and pace of instruction according to students’ needs. (p. 293)

The reading framework discussed in this study supported these findings. One of the strengths of the framework is that it allowed teachers to provide differentiated instruction. Furthermore, this framework afforded teachers the opportunities of eclecticism in order to offer a more balanced literacy approach (Stahl, 1999).

Another study by Nelson and Manset-Williamson (2006) compared explicit comprehension instruction to guided reading instruction and reported “The Manset-Williamson and Nelson study showed that students in the explicit comprehension intervention made significantly larger gains in their reading comprehension skills than did participating in the guided reading intervention” (p. 223). Lou et al. (1996) meta-analysis also revealed that “On average, students placed in small groups achieved more, held more positive attitudes and reported higher general self-concept than students in nongrouped classes” (p. 446). Using a small-group structure renders the same effects in all discipline areas. This study focused on the effect it has during reading instruction.

**Background**

The district used in this research was a large, urban district. According to the rating on the Department of Education State Report Card, this district was in its fifth consecutive year of Continuous Improvement. The district had not met the required percentage of state indicators for reading, 75% passage rate, during this period in grades four, five and six. As shown by Figure
1.1, the scores of fourth-grade students remained steady with slight increases each year. Fifth-grade had a significant drop from the 2006-2007 to 2007-2008 school year from 58.9% to 48.6% respectively. Their scores continued on a declining slope and in 2008-2009 only 47.2% of the students scored proficient or above on the state test. The sixth-grade reading scores in 2005-2006 were the closest to meeting the indicator and they continued to fluctuate in the high fifties to low sixties. These scores were dismal and had an impact on all other academic areas. Moats (2004) reported that, “An inability to read well contributes to a lack of growth in all language skills that support the development of literacy” (p. 145). Reading scores were of great concern to the district and this study examined the use of a small-group delivery method used during reading instruction at grades four, five and six.

Through the district’s Instructional Support Team (IST) formal and informal observations of reading classes, and reading audits conducted by an external agency, it became apparent that teachers were primarily using whole-group instruction and a very static style of delivery and instruction during the reading periods. Under the umbrella of a Reading Framework initiative, reading teachers at grade levels four, five and six were required to implement small-group instruction within the reading period. This initiative was designed to address the problem of low scores in reading and to provide teachers with a structure that supported small-group instruction.

The district charged a group of teachers who were district-wide literacy coaches to create a framework that would provide teachers with a structure to implement small-group instruction. This framework was created in a way that did not limit teachers to a scripted program, but allowed for autonomy in lesson plans according to students’ needs. Furthermore, the district did
Ohio Department of Education Achievement Tests Data

(Percentage of Students Passing)

Figure 1.1 Percentage of students passing the reading part of the Ohio Achievement Test.

Data retrieved from the Ohio Department of Education, website Dec., 2008
not want to purchase a new reading program, but wanted to utilize the current adopted materials
to the fullest potential so these materials were taken into consideration. For instance, leveled
readers were a literature rich resource available in the current textbook series. However, many
teachers were not using these materials because they were not aware of its correlation to the
anthology or that it used the same vocabulary words that were introduced in the story. Along
with the framework, teachers were given suggestions on opportune times to utilize their resource
materials within this format.

The goal of the framework was to help teachers utilize a structure to incorporate small groups,
navigate through the different components in the adopted reading materials and to implement it
during a 90-minute reading block. This framework provided teachers with opportunities to work
with small groups of students to deliver explicit instruction on reading indicators that are
identified in the curriculum. The framework consisted of 90-minute blocks and teachers were
expected to use a small-group delivery method for 60 of those 90 minutes. There were three
components to the framework: 1) whole-group instruction to begin the lesson, 2) small-group
instruction for explicitly teaching groups of students at a teacher’s station, and 3) whole-group
instruction as a closure to the reading block.

The reading period began with the teacher teaching a focus lesson to the whole group for 20
minutes. Teachers had the autonomy to provide a variety of instruction such as teaching a
reading indicator as a focus lesson or conducting a mini lesson on a writing piece. This time was
also used to review the materials, instructions, procedures or activities used in stations.

The next 60 minutes was devoted to small-group instruction where the teacher was able to
work with small groups of students in another area in the room referred to as the teaching station.
The framework suggests that teachers rotated three groups to the teaching station within this time period. Each group received approximately 20 minutes with the teacher at the teaching station.

The final ten minutes consisted of whole-group instruction and was used as a closure where the teacher reviewed the lesson or had students reflect on their learning for the day (See Figure 1.2).

The first objective was to train the district leaders on this framework. A PowerPoint of the framework, which included opportunities for explicit instruction in small group, was created and presented to the district’s elementary administrators. There were two presentations, one in each month, to train principals. The second presentation included strategies to address the challenges that many of the schools were voicing.

Another dimension of the implementation of this framework was to work with the literacy coaches in the district. When implementing a new program it is critical to provide on-going coaching support to teachers during the implementation process. It was critical that coaches were well versed on the framework. Coaches were trained in weekly sessions. These training sessions were structured much like the framework. This provided the coaches with a concrete understanding of the details involved in implementing the framework.

Finally, it was critical to provide support to teachers in the field and to differentiate the support provided to the teacher according to their need. Substitute coverage was provided so that teachers were able to have individualized coaching sessions on their implementation. If needed, coaches were able to escort teachers to other classrooms where the teacher had the framework in place. This provided them with a better understanding of the framework and a variety of
Figure 1.2. Reading Framework (90-minute reading block to indicate whole- and small-group instruction).
organizational structures to use within the framework. Coaches were able to plan and co-teach with teachers to assist with the implementation of small-group instruction.

Teachers started using this framework, incorporating small groups, in the fall of the 2008-2009 school year. During the first year of the initiative, it became evident to administration and literacy coaches that many teachers were using this delivery method for the first time or they were experiencing a major transformational shift from a predominate delivery method of whole-group to small-group during reading instruction. In the 2009-2010 school year the requirement to use small groups expanded to include other subject areas. Teachers continued to struggle with their implementation of small groups across all disciplines. When studying schools incorporating peer learning within small groups, Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway and Krajcik (1996) reported “…it is not so easy to transform the culture of schools to incorporate extensive use of small group learning” (p. 37). They indicated that because there are a variety of ways that small-group instruction may take place, that many teachers are reluctant to select a method with confidence. Changing a school’s culture is often very difficult and requiring teachers to shift from one delivery method to another is even more challenging. Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway and Krajcik (1996) also reported “Teachers need to have clear purposes when using group work, and they need to be aware of some of the many limitations and considerations to be successful” (p. 38). They listed the following key areas needed when implementing a small-group delivery method:

1) group norms,

2) tasks,

3) giving and seeking help,

4) group collaboration,
5) accountability, and
6) group composition (p. 38).

Reading teachers in this district have had one year of experience using this delivery method, so they had their actual experiences as a reference. However, many teachers continued to struggle in the areas listed above and with implementing a small-group delivery method. On the other hand, there were teachers who had mastered different components of this framework and were able to successfully implement small groups within their classes. Thus, examining the phenomena of utilizing a small-group delivery method became the impetus of this research study. This research examined teachers’ responses to changing their primary instructional delivery method from whole- to small-group instruction during reading. I wanted to understand teacher’s responses throughout this transition and to gain additional knowledge that may be helpful to other teachers who are also experiencing this type of transition.

Research Questions

Although there are a plethora of studies on the effectiveness of a small-group delivery method, most of them are quantitative in nature and very few studies looked at this topic through the lens of the teacher. Furthermore, most of the research used a positivistic stance where data was the primary factor used in the interpretation of the findings. This study used a qualitative approach to explore this topic. The research solicited the perspectives of four teachers in a large urban district as they revealed their reactions, challenges, and benefits to using small- and whole-group delivery methods. More specifically, this study explored two research questions: 1) How do teachers adapt their instruction when transitioning from a whole- to small-group delivery method during reading instruction? and 2) What are the benefits and challenges encountered by teachers when using a small-group delivery method within the reading framework?
First, teachers undergo several adaptations when transitioning from a whole- to small-group delivery method. Classroom and time management are foundational components when using a small-group delivery method. This was an area of particular interest throughout this research study. There are numerous studies and training programs that discuss classroom and time management strategies used by teachers during the reading period (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999). However, teachers in urban settings are working under unique circumstances that are much different from their suburban counterparts and would approach these areas differently. For instance, student mobility is a major factor that influences the effectiveness of small groups and the building of a class community early in the school year. Having a low mobility rate allows a teacher to teach routines, procedures and build a positive classroom community needed for small-group instruction at the beginning of the school year. Students are able to internalize and routinize the expectations for small-group instruction. By contrast, when there is a constant revolving door of students, teachers must develop strategies to incorporate new students as well as fill in the gaps left by students who have withdrawn from the school. Many suburban teachers work with more stable classroom populations from the beginning to the end of the school year, whereas urban teachers face a high mobility rate throughout the year. Teachers in both settings, urban and suburban, adapt and use different strategies according to their environment. Synthesizing urban teachers’ reported beliefs, understandings and strategies regarding effective classroom and time management provided opportunities to examine patterns or outliers in this area and thus give insight into utilizing a small-group delivery method in urban schools. Furthermore, reported beliefs that are in alignment with classroom practice and are factors to successful implementation will lend insight into teachers’ thought processes in these areas.
Next, under the pressure of implementing the reading framework initiative, many teachers have experienced challenges and benefits while using a small-group delivery method. This research reviewed, analyzed and discussed what teachers listed as challenges and benefits. In a pilot study conducted with five teachers during the 2008-2009 school year, participants listed more challenges than benefits and this study probed further into those areas.

**Operational Definitions**

There are several terms used in this study that have multiple meanings and interpretations within the field of education. In order to aid in the clarity of usage and the context and interpretation of key terms used in this study, operational definitions are established in this section. It is important to lay out operational definitions in order for the reader to understand the intent and findings of this study.

First, it is important for the reader to understand the operational definition of the terms small and whole group and to establish parameters to distinguish the two. For purposes of this study, whole group was defined as teaching a lesson to the entire class at one time. Small-group instruction involves teaching a lesson to a smaller group of students within the classroom while the other students are working on different assignments without the assistance of the teacher. Throughout the research study, there were instances where teachers reported using both delivery methods within a reading period and there were cases where one method was predominately used.

Secondly, although the two terms are often used interchangeably, it is important to note that, small group is not synonymous with cooperative groups. Kagan (1994) stated “Traditional classroom organization is characterized by competitive or individualized social organization; collaborative group work includes students working together, but does not necessarily include
the key concepts of cooperative learning” (p. 4:1). There are cooperative group similarities that may be present when examining small groups but it was not the intent of this study to evaluate the characteristics of cooperative groups.

Next, it was important to differentiate between homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping and the manner that these terms were interpreted and used in this research. Homogeneous grouping, uses criteria, usually academic ability, to group students. Conversely, heterogeneous grouping occurs when students are randomly grouped. In some academic arenas, there are negative connotations regarding homogenous grouping and many grouping practices are not viewed as effective for all groups of students. There are claims that grouping is harmful to students’ self-efficacy and that it is a way to track students. Research studies on ability grouping have permeated court cases involved with desegregation. Slavin (1987) reported “…plaintiffs have argued that ability grouping is used as a means of resegregating Black and Hispanic students within ostensibly integrated schools…” (p. 294). Additionally, many research studies responded to societal issues that influenced the connotation of grouping practices. Lou et al. (1996) stated “For example, during the 1950s “excellence” was a byword in education, and between-class grouping was seen as beneficial for high-ability students. In the 1960s and 1970s, concerns about equal opportunity increased, and between-class grouping was seen as harmful for disadvantaged students” (p. 429). Although there will be a focus on grouping practices within this research, the researcher did not delve into the validity of heterogeneous or homogeneous groupings and believe that both have their appropriate time and place in the classroom.

Another point of clarification that will aid the reader of this study is to understand the context that explicit and repetitive instruction is used because teachers repeatedly referred to this as a benefit to using a small-group delivery method. Utilizing a small-group delivery method that
provides explicit and repetitive instruction should not imply the absence of instruction that requires higher level thinking skills. When used correctly, instruction at the teaching station will challenge students in their thinking and ability. Again, it was not the intent of this study to evaluate the work performed at the teacher’s station, nor work provided for students at the independent stations within the classroom.

Another term that is unique to this district and teachers frequently used is Elementary Initiatives (EI). The district identified fifteen schools that were in the category of academic watch and academic emergency on the state’s report card. These schools were categorized as Elementary Initiative (EI) schools. All of the schools with the classification of EI did not meet the required Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) scores in reading. Schools in this category were required to implement several educational components. One of the components, the reading framework, became the foundation of this study.

Finally, many teachers referred to the type of instruction used in small groups in terms that may not be familiar to those outside the field of education. Teachers frequently referred to the English–Language Arts Ohio Academic Content Standards. The standards are: 1) Acquisition of Vocabulary, 2) Reading Process: Concepts of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-monitoring Strategies, 3) Reading Applications: Informational, Technical and Persuasive Text, 4) Reading Applications: Literary Text, 5) Writing Processes, 6) Writing Applications, 7) Writing Conventions, 8) Research, and 9) Communication: Oral and Visual. These standards are the core of the district’s curriculum and have become a common language among teachers. Grade level indicator (GLI) or indicator is another term that is used throughout the study. These indicators are subskills that fall under each of the standards. The district has a unique classifying system that identifies each standard and subskill and teachers referred to these frequently when
discussing small-group instruction. It was not the focus of this study to evaluate or determine the
type of instruction, number of grade level indicators or standards that were used within the small
groups observed.

It is important to caution the reader of possible misinterpretations regarding small groups.
The assumption should not be made that repetitive, explicit instruction translates into mediocre
curriculum, low expectations of students or inadequate standards. Explicit and repetitive
instruction includes higher order thinking as well as in-depth comprehension skills during small
groups. Teachers are providing this instruction in a format that allows them to offer feedback
and assess students’ understanding on a more precise basis.

Like most fields, the field of education has a host of acronyms and terms that have evolved
over time. Many of these terms may have multiple meanings depending on the era, geographical
location, or district that the term is used. Having a working knowledge of the aforementioned
terms will aid in the contextual understanding and intent of the study. Furthermore, an
understanding of the philosophical stance that this research operated within will aid the reader of
this study. We will turn our focus to the epistemological stance and theoretical framework that
this study was nested.

Theoretical Framework

When considering the ontology of small groups, one would have to consider the
epistemological and theoretical perspectives of past research and of this study. The positional
stance of ontological relativity influenced the methodological and method decisions made in this
research. Crotty (2003) reported:

Ontological issues and epistemological issues tend to emerge together. As our terminology
has already indicated, to talk of the construction of meaning is to talk of the construction of
meaningful reality. Because of this confluence, writers in the research literature have trouble keeping ontology and epistemology apart conceptually. Realism (an ontological notion asserting that realities exist outside the mind) is often taken to imply objectivism (an epistemological notion asserting that meaning exists in objects independently of any consciousness). (p. 10)

The realities in this study were constructed using a qualitative approach. The participants’ realities of the classroom, pedagogy of teaching, and discussions on the artful practice of implementing a small-group pedagogy, were driving forces throughout this study.

This study nested itself in the epistemology that embraces constructivism. It is, however, important to distinguish between constructionism and constructivism. Crotty (2003) stated that “It would appear useful, then, to reserve the term constructivism for the epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on ‘the meaning-making activity of the individual mind’ and to use constructionism where the focus includes the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning“ (p. 58). Patton (2002) also lent clarification “So constructivists study the multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others” (p. 96). In this study, teachers are making meaning of their pedagogical practices and how it constructs meaning regarding small groups. Crotty (2003) expounded on this distinction and stated:

Whatever the terminology, the distinction itself is an important one. Constructivism taken in this sense points out the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other, thereby tending to scotch any hint of a critical spirit. On the other hand, social constructionism emphasizes the
hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even in the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world. (p. 58)

Constructivism is an epistemological view that meaning or truth is constructed by the interactions of human beings within their world. Therefore, meaning or truth doesn’t exist until it is constructed through interaction and interpretation with an object or the world. Because individuals bring different cultural perspectives and background knowledge to the experience of a phenomenon, meaning may be constructed differently regarding the same phenomenon. Patton (2002) went further to explain the role of the constructivist researcher. He stated:

The constructionist evaluator would attempt to capture these different perspectives through open-ended interviews and observations and then would examine the implications of different perceptions (or multiple “realities”) but would not pronounce which set of perceptions was “right” or more “true” or more “real” as would a reality-oriented (post-positivist) researcher. (p. 98)

Furthermore, Patton gave a list of foundational central questions that illuminates the perspective of constructionism and constructivism and stated “How have people in this setting constructed reality? What are their reported perceptions, “truths,” explanations, beliefs and worldview? What are the consequences of their constructions for their behaviors and for those with whom they interact?” (p. 132). This study also aligned with Thomas’s theorem (as cited by Patton, 2002) that stated “What is defined or perceived by people as real is real in its consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572)” (p. 96). Thus, this research study examined the meaning or truth revealed about using a small-group delivery method of instruction from the perspective of four teachers.
The theoretical perspective that guided this research was symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism came out of the posthumous work of George Herbert Mead during the 1930s. One of Mead’s former students, Herbert Blumer is credited for the compilation of works that contributed to the book entitled *Mind, Self and Society*. The book detailed three basic interactionist assumptions and one assumption in particular was heavily weighted in this study. Crotty (2003) stated “In a much-cited formulation, Blumer (1969, p. 2) enunciates the basic interactionist assumptions: ‘that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them’...[sic]” (p. 72). Mead used an analogy of children during role play to define the term ‘generalized others’ or putting oneself in the place of another. Hence, he encouraged researchers to assume this position and take the standpoint of others when conducting research.

Crotty (2003) cautioned researchers against seeing and interpreting social behaviors and objects through their own perspectives and beliefs. In fact, he explained that if a researcher continues to interpret behaviors and objects through her own eyes for an extended period of time, then the results may be flawed and subjected to the process of sedimentation. Furthermore, Crotty challenged researchers to approach their research with a blank slate ready to discover new meanings and interpretations.

When considering the principle of intentionality, it becomes clear that constructionism is both subjective and objective. After observing a group of students interpreting a poem, Crotty (2003) stated “The meanings emerge from the students’ interactions with the poem and relate to it essentially. The meanings are thus at once objective and subjective, their objectivity and subjectivity being indissolubly bound up with each other” (p. 48). Subjectivity and objectivity are examined through the interaction of the object and the extent that the observer’s knowledge
and experiences may influence interpretations. Analyzing teachers’ perspectives gives insight into their practice and experiences with utilizing small-group pedagogy. Understanding the epistemological stance and theoretical perspective used in this research will aid the reader in understanding the findings.

Summary

This study used a constructivist approach and utilized a framework that supported a qualitative study. The theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism aligned to the research methods used. Also, practice ethnography provided the researcher with a lens to systemically study the process of small-group implementation. It was expected that although teachers reported many challenges, they would conclude that using a small-group instruction delivery method in the reading framework is an effective pedagogical practice and they will continue to use it in the future after the reading framework initiative was over. Through a pilot study conducted in the 2008-2009 school year, teachers, n=7, reported that classroom and time management were challenging areas when implementing a small-group delivery method. Therefore, instructional strategies that pertained to classroom and time management used by teachers during a small-group delivery method were explored throughout this research. Specific instructional strategies that promote the effective use of small-group instruction within an urban environment emerged from the study and are contained in the discussion section of this dissertation.

To establish a solid foundation, a working knowledge of the current and past research on small-group pedagogical practices are needed and is described in the next section on the review of literature. Furthermore, when analyzing teachers’ perspectives on this topic, it is beneficial to
review the literature on teachers’ epistemological beliefs and how it transfers into their practice. Having this knowledge base will aid the reader in comprehending the findings in this research

**Literature Review**

The first part of this literature review examined the literature on the pedagogical practices of whole- and small-group delivery methods of instruction during reading. Benefits and challenges associated with these delivery methods will also be a focus. The next part addressed literature regarding teachers’ epistemological beliefs and how it transfers into their practice. Part three examined literature on the theory of change process and the variables related to adopting change.

**Small-Group versus Whole-Group Instruction**

There are studies that evaluate the effectiveness of whole- and small-group instruction. Many of the studies were quantitative in nature and computed effect sizes using test scores from standardized assessments as a tool for measuring effectiveness (Lou et al., 1996). Studies conducted earlier compared the effectiveness of whole- to small-group instruction (Slavin, 1987). Also, there are research studies that examine small-group pedagogical practices. Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway, and Krajcik (1996) reported “Several widely used types of research-based group work are available to teachers. All conceive of this approach as part of a larger set of instructional methods, not as a panacea to change classroom teaching and learning completely” (p. 37). Understanding that there are other perspectives regarding the effectiveness of using a small-group delivery method, I approached the study of small groups under this premise. Furthermore, utilizing a small-group delivery method does not imply the absence or ineffectiveness of whole-group instruction. There are occurrences where one or both delivery methods are appropriate. Cooper, MacGregor, Smith, and Robinson (2000) stated “Lecture and small-group work must be framed as both/and endeavors, not either/or ones; yet somehow the
message is too often sent that to be in favor of small-group learning is to be completely anti
lecture” (p. 63). Being aware of and effectively using a small-group delivery method is a
resourceful pedagogical tool for teachers. Small-group pedagogical practices are in the front of
many educational reforms across the nation.

Lou et al. (1996) conducted a meta-analysis on within-class grouping structures. This meta-
analysis included 51 studies that compared the delivery method of small-group (with-in class
grouping) to whole-group instruction. The overall effect size for within-class groups was +0.17.
They reported that “On average, students learning in small groups with-in classrooms achieved
significantly more than students not learning in small groups” (p. 439). This meta-analysis
provides evidence in support of the effectiveness of small-group instruction and heavily
influenced my evaluation and perspective on this topic. There are other studies that substantiate
the use of a small-group delivery method and reveal that this is an effective delivery method
(Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway, & Krajcik, 1996; Bonfiglio, Daly, Persampieri, & Andersen,
2006).

Proponents for small-group instruction have looked at possible benefits of a small-group
delivery method and its effectiveness on student achievement. Most current studies reveal that
small-group instruction during the reading period is significantly more effective than a whole-
group delivery method (Bonfiglio, Daly, Persampieri, & Andersen, 2006; Kamps, Abbott,
Fluidity and differentiating the instruction are also key factors in successful grouping practices.

Another study that heavily influenced this research was the Crawford and Torgesen (2006)
study of the Florida’s Reading First Schools. These schools were urban schools with low
reading scores. Their findings revealed a significant reduction in the percentage of students with
reading difficulties. In their summary of the practices used in these schools, they identified small-group instruction as a key component. They reported the following:

We must increase the quality, consistency, and reach of classroom instruction by providing systematic and explicit initial instruction, and by providing differentiated instruction delivered individually or in small groups. Small groups should be differentiated by:

- The frequency of meeting in small groups (3x/week, 5x/week)
- The size of the instructional group (3, 6, 8 students)
- The focus of instruction (phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension)
- The format of the lesson (guided reading vs. skills-focused). (p. 1)

The formal evaluation of the Florida Reading Initiative reported that the percentage of students identified as learning disabled was reduced in three years in kindergarten by 81%, first-grade by 67%, second-grade by 53% and third-grade by 42%. They also reported a significant improvement in the percentage of students finishing the year reading on level. This research is significant because it provided valuable insight into Florida’s Reading First Schools that consisted of schools in urban areas. These schools used small groups during reading and reported significant gains in their reading scores.

Rashotte, MacPhee, and Torgesen (2001) looked at the effectiveness of a reading program for 116 students in a low socioeconomic school. They used two groups where the treatment group received their instruction using a small-group delivery method. The other group received instruction using a whole-group delivery method. After the eight-week study, they found that students in the treatment group effect sizes were strong in most areas and there were improved reading skills. They also found that students in the treatment group performed significantly
better than the group that did not receive treatment. They reported “One of the implications of
the results of the present study is that a group-delivered instructional program can be successful
in a low economic school environment with many reading impaired students” (p. 132). During a
second part of the study, they administered the treatment to the no treatment group and found
that these students also improved in their reading skills when instructed in small groups. This
study provided strong support for small-group instruction as an effective delivery method.

McCurdy, Daly, Gortmaker, Bonfiglio, and Persampieri (2007) conducted an experimental
analysis on small reading groups for intervention purposes. They used four students in their
study and found that there was an increase in all students’ fluency as well as their overall reading
performance. They reported “The data indicate that the students’ generalized oral reading
fluency was more improved when modeling, repeated opportunities to respond, and corrective
feedback were used” (p. 13). This report is consistent with other research that analyzes reading
instruction during intervention. Opportunities to respond would include behaviors such as
students answering the teacher’s questions or offering insights about their learning. Providing
immediate corrective feedback is a key benefit when using a small-group delivery method. This
increases the amount of time and opportunities for a student to practice strategies and procedures
that are correct versus spending time on reversing incorrect practices.

Furthermore, providing students with a model is another effective benefit of small-group
instruction. Often times, students need repeated modeling or instruction during reading
instruction and, in a small-group format, teachers are able to closely monitor students who would
benefit from having instructions repeated. This is consistent with other current research and
Bonfiglio, Daly, Persampieri, and Andersen (2006) found that the number of opportunities to
respond increases with small group sizes.
Lou et al. (1996) reported on the effect of small groups on students’ attitudes and self-concept “Overall, within-class grouping was positively related to student attitudes (d+ = +0.18, 95% confidence interval is +0.12 to +0.23” (p. 444). They also reported on students’ self-concept “…students in grouped classes had significantly higher general self-concept than students in the ungrouped classes (d+ = +0.16)” (p. 445). This was significant to this study because teachers reported this as one of the benefits that their students experience during small-group instruction.

Nelson and Manset-Williamson (2006) compared explicit comprehension instruction to guided reading instruction and reported “…students in the explicit comprehension intervention made significantly larger gains in their reading comprehension skills than did participants in the Guided Reading intervention” (p. 223). Providing explicit instruction during reading is also supported in the National Reading Panel’s (2000) report as a best practice used in reading. When looking at the effects of small-group reading instruction on students most at risk in kindergarten, Kamps, Abbott, Greenwood, and Wills (2008) found that structure and explicitness of the instruction and activities in small groups were important factors that contributed to students’ success.

When looking at the effectiveness of using a small-group delivery method at the college level, Cooper, MacGregor, Smith, and Robinson (2000) found similarities that are beneficial at the lower grades. They gave insight into key areas that are affected when using small-group instruction: content coverage, amount of learning, pre-requisite learning; student resistance, logistics, and time. Two-thirds of the faculty members reported that they covered less content but that students had a greater in-depth understanding of the topics covered. When comparing students in other classes who were exposed to a traditional whole-group lecture style, they
reported that students in small groups performed at or above the level of other students. When looking at the preparation required to incorporate group work, half of those interviewed stated that there is preparatory work needed prior to group work. By contrast, the other half of the group intentionally did not include preparatory group work in order to facilitate an inquiry based approach to learning. Faculty members reported that there was minimal student resistance at the beginning of small group and most resistance was a result of past experiences that students had.

Cooper, MacGregor, Smith, and Robinson (2000) reported that “According to our informants, student resistance to small-group instruction is generally not due to dislike of small-group work as much as dislike for how these strategies are implemented” (p. 68). Participants in this study reported that by using strategies to facilitate small groups, they were able to minimize any logistical concerns. Some of the effective strategies used were: 1) circulating to different groups during the small-group instruction, 2) having a signal to get the attention of groups when needed, 3) establishing guidelines with the class and 4) providing well structured and challenging material. There were mixed reports regarding the amount of time small groups required. When researchers asked if small group work take more time, some participants reported that it did require more preparation time whereas others reported that the time commitments became less as they gained experience.

The Bonfiglio, Daly, Persampieri, and Andersen (2006) study examined an effective package administered to students to improve their reading skills. When receiving the recommended treatment, they found significant increases in students’ performance and academic engagement. An even more interesting fact is that the effort teachers used to engage the learner decreased while there was an increase in academic engagement. They reported “Therefore, performance and academic engagement increased, while teacher effort decreased; thus, identifying an
effective, yet more efficient reading intervention package” (p. 106). Academic engagement in this context refers to students being actively engaged, such as reading aloud or responding to question cues, in the learning processes.

Musti-Roa and Cartledge (2007) also examined this area and reported that active student responding and engagement is significant in the learning process. Teaching within small groups is an effective pedagogical practice that promotes students’ active engagement in reading. Furthermore, they reported that often times urban readers do not respond to whole-group instruction alone and will require follow up or small-group instruction when developing reading skills.

There is research that revealed that instruction delivered in a small-group structure offering explicit and repetitive instruction is effective when teaching reading with urban youth (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Kamps, Abbott, Greenwood, & Wills, 2008; Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2007; Rashotte, MacPhee, & Torgesen, 2001). These reports were significant to this research because they provided data on the effectiveness of using a small-group delivery method in urban environments.

Shifting from a primary delivery method of whole- to small-group instruction requires teachers to analyze the way that they view small-group instruction. Furthermore, this is a delivery method that may be different from the way that they were taught in school and this contributes to their beliefs and how they may respond to this transition. Therefore, understanding teachers’ epistemological beliefs and how it aligns with a particular delivery method becomes an area of consideration.
**Epistemological Beliefs**

Many studies analyzed how teachers’ epistemological beliefs are associated with their response to change and how it transfers into their practice (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Fives & Buehl, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Herbel-Eisenmann, Lubienski, & Id-Deen, 2006; Holt-Reynolds, 2000; Kollar, 1999; Olafson & Schraw, 2006; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell & Lloyd, 1991; Sockman, & Sharma, 2008; Tobin & Dawson, 1992). This is a key component when examining teachers’ beliefs and change (Fives & Buehl, 2008). Understanding teachers’ epistemological beliefs about teaching and allowing opportunities for them to process proposed changes increase the likelihood that they will authentically embrace the initiative.

Herbel-Eisenmann, Lubienski, Thuele, and Id-Deen (2006) used a case study and found that during reform initiatives, teachers may be bound to conform to a reform that conflicts with their belief (Ferrini-Mundy, Burrell, & Schmidt, 2007). They reported “Most of this literature implies that individual teachers have a particular pedagogical stance that, although it is evolving over time, is consistent enough at any point in time to be described and categorized somewhere on a traditional-reform continuum” (p. 316). Under pressures to conform, many teachers will halfheartedly implement a required curricular change only to return to their original stance after the pressure is alleviated. Teachers are constantly adjusting and balancing their epistemological beliefs and pedagogies in their reactions to curricular changes (Fang, Fu, & Lamme, 2004; Ferrini-Mundy, Burrell, & Schmidt, 2007; Goodrum, Cousins, & Kinnear, 1992; Sockman & Sharma, 2008). Many decisions made in educational reform efforts are shortsighted on teachers’ beliefs or on the realities in the classroom. These reform initiatives rarely obtain information from teachers that would offer insight into this area.
Holt-Reynolds (2000) used a case study of a pre-service teacher’s experience as she transitioned into a constructivist’s pedagogy after being exposed to this pedagogy during her field experience. She stated:

The constructivist pedagogies that are increasingly part of teacher education course work and expectations emerge from an intellectual work where knowledge is seen as created rather than received (von Glaserfeld, 1991), mediated by discourse rather than transferred by teacher talk (Vygotsky, 1962), explored and transformed rather than remembered as a uniform set of positivistic ideas (Dewey, 1969; Rorty, 1979). Consequently, we no longer educate teachers solely for a role as a dispenser of knowledge. (p. 22)

This pre-service teacher received training and coursework at the same time as having multiple opportunities in the field to reflect and experience the phenomena. Having the experience and time to process this pedagogy was an essential element in having this teacher embrace change and transition to a different epistemological belief.

Kollar (1999) examined his own experience in changing pedagogies from a primary lecture style to one of collaboration that encouraged small groups, students’ discourse and critical thinking at the college level. He stated “We need support because when we begin to change pedagogies away from the lecture method, we are beginning to change the culture of an institution” (p. 159). Through dialogue with colleagues and a considerable amount of feedback from students, Kollar was able to change his pedagogy and beliefs about teaching that he had developed for most of his career.

Many reform efforts do not allow teachers time to process initiatives and as a result the implementation is reluctantly carried out. In both case studies above, it is very clear that there was a need for opportunities to process, apply and reflect on the proposed change. It is also
apparent that support during the change was beneficial. In order to increase the possibility of successful reform efforts or curricular changes, a working knowledge of teachers’ epistemological beliefs must be considered.

Fives and Buehl (2008) expounded on this topic and reported that “Understanding teachers’ epistemic beliefs about teaching knowledge may lend new insights into conceptual change, self-regulation, and professional practice in teachers” (p. 136). Using a qualitative methodology, they looked at how teachers are able to articulate their beliefs about teaching knowledge and the nature of teaching. They had pre-service teachers, n=53, and practicing teachers, n=57, complete an open-ended questionnaire. They reported their findings using five themes that emerged in the final data analysis “…teaching could be organized into five themes: 1. pedagogical knowledge, 2. knowledge of children; 3. content knowledge; 4. management and organizational knowledge; and 5. knowledge of self and others” (p. 142). They found that teachers’ knowledge in these areas influenced their beliefs and classroom practices.

In their second study, they created a framework for organizing teachers’ knowledge and ability beliefs. This framework included four components: 1) importance of teaching knowledge, 2) ability to acquire teaching knowledge, 3) need for cognitive skills and 4) need for affective qualities. Categorizing the data into these four components allowed the researchers to identify patterns within these areas. Many of the participants reported that teachers should have knowledge of how to teach. It was also revealed that beliefs are complex and that many teachers value different aspects of knowledge and this influences how they articulate their beliefs. Participants felt that it was important for educators to have knowledge of their content, students, classroom management and organizational knowledge.
Fullan (2007) described the term reculturing as “how teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits” as a key element that is missing in many restructuring efforts. He purported that teachers need time to process, through questioning and making sense of change, in order to change their beliefs and habits. Furthermore, he stated “…changes in beliefs and understanding (first principles) are the foundation of achieving lasting reform” (p. 37). Teachers, in particular those in urban settings who are continuously faced with low test scores, began to doubt and question their abilities as educators and are reluctant to embrace educational reform efforts. Under the pressure of making change, many reform efforts will not include opportunities for teachers to become familiar with the latest research or process new information. Frequently, teachers are given fast paced professional development on a reform initiative that omits any opportunities for reflection on the reform or process how it aligns with their current beliefs and habits.

Buehl and Fives (2009) looked at teachers’ beliefs about knowledge and stated “…relatively few empirical investigations have explored teachers’ beliefs about the nature of knowledge…” (p. 369). Their study looked at teachers and pre-service teachers’ epistemic beliefs. They found that teachers’ epistemic beliefs influence their beliefs in pedagogies as well as their acceptance or resistance to innovative curricular changes. Understanding that there is a limited number of research studies on this topic provided insight into why there are a limited number of studies that analyzed teachers’ perspectives on using a small-group delivery method. In addition to understanding the alignment of teachers’ epistemological beliefs and how it correlates to a reform initiative, teachers’ responses to reform initiatives are also linked to the processes of change.
Processes of Change

Processes of change are key areas that are often overlooked during school reforms. School districts are under such pressure that there is very little time used to plan, analyze or reflect on the processes of change. Change and reform are not exclusively related to the field of education and Sarason (1996) suggested that most organizations in the United States have undergone reform initiatives. With this in mind, he proposed that the theories of change and the findings in research on educational reform are applicable to all organizations that undergo change. He reported “It is all too easy to discuss and judge efforts to change schools without recognizing the possibility that one’s conclusions may not be peculiar to schools, i.e., the characteristics of the change process, their implicit and explicit rationales, may be modal for any effort to change any institution” (p. 45). He also posited that the process of change is one area that warrants attention during reform and that very little research on reform initiatives have focused on this area.

The theory of change process is defined as a pathway of change that illustrates the relationship between a variety of outcomes to long-term goals. There are measureable benchmarks and interventions used throughout the change. In order to obtain factual information regarding an educational need or to work on solutions, it is critical to involve those intimately connected, most likely the teacher, from the inception of the initiative. Without this involvement, there is a greater chance of resistance. Sarason (1996) reported “Theory of the change process is helpful to the extent that it says not only what would happen but also what could happen under certain conditions….A theory of the change process is a form of control against the tendency for personal style, motivation, and denial of reality to define the problem and its possible solutions along lines requiring the least amount of personal conflict” (p. 63).
Sarason (1996) compared the reaction of teachers during the implementation of a new math initiative during the late 1950s to the reaction of a simultaneous reform effort at Yale University that involved adding a new secondary teacher program to explore the processes of change during reform. He used an informal observational study of the math instruction at the end of the program and observed six math classrooms over a six-week period. He also used A. G. Levine’s 1968 study that looked at women in professional schools: law, medicine, nursing and teaching offered at Yale University to substantiate his analysis of this educational initiative. The findings in both studies revealed that the processes of change were not considered and this led to dismal statistics in the reform efforts. In both cases, reform planning and agendas were made without the collaboration of those intimately connected and there were often misconceptions on what the needs were of the educators who were expected to implement the reform.

Joseph and Reigeluth (2005) examined system changes at the district level in a relatively small school district. This district considered the change process and they utilized a Guidance System for Transforming Education (GSTE) method as a way to systemically approach a reform initiative. It is encouraging to see a reform effort that included an intentional focus on the change process. The researchers identified strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of the GSTE process within this school district. A strength of the study was that the researchers had a key participant review a draft of the study to add validity to the findings.

Fullan (2007) postulated that the phenomenology of change is also ignored in many reform efforts and there is a limited amount of research that looks at this area when examining teachers’ reactions to curricular changes or educational reforms. He defined the phenomenology of change and stated that it is “…how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended” (p. 8). Oversights in the areas of the process of change have resulted in failed
attempts in most reform initiatives and additional research is warranted (Fullan, 2007; Sarason, 1996). Examining this area may lend insight into the teachers’ perception of implementing small groups and the actual occurrences in the classroom.

Summary

The art and science of teaching is complex. Utilizing small-group instruction provides teachers with a tool to deliver instruction in a way other than the traditional whole-group structure. Allowing teachers’ time to reflect, process and apply reform initiatives is a valuable component in successfully implementing and sustaining reform over time. Understanding how their epistemological beliefs align with new initiatives also contributes to a successful and sustainable implementation. Intentionally creating a structure where the process of change is used will benefit students, teachers and administrators. Having these systems in place will increase the likelihood that teachers will implement the initiative with integrity, and it provides an opportunity for mid-course corrections, if needed.

Providing opportunities for teachers to reflect and report on the challenges and benefits encountered when implementing small groups will provide valuable information for the field of education. In order to glean qualitative data that truly reflects teachers’ perspectives, the methodological tool and methods were carefully selected. We will now turn our focus to the methodology section of this dissertation.
CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research study was conducted using a constructivist epistemology that meaning or truth is constructed by the interactions of human beings within their world. Because individuals bring different cultural perspectives and background knowledge to the experience of a phenomenon, meaning may be constructed differently regarding the same phenomenon. Patton (2002) stated “Any notion of ‘truth,’ then, becomes a matter of consensus among informed and sophisticated constructors, not of correspondence with an objective reality” (p. 96). Obtaining data regarding teachers’ perspectives on whole- and small-group instruction moves educators closer to the realities or truths regarding this topic.

The first section of this chapter discusses the methodological and theoretical frameworks that supported this study. The next section examined previous methodologies and methods used to study the effectiveness of small groups, and the third section discusses in detail the methods strategically selected and used in this study. A rationale for these selected methods is contained in the final section of this chapter.

Framework

This research was constructed using the premise that realities exist outside the mind, are multiple and are socially constructed. Patton (2002) further stated:

Although some versions of constructivism do appear to deny reality, many (if not most, I suspect) qualitative inquirers have a common sense realist ontology, that is, they take seriously the existence of things, events, structures, people, meanings, and so forth in the environment as independent in some way from their experience with them. And they regard society, institutions, feelings, intelligence, poverty, disability, and so on as being just as “real” as the toes on their feet and the sun in the sky. (p. 101)
Challenges and benefits that teachers encounter when transitioning to a small-group delivery method are real and in many cases diverse. Capturing these truths provides opportunities for educators who are struggling with this pedagogical practice.

Also, this study closely aligned with symbolic interactionism and this heavily influenced the research tools used. Observing teachers’ interactions in the classroom and understanding their perspectives on small-group instruction supported the fundamental concepts of this theoretical perspective. Crotty (2003) stated:

In a much-cited formulation, Blumer (1969, p. 2) enunciates three basic interactionist assumptions:

- that human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings that these things have for them;
- that the meaning of such things is derived from, and arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows;
- that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p. 72)

Participants in this research shared their experiences and the art of implementing and using a small-group delivery method.

**Practice Ethnography**

The methodology used in this research operated under the umbrella of *practice ethnography* as a foundational backdrop. It became very apparent in the review of literature that a preponderance of the studies conducted on this topic was not only positivistic but also institutional in nature. Floersch (as cited in Padgett, 2004) stated “In contrast to institutional ethnography, I propose *practice ethnography*. It does not focus on the institutional or
organizational determinants of practice, although these matter. Instead, practice ethnography examines the process of practice and investigates how practitioners use theory in practice” (p. 76). The theory of teaching using a small-group delivery method is not a novel idea. However, teachers across the nation continue to struggle with using this pedagogy. This research discusses the pedagogical practice of implementing small groups in comparison to theory. Floersch used a methodology of practice ethnography in a case study of a client and social work case managers. His study analyzed the sociological and ethnographic principles of a social work theory called strengths case management. He participated in training sessions on this technique, along with the case managers, and followed, interviewed, and observed the social work managers and one client for approximately one year. Using this technique allowed him to analyze the phenomenon of theory (the trainings) as it is applied in practice. He stated “In short, I used practice ethnography to gather lived case management experience to see (i.e., methodologically speaking) the hidden structures of practice power: the work of disciplinary and situated knowledge” (p. 86). In this study, understanding the teachers’ perspectives on using a small-group delivery method helped to analyze this theory in practice and is the foundation of this research.

The reading framework that teachers were required to use during reading instruction was the nucleus of this study. The research was guided by two questions: 1) How do teachers adapt their instruction when transitioning from a whole- to small-group delivery method? and 2) What are the benefits and challenges encountered by teachers when using a small-group delivery method within a reading framework? Teachers received training on the theory of a reading framework during the 2008-2009 school year in various sessions. One session included an introduction and training on the theory of the framework. These sessions were conducted with small groups of teachers. The next session included one-on-one guidance from a coach to
integrate this framework within the teacher’s current practice. Follow-up sessions were given upon request from the teacher or an administrator. There were three components to the reading framework: 1) whole-group instruction to begin the lesson, 2) small-group instruction for explicit teaching which included a teaching station and a variety of independent work stations, and 3) whole-group instruction as a closure to the reading block. The framework consisted of one 90-minute block, and teachers were expected to use a small-group delivery method for 60 of those 90 minutes (See Figure 1.2).

Approaching this topic under practice ethnography allowed the researcher to capture teachers’ experiences and perspectives regarding the practical application of using a small-group delivery method. Furthermore, in order to maintain a narrow perspective, this research concentrated on the process of implementing small groups and did not focus on institutional ramifications.

**Reflexivity**

Practice ethnography requires that the researcher gains entry into the field site, is viewed as an insider and gains the trust of participants. I approached this research as a practitioner with 13 years of teaching experience and have worked side-by-side with teachers in a large urban district. I have also had unique opportunities to work at a district level in the role of a coach, have visited over 50 elementary schools, and conducted hundreds of classroom observations. These experiences served as advantages throughout the research study. Although my role as a teacher served as a point of entry, it also warranted my reflection and caution. Floersch (as cited in Padgett, 2004) stated “As a researcher/practitioner I brought my bias into the study and because I was foremost a researcher, managers certainly occupied a standpoint that I could not absolutely see or gain access to. Thus, practice ethnographers must be reflexive…about the research
process and never foreclose on the social worker’s standpoint” (p. 93). Throughout the study, I needed to allow my researcher’s side to dominate my thinking and not to completely shift into a teacher’s thinking mode.

In my current teaching assignment at the time of the study, I was using a small-group format very similar to the reading framework that teachers were required to use. There were advantages and disadvantages of having this experience as a frame of reference. During field observations, having a working knowledge of many of the processes involved in implementing and maintaining small groups served as a huge advantage. I had an insiders’ view of the expectations of using this pedagogy. I also understood the many covert strategies that are needed to effectively implement small groups within a classroom. For example, I knew that students had to have multiple experiences with the transitions that occurred, signals given for the start or ending of a transition, how to handle conflicts, and the basic classroom expectations of the teacher. However, this also served as a disadvantage at several points in the study and required a greater effort on my part to remain unbiased. It was important for me to recognize that there are various ways to implement small groups and teachers may use different techniques, as part of the art of teaching, to arrive at the same end result. Because I was intimately connected with this field of study, being reflexive throughout each stage of the research required constant critique.

Effectively using practice ethnography required an understanding of the everyday, routine tasks that are performed by teachers and the intricate details that are involved in implementing small groups. Having a working knowledge of the design of the reading framework placed the researcher in a unique position to understand participants’ perspectives. This is an important stance to use when conducting fieldwork and Crotty (2003) stated the following:
To ‘enter the attitudes of the community’ [*sic*] and ‘take over the institutions of the community’[*sic*], as Mead argues we inevitably do in our emergence into personhood, we must be able to *take the role of others*. We have to see ourselves as social objects and we can only do that through adopting the standpoint of others. (p. 74)

There were many instances during the observations where teachers would give an explanation for a particular occurrence or student behavior. Having a working knowledge of the reading framework and small groups aided in the interpretation of these brief and somewhat coded conversations. It also allowed me to understand the role of the teacher.

**Summary**

Many researchers, who have studied small groups, have applied a positivistic approach where they have reviewed and analyzed quantifiable data to discuss and interpret findings. This utilizes an objective approach that relies on larger samples in order to generalize and apply findings to the targeted population. Also, in a positivistic approach, research starts with a hypothesis and findings are interpreted using statistical data. This study “heard the voices” of teachers as they shared their successes and challenges during their transition to small-group instruction during reading. A qualitative approach was a natural fit to delve into this topic regarding adaptations made when transitioning from a whole- to small-group delivery method during reading. This research also analyzed teachers’ perspectives about the benefits and challenges when using the reading framework that incorporated small groups. Practice ethnography provided a lens to focus specifically on the process of implementing small groups. Selecting and applying methods that promoted understanding of this topic provided in-depth knowledge. The next section discusses the previous methodologies and methods used to evaluate the phenomena of small-group instruction.
Previous Methodologies and Methods

Although there is a plethora of studies on whole- and small-group delivery methods, there were a limited number of studies that looked at this topic through the lens of teachers and solicited their perspectives regarding the use of these methods. Most research on these delivery methods used a positivistic approach and primarily focused on student achievement as an indicator. Effect sizes were used to determine the significance or effectiveness of using both delivery methods. When looking at small groups during reading, many studies used Reading Connected Text (RCT), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) fluency checks, and a variety of reading comprehension and standardized assessments to determine effectiveness using this type of delivery method. As a result of this, few studies collected or analyzed teachers’ responses to using a small-group delivery method.

There were several meta-analyses that examined the effectiveness of whole- and small-group delivery methods. The strengths and limitations of these studies as well as the examination of patterns, key methodologies, and methods are discussed herein.

Lou et al. (1996) conducted a meta-analysis to study the effectiveness of whole- and small-group instruction and found that small group is more effective for student learning than whole group. They had an average achievement effect size of +0.17. The researchers used achievement data and collected that data at three points: midtreatment, posttest, and delayed posttest. They conducted statistical analysis using SPSS and performed homogeneity tests. One of the strengths of this analysis was the use of two people coding the data. Each person coded their data separately at different locations. This provided the researchers with the ability to cross check the coded data. They made note of several methodological considerations and reported:
For example, curriculum and teaching method were not always held constant across conditions. In some studies teachers were requested to keep content and teaching method the same. In other studies, special materials and pace were made available for students according to their group placement. In yet other studies, teachers using small groups were given special training, while control teachers using whole-class instruction were not. (p. 428)

Although there was a considerable amount of effort to train teachers, the results section primarily focused on students’ achievement.

The second part of Lou et al. (1996) meta-analysis reviewed twelve studies to compare heterogeneous and homogenous groupings. He looked at the overall effect of within-class grouping on student achievement at the elementary level. He used effect sizes, $t$ tests, $F$ tests, $p$ levels, frequencies and $r$ values within his analysis. Because these studies used different tools to measure, he had to use several conversion formulas in order to compare the data. He performed two analyses on the data: 1) analyzed the effect sizes from the studies to compare small and whole groups, and 2) analyzed the influence groups have on student achievement. In both cases, he needed to work with conversions of effect sizes. This made the process more cumbersome and increased the chance of error. Also, in both cases, results focused on students’ achievement and did not elicit teachers’ perspectives.

Bonfiglio, Dally, Persampieri, and Andersen (2006) conducted a study on the effectiveness of a reading intervention program using small groups. They selected four students and set up an experimental design. One of the strengths of the research was that they had the observed sessions on audiotape and this allowed for several observers to rate the session. To increase the reliability, they rated 11 out of 32 sessions and had an inter-rater agreement of 99.2%. They
also had several observers on site, a total of 34.4%, and maintained an inter-observer agreement rate of 91.5%. They found that there were large effect sizes, 1.37 to 6.99, across all treatments for all participants. Although the researchers reported their findings using statistical data of students’ progress, there was a concerted focus on teachers’ training on using small groups within the intervention program. Furthermore, there were many observations that recorded teachers’ behaviors. Unfortunately, akin to many other studies, the findings concentrated on the students’ response to the reading intervention program in small groups and did not consider teachers’ beliefs or responses to using whole- or small-group delivery methods.

Nelson and Manset-Williamson (2006) compared explicit comprehension instruction to guided reading instruction in a summer reading intervention program. Through purposeful sampling, they selected students in grades four-to-eight and used surveys and reading inventories to collect baseline data on participants. Students were required to complete a Reading Fluency and Passage Comprehension subtest. They needed to achieve a standard score on the Phonological Awareness, Phonological Memory, Rapid Naming Inventory, and Intellectual Screening assessments. All students were required to complete a self-efficacy survey and a modified version of the Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children. The study lasted six-weeks during summer break. Students were given pretests and posttests during the study. They received daily interventions for four-days a week throughout a five-week period. One group of students received guided reading, and the other group received explicit comprehension instruction. They used statistical analysis on the data to determine the reading effect. Their findings revealed that students who received explicit comprehension intervention made significantly larger gains in their reading than the other group.
Rashotte, MacPhee, and Torgesen (2001) conducted a study to analyze the effectiveness of a reading instruction program that uses small groups. They selected 116 participants from grades one-to-six and the participants were given a pretest at the beginning of the study. Parents of participants completed a home literacy questionnaire. This also allowed the researchers to collect more demographic data and gain insight into the families’ literacy practices. One group of students received instruction on a Spelling Reading program where the other group received the regular reading program. They used a variety of subtests in the areas of phonological awareness, word-accuracy, comprehension, aptitude, and spelling measures. The findings were analyzed by looking at the pretests and posttests scores for both groups. They also used the effect sizes of the Spell Reading Instruction tests. They reported “… that phonologically based reading instruction programs delivered in small groups (3-5) can significantly impact the phonetic and word-level reading skills as well as the reading comprehension skills of deficient readers in first through sixth grade” (p. 130). This finding lends strong support for the effectiveness of small groups. However, emphasis is placed on students’ achievement in small groups and does not discuss or analyze teachers’ perspectives.

Kamps, Abbott, Greenwood, and Wills (2008) conducted a quantitative study to look at the reading instruction provided to students most at risk in kindergarten. Students were given pretests and posttests to measure effect-sizes. They used the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test and normed-referenced reading assessments. Also, they used two subtests: 1) Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF), and 2) an Oral Reading Fluency (ORF). This study used a larger sampling and included eight experimental and five comparison schools. The researcher increased their pool in order to obtain participants from a larger culturally and economically diverse group. They used repeated measures analysis of
variance (ANOVA) and the post hoc test. Their findings revealed that there were important gains for the participants.

The findings of the meta-analysis and other research studies on this topic consistently revealed that small-group instruction is an effective pedagogical tool. Most research conducted on this topic used pretests, posttests, subtests, screening measurements, and norm and criterion tests as tools to measure success. In many of the studies, effect sizes were used to measure effectiveness. The methodological assumptions made in these studies were adequate for summative and formative evaluations. The instruments used to study the effectiveness of groupings on students were also adequate. An overwhelming number of studies reviewed were quantitative in nature and focused on students’ test scores and achievement results. Although these findings are valuable, it does not render data regarding teachers’ perspectives on using a small-group delivery method. The focus of this research will involve looking at this topic from a teacher’s perspective and will use methods that are commonly used in qualitative studies. These methods are discussed in the next chapter.

**Research Methods**

**Setting**

Pseudonym names have been assigned to all schools and teachers to protect the participants in this study. The setting of this study was within a large urban district located in a Midwestern state in the United States. The district was one of the largest urban districts in the state. It comprised 90 square miles within an urban county. The public school district educated approximately 35,000 students from pre-kindergarten-to-twelfth grades. Seventy percent of the student population was African American, 1.64% Hispanic, 0.87% Asian, 0.10% American Indian, 27.09% White and 0.30% Multi-Racial. Sixty-six percent of the student population
received free or reduced lunch. The district consisted of approximately 46 elementary schools that serve prekindergarten-to-grade eight and 16 high schools which traditionally served grades nine-to-twelve. There was one high school that contained fourth-to-twelfth grades and another school that contained grades seven-to-twelve. Both schools were considered magnet programs. The district offered magnet school programs in several elementary and high schools throughout the city in the areas of Montessori, arts, foreign languages, paideia, and college preparatory.

The district employed approximately 1,758 classroom teachers, 465 intervention specialist, and 744 instructional paraprofessionals. Over 33,000 students were transported to schools throughout the city.

There were four elementary schools that participated in the study. Three of the four schools contained kindergarten-to-eighth grade. The fourth school in the study contained kindergarten-to-six grade. Three of the schools were schools with low academic performance and economical and social characteristics that are typical of urban schools. By contrast, the other school was an academic award winning school within the district. Teachers in all of the schools were required to use the reading framework, incorporating small-group instruction, during reading instruction.

The first school, Barack Elementary School (pseudonym), was a newly-built school located in one of the city’s high crime areas. Ms. Robinson (pseudonym) is assigned to this school and teaches fourth-grade. This school is a bright spot on the street of old buildings and a vacant lot owned by the city. The school houses over 700 students and class sizes for the intermediate grades are between 25 and 30 students per teacher. The student population is predominately African American, and many students live within a three-mile radius of the school. The administrator of the school is seen as a true instructional leader. The moral at the school started out high and gradually decreased over the year. Teachers reported low parental support and a
large percentage of disciplinary concerns with students. The classrooms in this school were compact and Ms. Robinson had the desks arranged in a horseshoe to support her small-group instruction. There were four computers in the room and these were set up as part of the stations during small-group instruction. There was a teaching station with five chairs in the middle of the room. During the observation, the researcher remained stationary in the rear of the classroom (See Figure 2.1).

The second school, John F. Kennedy Elementary School (pseudonym), was also a newly built school. Ms. Bouvier (pseudonym) is assigned to this school as a sixth-grade teacher. This school is located in an area of the city that was recently abandoned by the affluent social class and replaced with low income housing projects. The school houses over 700 students and class sizes for the intermediate grades were between 25 and 30 students per teacher. The student population is also predominately African American, and a large percentage of the students live within a three-mile radius. This school has a high mobility rate and there are students who withdraw and enroll in the same year due to family situations. The administrator is new to the school this year and teachers were apprehensive about having a new administrator. However, by the end of the year, many teachers seemed to have gained confidence in the school leadership and moral was high. They report that he is fair, firm and consistent. Teachers also report that there is low parental support and a large number of disciplinary and mental health concerns of students. The classrooms and halls are painted with bright colors and are kept clean and fresh looking. The floors are shiny and the halls have bulletin boards with motivation sayings.

Ms. Bouvier’s classroom was set up in seven groups. The average group size was five students per group. There were three same-sex groups and one of those groups consisted of five girls. There were two groups that contained all boys. She had computers in the back of her
Figure 2.1 Barack Elementary School fourth-grade classroom
classroom and students did not work on the computers during the observation. The researcher assumed a position next to the teacher’s desk at the beginning of the observation.

Toward the end of the observation, the researcher walked to the board in front of the classroom to observe the work folders that students were using. There wasn’t a separate area for a teaching station and the teacher circulated among the groups during small-group instruction (See Figure 2.2).

The third school, Washington Elementary School (pseudonym), was located in a high crime area of the city. Ms. Ross (pseudonym), a fifth-grade teacher, is assigned to this school. The school was a new building and the classrooms and hallways were clean and bright. The grounds that the school sits on were well kept with a manicured look. The school was surrounded by a large fence and visitors rang a bell to gain entry into the building. The school housed approximately 450 students and the class size for the intermediate grades were approximately 27 students per teacher. This school had a high mobility rate of students and the teacher reported receiving up to 3 new students in one week. The teacher reported that the overall culture in the building was one of respect and high expectations. Students’ desks were arranged in pairs and they changed the configuration of the seats after they were assigned to groups.

The teacher had a system where students’ desks were arranged in pairs throughout the room during whole-group instruction (See Figure 2.3). Students were assigned heterogeneously at the end of whole-group instruction by the teacher. She had each student count off using numbers one, two, three and four, and then directed students with similar numbers to go to an area in the room and arrange their desks and chairs into a group. After their assigned groups were given, they moved their desks and chairs to create groups within the room. There were four computers in the room that were turned off. Students did not use the computers during the small-group
Figure 2.2. John F. Kennedy Elementary School – Sixth-grade classroom
Figure 2.3. Washington Elementary School fifth-grade classroom
observations. There wasn’t a separate area for a teaching station, and this teacher circulated among the groups during small-group instruction. During the observation, the researcher remained stationary near the entrance door next to the computers.

The fourth school, Martin Luther King Elementary School (pseudonym), was located in a more affluent section of the city. The fourth-grade teacher assigned to this school was Ms. Scott (pseudonym). The school was recently renovated and the classrooms were large, bright, clean, and appealing. It housed approximately 500 students and class sizes for the intermediate grades are the same as the other schools. Of the four schools that participated in the study, this was the only school that contained grades kindergarten through six. This teacher reported a very high percentage of parental support and minimal disciplinary issues within the student body. This school had a very low mobility rate and students rarely withdrew from kindergarten to six grade. Students’ desks were arranged in groups and there was a teaching station in the right corner of the room (See Figure 2.4).

The state assesses students in grades three-to-eight in reading, math, science, and social studies to evaluate a district’s academic performance. This district has not met the required percentage of state indicators for reading, 75% passage rate, during this period in grades four, five, and six. As a result of this report card rating, the district evaluated its reading instruction and formulated a reading framework to be used in its school system.

The district is in its fifth consecutive year of Continuous Improvement, which made it a prime candidate for this study. Barack Elementary School, John F. Kennedy School, and Washington Elementary School did not meet their state indicators in reading and have a report card rating of academic emergency. Martin Luther King Elementary School not only met their
Figure 2.4. Martin Luther King, Jr. fourth-grade classroom
indicators, but also received the highest report card rating of academic excellence.

The characteristics of this district and the selected schools were prime areas for this research. Selecting teachers at schools with a rating of academic excellence and emergency gave the research a flavor of diversity that was beneficial in the analysis and findings of this study.

Participants

There were four teacher participants, n=4, selected for the study. Three of the four teachers were veteran teachers: 1) Ms. Bouvier, 2) Ms. Robinson, and 3) Ms. Scott. One teacher, Ms. Ross, was a first-year teacher. There were three White and one African American participants. Two teachers taught fourth-grade, one teacher was assigned to a fifth-grade classroom, and one teacher taught sixth-grade. Three of the four teachers reported that they had received training in small-group instruction. Participants had informally reported that they were using small-group instruction and that information was used in the selection process. These teachers felt comfortable openly expressing their perspectives on small-group instruction. Two of the teachers expressed negative connotations regarding small-group instruction, one teacher was in favor of this pedagogical practice, and the other teacher was not decided.

Gaining Entry

An application to the International Review Board (IRB) was submitted in the winter of 2009. An application was also submitted to the school district simultaneously. Having permission to conduct this research from both entities was critical. Upon approval of the research applications, an invitation to participate was sent through an email message to four participants. Once participants agreed to participate, they were assigned a number for identification purposes and sent a survey through the interoffice school mail. Also, at this time, the participants’ building
administrators were notified, through email message, of the teacher’s involvement in the study. After the first-cut analysis of the survey data was performed, an email requesting dates for the observations was sent.

**Data Sources**

This research employed instruments that were conducive to qualitative research and supported an epistemology of constructivism. Data collection occurred during the 2009-2010 school year. The specific methods used to collect data included a pre-observational survey, classroom observations, and post-observational interviews. Following the collection of data from each method, an analysis was performed in order to drive decisions in the next phase of the study. There were three phases to this study: 1) in order to participate, teachers were required to complete and return a survey, 2) after the return of the survey, two observations in each classroom were conducted, and 3) each participant had a post-observational interview.

Collecting data through the use of a survey provided the participant with an opportunity to think and reflect on the areas of interest. Participants were able to complete the survey at their convenience without the influence of a researcher. This was a less intrusive way of collecting data and it set the stage for participants to be as transparent as possible without the influence of a researcher or other participants. The survey was designed to be completed within 30 to 40 minutes (See Appendix A). The survey included multiple choice, forced choice, and short answer questions. Having multiple choice and forced choice items afforded opportunities to collect quantifiable data. A pilot study on this topic was conducted in the 2008-2009 school year and revealed that several questions on the survey were ambiguous and did not render the intended data. As a result of this finding, those questions on the survey were revised in order to
elicit the intended information on the areas of interest. Also, in order to provide participants with a venue to include personal reflections, open-ended items were included.

Next, observation is a common tool used in practice ethnography. Two field observations were performed on all participants during phase two. The researcher assumed the role of observer during the field observations in classrooms. To nurture their trust, teachers were permitted to select the day and time of the observations. Classroom observations were approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length and specifically observed small-group instruction and transitions to small groups. A checklist was used to record occurrences in the focused areas (See Appendix B). Also, space was provided on the form to use a tally mark system to record the frequency of events of specific behaviors. Handwritten notes were also included as part of the checklist and provided an area to record questions and clarifications that were posed later in the interview stage.

In a pilot study conducted during the 2008-2009 school year, classroom management was reported as a key concern when implementing small groups. Therefore, items were included on the checklist template to specifically observe this phenomenon. It became apparent that several of the teachers used unique strategies that were not reported in the survey. This omission may have been a result of automaticity and the art of teaching. When questioned about several of the observed strategies in the interview, many teachers were not aware that they were utilizing these techniques. Another review of the data was performed to discover patterns, outliers and possible areas for triangulation.

Finally, interviewing is an instrument that is frequently utilized in qualitative research. In this study, post-interviews were used as a final collection of data in order to make meaning of the information collected in the previous phases. A semi-structured interview protocol was used
during each interview (See Appendix C). Conducting a semi-structured interview allowed the interviewer to ask clarifying and probing questions based on participants’ responses and to promote natural conversation. There was also a need to listen to voice during the interviews. As stated by Padgett (2004), “The focus on voice begins when the interviewer listens actively for hesitations, self-interruptions, meta-statements, self-criticism, and pauses, cues that suggest that the participant is struggling with the discrepancy between her own voice…” (p. 50). Attending to the interviewee’s voice gave more in-depth analysis data. Also, transcription symbols to assist with the interpretation of the data were used. A coding system to indicate cues was created and used during the interview. To indicate that there was a pause, a single letter of (p) was written, hesitations were indicated by (h), self-interruptions were (si), and meta-statements were indicated by the notation of (m). This system was enlightening during the transcription and analysis stage because it helped to recreate the participants’ actual response in relation to the words being spoken. Another advantage for using interviews is that, in most cases, participants were able to share personal experiences, beliefs, and feelings.

Participants were given the option to have the interviews conducted at their school or a location that was convenient to them after school hours. Three of the four interviews were conducted in the teachers’ classroom. The fourth interview took place at the participant’s home. Each official interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded. Transcriptions of all interviews were analyzed and placed on a coding matrix that included data from phases one and two. This coding matrix was used as an opportunity to gain insight into areas of triangulation or discrepancies between the pre-observational survey, classroom observations, or the post-observational interview.

Peer reviews were obtained to examine drafts of the survey, to establish an interview
template, and to provide feedback on various phases of the study in order to enhance the trustworthiness, validity and reliability of the report.

As part of an exit strategy, teachers who participated in the study were sent thank you notes. Also, I plan to meet with the department chair of the district’s Research and Evaluation Department to share the findings of the study at some future date.

**Analysis**

Having three data sources, pre-observational surveys, classroom observations, and post-observational interviews provided opportunities during coding for triangulation. Patton (2002) stated:

> Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods. This can mean using several kinds of methods or data, including using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Denzin (1978b) has identified four basic types of triangulation: (1) data triangulation, the use of a variety of data sources in a study; (2) investigator triangulation, the use of several different researchers or evaluators; (3) theory triangulation, the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data, and (4) methodological triangulation, the use of multiple methods to study a single problem or program. (p. 247)

In this study having multiple methods aided in the identification of areas of triangulation. Recurring regularities or patterns were sorted into themes or categories starting with the survey in phase one. A first-cut analysis was performed on the data collected in the survey phase of the research. A color coding system was used to determine the frequency of recorded items and these were placed into themes. Also, teachers’ responses from the surveys were color-coded to provide a method to track the quantifiable group and individual data. When analyzing the coding of the multiple choice and forced-choice items, there were patterns and outliers. For example,
100% of the teachers reported that they maintained at least one-to-two low maintenance stations during small-group instruction. This information was used as a lead into the observation phase of the study and specific notations were made of any low maintenance station materials that students were using. Low maintenance stations are stations that do not require the teacher to create a completely different activity each week. The procedures for completing the activity remain the same every week. However, students are provided with a different set of vocabulary words or book to complete the activity using the same procedures. Another phenomenon that was interesting and gave specific focus for the observation phase is that 75% of the teachers reported that they worked with three or more groups at the teaching station in one day. This was another area of focus during classroom observations and will be discussed further in the discussion section of this report. When asked if classroom management during reading times is more manageable, two respondents had a favorable response and the other two were unfavorable. I had already identified this as an area of interest and focused on specific instructional strategies that may have contributed to effective classroom management.

Recurring regularities and patterns were sorted into five themes or categories. Hammersly and Atkinson (1995) explained “The reorganization of data into categories provides an important infrastructure for later searching and retrieval” (p. 193). The themes that emerged in this study were: 1) positive benefits of using small groups, 2) challenges of using small groups, 3) effect on instruction 4) effect on classroom management, and 5) adaptations and transition to using a small-group delivery method. These themes were placed on a data display (See Figure 2.5) and served as a guide in phase two and at the data analysis stage.

My experience in conducting classroom observations as a coach aided in my ability to gather data during the field observations in this study. Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle indicated that
Figure 2.5. – Data display of themes that emerged during the first-cut analysis.

Themes/Categories

Teachers’ Responses to Using a Small Group Delivery Method during Reading Instruction.

Positive Benefits of Using Small Groups

Challenges of Using Small Group

Effect on Instruction

Effect on classroom management

Adaptations and transition to using a small group delivery method
researchers affect the environment that they are observing by their mere presence. McKerrow and McKerrow (1991) explained “This principle is popularly understood to mean that observers, by their very presence, always change what is observed” (p. 17). So, in most cases, I positioned myself in a location in the room, usually in the back of the room, that was seemingly inconspicuous. As the observer, I did not have conversation with students and only spoke with teachers if they spoke to me.

During the classroom visits, I was careful not to look as if I was writing the entire time. I also made several mental notes and wrote those notations at an opportune time. I used a template to guide my focus as I collected data. The template included items with a checklist response and this also allowed me to observe without writing during the entire observation. One of the main areas that I focused on was classroom management during the transitions as well as while students were in small groups. I had a tally mark system to record times when a teacher had to redirect a student who was off task during small-group instruction. Also, the number of times that a student had an opportunity to response at the teaching station was recorded using a tally mark system. There was a *not observed* option added to the template to serve as an indicator that an effort was made to observe the required phenomenon.

At the completion of phase two, another analysis of the data was performed. The information was coded by displaying the data from phases one and two on one page in order to identify patterns, outliers, or possible areas of triangulation (See Figure 2.6). This display was created for each theme that emerged from phase one. An individual analysis was performed on each teacher using the survey and classroom observation field notes to provide guidance during the interview stage. Data analysis information collected at phases one and two served as valuable tools in phase three.
Positive Benefits of Small Groups

**Surveys**

- Able to provide differentiation to students according to their need.
- Feedback from instruction is more frequent and meaningful to teacher and student.
- Teacher is able to focus on individual or small groups with similar needs – targeting specific struggles.
- Allows you to explicitly teach skills to ALL students.
- Believe to be pedagogically sound practice. (100%)
- Students enjoy working in groups. Students get to talk.
- Promotes students social skill development. Students enjoy working in groups
- It gives students more responsibility. They are more self-sufficient. Classroom management becomes part of the student’s responsibility.

**Observations (Field Notes)**

- All students given multiple opportunities to respond at teacher station. (Btw. 3-10 responses/student)
- Teacher gave explicit instruction on skill taught.
- Teacher differentiated instruction given at teaching station.
- Students are laughing while doing role play assignments. Kids are eager to start stations.
- Students are working cooperatively in independent groups.
- Students on task working independently while teacher in teaching station. (5 minutes after transition 13 out of 13)
- Student tells teacher about a siblings birthday during transition to teaching station.

Figure 2.6 – Example of data display after phase two of study. Display used to identify patterns and possible areas of triangulation.
Upon completion of the interviews, recorded sessions and field notes were transcribed and coded by themes on a matrix. Data from completed surveys and classroom observation transcriptions were also coded on the same matrix. An inductive analysis was performed to categorize the data, and a coding matrix was created to display the data from all three methods under the five themes (See Figure 2.7). This matrix assisted in identifying areas of triangulation.

The methods and instruments used in this study aligned with the methodological considerations of ethnography and more specifically, practice ethnography. The data collected at each stage intertwined and provided opportunities for rich triangulation and served as springboards throughout the research process.

**Rationale**

The methods used in this study are in alignment with a practice ethnography methodology. This section provides the rationale for the selection of participants, district and schools represented in the study. A rationale for utilizing surveys, observations and interviews as the preferred methods is also discussed.

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. This design strategy allowed the researcher to select individuals with the characteristics needed for the study (Patton, 2002). Patton used a comparison case study by Kingsley Davis of the babies Anna and Isabelle to illustrate the richness of purposeful criterion sampling. His study analyzed the effect human contact had on the two babies. Both participants were selected because of their unique circumstances and Patton (2002) stated “This single case, horrifying as was the abuse and neglect, offered a natural experiment to study socialization effects and the relative contributions of nature and nurture to human development” (p. 45). In this study, rich data on a few
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Positive Benefits of using small groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>*Helps teacher to understand how the student is thinking or working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Able to provide differentiation to students according to their need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Feedback from instruction is more frequent and meaningful to teacher and student.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Teacher is able to focus on individual or small groups with similar needs – targeting specific struggles.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* It gives students more responsibility. They are more self-sufficient – which deceases negative issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* The kids enjoy the work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>* Students on task working independently while teacher in teaching station (5 minutes after transition – 13 out of 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Students make decisions by getting station work throughout small group time without assistance from teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Students are laughing while completing role play assignment in stations then goes back to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>* To help differentiate instruction for them. So small group does work. I try to limit my whole group time and have more small group time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* I quickly learn which kid don’t have this or which ones they need and I drill on that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* I deliberately call on certain kids…If I haven’t heard from them I don’t know what you are thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* I can break it down into reteach groups, practice and enrichment groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* I think it’s easier for me to see their progress and where exactly their falling and where I need to go back and meet that individual student to bring them up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Benefits is that the students like being able to talk and work in their teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* The team leader is in charge of getting the materials. They run the stations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.7. Sample coding matrix used after phase three. Matrix used to identify patterns and areas of triangulation.
purposefully selected subjects proved more valuable than a positivistic approach that require large sampling. Patton stated “These two cases offered considerable insight into the question of how long a human could remain isolated before ‘the capacity for full cultural acquisition’ was permanently damaged…” (p. 46). Utilizing purposeful sampling was critical in order to obtain the insight and rich data needed for the comparisons made in the final analysis.

Employing a purposeful sampling design strategy was most applicable to this research study in its quest to capture teachers’ perspectives regarding their transition to a small-group delivery method. Therefore, reading teachers in a large urban district were of particular interest so this was a criterion. Furthermore, purposefully selecting reading teachers at grades four, five, and six narrowed the focus of this study. Most elementary grade levels in this district were required to use a small-group delivery method and teachers from grades four through six were strategically recruited. Most of these teachers had some experience with implementing a small-group delivery method in their classrooms in the previous year.

In order to collect an adequate amount of data within the time frame allotted for this research project, four participants, n=4, were selected for the study. Selecting four participants for the study provided opportunities for rich data and possible areas of triangulation. Also, this allowed the researcher to obtain information beyond numbers. As stated by Patton (2002) “Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, even single cases (N=1)…selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth” (p. 46). In order to obtain diverse perspectives, teachers who had positive and negative connotations about small groups were selected. Additionally, three of the four teachers were veteran teachers and one was a first-year teacher.
The setting for this study consisted of four schools within a large metropolitan urban district. This district was selected because of the researcher’s particular interest in teachers implementing a small-group delivery method within urban environments. The district identified fifteen schools that were in the category of academic watch and academic emergency on the state’s report card. These schools were categorized as Elementary Initiative (EI) schools. All of the schools with the classification of EI did not meet the required Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) scores in reading. The schools in this category, along with the other elementary schools in the district, were required to implement a reading framework that used a small-group delivery method during reading instruction beginning with the 2008-2009 school year. The Elementary Initiative schools received extensive training and coaching on the implementation of stations and using small groups. The remaining schools were able to receive training upon request or in voluntary after school sessions. Three of the four participants were in schools designated as EI schools and one participant was in a school with high academic distinction on the State’s Report Card, have met and exceeded their AYP, and previously held the Blue Ribbon Award for a school of excellence. Selecting teachers at schools with a wide range of scores on the report card provided opportunities for variations in the data.

Having opportunities to observe teachers aided in the understanding of this topic. An agreed upon time and date for the observations were made prior to the classroom visit. Participants were told that the researcher would be as inconspicuous as possible during the visit. They were also informed that questions and clarifications would be addressed during the post-observational interview. Observations provided greater opportunities for triangulation.

Conducting interviews was a natural tool under the umbrella of a constructivist epistemological framework. The data collected during the post-observational interviews provided
a way to clarify any misunderstandings or contradictions with the survey or classroom observations. It allowed participants to voice their realities regarding small-group instruction. Furthermore, it allowed opportunities for teachers to offer information that was not addressed in the first two stages of the research.

**Summary**

Practice ethnography is a modern-day approach that provides researchers with the methods needed to obtain data in a naturalistic state. Furthermore, it offers tools that obtain data with a specific focus on the theory in practice. This approach allowed the researcher to gather in-depth data on the process of using a small-group delivery method. Using a systemic research approach that looks at the practitioners’ perspective contributed to the analysis and findings of this study. The methods used in this research provided multiple opportunities to gather rich data. The next chapter of this paper highlighted and discussed the results of the data retrieved from the various methods.
CHAPTER THREE – RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to gain insight into teachers’ perspectives on using a small-group delivery method pedagogy. Although this type of pedagogical practice is not new, it is a method that may be difficult to employ and many teachers continue to struggle with the philosophy and implementation of using small groups during reading instruction. This study revolved around two questions: 1) How do teachers adapt their instruction when transitioning from a whole- to small-group delivery method? and 2) what are the benefits and challenges encountered by teachers when using a small-group delivery method within reading instruction?

This chapter presents the data collected during the study. When analyzing the data, the themes that emerged fell into five categories: 1) adaptation and transition to using a small-group delivery method, 2) positive benefits of using small-group instruction, 3) challenges in using a small-group delivery method, 4) the effect that a small-group delivery method has on instruction, and 5) the effect that this type of delivery method has on classroom management. Analyzing the data under these categories provided information that aligned to the research questions.

The first theme, adaptation and transition to using a small-group delivery method, captured teachers’ reactions to changing from a predominately whole- to small-group delivery method and will be discussed in the first section. Each teacher’s story on their reaction to the reading framework and their adaptation and transition from whole to small group is unique. Observing their interactions throughout the transitional process provided data on their interpretations and meaningful realities. When discussing symbolic interactionism, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) purported “The meaning people give to their experience and their process of interpretation are essential and constitutive, not accidental or secondary to what the experience is” (p. 27).
Therefore, each teacher’s story was captured and reported as a case analysis. Data from all three methods were used in this analysis.

The next section discussed the patterns of the remaining themes that emerged and will be couched in the principle of maximum variation (heterogeneity). Maximum variation (heterogeneity) states that extrapolating the commonalities of small sample sizes with variations proves to be a valuable process in analyzing data. Patton (2002) stated:

This strategy for purposeful sampling aims at capturing and describing the central themes that cut across a great deal of variation. For small samples, a great deal of heterogeneity can be a problem because individual cases are so different. The maximum variation sampling strategy turns that apparent weakness into a strength by applying the following logic: Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon. (pp. 234-235)

Hence, a cross-case analysis was conducted during this phase. Composite data collected from the surveys, observations, and interviews were analyzed. A keen focus was placed on the consistencies, inconsistencies and contradictions that were evident in the data. Additional analysis was given to the common threads that emerged throughout the three methods and were presented in this manner.

Framework Implementation

When examining the adaptation and transition to small groups, one must consider teachers’ reactions such as their resistance or transformation if applicable. There were two veteran teachers who adamantly opposed this style of teaching in the first year of implementation. One participant was in favor of this pedagogical practice. The other teacher did not have a strong
opinion one way or the other at the beginning of the study. Three of the four teachers were in their second year of implementing the reading framework that required using a small-group delivery method. Also, it is important to note that three of the four teachers were currently working with a district coach to help with the practical application of the framework in their classrooms. Coaches provided support on an individual basis through modeling, providing station materials or escorting teachers to other schools to visit classrooms where they were provided a model of this framework being used in a setting very similar to theirs. The other teacher did not request support from a coach and was solid in her implementation of the framework. Through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism, I analyzed each teacher’s reaction to the framework and the way that they adapted during this transition.

**Ms. Bouvier**

Ms Bouvier was assigned to John F. Kennedy Elementary School. She is a White veteran teacher with approximately six years of experience. She taught English language arts to 3 sixth-grade classes. Her average class size was 28 students and would increase or decrease on a weekly basis due to their high mobility rate. This year, due to budget cuts, her class size went from 18 to 30 students in the middle of first quarter. Requiring teachers to change their teaching assignment or school building in the middle of October is a normal occurrence for this district. She reported:

My first year I started out teaching math in 6th grade [hesitates] and then I was surplussed in October. I was placed in a 7th and 8th grade position at Simon Elementary School (pseudonym) teaching math for 7th and 8th graders. My second year of teaching I taught grades 4, 5, and 6 language arts at Simon and then the school closed. So, I was hired at John
F. Kennedy where I taught 6th grade language arts and have been teaching 6th grade language arts since. I just finished my 4th year.

Ms. Bouvier is energetic and reported that she spends a considerable amount of time completing school work after school hours. She is a mild-mannered teacher and has a good rapport with her students. Although she supported administration, she expressed reservations about implementing the reading framework during the 2008-2009 school year and was reluctant to start in the current school year. She remarked:

At the beginning I was doing stations every other week. That’s the way it worked out.

Then we were told about the Elementary Initiatives and the principal wanted it done three times a week so it turned into stations every week. Which is what the goal was [pause]. So, I would say that after I started doing it every week it maybe took three times and then they had it down.

Ms. Bouvier had participated in Kagan’s Cooperative Learning training several years before the reading framework implementation. Kagan’s Cooperative Learning courses are nationally known as one of the forerunners of training on small groups. However, even after completing several of these courses, she felt-ill prepared to teach using a small-group delivery method and was reluctant from the very beginning. When asked about this training in the interview she stated “You know I feel like I used the philosophy behind small groups and I keep those things in the back of my mind but I have not been diligent about using the small-group strategies.” This reaction is typical of many teachers who are required to make changes in their pedagogy and Blumenfield, Marx, Soloway, and Krajcik (1996) reported “…it is not so easy to transform the culture of schools to incorporate extensive use of small-group learning” (p. 37). When asked about her first response to implementing the reading framework she stated:
I didn’t feel comfortable. I don’t know if it was me or the group of students that I had. I had a rough couple of groups for the past two school years [pauses]. Uhm, my first instinct was to blame them. They had some social issues like getting along with each other. Uhm, but I guess it was a mixture of both. It was my wanting to control the whole class and then also I didn’t trust them to get along with one another.

Mrs. Bouvier stated that she did not start implementing the framework until late in the first year of the required implementation and only after she felt pressure from administration and persistence from a district coach. She remarked “Last year we had to do stations. They told us in the fall and I don’t think I really worked at implementing them. It took my coach until maybe February to get me to the point where I really started working and trying stations.” At one point during the interview she simply stated “I was out of my comfort zone.”

In the first year, Ms. Bouvier received one-on-one coaching from a district coach. The coach escorted her to other schools in the district with similar demographics to allow her to see this framework in action in other classrooms. She stated that this was a key opportunity and turning point for her and her perspective on small-group instruction. She also stated that prior to the framework, she used only one type of delivery method and needed to see the framework within other urban classrooms. When asked to describe a major difference between how she prepared her lessons before implementing the reading framework and how she currently prepared them she reported:

I did whole group all day every day and I found myself exhausted at the end of the day. I was constantly fighting for their attention. I found that with stations it is less frustrating for me. I can just monitor and go around and work with different teams but then also they are
more engaged….It’s more enjoyable for them if they can work in their teams and its more enjoyable for me because I don’t have to compete for their attention.

Her strategy to teach small groups of students was to circulate throughout the classroom while students were working on their group work. She stated “It’s less stressful and more enjoyable for me because I am able to sit with a team and talk about what we’re learning and have enjoyable conversations based on academic and content materials instead of me talking and them listening.”

During both observations she was a calm, soft-spoken teacher as she walked around the room assisting groups and individual students. It is quite apparent that she is respected by her students and they are eager to please her. The classroom culture seemed caring and inviting. Students were comfortable asking questions and were also familiar with the many routines that were established in the classroom. The classroom was freshly painted and there were educational posters on the walls and bulletin boards. There were clearly marked areas in the room to indicate that groups were a regular routine. There were signs with group numbers hanging above each group. Folders with station work were on the board in the front of the room with the number of the station written on the outside of the folder. On one side of the room, there were bins with students’ folders.

During one observation, the researcher entered the room just before the transition into small groups. Ms. Bouvier stopped a taped recording of the book entitled Hoot by Carl Hiaasen and addressed the researcher by saying in a welcoming voice “Perfect timing.” She continued by giving students directions for small group station work. Several students began to go to the board to get station work and folders for their group. Ms. Bouvier told the students that they didn’t need to be completely silent, but not to use a full voice. During the interview, she
reported that she taught this skill earlier in the year. Students continued to move about the room and rustled papers within their folders and desks. Everyone seemed busy moving about. Then the noise level slowly decreased to a hum as students began to work. A sense of authentic engagement and learning became evident in the classroom as students made this transition. Classroom management was an area of interest and particular attention was given to this transition. A section on the observation checklist was provided for the observer to write in the number of students working on task after five minutes into the transition. At approximately five minutes there were 22 out of 23 students on task. One student was alone with his head on the desk. The teacher circulated throughout the groups for the remainder of the observation. She continued to encourage the student who worked alone and he eventually completed two stations.

During this observation, Ms. Bouvier had solid classroom management and instructional strategies in place during reading instruction. However, she stated that she still is not as comfortable with operating a teaching station during the small-group period and that she had set this as a goal for the next school year. Ms. Bouvier had 75% of the specific traits that were included on the observation checklist in place. The other traits were marked not observe because they were pertaining to operating a teaching station.

It is important, however, to note the transition and growth that she made during her second year of implementing the reading framework. During the observations, interviews and her responses on the survey, it was apparent that she had authentically embraced this type of delivery method. Her classroom moved from being teacher-centered to student-centered. She stated “…I had to step back and listen to what they would say to each other because they would answer each other’s questions and they didn’t need me. They could answer each other’s questions which was amazing to see at the end.” On the survey, when asked if she would continue to use this
particular pedagogy after the elementary initiatives, she stated, “Yes.” She also reported on the survey that she uses this delivery style when teaching social studies. When asked if she felt that using small group had become a part of her teaching style she reported:

Yes and I like it. I’m getting better at it you know - like with the organizing. I’m making all of the materials and I pull all of the work from the novel. Now that I have it down, I will use it again for next school year. Next year will be good.

During this study, her second year of implementing small groups, she had gained confidence and implemented station work with a sense of ease.

**Ms. Robinson**

Ms. Robinson was a fourth-grade teacher at Barack Elementary School. She is a White, veteran teacher with 15 years of experience. Ms. Robinson entered into a special program for pre-service teachers at the local university. The program was co-sponsored by the local university and the school district. This program offered students grant monies for tuition and paid for a year’s internship in their fifth year. As part of the agreement between the district and the university, pre-service teachers were hired and placed in the same school where they completed their student teaching in year four of the degree program. There was one other teacher from her cohort that was placed in the same school. Ms. Robinson recalled this account during the interview “We actually got paid and this money was paid into our retirement. Nice right! [laughs]. I worked one year, and from there I left and taught one year in Mapleleaf School (pseudonym). I came back to this district the next year and have been here every since.” Ms. Robinson has worked in two schools in the district and recently transferred to her current assignment as a fourth-grade English language arts teacher. She has three classes of fourth-graders that rotate to her each day. Her class sizes range from 27 to 30 students per class.
Ms Robinson readily agreed to participate in the study. She was a teacher who openly expressed her opinion regarding small groups and in particular the Elementary Initiatives. She was not in support of many of the initiatives and was very reluctant in implementing small groups during the 2008-2009 school year. Ms. Robinson’s survey was completed and returned immediately. Her responses were curt and to the point. Her major complaint was class size and that she did not have the necessary materials needed to start the implementation. She had over 30 students in one class and did not have enough textbooks for all students. In the first year of implementation, she was very abrasive when approached regarding small groups and rejected the assistance from a coach. She insisted from the very beginning that she wanted to see this framework being implemented with students who are similar to those in her classroom.

Throughout the survey and interview, it was clear that Ms. Robinson was not a proponent of the Elementary Initiatives and she emphatically stated that she did not want to implement small groups as outlined in the reading framework from the very beginning of the initiative. With little to no training in small groups she was not comfortable implementing this in the middle of the school year. She also reported that large class sizes made this task even more daunting. When asked how long she had to prepare before implementing the framework, she stated:

Hours [laughs]. You know, I still remember sitting at Mapleleaf School and being handed a folder of information. Everybody was kind of overwhelmed and asked the question when does this start? We were told, ‘Monday’. So, we had no proper training and no kind of handbook… I wanted to get a grasp of it myself before you just throw me out there and say do it.

Ms. Robinson received one-on-one support from a district coach in the first year of implementation. Although there was push back, the coach worked with Ms. Robinson to
implement the framework with the resources and textbooks that she currently used. Additional resource materials for stations as well as modeling lessons and other support services were provided. During her second year of implementation, she received weekly support from a district coach. She stated “We meet here weekly with an Elementary Initiative coach and they give us pointers and recommendations.”

During both observations, Mrs. Robinson had a bubbly and energetic personality that her students responded to very well. On occasion, she used terms in the dialect of the students. A clear example of this is captured in dialogue presented later in this section. Her rapport with students was an apparent strength that she possessed. She was very welcoming and adapted very well with an unexpected schedule change. During both observations her whole-group lesson at the beginning of the framework was very brief. Both observations were conducted toward the end of the week, therefore students were familiar with the indicator and the expectations of the assignment.

Within two minutes into the observation, she told students to rotate for their stations. There were areas that were clearly marked to identify each station. She had themes and props for several of the stations and had a total of four operating: 1) construction site that was a station to build vocabulary words (students put on hard hats and construction site vests at this station), 2) the beach where students had a blanket and picnic items to pretend to be on a beach as they read leveled readers aloud to each other, 3) a computer station where students work on reading software, and 4) a listening station where students listened to a story on tape and then answered questions. Many of these stations were considered low maintenance stations. Low maintenance stations are stations that do not require the teacher to create a completely different activity each week. The procedures for completing the activity remain the same every week. However,
students are provided with a different set of vocabulary words, reading passage, or book to complete the activity using the same procedures. Five minutes after the transition in the first rotation there were 16 out of 18 students on task, the second rotation there were 16 out of 18 students on task and the third rotation 18 out of 18. Ms. Robinson rotated to the groups of students and helped individual students throughout the observation. She explained that she normally operates the teaching station but students were working on their writing portfolios. There was evidence in the room to indicate that a teaching station is a routine occurrence and one student asked if they could go to the teaching station. Many of her students had leadership roles within their groups, and were on task. Ms. Robinson indicated that she continues to work on social skills to encourage students to work together. An exchange during one rotation between two students speaks volumes of the caring, trusting environment that she has created:

T: Alright guys lets switch.

S: Aahh [Seemingly disappointed to stop working at the station.]

T: Five, four, three, two and…

[One student starts to move and bumps another student.]

S1: You did that on purpose.

S2: No I didn’t.

S1: I bet you won’t do it again. [Balls up his fist.]

T: One. Relax. Let’s solve this peacefully.

S2: I was just getting my materials.

T: You can say my bad if it was an accident.

S2: My bad. [Both students go to the next station and the issue is resolved. Within three minutes 18 out of 18 students are on task.]
In the interview, when questioned about the teaching decisions made during this exchange, Ms. Robinson wasn’t aware of her natural instincts to handle this potentially disruptive situation. She also wasn’t aware that she had shifted into their dialect to communicate and encourage positive conflict resolution. She listed many more benefits than challenges and reported that she strongly agreed with the statement that a delivery method of small-group instruction is a pedagogically sound practice. In the interview, she stated that implementing the teaching station during small groups will be an area of focus for her next year. During the observation, her students responded well to this type of delivery system. In fact, she supported using small groups and stated the following:

There are a lot of benefits to small groups. I think it’s good practice [pause]. Uhm, I had to make adjustments personally because like I mentioned earlier it’s a little more difficult too. I’m the teacher who likes to run around the room and make sure that everybody’s visited and revisited and everybody’s on track. And so it’s a big adjustment for me to be seated at the table and kind of let them go. So it’s been a little more difficult for me to maintain the kind of management that I like.

Ms. Robinson felt that although using small groups is strenuous at this time for students and teachers, it would become easier overtime. In her interview she stated, “If each teacher is doing this, the same practice with small groups, and kind of have the same expectations year after year and between classes. And the next class. I think it would be progressively less challenging”. During her classroom observation, she had 95% of the specific traits identified as strategies needed to ensure successful implementation of small groups in place. She demonstrated a command of this framework and students responded with a sense of responsibility, ownership and authentic engagement in the stations and their work.
Ms. Scott

Ms. Scott was a fourth-grade teacher at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School (pseudonym). There were three classes that rotate to her on a daily basis. Her average class size is 28 students. She is an African American and has worked for the district for 27 years in various positions. Earlier in her career, she was employed as a paraprofessional and a substitute teacher. She held a bachelor’s degree in interior design but was drawn to the field of education. She entered a teaching program sponsored by the local university. This program identified 25 employees of the district who had undergraduate degrees in areas other than education and had potential to become certified teachers. The program consisted of two years of course work and a one-year internship placement within the district. As part of the agreement, students were expected to work for the local school district for three years after the completion of the program. Ms. Scott remarked that she often referred to this requirement as a guaranteed job.

Ms. Scott has had a remarkable career in her teaching assignments. Her first teaching assignment was as a Three Plus teacher. The Three Plus program was developed to reduce the number of retentions at third-grade. This program gave students remedial work as well as work at the next grade level when appropriate. She also became a Direct Instruction coach for the school building. Direct Instruction is a reading program that the school had adopted for several years. Later, she became a lead teacher in the district and worked at central office as a district-wide coach. She reported having Kagan’s Cooperative Learning training. Additionally, she completed three courses on differentiated instruction. She had teaming and classroom management training. She had conducted numerous trainings for teachers on a variety of topics at the local training facility that supported the district. She was very adept in her skills as a
classroom teacher and coach. She was well-respected among her colleagues throughout the
district.

Ms. Scott was a strong supporter of this delivery method from the very beginning of the
reading framework implementation. Although she received minimal training from the district on
the reading framework, she seemed to have a strong command of the management and
implementation of this structure. During her classroom observations, she had 100% of the
observation checklist’s specific traits identified to ensure the successful implementation of small
groups in place. Furthermore, her students responded well to this pedagogy and worked very
well independently while the teacher was at the teaching station.

When asked about her beliefs about changing her reading instruction from whole-group to
small-group instruction, she responded:

As a student I was taught using whole group and I always taught using whole group. But
the benefits [of small groups] are helping to meet the changes in the laws down through the
years – like No Child Left Behind (NCLB). It literally means don’t leave any child behind.
So the only way that you can do that is that you have to reach every child at some point or
another. Small group is the only way you can do it. You can teach whole group and walk
around and try to monitor, but if a child needs more than one minute or two, you need to
have a small group to do it in. Uhm, to help differentiate instruction for them - so small
group does work.

During the observation, it was noted that one of her key strengths is delivering and
differentiating instruction to different small groups at the teaching station. When Ms. Scott was
asked if she would continue to use small groups after the Elementary Initiative she reported
“Yes, the components of it are sound. It’s just working out the time frame. That’s what teachers
have to work out. What they have to do is to manipulate the time and use the framework to make it work for them. It is a sound framework and you have to be able to manipulate your time.”

During both observations she operated a teaching station and worked with three groups. She had a fairly large room and it was freshly painted. There were areas in the room where students went to retrieve station materials. For instance, the novels were in one area of the room and students went to that area when they needed a book. There were bulletin boards with students’ work and educational materials. Although the groups were working on different novels, she differentiated instruction with each group. While the teacher was at the teaching station, the other students remained at their desks and completed independent work. One student entered the classroom in the middle of class, quietly went to another location in the room and spoke with another student for a brief moment. He went to his desk, got out his folder and book and began to work. When asked about this particular student during the interview, Ms. Scott stated that he was a student with a disability. She stated that she frequently reviews and keeps a PowerPoint with the directions for independent work on the polyvision board. This is an accommodation that she has made as a result of using small groups and she stated this later in her interview. It was very evident that Ms. Scott had 100% of the specific traits in place during both observations. She operated her teaching station with a skillful art, much like a culinary specialist prepares his/her favorite dish, and differentiated the instruction with each group.

Ms. Ross

Ms. Ross is a fifth-grade teacher at George Washington Elementary School (pseudonym). She is a first-year teacher who is middle class, White and wanted to teach in an urban district. In fact, she did her student teaching in another school within the district that has similar
demographics to George Washington Elementary School. She felt that experience helped to prepare her for her current teaching assignment this year. She was energetic and excited about her first teaching assignment. She stated “I was so excited and during my interview, I couldn’t help it and kept smiling. I was so happy to get a job.”

She is a teacher who works very hard and reported that she comes to school very early, stays late and works on a considerable amount of school work on the weekends. She is organized and plans her lessons with great detail. She has three classes of 5th graders and her average class size is 23. When asked to tell about any trainings that she may have had on small groups, she replied:

I don’t think I’ve had much training. We did have a college course in which one of my favorite professors gave us a lot of small-group instruction. We used a list of different instructional strategies like three stray, one stay and she exposed us to all of these different ways that we can instruct. It wasn’t until my last year of college that I found out about small-group instruction. I didn’t know that they had specific names for them and ways to do it and more procedures. So no, not formal training but a couple of college classes just kind of put it in there and that’s about it. I read some books and got more knowledge.”

Ms. Ross was not in support of the reading framework and it was clear that she struggled with its theory and practical application. Her first formal introduction to the framework was in a workshop given by the curriculum managers in the district. Teachers reported that the meeting was overwhelming because many of the other Elementary Initiatives were introduced simultaneously. The transformation of her stance is quite interesting and she verbalized her meta-cognition at several points throughout the interview. When asked if she thought that small group was more or less effective than whole group, she emphatically stated that she felt it was less effective. Although she did not report having any formal training on using this pedagogy during
the interview, on her survey she reported having support from a district coach but felt that it was minimal. The bulletin boards in her room contained students’ work and educational posters. She expressed concerns over the lack of social skills of her students as a major obstacle. Although her students worked well during the observation, she was reluctant to have them work independently without her supervision. She also expressed concerns over students’ accountability and learning. During the interview she had the following epiphany:

I: Most of your students were working cooperatively in their groups. I thought that they did a good job with their role plays.

T: [Nods in agreement] You can kind of listen and see where they are before you get them involved in doing more things. I usually listen to what the group is saying and say okay. Okay the next person is talking okay. Everyone is okay. They are good. I can walk away from them. I can kind of listen to them and know who I need to stand by and who I need to visit again. So I do a lot that way but my anxiety is if they are doing small group work then they are all independent and they are all doing something different. Are they retaining? Are they learning or are they just doing work? You know then I have to look at the activities that I have for them to work on. Are they valuable? But even if I feel like they are valuable, you know they are using their hands on word sorts and things like that but I have a fear that they are not retaining. They are just doing it and there is no accountability. Is it helpful? I don’t know. I have them do a reflection [on their work], but the reflection is not giving me much information. Like in whole group - I know I can monitor it. What are you doing? Ask - Do you have any questions? - And I feel like it’s more intense. I know that they have to retain something at the end of this, but then again I question, really? [hesitates] Even if it is whole group [hesitates] even if I – well it’s more of a control thing for me.”
Ms. Ross is expressing what many teachers who are using this pedagogy for the first time will experience. Relinquishing control and responsibility of a class is often expressed as a major concern when transitioning to a small group delivery method. Additionally, Ms. Ross struggled with her beliefs on how students learn. On her survey, Ms. Ross reported that she strongly disagreed with the statement that using the reading framework allowed more individualized instruction to students. At another point in the interview when asked if she would continue to use small groups after the initiative is over, she stated:

Yes [pause] They lack a lot of social skills so even if it’s more difficult to do small groups they need it. They need it for their life. They need it for skills. So whether I like it or not or think it’s less effective it has to happen for them and that’s what we are here for. They are the reason. Not to make me happy - but for them and that’s all that matters.

Ms. Ross is still not sure if this pedagogy aligns with her epistemological belief. Many studies analyzed how a teacher’s epistemological beliefs are associated with their response to change and how their beliefs transfer into their practice (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Fives & Buehl (2008); Fullan, 2007; Herbel-Eisenmann, Lubienski, Id-Deen, 2006; Holt-Reynolds, 2000; Kollar, 1999; Olafson & Schraw, 2006; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd (1991); Sockman & Sharma, 2008; Tobin & Dawson, 1992). This is a key component when examining teachers’ beliefs and change (Fives & Buehl, 2008). Understanding teachers’ epistemological beliefs about teaching and allowing them opportunities to process proposed changes increase the likelihood that they will authentically embrace the initiative. In addition to the alignment of her epistemological beliefs to this pedagogy, it seems that she wasn’t permitted time to process this new initiative before the expected implementation. Fullan (2007) described the term reculturing as “how teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits” as a key element that is
missing in many restructuring efforts. Ms. Ross is still more comfortable with teaching in whole
group and feels that this contribute to her strong classroom management. She referred to
students’ lack of social skills as an additional factor that prevented the implementation of small
groups. With no prior experience, she struggled. However, she did recognize some of the
benefits of small groups.

Summary

Although all of the teachers reported on their survey that they were using the reading
framework, it became apparent through the surveys, observations and interviews that they were
at different stages of implementation. It is clear that three of the four teachers’ initial reaction
was to reject using a small-group delivery method. However, two of the four teachers in this
study transformed their thinking on using this delivery method. One teacher still struggled with
the theory and implementation of small groups. In each case, the meaning or change in their
epistemological belief is a result of their social interactions throughout the implementation
process. A common factor that became apparent when comparing the data is that the teachers
who eventually embraced this method had at least two years of teaching experience with small
groups and that they received support from a district coach. Another factor that may have
contributed to their successful transformation is that they had two or more low maintenance
stations in place and this minimized the amount of time needed to plan (See Table 1). Also,
these stations were more manageable during small groups because students were familiar with
the procedures and expectations.

All of the teachers were at different levels in their implementation of the reading
framework. Two teachers stated that they had set goals to work on their implementation of a
teaching station. It was clear that one of the two teachers was operating a teaching station and
the other teacher was not comfortable with this next step. Both teachers indicated that they would work on improving or implementing a teaching station next year. One teacher is still unsure of this pedagogical practice and did not voice any intentions for next steps. The other teacher who had one hundred percent implementation also noted that there were adjustments needed in her teaching station. She stated, “As a teacher you must release management or believe that the student can work in groups and work independently. Once your class has mastered the management for small-groups, whole-group is really much easier. It does benefit whole-group as well."

Many of their first reactions were to reject this reform initiative and this type of pedagogy. Teachers’ interactions with students and continued dialogue with colleagues and coaches played a major factor in their beliefs and perspectives on using a small-group delivery method. This also is in alignment with Blumer’s social-psychological approach of symbolic interactionism. Through this transition, teachers were able to experience benefits and challenges of using small groups. They were able to see how their students reacted to this delivery method. On most occasions, students were excited and enjoyed working in small groups so this was also a factor in the teachers’ decisions that led to their transformation.

A cross analysis of the remaining themes: 1) positive benefits of using small-group instruction, 2) challenges in using a small-group delivery method, 3) the effect that a small-group delivery method has on instruction, and 4) the effect that this type of delivery method has on classroom management is discussed in the next section. The next section compiles the data of all participants and identifies commonalities within the themes that emerged.
Table 1

Comparison Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Number of years teaching using a small-group delivery method.</th>
<th>Number of years assigned a district coach</th>
<th>More than two low maintenance stations in place.</th>
<th>Authentically adopted small-group pedagogy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Bouvier</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Robinson</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Ross</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Scott</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Previous experience and training in cooperative groups, teaming, and classroom management.
Emerging Themes

**Positive Benefits.** An important commonality across all participants was that they felt that using a small-group delivery method of instruction is a pedagogically sound practice. This data was collected during the survey phase and was reiterated in subsequent phases. All participants interviewed reported that there were positive benefits in using a small-group delivery method. Ms. Scott stated “You are helping the child one-on-one with whatever they need.” Ms. Bouvier stated “It gives students more responsibility. They are more self-sufficient – which decreases negative issues.” This was evident in the observations as well when the researcher noted that one student entered the room after small-group instruction began. The student asked another student one question and within seconds went to work on his assignment. Also, during the observation, students made decisions by getting station work and staying on task throughout the small-group time without assistance from the teacher. On the survey, all four participants stated that they would continue to teach using a small-group delivery method after the district’s initiative was over. However, after the observations and interviews, it was clear that one teacher still struggled with small groups and had not authentically embraced this pedagogy. Three out of four participants reported that they would use small-group instruction in other subject areas. When asked if changing from a predominately whole- to small-group delivery method has had a positive effect on their practice, one participant strongly agreed, two participants selected somewhat agreed, and one participant was undecided.

The majority of the teachers felt that a major positive benefit of using small groups is that they are able to identify who needs extra help more easily and that they are able to personally connect with their students. Ms. Robinson stated “I think the benefit is...I can break down the groups, break it down into reteach groups, practice and enrichment groups. I think it’s easier for
me to see their progress and where exactly they’re falling and where I need to go back and meet that individual student to bring them up.” Ms. Scott stated “So the group that I know needs that specific indicator, I will teach it to that group. I quickly learn which kids don’t have this or which ones need it.” On an extended response question on her survey she wrote that “Feedback from instruction is more frequent and meaningful to the teacher and student.” During the interview Ms. Bouvier stated “It’s nice to be able to interact with the teams and see how they are doing.”

Teachers felt that another benefit to small-group instruction is that it allowed time for more personal interactions and thus promoted positive student-teacher relationships. Ms. Bouvier reported:

So, on a personal level it’s nice to be able to interact with the groups and see how they are doing. That’s another benefit. You get to know them better and they get a chance to talk. So the times that I do need to talk in front of the class hopefully they don’t feel the urge to talk while I’m talking. It [small groups] does help and it’s nice when I can go around too. It improves teachers’ interactions with students.

During the observation, students in Ms. Scott’s class were excited to go back to the teaching station and many of them anxiously awaited their turn. At each transition, a student had an opportunity to tell the teacher a personal story. During the interview, Ms. Scott made reference to this and stated that this type of interaction is very limited in a whole-group structure. Ms. Bouvier stated “It’s less stressful for me and it’s more enjoyable for me because I am able to sit with a team and talk about what we’re learning and have enjoyable conversations based on academics and content materials instead of me talking and them listening.”
On the survey, when asked if the reading framework allowed students more opportunities to respond, two of the four participants responded with strongly agree, one participant responded somewhat agree, and one participant responded somewhat disagree. When posed with this same question during the interview, Ms. Bouvier reported “I think they have increased opportunities. I am thinking about my girls who are just quiet. They would not participate in class in anything. But in stations they were like going at it with their little group and they all had similar personalities so they got their work done and helped each other. But when you put them in a big group they blend in with the walls [laughs].” Ms. Scott reported “If I haven’t heard from them I don’t know what they are thinking so I deliberately call on certain kids during my teaching station.” During the observations, the researcher had a tally mark system and marked each time a student had an opportunity to respond during the teaching station. An opportunity to respond would include when a student has the opportunity to answer the teacher’s question, engage in conversation about the lesson or give an explanation or insight into their thinking. In one observation, within a 20-minute period, the recorded number of responses per student was between a range of three to ten responses. On average, students were able to respond six times within a 20-minute teaching station (See Figure 3.1). This is consistent with research and Bonfiglio, Dally, Persampieri and Andersen (2006) found that the number of opportunities to respond increases with small group sizes. This was a message that was loud and clear and consistently referred to in other areas.

Teachers also reported that students enjoy working together in small groups and that this helped to improve their social development skills. One teacher reported “The kids enjoy working together.” This finding also undergirds their belief regarding the positive impact on classroom culture. When asked how small groups affect their classroom culture, another teacher
Figure 3.1 – Number of times each student had an opportunity to respond at the teaching station (20-minute period).
stated “I think it has had a positive impact on the culture – the classroom culture because they are taking ownership of their own education. Definitely. Most of the time, students help each other.” On the survey, Ms. Bouvier responded “One benefit is that they like being able to talk and work in their teams.” During the interview she stated “You get to know them better and they get a chance to talk.” During Ms. Ross’s observation, the researcher noted that students were laughing and having fun while they completed an assignment to role play a character from a novel. As soon as they finished their role play, with much laughter, they continued to work.

Another positive benefit that was consistently heard from three out of four participants is the ability to formulate flexible groupings. Lou et al. (1996) stated “…grouping means that teachers may have greater flexibility in adjusting the learning objectives and the pace of instruction to meet individual learning needs. Using homogeneous ability groups means that the teacher can increase the pace and level of instruction for high achievers and provide more individual attention, repetition, and review for low achievers” (p. 425). All teachers reported that they used fluid, heterogeneous and homogenous groupings within this framework and felt that this added to the benefits of this type of delivery model. One teacher specifically reported on the impact of heterogeneous groupings on students. She stated “If you know anything about grouping, then I can have my low kids with the high kids and that makes them feel happy. I can get my extremely low kids and group them with the higher kids. That’s a positive thing.” During the interview when asked about the benefits of homogenous groups, Ms. Scott stated “If I know that a child is weak in setting, recognizing setting or how the setting influenced the story…when that child or particular group comes back I will work on that indicator.” Ms. Robinson remarked, “So I would just take a homogenous group who were all struggling with inference and then work
on an inference activity with them at the teaching station. Then they would return to their
various heterogeneous groups.” In responding to an open ended question which asked
participants to list advantages and disadvantages of small-group instruction, several participants
indicated that an advantage is the ability to create fluid homogenous and heterogeneous groups
allowed for more individualized instruction. Ms. Scott stated “I’m able to provide differentiation
to students according to their need.” On the survey, Ms. Robinson reported “The teacher is able
to focus on individual or small groups with similar needs and target specific struggles.” Overall,
teachers felt that this benefit enabled them to meet the individual needs of students on a more
systemic and thorough basis.

Effect on Instruction. When asked if they felt that using this delivery method has had a
positive influence on their instruction, three of the four participants reported positively and stated
that they are able to identify and explicitly teach specific grade level indicators at the teaching
station. They also reported that they are using the indicators to set up their lessons and that they
are integrating the indicators more often. Ms. Robinson stated “I think the benefit is mainly that
I can focus on many different indicators in the reading lesson rather than just one whole group.”
Teachers indicated that they are able to check mastery through the use of the district’s short cycle
assessments more effectively. Also, corroborating their claims made under the theme of positive
benefits, teachers reiterated that they are able to identify which students need help more quickly
and are able to provide individualized instruction to those identified students. However, the
teacher who was still struggling with this pedagogy did not list this as a benefit. This may have
been a result of her resistance to the implementation process and not having experiences that
become apparent at the advanced stages of implementation.
When asked to list the adaptations in instruction that they made to shift from whole- to small-group, several teachers listed planning as a major area where they had to adapt. Teachers stated that planning and differentiating instructional strategies to reteach, provide practice or offer enrichment activities on a specific indicator for all students was challenging. One of the teachers reported “I had to make sure that the differentiation matched the children’s needs. I also had to make time to plan and produce the work needed for small-group delivery.” Ms. Robinson explained “I can’t simply say I’m planning this one major lesson. I’m planning maybe one focus lesson plus five or six kind of smaller activities. So it’s a lot more extensive in planning time.” She also added “I think it is very important to model the exact behavior that you want to see and even the work that you want to see coming from the station.” Another teacher stated “It helps me to keep everything straight and to make sure we are hitting everything. Like I said, planning can be nightmarish with all the stations and getting something different each week.”

Some of the effects made in instruction involved the physical locations of the desks and chairs in the classroom, the location of the teacher’s station, and the location of stations or station materials. There were several distinct differences in the classroom layouts. In three of the four classes students desk were arranged into groups (See Tables 2.1, 2.2, & 2.4). One teacher had her students’ desks arranged in pairs (See Table 2.3). The location of students’ desk is another important factor when considering building a classroom community of groups and delivering instruction in small groups. Most teachers who are transitioning from whole- to small-group may make changes in the arrangement of their desk or adapting the instructional materials that they use. Ms. Scott reported:

One of my biggest adaptations is that I had to get a small board so that I could still be able to write so that kids could see it. I had to still meet the needs of my visual learners. A lot of
kids can’t picture things in their head. So a small board is one of the things that I had to adapt to.

Overall, teachers did not change their curriculum or instructional strategies, but they adjusted when, where, how and to whom they delivered the content.

Another important pattern that resonated throughout all participants’ responses was the concern about the work performed at the stations without the assistance of the teacher. One teacher reported “I needed to make sure that the work is rigorous enough to meet the challenges of the kids and gives me the benefits that I’m looking for.” Ms. Robinson reported “So we actually introduced the vocabulary words and then when they get to the stations they are kind of applying what they’ve already learned.” Teachers reported that it was important that students had a grasp of the material before being expected to complete the work independently at the station. When asked how she handles this common concern that is consistent among the group, Ms. Robinson stated:

I would say breaking down the stations one at a time where I just introduce one station at a time. This is what you do at the vocabulary station. This is [emphasis added] the vocabulary station and this is what you would do here. I would show it, model it and have students role play it. Then I’d let them go on their own since they’re sort of on their own while they move around the room - while the teacher is focused on the teacher station.

One teacher reported that she used PowerPoint presentations more often to provide students with a resource to use when she was at the teaching station.

**Effect on classroom management.** Classroom management is a critical factor that undergirds a successful implementation of the reading framework and implementing small groups. Two of the four participants felt that classroom management during small-group
instruction is more difficult. Many of the responses under this category overlapped with the responses under the challenges category. There were consistencies in some of the strategies that teachers reported are necessary to an effective implementation of small groups. All of the teachers felt that it was necessary to have a timer that is visible to everyone during stations. Ms. Bouvier stated “I would use a timer and a whole-group signal to get them all back.” Ms. Scott reported “Timers or a schedule to make sure all groups are given equal time.” Ms. Robinson responded “The kids stay on task more if they know they only have a certain amount of time.” Ms. Ross stated “I used timed work activities.” She offered the following comment “That was really hard for me at the beginning of the year. Uhm, I found out within three months that I needed to do timed work.”

They also felt that it was critical to practice the rotations and expectations during small-group instruction. Ms. Bouvier stated “Practice, practice, practice! It wasn’t easy but became easier the more we practiced.” During the interview, when Ms. Scott was asked what is the most important advice that she would give a new teacher she stated “Take the time to train your students. It will pay off in the long run. If you practice with them you must be consistent. You cannot vary from it or let them deviate or change up your procedures. I think that it is the most important thing and that’s why I do it in the first three weeks of school.” Further in the interview she went into more specifics and stated that:

It’s the first three weeks of school. I train my children on everything from how to do pencil sharpening to how to go to the restroom. I train them on how to change groups, how the stations are going to work and what’s required. I go week by week. The first week might be to show them how to do simple things like how to push in a chair, how to open and close their desk, where to sort materials for easy access and availability. The second week is
usually how to rotate from one group to another without chairs clinging, books falling. What materials they need to carry with them from the station and what to do when they are completed [with the work] and how I am to know that they are finished with the station.

Ms. Robinson made a very important distinction on practicing the process and not so much the content materials when teaching classroom procedures. She stated:

I’m actually training the kids to work in the small groups and not so much on the activity that I placed at the station but really training them on what each station should look like. I train them on what their behavior should look like with all groups and how they should work together in cooperative groups. We actually have to practice that quite a bit.

Another common strategy is that all teachers stated that they needed to practice and teach appropriate voice levels. Ms. Bouvier stated “I practice coming up with the level one, two, three, and zero voice levels and make sure that they know the difference between those four.” Ms. Robinson remarked that “Each quarter I work on noise levels.” On her survey Ms. Scott listed noise levels as one of the things that she must teach students.

Teachers also consistently reported that the makeup of groups is a critical factor when considering classroom management. One teacher stated “It depends on the grouping. You have to know your kids. If you don’t know your kids it won’t work.” Another participant stated that she looked at small groups as cooperative learning. The researcher did not critique the respondent’s operational definition of cooperative learning. Delineating the characteristics of cooperative learning is out of the scope of this study.

All teachers reported that this structure permits opportunities for positive social development. They reported that it promoted student-to-student as well as teacher-to-student discourse and interactions. One teacher reported, “They [students] like the independence as well
as the attention available in a small group. Another reported “The kids love center work as well as meeting with me in small groups. Another teacher reported on the positive influence on social development using a small-group delivery method and stated “I believe small-group instruction has helped students build rapport with classmates.” This is consistent with current research and Lou et al. (1996) reported on the effect of small groups on students’ attitudes and self-concept, “Overall, within-class grouping was positively related to student attitudes ($d^+ = +0.18$, 95% confidence interval is $+0.12$ to $+0.23$” (p. 444). They also reported on the students’ self-concept, “…students in grouped classes had significantly higher general self-concept than students in the ungrouped classes ($d^+ = +0.16$)” (p. 445). During the observations, students were working on a reading program on the computers and one student was so involved in getting a better score than the student next to him that he postponed going to the restroom. He waited until the last minute, and rushed to the restroom. On his way out, he stated in a hurried voice, “I’ll be right back.” Within three minutes he returned, looked at the other student’s computer screen to see how far he progressed. He sat down at his computer and stated, “You’re trying to catch me!” He went back to work. This was evidence of self-evaluation and motivation. Additionally, the student stayed on task throughout the period.

Organization of materials needed for stations was a strong recommendation from the teachers who were effectively using a small-group pedagogy. Because students are working on a variety of skills at one time, their organization is a critical factor to the successful implementation of this type of delivery method. Ms. Bouvier stated “In my class I have learning station folders. The kids all have to bring in a folder that stays in the classroom. They keep all their work in their folder and we pass out the folders at the beginning and collect them at the end. They keep all of their work in progress or completed work in the folder until the end of the week.” Ms. Scott
stated “Organization of their materials has to be taught to them. I needed to teach sharing of books because we don’t have 30 books at any one given time. So this year 88 students had to share 30 books and the books had to stay in their desks.” She had a folder located in a bin for each child in the classroom. Ms. Robinson also used a folder system and shared a student’s folder with me during the interview. She explained their organization process and stated that she takes one day at the beginning of each quarter to teach students how to set up their folder for the quarter. During the observation it was evident that students took responsibility and pride in their folders.

Ms. Robinson had a strong classroom management system that shared the responsibility of management of materials with students. Students applied for positions through a mock job application. Again, it was evident in her classroom that they not only shared the responsibility but took great pride in their roles and responsibilities within this classroom community. Ms. Robinson explained:

I use team leaders in the groups as well to make that run a little more smoothly. So if there’s any materials necessary, the team leaders in charge of getting them. The team leader is in charge of the listening station. No one should be operating the cd player. If the group has a question, the team leader is kind of the go to person before you come to me. That kind of organized management works. So we do classroom managers too and things like that to make it kind of run a little smoother.

Assigning students’ responsibilities, such as group leader, encourages them to become more responsible. This data was consistent with data from the surveys and observations.
Challenges. Teachers reported several challenges to this type of delivery method. The responses were subsumed into two areas: 1) classroom management or managing on-task behavior, and 2) adequacy of independent station work/materials.

All teachers reported that it is challenging to maintain students’ on-task behavior at the other stations that are independent of the teacher. Two of the respondents from the survey reported that classroom management is more manageable during the small-group instructional period and two listed students off-task behavior as a major disadvantage of small-group instruction in another area on the survey. When asked to list challenges on an open-ended question on the survey, Ms. Scott responded that “As a teacher, being sure that classroom discipline could be maintained when the teacher was in small group.” Ms. Robinson added “A challenge is monitoring groups’ on-task behaviors.” When posed with the same question during the interview she stated “Managing the little things that pop up while I’m at the teaching station. I need to be monitoring each group that’s going on elsewhere.” Ms. Ross stated “Some of the challenges are monitoring progress and behavior [mostly]. Preventing behavior problems from arising.” Ms. Bouvier simply stated “Management”.

During the observation, a tally mark system was used to record the number of times that a teacher had to interrupt the teaching station to correct off-task behavior. Within 20 minute rotations, one teacher had nine interruptions to correct off-task behavior. In another 20 minute rotation, there were seven interruptions. Interruptions of phone calls or visitors to the classroom were not counted. Collecting data for this area was only available when the teacher operated a teaching station during the observation.

Having appropriate materials at independent stations was another major concern that was consistently reported by all teachers. One participant stated that “keeping the rigor of the work
and still making it challenging at independent stations is difficult.” Another participant reported that some students may finish early and run out of work, which may lead to off-task behavior. Several teachers reported that students may not complete assigned task or incorrectly completed the assignments. When looking at the effects of small-group reading instruction on students most at risk in kindergarten, Kamps, Abbott, Greenwood and Wills (2008) found that structure, explicitness of the instruction and activities in small groups were important factors which contributed to students’ success. All teachers reported that they use the district’s adopted textbook, Trophies, to prepare materials for the stations. Planning time for one of the respondents decreased and the other three respondents either increased or remained the same prior to using the Trophies materials. All of the teachers reported that they have low maintenance stations (stations that require the same procedures every week) during small-group instruction time. Although this was only evident in three out of four of the classrooms observed.

Summary

The teachers that participated in this survey shared many beliefs regarding the positive benefits and challenges of using a small-group delivery method. Most significant is that on their survey all of the respondents felt that this is a pedagogically sound practice. Teachers reported that students are given increased opportunities to respond as well as opportunities to develop a more personal relationship with their teacher. Other resounding patterns reported were that students enjoyed this framework, were permitted to talk and to develop their social skills. Ms. Ross reported social skill development as a primary concern. In fact, this was the key benefit that she used to justify her continued use of a small-group delivery method. During the observations, it was exciting to see and hear students’ responses when they transition to small groups. It was also exciting to see teachers transition from a teacher-centered to student-centered classroom.
During the analysis of data several inconsistencies emerged. On the survey three of the participants listed that they are able to work with three or more groups at the teaching station in one day. The other one listed two groups. During the observations, it was clear that only two of the teachers were utilizing a teaching station on a consistent basis. The other two circulated throughout the classroom and worked with all groups. Another question on the survey which asked participants to identify what percentage of students were on-task in the independent stations while the teacher was at the teaching station, had conflicting results. Three of the four teachers indicated that 51-75% of the students were on-task. The other teacher indicated less than 0-50%. These findings were inconsistent with the data collected during the observations. One teacher’s data consistently revealed that 95% of her students were on task during both observations and with each transition. A rationale for this conflict may be due to the way the question was posed. Another possible rationale for these contradictions may be cognitive dissonance. All of the teachers in this study strived for a balance between their beliefs, attitudes and actions throughout their transition.

Overall teachers reported many more positive benefits than challenges. They also reported on the effect that this delivery method has on their instruction. Most teachers felt that it allowed them to identify students’ needs quicker and provide differentiated instruction according to the individual or a groups’ particular need. There were distinct instructional strategies that these teachers listed as critical to support and maintain effective classroom management. Most teachers felt that this type of delivery method provided opportunities to enhance student-teacher relations as well as social development. The findings in this study were consistent with other studies and Cooper, MacGregor, Smith and Robinson (2000) reported on several effective instructional strategies that are consistent with the findings in this study. They reported that the
following strategies are key in implementing an effective small-group delivery method and the teacher should: 1) circulate to different groups during small-group instruction, 2) have a signal to get the attention of groups when needed, 3) establish guidelines with the class, and 4) provide well-structured and challenging material.

Teachers’ reactions varied according to their experiences, interactions and beliefs. When there was equilibrium between teachers’ theory of small-group pedagogy and the process, there was a greater chance of authentic implementation. When embraced, this pedagogy became a part of the teacher’s repertoire of resourceful tools.

There were inconsistencies to the number of teachers operating a teaching station. In the surveys, the data revealed that all teachers were using a teaching station. Clarification was provided through the observation and the interviews. There were two teachers who mentioned that this would be a goal in the upcoming school year. Collecting, analyzing and triangulating phases provided data on teachers’ perspectives of transitioning to a small-group delivery method.

All three methods used in the study were viewed through the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism and the methodological considerations of practice ethnography. The next chapter includes a summary of the study, a discussion on the findings, and conclusions. This chapter also contains the limitations of the study, and the implications for the field of education as well as future research.
CHAPTER FOUR- SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The first section of this chapter consists of a summary of the study. Here, an overview of the methodology and methods will be discussed. The section contains a discussion of the findings and conclusions that were extrapolated from the study. A discussion on the limitations of the study and the implications for the field of education as well as for future research is contained within final sections.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze teachers’ responses on transitioning from a whole- to small-group delivery method during reading instruction. The research operated under the umbrella of practice ethnography as it closely examined a reading framework that incorporated small-group instruction. The research revolved around two questions: 1) How do teachers adapt their instruction when transitioning from a whole- to small-group delivery method? and 2) What are the benefits and challenges encountered by teachers when using a small-group delivery method within a reading framework? To present the research used to address these questions, this dissertation was organized into four chapters.

The first chapter of this dissertation defined the statement of the problem and presented the parallel needs of other schools and classrooms across the country. The Nation’s Report Card on Reading and Education Trust research reports were discussed to provide a larger context of this problem. Both reports revealed that there is a dire need for improvement in the reading scores of students, and, in particular, minority students. This need is also reflected in the reading scores reported on state assessments. The district selected to participate in this study created a reading framework that provided teachers with a structure to implement small groups. The district’s
objective was to increase opportunities for more systemic, explicit, and individual instruction through the use of small groups during the reading period, and thus improve reading scores. The context and background of this framework are discussed within this chapter. Because the nucleus of this study is small groups, a review of the literature on the effectiveness of small groups during reading instruction was conducted. The reviewed literature revealed that although most of the research reports are quantitative in nature, there are significant findings to support the effectiveness of small groups during reading instruction. A review of the literature on teachers’ reactions to reform initiatives was also included.

The second chapter presented the landscapes of the theoretical framework, methodology, and methods in which this research study was couched. In adherence to a constructivist epistemology and alignment to a theoretical perspective of symbolic interaction, this chapter set the stage for the philosophical views of the research. Practice ethnography was used to examine the process of teachers’ implementation of a small-group delivery method. Teachers’ interactions in the classroom and responses to the reading framework were examined under these premises.

This research study was conducted in a large urban school district. Four teachers were used in the study. All four teachers were required to use a reading framework that incorporated small groups. The study analyzed the reactions of each teacher when transitioning to this small-group pedagogy. The study also examined these teachers’ perspectives on the challenges and benefits of using a small-group delivery method.

Pre-observational surveys, classroom observations, and post-observational interviews provided rich data for analysis and triangulation. Strategically using these methods in this sequence allowed the researcher to analyze data after each stage and to use that information to
guide the subsequent stages. Pre-observational surveys provided opportunities during classroom observations for verifications or contradictions to surface. Post-observational interviews allowed the researcher to ask clarifying questions from the surveys and classroom observations.

The third chapter presented and analyzed the data that was collected from the various methods used. There were five themes that emerged from coding the data: 1) adaptation and transition to using a small-group delivery method, 2) positive benefits of using small-group instruction, 3) challenges in using a small-group delivery method, 4) the effect that a small-group delivery method has on instruction, and 5) the effect that this type of delivery method has on classroom management. A case analysis for each participant and a cross-case analysis were performed on the data and presented in the following manner:

The first part of the chapter presented the data using a case analysis for each teacher to analyze her resistance or transformation to using a small-group delivery method. Through the use of surveys, observations, and interviews, each teacher’s unique story is told and her reactions are revealed. After completed surveys were received, a first-cut analysis was performed on the data and was coded on an survey template. Teachers’ responses from the surveys were color coded to provide a method to track the quantifiable group and individual data. Several key patterns emerged from this analysis and that data were used as a focus during classroom observations and the interviews. An individual analysis was performed on each teacher using the survey and the classroom observation field notes to provide guidance during the interview stage.

The next section of the chapter used a cross-case analysis to identify and discuss the patterns, inconsistencies, or contradictions that emerged from the data. During this phase of data analysis a chart was used to display the five emerging themes (See Figure 2.5). After phase two
At the completion of the data collection phase, an inductive analysis was performed to categorize the data, and a coding matrix was created to display the data from all three methods under the five themes (See Figure 2.7).

The final sections of chapter four presented a discussion of the findings, conclusions, limitations of the study, and implications for the field of education, and future research.

**Discussion of findings**

Conducting this research under the umbrella of practice ethnography provided opportunities to closely examine the pedagogy of small-groups. The key findings revealed in this study are categorized into four areas: 1) the alignment of this pedagogy to teachers’ epistemological beliefs and how it transfers into their practice, 2) the effect that this type of delivery method has on students, 3) the effect that this delivery method has on instruction, and 4) key classroom management techniques and strategies.

First, data revealed that how a teacher’s epistemological belief aligned to her theory of small-group instruction and affected the implementation within her practice. In fact, the data from two of the four case studies clearly showed that the teachers’ epistemological beliefs did not align with their theory of small groups in the initial stages of implementing the reading framework. Because of this disequilibrium, they were reluctant to transition to small groups. After two years of implementation and receiving support from a district coach, two teachers made a transformation to effectively use a small-group delivery method. One teacher had a strong belief in this pedagogy and continued to refine her skills in this area. Another teacher continued to struggle with her epistemological beliefs and the alignment to her pedagogical stance on small groups. This particular teacher also struggled with transferring it into her practice within the
classroom. Additionally, her beliefs and expectations regarding students’ ability to work independently also interfered with her implementation. A teacher’s pedagogical stance is continuously being challenged, refined, and reaffirmed, and it evolves over time through lived experiences and interactions. This finding is consistent with other studies and Herbel-Eisenmann, Lubienskik, Thuele, and Id-Deen, 2006 reported “Most of the literature implies that individual teachers have a particular pedagogical stance that, although it is evolving over time, is consistent enough at any point in time to be described and categorized somewhere on a traditional-reform continuum” (p. 316).

Fullan (2007) describes reculturing as a key element that is missing in education reforms. It is clear that this teacher did not have time to process, question or make sense of this pedagogical practice. This omission played a key factor in her stance at the end of the study. In fact, the two teachers who changed their pedagogical stance had one year of experience that afforded them opportunities to process and make necessary adjustments to implement a small-group delivery method.

A primary belief that students are socially and academically capable of performing within this type of delivery method is paramount. Several teachers expressed concerns over students’ ability to perform within this delivery method. Through their transition it became apparent that their belief in students’ abilities was strengthened. Two of the teachers changed their pedagogical stances after two years of implementation. Additionally, the alignment of their epistemological belief to the theory in practice supplied them with the persistence and motivation needed to work through the challenges that were presented.

Another aspect that undergirds this finding is the importance of the support given to teachers during this transitioning stage. Although teachers reported on their survey that the theory of
using a small-group delivery method was pedagogically sound, it was clear through observations and interviews that the process of implementation was overwhelming. In light of the fact that they were experiencing more positive benefits, they reported several challenges on which they are still working. This is consistent with research and the data revealed that transforming from a whole- to small-group pedagogy requires training to conceptualize a systemic implementation, time to process and adapt to the necessary changes and support from experienced colleagues. The teacher who still exhibited signs of reluctance, had not been afforded support in these areas to the extent that the other teachers had. Kollar (1999) reported that a key element to his changing to a small-group pedagogy was the support that he received from his colleagues. These data were consistent with the findings of this study.

Secondly, the positive effect that teachers observed in students is a significant finding when evaluating the use of a small-group delivery method. A large percentage of the studies conducted on small-group instruction is qualitative and focused on students’ academic achievement (Bonfiglio, Daly, Persampieri, & Andersen, 2006; Rashotte, MacPhee & Torgesen, 2001). In this study, teachers identified benefits to students that were more social and directly related to their response to a small-group delivery method. Having experience with this benefit was a major influence to teachers changing their perspectives on small groups and embracing this pedagogy.

All teachers reported that this delivery method promoted student discourse, social skill development, personal student-teacher relationships and increased the opportunities for students to respond and actively engage in the learning process. Students were provided many opportunities for accountable talk and academic discourse when in small groups, which is something that is not as prevalent when receiving instruction using a whole-group pedagogy.
These communications and interactions provided natural occurrences for the development of students’ social skills. Social skill development is an area that maybe seamlessly threaded into the curriculum with this type of pedagogy. All of the teachers reported on the importance of developing social skills in their classrooms. In fact, Ms. Ross used this as a key factor in rationalizing the importance of this pedagogy.

This delivery method also provided students with increased opportunities to respond in order to actively engage in the lesson being taught. An opportunity to respond includes when a student is provided an opportunity to answer the teacher’s questions, engage in conversation about the lesson, or give an explanation or insight into their thinking. Using small-groups provided teachers with opportunities for immediate feedback to guide their instruction, offer positive feedback to students, make corrections as necessary, support students who are auditory learners as well as provide opportunities for personal one-on-one communications with the teacher. Having students in close proximity and working with small groups provided the teacher with a forum to develop personal relationships with students. Social development and addressing different learning styles are key components in the total education of students.

Next, the positive effect on the instruction delivered in the classroom is another important finding that surfaced in this study. One key benefit when using a small-group pedagogy is that teachers are able to provide differentiated instruction according to students’ academic needs. This is consistent with the study conducted by Crawford and Torgesen (2006) on the Florida’s Reading First Schools. They reported “We must increase the quality, consistency, and reach of classroom instruction by providing systematic and explicit initial instruction, and by providing differentiated instruction delivered individually or in small groups” (p. 1). Teachers in this study reported that they were able to formulate fluid heterogeneous and homogenous groupings and
this allowed them to group students for reteaching of a specific skill, practicing a skill if necessary, or providing enrichment activities to students who have mastered the identified skill. Hence, teachers were able to provide a laser-like approach to meet the needs of individuals and small groups of students. This instructional benefit also aligns with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory that substantiates the support provided to students in small groups or on an individual basis.

This benefit is not without costs and teachers repeatedly expressed that it requires more time to plan for instruction that is differentiated versus a one size fits all, whole-group approach. It is also important to note that the curriculum or myriad of instructional strategies that teachers used were not abandoned under this pedagogical practice. However, there were adaptations on when, where, how, and to whom the instructional strategy was delivered.

Finally, all of the teachers expressed concerns regarding classroom management when utilizing this delivery method. This is an area that was identified as a top concern in a pilot study conducted in 2008-2009. As a direct result of those findings, this study probed further into this area. Operating under the umbrella of practice ethnography greatly aided the research process and, in particular, the findings in this area. The findings in this study revealed clearly-identified patterns of instructional strategies and behaviors that are needed to promote effective classroom management when utilizing this delivery method:

1) Teachers emphatically stated throughout the study that it is necessary for students to practice the expected routines, procedures and desired behaviors during small-group instruction repeatedly at the beginning of implementation and throughout the year,

2) all teachers reported that a timer that is visible by students and teachers is fundamental to this process, and
3) the organization of students’ desks, materials, and completed and incomplete station work is also an area that teachers must develop when they are implementing a small-group delivery method.

First, teachers reported loudly and clearly that students need multiple opportunities to practice the required routines and procedures during small-group instruction. With this, they also recommended practicing the routines, desired behaviors, processes and procedures as opposed to placing a great amount of emphasis on the planned station activities in the early stages of implementation. Teachers recommended training students in phases. For instance, the first stage would involve students working in groups while the teacher circulated among the group. The next stage would involve operating a teaching station while students worked in groups independent of assistance from the teacher.

Next, teachers reported that timers served several key purposes for students and teachers. For students, a timer is a way to gauge the rate that they are progressing to complete the required assignments. This tool becomes helpful as it encourages students to stay on task or to work at a faster pace. For teachers, a timer is used during small-group time to notate the amount of time that each group spends at the teaching station. It also allows a teacher to make necessary adjustments according to the needs of a specific group of students. Additionally, the timer is a way to signal students at the beginning and ending of transitions or to obtain students’ attention as a whole group when needed.

Finally, an important finding that was revealed in the data is the teacher’s ability to organize students’ desks and materials when using a small-group delivery method. In fact, one key factor of the teachers who were having success with a small-group delivery method was that they had systems in place to organize students’ desks and materials. Three of the classrooms had routines
and procedures in place for students to retrieve materials needed in groups as well as where to submit completed assignments. Another critical factor was the arrangement of the desks. Three of the four classrooms had desks arranged in a manner that is conducive to group work (See Figures 2.1, 2.2, & 2.4). The other classroom desks were arranged in pairs and this made it awkward for students when it was time to transition from whole to small-group instruction (See Figure 2.3).

Another factor that is paramount is whether a teacher decided to have students physically rotate to different stations or opted to have students retrieve materials and return to their original desk location. Teachers who selected the latter option preferred keeping materials in baskets or folders. The data collected during the observations revealed that there were distinct differences in the way that each teacher structured this part of the implementation. For example, Ms. Bouvier had students retrieve station materials from folders in the front of the room. Students returned to their original location to complete the assignment. Ms. Robinson opted to have students physically move to a designated location in the room and complete their assignment at that location. Ms. Scott had students retrieve materials from baskets and folders. Students returned to their original location to complete the assignments. Ms. Ross had students physically move to another area in the room and arrange their desks and chairs into a group. Once students had formed their groups, she passed out the materials to each group. A teacher’s style usually dictates the method that she will use. There are various methods that are more effective and are conducive to a small-group delivery method. Close attention to these areas are critical when implementing this type of delivery method.

Utilizing the basic fundamental strategies, such as the ones listed above, will alleviate most challenges in the beginning stages of implementation. This study revealed that teachers
identified more positive benefits than challenges when implementing a small-group delivery method. This is consistent with other studies and Lou, Abrami and Spence (2000) listed five distinct advantages for using small groups:

There are several reasons for using small-group instruction. First, the emphasis on peer learning means that the teacher may have more time to provide either remedial assistance to students experiencing difficulties or enrichment activities to students who have already mastered prescribed content. Second, using within-class grouping means that teachers may have greater flexibility in adjusting the learning objectives and the pace of instruction to meet individual learning needs. Third, students in small groups may rehearse material orally, explain it to others, discover solutions, debate, and discuss content and procedural issues, and so forth. Fourth, students who learn together in small groups may be motivated by cooperative, as opposed to competitive, incentive structures. Fifth, small-group instruction means that students may have the opportunity to develop social and communication skills because of the need and opportunity to work with others to learn. (p. 102)

Conducting and analyzing this study through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism provided for rich data. Operating under the umbrella of practice ethnography provided a methodological focus to analyze the pedagogical practice of small-groups. The next section will discuss the conclusions made from the study.

Conclusions

There are three overarching conclusions that were drawn from this study: 1) teachers require training and support during their transition to utilizing a small-group pedagogy, 2) small-group instruction is not only beneficial and academically sound for students in urban districts,
but they enjoy learning using this delivery method, and 3) there are succinct classroom management strategies that support an effective implementation of small groups.

Much like the teacher in the opening vignette of this dissertation, many teachers’ first reactions to this pedagogical skill may be one of reluctance. However, after one to two years of implementation and with support from a coach, they began to see that there were many more benefits to students’ learning using a small-group delivery model. This delay may be a result of needing enough processing time to understand the initiative (Fullan, 2007; Sarason, 1996) as well as opportunities to have collegial discussions on their specific needs for the implementation. It may also have been the result of cognitive dissonance. The participants in this study strived for a balance between their beliefs, attitudes and actions throughout their transition.

Furthermore, teachers who are new to this type of pedagogy require training and additional support throughout the implementation stages of using a small-group delivery method. Many teachers require models and coaching on an individual basis to address their specific needs when implementing this within their classrooms. In some cases, they may need to incorporate this pedagogy in stages. A primary conclusion from this study is that support and training are critical factors in sustaining teachers in their transition from a predominately whole- to small-group delivery method.

Small-group instruction is beneficial for students and, more specifically, students in urban settings. This is consistent with other studies and Rashotte, MacPhee, and Torgesen (2001) reported “One of the implications of the results of the present study is that a group-delivered instructional program can be successful in a low socio-economic school environment with many reading impaired students” (p. 132). Teachers in this study continuously reported positive
benefits for their students’ academic and social needs. More importantly, teachers were able to provide individual instruction and instructive feedback on explicit skills within small groups. Small groups are not only academically sound, but students enjoy and benefit from this pedagogy. Teachers reiterated this particular benefit throughout the study.

There are specific instructional strategies that are necessary for the effective implementation of a small-group delivery method. A pattern of effective strategies to be used when implementing small groups emerged through this study. Strategies such as having a timer, repeated practice, and organization of materials were listed. Although many of the strategies seem minor, they are huge when determining whether a teacher will have success with his/her implementation. Furthermore, this supported Vygotsky’s theory of cultural mediation. Cultural mediation purports that specific knowledge is gained through social interactions and that these interactions represent shared knowledge of a culture. Through repeated practice of routines and procedures, teachers were creating shared knowledge of a collaborative classroom community.

The overarching conclusions listed above give credence to the value of using a small-group delivery method. We will turn our focus to the implications for the field of education and for future research.

**Implications for the field of education**

This section will look at the implications for using a small-group pedagogy for the field of education. In the era of accountability, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and Race to the Top agendas, meeting students’ individual needs no longer exists as an option. Utilizing a small-group delivery method is one tool that may be used to meet this requirement and to affect reading achievement in urban schools. One participant articulated this very well when she stated:
…No Child Left Behind (NCLB). It literally means don’t leave any child behind. So the only way that you can do that is that you have to reach every child at some point or another. Small group is the only way you can do it. You can teach whole group and walk around and try to monitor, but if a child needs more than one minute or two, you need to have a small group to do it in. Uhm, to help differentiate instruction for them - so small group does work.

Many teachers across the nation continue to struggle with this pedagogical skill. However, a great number of teachers recognize this as a valuable benefit to students and their practices. It would benefit the field of education and school districts to further explore this area. There are several implications that were revealed as a result of this study:

- Teachers need training and coaching support when transitioning from a whole- to small-group delivery method. Districts should make a concerted effort to identify and provide coaching support to teachers who are unfamiliar or are struggling with using a small-group delivery method.

- Inexperienced teachers should be provided with a model of a classroom using small groups. This model should be of a teacher and school environment that is similar to theirs. Therefore, districts should continue to identify effective teachers within their ranks to serve as model classrooms using a small-group delivery method.

- Teachers spend a considerable amount of time planning multiple, differentiated station activity work. It would be beneficial to teachers and students for the district to obtain and provide curriculum resource materials, particularly materials that address differentiation, that are aligned to state standards and indicators and may be used for station materials.
● It would be beneficial to provide teachers with a checklist of effective classroom management strategies and a variety of structures to rotate materials or students during transitions. These strategies should also address discipline and positive classroom behaviors.

● There is a need for training in areas that undergird a successful small-group implementation. Additional training and support in the areas of: classroom management, team building, cooperative groups, differentiation, and social skill development are needed.

● Teachers need time to process and experience education reform initiatives. As with any new initiative, allow teachers time to process how the reform initiative aligns with their epistemological beliefs and pedagogical stance in hopes that teachers will authentically embrace the recommended reform.

● Colleges and universities should offer courses to preservice teachers that develop their understanding, beliefs and application of using a small-group delivery method.

As a result of this research study, the debate regarding small-group instruction versus whole group dissipates and one would need to recognize the benefits of both. To address the need of providing individual instruction to every student, the more important question becomes: how are we able to support teachers in gaining and refining this pedagogical tool in their practice? These implications provide the momentum to sustain districts and teachers as they move toward a transition to using a small-group delivery method in the classroom.

**Implications for future research**

Because of the value of this pedagogical skill, there is a need for further research in this area. The focus of this study was on teachers and their perspectives. Further research into their practice and application when using a small-group delivery method would be of benefit to the
field of education. More specifically, there are three areas that are in need of further exploration: 1) the instruction that is delivered at the teaching station, 2) identification of additional effective classroom management strategies using this delivery method, and 3) sociological and psychological effect on students.

First, more substantial data is needed to support the significance of the instruction delivered at the teaching station. Teachers reported that they were better able to differentiate instruction according to students’ needs using this delivery method. Conducting a whole- and small-group comparison study that evaluates students’ achievement on a set of indicators would render valuable empirical data. Also, further research is needed to critique the instruction provided in small groups and how a teacher aligns, plans, integrates, and differentiates the independent work assigned.

Next, teachers were able to identify several succinct classroom management strategies. The strategies identified do not constitute an exhaustive list. It would add to the body of knowledge in this area if research was conducted to identify beneficial covert and overt classroom management strategies. Strategies in the specific areas to explore would be:

- identify specific regular routines and procedures that should be practiced at the beginning of implementation,
- look at specific procedures of rotating groups, using baskets, or folders,
- analyze strategies used to promote acceptable behaviors and classroom discipline plans,
- identify specific details of the most appropriate physical layout of the classroom desk, equipment and station materials,
- identify strategies that incorporate new students enrolling in the middle of the year and filling in the gaps of students who are withdrawn or absent.
Researching these areas will provide resourceful data and information that is useful when applying the theory of small groups into practical application. Enhanced training on group structures, rotations and station materials will minimize issues prevalent in classroom management. Also, having this body of knowledge as a resourceful tool will benefit teachers in their implementation of small groups. It is also important to note that some of these same strategies are applicable to whole-group pedagogy.

Another important area to consider for further research is the sociological and psychological effect that this type of delivery method has on students. During the observations, students appeared to enjoy working in groups and coming to the teaching station. Current research indicates that students being taught using a small-group delivery method have significantly higher general self-concepts. Lou et al. (1996) reported on the effect of small groups on students’ attitudes and self-concept and stated, “Overall, within-class grouping was positively related to student attitudes (d+ = +0.18, 95% confidence interval is +0.12 to +0.23” (p. 444). Additional research in this area would substantiate the importance of using small groups. Some of the additional questions that surface are: 1) are students able to develop long, lasting relationships with classmates in small groups? 2) are students able to develop better relationships with their teachers using this delivery method? 3) are students’ multiple-intelligences fostered greater in this delivery method? 4) how often is the teacher able to provide positive and corrective feedback to students using this forum? and 5) to what extent does this feedback effect students’ self-confidence, self-esteem or self-concept?

The implications for research listed here are monumental when considering the positive benefits to students and teachers using a small-group delivery method. Using methodological
tools such as ethnographies, action research, and survey research provides a lens into areas of teaching that are part of the art.

**Limitations of the study**

The methods used for this study were adequate tools to evaluate teachers’ perspectives on transitioning to a small-group pedagogy. There were, however, several limitations that will be discussed in this section. First, increasing the number of participants to include a balanced number of schools with effective and noneffective report card ratings would have provided greater diversity in the data. This study contained one effective school, and that may not have been an adequate representation of what other effective schools in the district experience.

Second, having a first-year teacher in the study may have served as a limitation. The first-year teacher in this study had limited experiences and that prevented her from having an adequate comparison of both delivery methods. Finally, the timing of the observations may have influenced the data differently. Both observations in this study were conducted in the spring of the year. Students and teachers were anticipating testing and spring break. A suggestion would be to conduct an observation at the beginning of the year and then another at the end of the year. Having this data may also provide information on the sustainability of the processes and procedures started at the beginning to the end of the year.

The true goal of this research study was to contribute to the field of education by gaining insight into the practice of teachers. The findings in this study captured teachers’ perspectives on this topic and contributed valuable information to educators and researchers. In the field of education, because most of the studies conducted on small groups are quantitative in nature and focus on students’ achievement scores, we have forgotten about the teacher. Hearing their voices and perspectives on transitioning to a small-group delivery method, knowing their stories,
challenges and successes were of great benefit to me and add to the field of study. While sifting through the mounds of data and deciding which components to include in this dissertation, I only hope that I have represented their voices in a scholarly fashion.
References


Appendices
Appendix A

Survey – Teachers’ Responses to Using a Small-Group Delivery Method

Thank you for taking the time to complete the following questionnaire. The information you provide will be used to analyze data received during research.

Fill in the bubble next to the response that applies to you.

1. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female

2. Number of years you have taught?
   - 0-5 years
   - 6-10 years
   - 11-15 years
   - 16 years and over

3. Have you had training in small-group instruction?
   - Yes
   - No

4. Have you had formal training in Cooperative Learning?
   - Yes
   - No

5. How many years have you taught using a small-group delivery method in reading?
   - 0-1 year
   - 2-4 years
   - 5 years or more

6. On average, how often do you provide small-group instruction during reading in one week?
   - One day
   - Two days
   - Three days
   - Four days
   - Five days

Participant Number:

132
Survey Continued-A1

7. During small group time, I am able to work with _____ at the teaching station in one day.
   ○ 1 group
   ○ 2 groups
   ○ 3 or more groups

8. When I am teaching at the teaching station ________ of students at the independent stations are on task.
   ○ 76 – 100%
   ○ 51 – 75%
   ○ 0 to 50%

9. I have _____ low maintenance stations (stations that require the same procedures every week) during my small-group instruction time.
   ○ 0
   ○ 1-2
   ○ Over 3

**Circle the response that best reflects your feelings:**

10. Using the Reading Framework allows me to provide more individualize instruction to students.
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Students are given opportunities to respond when at the teaching station.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. On days that I have small-group instruction, classroom management during reading times is more manageable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>

13. I am aware that the Reading Framework is a part of the Elementary Initiatives. After the initiative is over, I will continue teaching using a small-group instruction delivery method.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Survey continued – A2

14. I believe that the delivery method of small-group instruction is a pedagogically sound practice.

Strongly Disagree Somewhat Disagree Undecided Somewhat Agree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

15. If given the opportunity, I will use small-group instruction in other subject areas.

Strongly Disagree Somewhat Disagree Undecided Somewhat Agree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

16. Changing from a predominately whole-group to small-group instructional delivery method during reading instruction has had a positive effect on my practice.

Strongly Disagree Somewhat Disagree Undecided Somewhat Agree Strongly Agree
1 2 3 4 5

Complete the following questions by filling in the blank. Continue on the back of this page if needed.

17. What types of adaptations did you make to change from a predominately whole-group to small-group delivery method?
Survey continued – A3

Complete the following questions by filling in the blank. Continue on the back of this page if needed.

18. Identify what you feel are the benefits and challenges of small-group instruction?

19. How has small-group instruction effected your overall classroom management?

20. What challenges did you encounter when you first started using a small-group delivery method of instruction?
Survey continued – A4

Complete the following questions by filling in the blank. Continue on the back of this page if needed.

21. What are three important classroom management strategies that you feel are critical in order to successfully implement small-group instruction:

22. What are three important time management strategies that you feel are critical in order to successfully implement small-group instruction:
Survey continued – A5

Complete the following questions by filling in the blank. Continue on the back of this page if needed.

23. Are there any classroom management strategies that you feel are specifically needed for teachers working in urban schools?

24. Are there any time management strategies that you feel are specifically needed for teachers working in urban schools?

25. What types of support do you receive or have you received in implementing the reading framework?
Appendix B

Classroom Observation Template

Teacher: ________________________________ Date: __________________

A. Total minutes of small-group reading instruction: Start time: _______ Stop Time

B. Number of students in class: ___________ Number of adults in class: ______

C. Number of students in small group with teacher: ______

D. Number of students on task in the independent groups after 5 minutes into transition _____ out of _______

E. Number of interruptions from teacher to correct off-task behavior _________________

F. Number of small group transitions to teaching station ____

G. Group’s Time Period:
   #1 _____________ #2______________ #3__________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Trait</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not Obs.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H. Transition signal given to begin groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I. Explanation of station activities given prior to rotation</td>
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<tr>
<td>J. Explanation of behavioral expectations during independent work prior to rotation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>K. Procedures are available in written form at independent station.</td>
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<tr>
<td>L. There is a procedure in place for students when there is a question about the assignment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. Procedures for the organization of students’ materials are evident.</td>
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<tr>
<td>N. Procedures for the collection of students completed work are in place.</td>
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<tr>
<td>P. Procedures for students who finish work early are evident.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q. Transition signal given to end groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>R. Remainder of class is working independently during station time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>S. Students receive individual instruction at teaching station.</td>
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<tr>
<td>T. Students are given opportunities to respond at teaching station.</td>
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Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Question Guide –
Teachers’ Responses to Using a Small-Group Delivery Method

Questions for Interview Template

My name is Dorothy Reynolds. I am a researcher from the University of Cincinnati who is studying urban education. Your responses to the following questions will be tape recorded and transcribed, and stored in a locked file cabinet. You may refuse to answer questions, turn off the tape recorder, or withdraw from the interview at any time. Your name will be changed in transcripts, publications and other written materials in order to ensure anonymity.

Background Questions:

1. Provide me with an overview of your teaching career by describing the teaching positions you have held?
2. What are some of the trainings have you had regarding small-group instruction?

Global or Grand Tour questions:

3. Describe a typical thing that you do to prepare to teach stations (small groups).
4. Describe a major difference of how you prepared your lessons before implementing the reading framework to how you prepare them now.
5. Suppose I’m a new teacher and you are training me to use small groups. What advice would you give me?

Focused questions

6. I am interested in your beliefs about changing your reading instruction from whole group to small group within the Reading Framework. What do you consider as benefits and challenges for teachers who are going through this transition?
7. What types of adaptations did you make to adjust to a small-group structure?
8. What was the time period from the time of your finding out about the framework until the expected implementation?
9. What are some of the classroom management techniques that you use to ensure successful implementation of small groups?
10. What are some of the time management techniques that you use to ensure successful implementation of small groups?
11. After implementing small groups for a period of time, do you think that you will continue this delivery method in other subject areas?
12. Do you think that small-group instruction is more or less effective?
13. Do you believe that students are given increased opportunities to respond in a small or whole-group delivery method.
Appendix C1
Semi-Structured Interview Question Guide Continued
Teachers Responses to Using a Small-Group Delivery Method

**Direct and indirect questions.**

14. I am aware that the Reading Framework is a part of the Elementary Initiative. Do you think that you will continue to teach reading using a small-group delivery method after the initiative is over?

15. How has small-group instruction affected your classroom management?

16. How has small-group instruction affected your classroom culture?

**Follow up questions** (During the course of interviews almost always ask follow up questions in order to obtain more detailed data from respondents. These questions usually are not written down. They are concocted during the course of the interview to do more probing.

17. Could you elaborate on that?
18. Can you give me a more detailed description of what happened?
19. What did you do then?
20. What were other people doing when that happened?

**Interpreting questions.** These ask interviewees to delve more deeply into their feelings:

What do you mean by that?
How did you feel when they did that?
Am I hearing you correctly that so and so is …..