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Teachers' Making Meaning of Reduced Class Sizes: A Phenomenology

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TEACHERS’ MAKING MEANING OF REDUCED CLASS SIZE PRACTICES: A PHENOMENOLOGY

by

Brenda Ludy Snow

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Educational Leadership, Research and Technology Western Michigan University December 2014

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It is every teacher’s dream to have a classroom full of students who come to class each and every day highly motivated to learn. However, in all reality teachers know that this is not always the case. Researchers continue to search for reasonable alternatives to improve students’ learning. As children enter school a good start is imperative if they are to succeed in school, (Achilles & Finn, 2000). Class size reduction is a strong alternative and should be considered as part of a reasonable plan for student learning.

For this qualitative study, I examined and described the experiences of 12 teachers who participated in a reduced class size (RCS) program, each with a minimum of three years’ participation in two elementary schools in one school district located in the eastern part of the state of Michigan. Specifically, I examined how the teachers described and interpreted their lived experiences during their years in the reduced class size program.

Teachers were interviewed face to face, and the data gathered were inductively analyzed as described by Foss and Waters, (2007).

Through the data analysis process, I developed seven themes from the research questions: (a) organization of the classroom, (b) building trust, (c) discipline and
management, (d) teacher effectiveness, (e) changes in test scores, (f) challenges and mandates, and (g) factors influencing opportunities and successes.

My study affirmed some of the research and added to some research on reduced class size programs. The major findings of this study were: (a) new teachers struggle at the beginning of their careers regardless of smaller class sizes; (b) teachers constantly engaged in self reflections, which they believed made them more effective; (c) veteran teachers in the RCS program had no challenges or concerns while in the program; (d) the RCS allowed for teachers to pursue and get more parent participation and involvement in their children’s schooling.
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I first want to acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, because without His guidance, I could not have completed this endeavor. I believe that “I can do all things through Him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:13).

To my parents, the late Mr. Magnest and Mamie Ludy, for without them I would not be here today. Expressions of sincere appreciation are extended to my husband, Dr. James Snow, for his encouragement, love, and support during the past few years. To my daughters, Mrs. Maronda Payne, Dr. Ticheal Jones, and Mrs. Jami Brown, for the support and encouragement they have given me throughout my life.

My gratitude goes to my sisters and brothers who encouraged me to complete this task, especially to Mrs. Trudy Brown, Mrs. Bess Paschal, Mr. Steven Ludy, and my niece, Mrs. Mona Harris, for the impact they have had on my life.

A very special recognition is given to my advisor, Dr. Sue Poppink, who gave me direction and advice throughout my years in completing this work. We shared countless sessions together and she kept me focused.

I am grateful for the close relationship I developed over the years with Mrs. Gerisha Toler, who was such an encouragement to me daily to complete this study, and she also provided many hours of humor, which was needed to endure.

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Brenda Ludy Snow
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

As the ideology that all students can learn is embraced, it is important to provide the conditions necessary for success during the initial years in a child’s educational journey. The student performance problem has been at the center of public concern and was an important factor in the Albany School District’s (a pseudonym) applying for a grant to reduce class sizes.

In 1994, with support from State Senator Joe Conroy, class size reduction was implemented in Michigan. The initial investment by the state for funding class size reduction programs was approximately $6 million. The focus was on early elementary grades (i.e., kindergarten through third). Conroy (as cited in Bell, 1998) stated that “the results are significant” (p. 16).

As a state senator in Michigan, Conroy visited every school in his district that had reduced class sizes and observed changes in performances, teacher enthusiasm, and decorum. In 2005, the state of Michigan awarded to several additional school districts more than $20 million statewide to reduce class sizes. Albany School District was one of the districts awarded the grant.

In the fall of 2005, the Albany School District was one of the districts funded by the State of Michigan with a three-year grant to reduce class sizes for two of its four elementary schools.
The district is fairly small with approximately 4,300 students and exists within a four-mile radius that houses four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Established in 1946 by 23 of its pioneer settlers, early on the district was considered an exceptionally fine school system famous for the quality of its teachers, staff, and education programs (according to the school district’s annual report in 2000). The population at its peak was about 4,800 students.

By the late 20th century, however, this once thriving district had become a struggling district, losing valuable funding from the state to surrounding communities because many families moved to other districts, decreasing the enrollment and thus funding.

Today, the student body count averages approximately 4,300 with around 240 teachers, and additional support staff of social workers, psychologists, and paraprofessionals (according to the school district’s annual report in 2012). The Albany district is a school of choice district for one of the large urban districts that is approximately two miles away.

Two of the four elementary schools, Cooper and Mason Elementary (pseudonyms), were selected to participate in the grant funded by the State of Michigan. Cooper housed students starting in preschool and included kindergarten through second grade with approximately 280 students (PA-25 Report, 2005). Only those students in kindergarten through second grade were included in the grant for Cooper School. Mason housed students from kindergarten through fifth grade with approximately 570 students (PA-25 Report, 2005). Mason was the feeder school for students entering third grade from Cooper, so although Mason housed kindergarten through fifth grades, only those
students in kindergarten through third grades were part of the reduced class size grant. For Cooper and Mason Elementary Schools, the initial grant ran from the fall of 2005 to the fall of 2008 school years. The grant was renewed for an additional three years in the fall of 2008, which meant the grant ran from the fall of 2005 to the fall of 2011.

The rational for the choices of the schools selected was that Cooper and Mason had 62% of the “at-risk” elementary students in the district enrolled in their campuses. The State of Michigan defined the term *at-risk* as:

A student having at least two of the following characteristics: (a) is a victim of child abuse or neglect; (b) is below grade level in English language and communication skills or math; (c) is eligible for a federal free or reduced-price lunch subsidy; (d) has atypical behavior or attendance patterns; (e) has a family history of school failure, incarceration, or substance abuse. (Michigan Department of Education [MDE], 2011, p. 1)

The grant required that class sizes be reduced to an average of 17 students with no more than 19 students in each classroom and that each class have at least one certified, highly qualified teacher. The grant also provided funding for additional furniture and materials at the inception of the program for the new classrooms that would be needed to reduce classes from 30 students to no more than 19 students.

The purpose of the grant was to provide teachers with an opportunity to experience smaller classrooms and improve student performance by improving (a) classroom structure, (b) teacher–student dialogue, (c) classroom management, and (d) the quality of teaching provided to struggling students.
After being notified that Mason and Cooper Schools were recipients of the grant, a renewed spirit of hope and a change in the ethos were experienced among staff and students. Teachers were expressing their excitement at district staff meetings, and students were expressing their excitement through questions and dialogue with parents and teachers.

**Background of the Study**

**The Importance of Reduced Class Sizes**

Prior to the 2005-2006 school year, the Albany School District was a failing district for the past decade. Standardized test scores had plummeted to the bottom of the state ratings. A “failing” district was defined by the state as one in which the students in each school did not pass the MEAP (Michigan Education Assessment Program) as defined by the state’s cut scores. To be considered a successful district, 70% of the students needed to score above the cut scores in Math and Reading. For the 2004-2005 school year, the year before the reduced class sizes were in effect, the scores for the Albany district for third grade were below the cut scores of 54% for Reading and were slightly above the cut score for math. Seventy percent of the total number of students that had taken the Reading portion of the MEAP in 2004 did not make the cut score of 54%.

While the grant was in effect with reduced class sizes in kindergarten through third grades, the two elementary schools selected for the grant became successful elementary schools, as defined by the state, with greater than 70% of the students passing, thus scoring higher than the cut scores for Reading and Math. Cooper and Mason showed substantial increases in the standardized test scores, according to school district MEAP scores, 2006-2011. Table 1 indicates a seven-year span of the third grade MEAP
scores in the Albany School District. There was an increase of positive test scores during the six years the grant was funded by the state of Michigan.

Table 1

*Third Grade MEAP Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>2004/05</th>
<th>2005/06</th>
<th>2006/07</th>
<th>2007/08</th>
<th>2008/09</th>
<th>2009/10</th>
<th>2010/11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The acceptance of the grant was a monumental step for the district because it entailed making drastic changes that included training teachers and making available more classrooms to ensure that teachers were prepared to teach half and sometimes less than half of the students they were accustomed to teaching.

**Background of the Teachers’ Responsibility**

The superintendent sent out a mandate that teachers would need to learn about student performance in order to participate in the reduced class size grant. That included:

1. Classroom Structure, which meant a classroom configuration was set up so that the majority of the time was spent facilitating instruction and learning (Bradley, 2011). This structure, according to the grant, would accommodate 17 students with no more than 19 students per room.

2. Teacher–Student Dialogue, which included teacher strategies to improve conversations and encouraged using critical thinking, applying ideas, and raising more questions.
3. Classroom Management, which encouraged arranging the learning environment so that teachers could maximize the student learning. The goal was to optimize student learning while maintaining order. Training emphasized that management was also to prevent disruptive behaviors.

4. Teacher Quality, which encouraged improving pedagogical skills and differentiated instruction.

Immediately, the principals of the two schools selected for the grant collaborated and contacted a professional development specialist for the training. Two weeks of intensive professional training were completed by every teacher who accepted a position under this new grant.

The support from the superintendent was there, buy-in was there from parents and teachers, and for the first time in many years this district was ready for a paradigm shift that might have a positive impact on student performance.

In the fall of 2005, a short questionnaire, which is included below in Table 2, was completed by the teachers who were interested in participating in the reduced class size grant program. The results indicated that none of the staff that would be involved in the program had prior experiences in reduced class sizes. This meant that everyone had to participate in all of the training mandated by the central office.
Table 2

Reduced Class Size Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever taught less than 17 students in a general education classroom?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you any experiences working with small group of students?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that reducing class sizes will improve teaching skills?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you interested in teaching in the reduced class size program?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teacher Quality

All of the teachers in the reduced class size program from the Albany School District were certified but not necessarily highly qualified, as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) to teach students in kindergarten through third grade. This could have had an impact on the success of the program because some of the teachers had not taught in an elementary setting, but because of their K–6 endorsements, they were accepted in the grant to teach K–3 reduced class sizes. They were required to become highly qualified to be part of the grant.

Some studies reveal that an overwhelming number of students, especially those in disadvantaged and at-risk schools, are taught by teachers who lack professional training and strong knowledge in the subjects they taught (Ingersoll, 1996; Seastrom, Gruber, Henke, McGrath, & Cohen, 2002). According to Ingersoll (1996), there are distinct inequalities in the distribution of teacher quality across districts and schools. High-poverty schools have more teachers with less than a minor in the subject they taught than low-poverty schools.
Unfortunately, some students in high-poverty and at-risk schools are less likely than other students to be taught by teachers who are highly qualified in the subjects they teach (Ansell & McCabe, 2003). Haselkorn (2003) suggested that to understand the source of the achievement gap, the teacher gap between the qualified levels of teachers needs to be understood.

Therefore, to end the achievement gap between high-poverty and low-poverty students and those from rich and poor families, Education Week urged that states must first end the teacher gap: the lack of well-qualified teachers for those who really need them most (“To Close the Gap,” 2003).

For some students, good teaching is remembered for a lifetime, while bad teaching tends to limit opportunities for students. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF, 2003) asserted that what teachers know and can do is one of the most important influences on what students learn.

It would be difficult to disagree with the idea that the quality of teachers is one critical element in effective schooling and student performance. When compared with earlier research, which suggests that school input had little effect on student performance independent of family and societal background (Coleman, 1966), more recent research shows that “schools can make a difference, and a substantial portion of that difference is attributable to teachers” (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 2).

Goldhaber and Anthony (2003) concluded that teacher quality had the greatest impact on student performance among all education factors (e.g., class size, technology, educational materials).
Other studies have also concluded that the key to student learning is teachers and quality teachers can raise student performance (Collias, Pajak, & Rigden, 2000).

The effects teachers have on student performance are critical, and some studies have shown there are substantial differences between teachers in their ability to produce student performance gains (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004).

When studying teacher effects at the classroom level using the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, Sanders and Rivers (1996) found that students who were taught by several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower performance and lower gains in achievement. Students with highly effective teachers for three years in a row scored 50% higher on math skills than those whose teachers were ineffective.

Still other studies focused on investigating total teacher effects by looking at differences in growth rates of student performance across teachers. These studies revealed that, in the course of a single school year, students who were assigned to an effective teacher could gain a full grade level more that those students who have an ineffective teacher (Ferguson, 1991; Hanushek, 1992). An effective teacher is one who consistently obtained high learning growth from students on standardized tests, while ineffective teachers consistently produced low learning growth (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004).

In the book Qualities of Effective Teachers, Stronge (2002) concluded that the qualities of effective teachers include “characteristics of the teacher as an individual, teacher preparation, classroom management, and the way a teacher plans, teaches, and monitors students’ progress” (p. viii).
The above studies demonstrated that teachers differ in their effectiveness and differential teacher effectiveness is a strong indicator of differences in student performance, suggesting that interventions that increase the number of effective teachers might be productive strategies for improving student performance (Jordan, Mendro, & Weerasinghe, 1997; Nye et al., 2004; Olson, 2003; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997).

**Problem Statement and Significance of the Study**

A fundamental concern confronting policymakers and educational researchers is the influence of qualified teachers on student performance. Since feeling “very well prepared” is one of the possible indicators of teacher effectiveness (Lewis et al., 1999), valuable information can be obtained by understanding how teachers made meaning of these aspects of the program: (a) classroom structure, (b) teacher-student dialogue, (c) classroom management, (d) teacher quality, and (e) student performance in a reduced class size setting.

Classroom structure, according to Bradley (2011), should be configured so that most of the teacher’s time is spent on instruction and learning. Teachers should make meaning from how to structure their classroom. In addition, teachers should be able to understand the meaning of teacher–student dialogue, which allows students to be more active participants. Also, teachers should make meaning of how to manage classrooms, and have better quality of teaching to improve student performance in the reduced class size setting.

A set of studies has focused on exploring how well teachers are trained and prepared to teach in public schools. These studies present findings that described teacher characteristics, including degree levels, teacher certification status, and teaching
This study, unlike those described above, would seek to understand how teachers make meaning of the experience of reduced class sizes. I was studying this in a new way by looking at how teachers make meaning of these issues, which may give insight to teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Using research from this program can help researchers understand how teachers experienced these aspects of reduced class sizes.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

**Purpose of the Study**

Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe and interpret the lived experiences of 12 teachers who participated in a reduced class size program in two elementary schools in the Albany School District in Michigan. I worked to understand how they make meaning of the classroom strategies used under reduced class size, in particular in relationship to student achievement. That is, I wanted to know how teachers make meaning of reduced class size (a) classroom structure, (b) teacher–student dialogue, (c) classroom management, and (d) teacher quality. This phenomenology was guided by the following research questions.

**Research Questions**

1. How did teachers make meaning of classroom structure within the reduced class size program?

2. How did teachers make meaning of teacher–student dialogue within the reduced class size program?
3. How did teachers make meaning of classroom management within the reduced class size program?

4. How did teachers make meaning of teacher quality within the reduced class size program?

5. How did teachers make meaning of the changes in students’ test scores during the reduced class size program?

6. How did teachers make meaning of the challenges in the reduced class size grant?

7. How did teachers make meaning of the opportunities of the reduced class size program?

**Methods Overview**

This study used a phenomenological approach, which described and interpreted the lived experiences of participants who have experienced the reduced class size program at Cooper and Mason Elementary Schools. The phenomenology addressed the commonalities of all subjects as they experience a phenomenon. The basic focus is a “grasp of the very nature of the thing” (van Manen, 1990, p. 177).

Data collection was from interviews with 12 teachers who participated in the reduced class size program between the 2005 and 2011 school years who are still employed in the Albany School District. There were approximately 25 teachers in the initial grant but due to retirements, layoffs, and attrition at the end of the grant, there were only 10 teachers that remain employed in the district that took part in the reduced class size grant. I also contacted two other teachers that no longer are employed in the district.
who were in the reduced class size program in the Albany District during the years of 2006–2011. There was a total of 12 teachers interviewed for the data collection.

**Chapter I Summary**

In Chapter I the background of the study has been discussed, focusing on reduced class sizes in one urban district relative to student performance.

In Chapter II, I inquired to what extent reduced class sizes in one school district affected student performance by (a) changing classroom structure, (b) changing dialogue between teacher and students, (c) changing classroom management, (d) changing teacher quality, and (e) examining the changes in student performance.

Given the fact that teachers play a critical role in student performance, I explored how teachers made meaning of the reduce class sizes program in the areas of classroom structure, teacher–student dialogue, classroom management, and teacher quality.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

It is every teacher’s dream to have a classroom full of students who come to class each and every day highly motivated to learn. However, in all reality teachers know that this is not always the case; therefore, I investigated some of the concerns teachers may have in a reduced class size program based on the teachers’ perceptions. I explored how the teachers made meaning of class size reduction in relationship to (a) classroom structure, (b) teacher-student dialogue, (c) classroom management, (d) teacher quality, and (e) students’ performance and learning efforts.

This study attempted to contribute to the knowledge base of class size reduction and student performance in reduced class sizes, based on the definitions, evidences of successful programs, training of teachers and preparation by teachers. It was also based on how teachers made meaning of (a) classroom structure, (b) teacher-student dialogue, (c) classroom management, (d) teacher quality, and (e) teacher understanding.

From a practical point of view, knowledge of teachers’ understanding can help school districts develop new teacher induction programs or mentor programs to better address the needs of teachers who are in reduced class size programs.

Background on Reduced Class Size

Researchers continue to search for reasonable alternatives to improve student learning. As children enter school, a good start is imperative if they are to succeed later in school (Achilles, Nye, Zaharias, Fulton, & Wallenhorst. 1992). Class size reduction is a
strong alternative and should be considered as part of a reasonable plan for student improvement.

In the following section, I review the existing literature related to the following areas: (a) classroom structure, (b) teacher–student dialogue, (c) classroom management, (d) teacher quality, and (e) student performance and learning efforts.

The phrases “class size reduction” or “reduced class sizes” are used interchangeably in this literature review. These terms reflect teacher–student ratios that are lower than that of a typical classroom under the policy stated by the Board of Education in Albany and the grant mandates that were set by the State of Michigan.

Lewit and Baker (1997) provided the following definition for class size: “Class size is an administrative measure typically defined as the number of students for whom a teacher is primarily responsible during a school year” (p. 113). Class size simply is an addition problem, according to Achilles and Finn (2000), who argued that class size determines the number of students in a teacher’s classroom for whom the teacher is responsible.

The class size reduction term also suggested that no more than 17 students should be assigned to each certified teacher in kindergarten through third grade classrooms (Achilles et al., 1992). Class size includes the number of students per teacher who are randomly assigned to a self-contained classroom (Boyd-Zaharias, 1999).

The Clearinghouse on Educational Policy and Management (CEPM, 2011) noted that reduced class sizes are successful when the following conditions exist:

When the student-teacher ratio is reduced significantly. If the student ratio is dropped from 35 to 18 or below, then student gains will be made. The most
sustained change according to McRobbie, Finn, and Harman (1998) was in low-achieving students.

When reduction initiatives are implemented in grades K–3. The most effective reduced class size initiatives in Tennessee and California focused on grades K–3. Young students as noted by Nye, Hedges, and Konstantopoulos (1999) are more apt to receive the attention needed to acquire the basic skills in math, reading, and writing.

When certain services and or technologies are available to achieve the small class effect. (p. 1)

Beall (1998), in some of his research on reduced class sizes, also noted that teachers use effective instructional technologies when given professional training, a solid curriculum, and small classes.

According to Munos and Portes (2002), teachers in reduced class sizes have reported positive benefits from having fewer students in their classes. The teachers indicated higher levels of “student–teacher connection,” greater levels of satisfaction, higher morale, and lower stress. Munos and Portes further indicated that their study found that teachers enjoyed being in the teaching profession more.

Teachers in the reduced class size program provided a more supportive environment for student’s learning (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Teachers were also rated as better monitors of students during observation times.

**Successful Reduced Class Size Programs**

California adopted a class size reduction initiative in 1996 that called for all kindergarten through third grade classes to be reduced to fewer than 20 students per
teacher. Haimson (2002) found that California’s students from minority groups and those with high needs (at-risk) benefited most from this program. The program achieved its goal of effectively narrowing the achievement gap in California.

As part of their evaluation summary, Carlos and Howell (1999) pointed out that available data in California showed that students in reduced class sizes outperformed those in larger classes. The report also indicated that “the level of gain was similar for all groups of students, regardless of ethnicity, income status, or English language ability” (p. 2).

California’s program for reduced class sizes was the largest ever implemented. Bell (1998) asserted that this program resulted in a new outlook on educational reform in the state focused on improving student achievement. Other research done by Mitchell and Mitchell (2009) indicated that the effects of class size reduction on student achievement in California were difficult to detect since many other policy initiatives caused interference. The researchers also found that class size reductions had a small positive effect on student achievement in mathematics, but not in reading or language achievement.

Grisham (2000) also supports the theory that California’s reduced class size (RCS) program had too many other reforms that have been implemented to attribute student achievement results as significant. But Grisham’s findings indicated “the good news is that there is evidence that the benefits of being in a smaller class in California persisted into a non-reduced class for 1 year” (p. 2). California’s program also struggled with inexperienced and uncertified teachers during its inception, according to Jepsen and Rivkin (2002). The positive effects were often mitigated in these schools, resulting in
one-quarter of African American students in the high poverty schools being hit the hardest. Most teachers in the new RCS programs in these areas had only one to two years experience and were not fully certified (Jepsen & Rivkin, 2002).

Another program, Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE, 1999), was initiated in the state of Wisconsin to focus on the needs of disadvantaged students and prompted class size reduction. The program that began in 1995 was designed as a five-year pilot program under the leadership of Alex Moiner. SAGE targeted schools in districts where at least 50% of the children lived below the poverty level. The program included 30 schools in 21 districts and began with kindergarten through first grade. Second and third grade classes were added over the next two years.

The program for SAGE included four components: (a) reduce class size to an average of 15 students per teacher for grades kindergarten through third, (b) develop a strong curriculum, (c) provide a professional development system of accountability, and (d) establish lighted school houses to accommodate students from early morning to late afternoon (Biddle & Berliner, 1995).

Results from the SAGE program indicated larger gains from students in the reduced class size program when compared to those who were not in the program in the same district. A comparison was done on SAGE students testing their standardized test scores compared to those in non-SAGE students in areas demographically similar to each other. The results were overwhelming favoring the SAGE students in reduced class sizes. On every test, SAGE students were more successful than those in non-SAGE programs. The African American students made the greatest gains in the study (SAGE Initiative Evaluation, 2002).
Molnar (1998) found that there was a small effect overall for students in class size reduction programs on student achievement. But African-Americans showed the larger increase in student achievement. This study gave attention to classroom management, individual attention, and innovative strategies as factors to the success of the program. Molnar et al. (1999) concluded that class size reduction alone cannot influence academic performance directly, but when combined with other significant contributing factors, there were increases in student performances.

A 2001 evaluation of SAGE was done by researchers at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee and findings were that after a five-year program of class size reduction, the students living in poverty gained higher achievement.

The most successful reduced class size program was the Tennessee project, better known as Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) initiated in 1984. Project STAR included more than 7,000 students assigned to 300 classrooms in 79 schools. The gains for minority students were twice as large as white students in grades 1, 2, and 3 (Word, 1990).

Finn and Achilles (1999) also noted the same findings, indicating positives in all areas results that favored students in small classes. They pointed out that “the study in Tennessee yielded an array of benefits for small classes including: improved teaching conditions; improved student performance during and after the experimental years; improved student learning behaviors; fewer discipline problems; and fewer retentions” (p. 98). The study findings also noted that greater benefits were obtained by minority and inner-city students who were assigned to small classes.
Recently, Finn, Gerber, and Boyd-Zaharias (2005) investigated long-term effects of early school experiences with reduced class sizes, addressing three questions: “(a) is participation in small classes in the early grades (K–3) related to high school graduation? (b) Is academic achievement in K–3 related to high school graduation? (c) If class size is related to graduation, is the relationship explained by the effects of participants in small classes on student’s academic achievement?” (pp. 214-223). There were 4,948 participants in this Tennessee class size experience, Project STAR. The results showed that graduating was related to K–3 achievement in reduced class sizes and that if the students attended for more than three years, they were more likely to graduate from high school, especially at-risk students.

More recently, the Health and Education Research Operation Services (HEROS, 2011) found that in Project STAR, in classes of 13 to 17 students, the gains in learning persisted long after the students returned to average classes. The Tennessee researchers also found that African Americans and poor students reaped the greatest learning gains in reduced class sizes (Krueger & Whitmore, 2001; Sparks, 2010).

According to Mosteller (1995), an important educational investigation examined the effects of Project STAR. He further stated that “Research shows that small classes at the early elementary grades can make a significant and long lasting difference in student achievement” (p. 114).

Another researcher, Konstantopoulos (2008), found that class size reductions produced higher achievement in kindergarten mathematics and in first grade reading. He concluded that every group of students benefited from reduced class sizes; however, higher performers benefited more than lower performers in the program.
The U.S. Department of Education (2002) concurred that class size reduction is beneficial for students’ academic success, resulting in many states beginning to recommend class size reduction as a means to raise student achievement. Those researchers also determined that smaller classes tend to be friendlier, with students developing better relationships with their peers.

In North Carolina, another study on reduced class sizes was implemented in 1990. Data confirmed that the students in reduced class sizes produced higher test scores on standardized testing in reading and math than in non-reduced class sizes.

The recent findings in North Carolina from state and district reports showed “expanded classroom space, improved classroom management, strengthened instruction, enhanced student concepts and relationship with peers and improved teacher–parent communication” (Hopkins, 1998).

Yet another study of class size reduction in Chicago consisting of 88 first grade students was very successful. Using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills as the assessment tool for reading, the findings were that students in reduced class sizes produced higher scores and greater gains in reading achievement than those in larger classes. The reduced class size classrooms had 17 to 19 students per class with one certified highly qualified teacher.

The small class advantage also allows students to excel academically beyond their peers who are assigned to classrooms with larger student populations (Finn & Achilles, 1990). Finn and Achilles also stated: “The challenge we all must face is to deliver the promise of hope versus despair, enabling at-risk students to achieve” (p. 573). Green
(2003) inferred that if educators “set standards, collect data on how those standards are being met, we can bring about improvements in education for all students” (p. 1).

**Classroom Physical Structure**

According to Bradley (2011), classroom structure means to have the classroom configuration set so that the majority of the time is facilitating instruction and learning. In order to have an effective physical classroom structure, Bradley also suggested that the student’s desk should be aligned with the teacher’s desk, teacher’s podium, and the instructional technology.

Another researcher, Johnson (2011), found that one of the major factors that affects student performance is the physical structure of the classroom. He contended that to make the learning experience a positive influence, the teacher should structure the classroom in these five healthy ways:

1. Set up tables, carpeted areas, and learning centers for cooperative learning activities.
2. Set up some desk and learning centers for individual work.
3. Use color to create the mood in your classroom.
4. Post educational materials on the walls in the forms of posters, bulletin boards and pictures. Display student work as well.
5. Create connections between your classroom and the world outdoors. (p. 1)

The physical structure of the classroom speaks volumes for students because it sets the tone upon entrance of the room. As outlined by Burgio (2012), effective classrooms have structure and routines in place prior to students arriving each day for
smooth beginnings. She went on to say that labeling everything, including cubbies, materials, seating, and reading nooks, will help to prevent disruption in class.

Bradley (2011) added that each student should be aware of the predominant instruction platform. In other words, where the teachers spend most of the direct instruction of students is vital. All students should be able to observe the teacher during the instruction. This should be the focal point in the classroom.

Classroom structure also includes a set schedule. Students should always be aware of the schedule for the day. Burgio (2012) suggested that the teachers should have signs and signals to alert students of changes and or attention getters in the classroom. Start the day how you end it. Burgio also noted that established structural routines at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day are critical for a successful classroom.

**Teacher–Student Dialogue**

Dialogue is conversation between teacher and students and allows students to be active participants in construction of shared understanding by the novice, which is the student, and the expert, which is the teacher (Kinchin, 2003).

Effective teachers are connected to students in a way that fosters a strong bond. This bond is stronger when active dialogue is created. Active dialogue is when “the dialogue between pupils and a teacher should be thoughtful, focused to evoke and explore understanding, and conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, pp. 7-10).

Sustained dialogue between teacher and students is apparent when the conversation is not completely scripted or controlled by the teacher. This involves
sharing ideas with extended statements, questions, and direct conversation with other students.

When there is little or no substantive dialogue, the teacher–student interaction typically involves a lecture from the teacher. Newmann, Griffin, and Cole 1989 suggested that sharing conversations where students come to understand and share the knowledge of the teacher has been used as a guide for education over the years, although rarely achieved. Cole (1996) contended that schools have long been characterized by a mode of instruction where teachers show and tell students what they should know and be able to do to ensure that they are learning.

However, this is not the mode of how people learn outside of school, according to Resnick (1987). Research has shown that effective learning involves active participation by the learners and produces better results in knowing information (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

Effective teacher dialogue is the cornerstone for students’ success. It carries important messages that are intended to educate, inspire, and teach each student. (Papa, 2000).

To develop effective dialogue between teacher and the students, teachers should recognize different types of learning styles of students as they endeavor to make sense of new materials being presented to them in lessons. These learning styles include visual, hands-on, group discussion, and lecturing. These styles differentiate the dialogue to meet the needs of a greater number of students.

According to Bewley and Smardon (2007), some teachers expressed that they were attempting to develop more effective dialogue by not repeating back what the
students were saying, by using non-verbal gestures such as nodding and shifting eye contact to signal participation from other students. Other forms of scaffolding effective dialogue include small group inquiry in pairs of students with pre-arranged questions. Students are beginning to do more of the talking, which makes contributions and learning more effective. These “loops” of dialogue provide a co-constructivist view of feedback (Askew & Lodge, 2000).

**Classroom Management**

Classroom management is the orchestration of the learning environment of a group of individuals within a classroom setting (Evertson & Harris, 1997). It is a term used by teachers to describe the process of ensuring that classroom lessons run smoothly despite disruptive behavior by students. The term also implies the prevention of disruptive behavior.

Kauchak and Eggen (2008) explain classroom management as time management. The goal is always to optimize student learning while maintaining order. They process classroom management into four categories that overlap: instructional time, engaged time, academic learning time, and allocated time. Instructional time is what is left after the routine procedures are completed.

This is the time when teaching and learning takes place. Engaged time is sometimes referred to as time on task. During this time, students ask questions, respond to learning activities, complete teacher directed worksheets, and prepare presentations. Academic learning time is effective when students’ behaviors are managed to an effective level. It occurs when students are being successful during learning activities and students
are active participants. Allocated time is the entire time that has been allotted for learning, teaching, and classroom procedures like announcements and attendance.

According to Bear (2008), there has to be mutual respect between teachers and students creating a positive classroom community in order to prevent management problems. Rules are established that are fair with consequences by teachers and students based on acceptance, warmth, and unconditional support.

Also, students are give reminders and consistent feedback about their behavior. Preventive techniques encompass the use of rewards and praise as a means of informing students of their behaviors rather than as a means of controlling their behavior. As teachers emphasize the behavior being rewarded, the students are able to understand the specific skills they need to demonstrate to earn the reward.

There are some common mistakes that occur in classrooms that teachers need to be aware of, according to Barbetta, Norona, and Bicard (2005). Using loud voice tones to control classrooms may perhaps have adverse effects on students and may impair the teacher–student relationship. Research shows that not every approach works for every student. Therefore, teachers need to use different approaches on some students. It is imperative that the teacher knows what works for each student and what are the most effective approaches for the best results.

Additionally, another common mistake made by teachers is inconsistency in the way that consequences and expectations are handled. It may lead to dysfunctional classrooms. The more consistent a teacher is regarding classroom management rules and expectations, the more students will adhere to these clear, consistent expectations.
According to Gootman (2008), rules give students concrete direction to ensure that our expectations become a reality. It relies upon creating an environment where students are successful as a result of their own efforts.

Another noteworthy definition by Froyen and Iverson (1999) states that “classroom management focuses on encouraging and establishing student self control through a process of promoting positive student achievement and behavior” (pp. 128-129). As Anderson (2000) penned, reduced class sizes “enable teachers to worry less about managing learners and more about managing learning” (p. 3).

When there is disruptive behavior in small class sizes, students can assist in resolving the conflict. Problems can be resolved as a group, teaching valuable skills needed to be part of a community.

Students also monitor each other throughout the year by giving reminders to each other when conflicts arise. We know that effective managers in classrooms work with groups of students, but they also give special attention to the students who have behavioral needs at any given time.

Thus, it is important, according to classroom management research, to actively monitor behaviors closely, stop inappropriate behavior quickly before it escalates, and be consistent in dealing with inappropriate behaviors. Effective teachers often model acceptable behaviors, reinforce positive behaviors, and watch for signs of confusion (Gump, 1982).

**Teacher Quality**

The phrase “teacher quality” is an often-used term, but what is teacher quality? There is little consensus on what it is and how to measure it. One of the traditional
approaches to characterizing teacher quality is the “expert teacher study” (Leinhardt, 1989; Westerman, 1999), which focused on teachers who have been identified as successful by their administrators or peers.

Researchers found that quality teachers connect what they know with how they teach. For instance, they use knowledge about the children in their classrooms to create lessons that connect new subject matter to students’ experience.

In addition, quality teachers also know how to recognize children experiencing difficulties, diagnose sources of problems in their learning, and identify strengths on which to build.

Clearly, successful teachers not only have the knowledge, but also know how to convey that knowledge to different students effectively.

Many argue that the bottom line of whether or not students are successful depends on how effective the teachers are in their daily routines. Teacher characteristics such as degree level, subject matter knowledge, certification type, teaching experience, and teacher test scores on performance tests are often used as proxies for success in reduce class sizes.

It has also been discovered that when it comes to successful teachers, there is a great limitation when referring to students being motivated (Bradford, 2005). Successful teachers motivate their students by allowing them to be part of creating their learning opportunities and create student-centered hands-on activities.

Research on teacher quality is difficult because there is surprisingly little consensus on how to define it or how to measure it. In spite of the complexity and difficulty, researchers have been tempted to use a variety of ways to study teacher
quality. According to Lewis and his colleagues (1999), approaches to measuring teacher quality usually take some of the following forms: (a) classroom observations of teacher practices; (b) written examinations of teachers measuring their basic literacy, subject matter knowledge, and pedagogical skills; and (c) student performance and achievement.

Classroom observations, often combined interviews and collections of artifacts (e.g., teacher logs, homework) have been employed to document teacher practices or teaching practice; thus, classroom observations do not provide a complete picture of teacher quality. Observational studies typically include investigations of teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge and reasoning (Ball & Wilson, 1996; Grossman, 1990) and the connection between education policy and teacher practices (Ball, 1990), professional development and teaching (Bell, 1998), and subject matter and curricular activity (Stodolsky & Grossman, 1995).

Teacher observation is typically used to provide a detailed picture of classroom instruction, and teacher observational data provide rich detail and in depth information. However, collecting such data is costly and it is difficult to conduct in large numbers of classrooms.

Variety of tests such as tests of verbal ability or teacher college entrance exams have been used to measure teachers’ basic knowledge or overall academic proficiency. The measure of teacher scores on these achievement tests has received considerable attention, because it has been frequently linked to student test scores. For example, Ferguson (1990) found that teachers’ scores on a test of basic literacy skills were significantly correlated with their students’ test scores.
Goldhaber and Anthony (2003), summarizing studies by Ferguson (1991), Ferguson and Ladd (1996), Strauss and Sawyer (1986), and Strauss and Vogt (2001), concurred that there was a positive relationship between teachers’ test scores and student performance. They concluded that the measure of teacher tests on their academic proficiency represented one of the best predictors of teacher quality.

While many experts agree that teacher academic preparation is an important prerequisite to effective teaching, critics argue that teacher tests only focus on measuring teachers’ basic academic knowledge and not their pedagogical knowledge or their teaching practice; thus, this approach does not provide a complete picture of teacher quality.

Typically, teachers have been used to provide information on attributes such as their educational backgrounds, major and minor fields of study, certification, and professional development background experiences. Such indicators have been used to study characteristics of teacher certification (Shen & Poppink, 2003); teacher retention and attrition (Shen, 1997); and out-of-field teaching (Ingersoll, 1994, 1996; Lewis et al., 1999; Seastrom et al., 2002).

No doubt that these reports have played a very important role in providing updated information about the conditions of education and teacher quality for the policymaker in the development of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002).

Today, teacher quality tends to include standards developed by educational organizations such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

Although these organizations may differ in some respects, they share many common themes regarding standards for teachers. Standards established by the Interstate new Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC, 1995) state that teachers should be able to understand their subject matter and relate it to students, adopt teaching strategies that are responsive to different learners, establish proper assessment tools to measure student development, and engage in continual curriculum evaluation and professional development.

Teacher quality usually refers to two broad areas: teacher preparation and qualifications, and teaching practices (Lewis et al., 1999). “Conceptually, measuring teaching quality ought to be a high priority of any examination of teaching and learning, since literally defined, it represents the direct effect on students by teachers as they create their classroom magic” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 1).

While teacher quality is critical to student achievement, a substantial percentage of students were being taught by teachers who were under-qualified in the subject they taught (Kaplan & Owings, 2002).

An under-qualified teacher usually refers to those teachers whose lack of professional training and knowledge in the subjects they teach, including those teachers...
who lack regular teaching certification (teaching under emergency, temporal or provisional teaching certificates) or have not obtained academic majors or minor in the subject taught (out-of-field teachers) (Ingersoll, 2002; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Shen et al., 2004).

Ingersoll (2001) observed that one of the most important problems in contemporary American education was the failure to ensure that the nation’s classrooms are all staffed with qualified teachers.

Although many agree that teacher quality and teacher preparations are important for effective teaching, in terms of what specific indicators matter most to student achievement, there is still much debate in the educational field. The focus is on which knowledge is more important for a teacher to gain: pedagogical or subject knowledge. Some debate that teachers should possess strong knowledge of the subject they teach because it is an essential element that positively affects teaching performance and student achievement (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000).

Regarding the value of pedagogical preparation for teachers, the teaching of how to teach, disagreements among researchers and educators also continue. Shen and Poppink (2003) observed that on one hand there are those who hold that teaching ability is a function of innate talents and that teachers need minimal preparation to teach, suggesting no formal preparation for teachers. On the other hand, there are those who believe that teaching requires multiple forms of knowledge and skill that can be taught and learned, thus suggesting that ongoing professional development is needed.

The debate on a more proper definition for teacher quality is still continuing; however, the message sent to the public seems to be clear with the passage of the No
Child Left Behind Act, which defines what a “highly qualified teacher” means. A highly qualified teacher should have a certain level of general education (at least a bachelor’s degree), substantial pedagogical knowledge (a full state certification), and strong subject knowledge (e.g., at least a major in the subject taught to show competence in the subject a teacher teaches). Unfortunately, students in high-poverty, high-minority, and low-performing schools are less likely than other schools to be taught by teachers who are highly qualified in their subject (Ansell & McCabe, 2003).

**Teacher Attitudes**

Teacher attitudes involved teachers learning how to give more positive feedback and attention to students (Achilles & Finn, 2000). Teacher attitudes are important when the teachers are providing instruction. As researchers investigate teachers and their thinking, instructional guidelines for new teachers entering the program can be assessed.

Gursky (1998) reported on teacher attitudes and perceptions in reduced class size programs, reminding readers that “There’s nothing magical about class size, but by using common sense, the process boils down to better discipline, more individual attention for students and opportunities for teachers to use more diverse instruction” (p. 2).

Zahorik, Halbach, Ehrle, and Molnar (2003) stated, “Class size alone does not always lead to higher student performance; teachers must practice effective teaching strategies” (p. 75). Improving student performance can influence teachers’ attitudes that they might have while they are instructing students.

Imbimbo and Silvernail (1999) reported these findings regarding teachers’ attitudes on their professional preparations. Overall, teachers felt the need for better
preparation before entering the classroom, particularly in the areas of educational technology and working with new English language learners.

The teachers’ overall feelings of preparedness as they entered teaching most strongly related to subject area knowledge, instructional strategies, proficiency in educational technology, and effective classroom management. However, in the areas of classroom management and implementing state and district curriculum, new teachers did not feel less prepared than those experienced teachers.

Many positive changes have been noted in attitudes of teachers toward students when working in small class sizes. The teachers were more satisfied with their classroom performances (Smith & Glass, 1980). Teachers reported that students in small classes tended to spend more time on-task and exhibit fewer behavior concerns.

These outcomes were the result of their ability to give more attention to the students and each student also had greater opportunities to be active participants in the classroom (Finn, 2002).

Grossman (1990) suggested that when preparing teachers to work in schools, it is important to consider both the subject matter knowledge they bring with them and the pedagogical content knowledge they will need for effective teaching. Subject matter alone, while critical for teaching, does not provide teachers with the pedagogical understanding necessary for teaching a wide range of students (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001).

A number of studies on teacher effectiveness revealed that both subject content and content-specific pedagogy courses in a teacher’s preparation were positively related to student performance (Ferguson & Womack, 1993; Monk & King, 1994), emphasizing
the importance in preparing teachers with subject knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge.

**Teachers’ Preparedness**

Teacher preparedness is the state of being ready for teaching. Teachers’ preparedness provides one indication of the extent to which pre-service or on-the-job learning prepares teachers to meet the new demands of education. It is useful to compare teachers’ preparedness across various teaching activities to identify in which activity teachers felt most prepared or least prepared (Lewis et al., 1999).

Lewis et al. (1999) examined to what extent that teachers felt prepared to meet the most compelling classroom demands, including maintaining order and discipline in the classroom, implementing new methods of teaching; implementing state and district curriculum and performance standards, using student performance assessment techniques, addressing the needs of students with disabilities, integrating educational technology into the grade or subject matter, and addressing the needs of students with limited English proficiency.

Lewis et al. (1999) also noted that overall, less than half of American teachers reported “feeling very well prepared” to meet many of the above requirements. Particularly, only 20% of teachers reported feeling very well prepared to integrate educational technology into classroom instruction; about 20% of teachers who taught students with limited English proficiency or from culturally diverse backgrounds felt very well prepared to meet the needs of these students; and only 28% of teachers felt very well prepared to use student performance assessment techniques.
When comparing teacher preparedness between new teachers and experienced teachers, Lewis et al. (1999) found that in the context of education reform, experienced teachers may not necessarily feel better prepared than new teachers in certain teaching activities, such as integrating technology into classroom instruction and employing new teaching strategies.

In the above study, Lewis et al. (1999) also found that teachers who spent more than 8 hours in professional development in the content area of a specific activity in the previous 12 months were generally more likely than other teachers to feel very well prepared in that area.

Research also shows that a growing number of new teachers enter teaching without adequate preparation in their subject taught. In recent years, researchers also ask whether variation in teacher preparation influences how the teachers feel about their preparation for teaching.

One of the important studies on the topic of teacher preparedness was done by Darling-Hammond et al. (2002). In this study, Darling-Hammond et al. inquired into whether different kinds of programs prepare teachers differently by examining beginning teachers’ views of their preparation for teaching, their belief and practice, and their plans to remain in teaching.

They analyzed data from a 1998 survey of nearly 3,000 beginning teachers in New York City. Their findings indicated that beginning teachers who had been exposed to different education programs in teaching felt better prepared to teach than those who entered teaching without preparation.
The findings of this study are quite consistent with other research that has found relationships between teachers’ preparation and their effectiveness with students (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Monk & King, 1994; Wenglinsky, 2000). These studies found that teachers who entered teaching with minimal professional education have more difficulties in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Grossmann, 1989; Jelmberg, 1996) and they leave teaching at higher rates than those with professional educational preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Research also shows that teachers who make a positive difference in their student’s learning have the following general and specific characteristics:

- Strong general intelligence and verbal ability that help teachers organize and explain ideas as well as observe and think diagnostically;
- Strong content knowledge up to a threshold level that related to what is to be taught;
- Knowledge of how to teach others in their content areas in using hands-on learning techniques and in developing higher-order thinking skills;
- An understanding of learners and their development, including how to assess and scaffold learning, how to assist students with learning differences, and how to support the learning of language and content of those not yet proficient in the language of instruction;
- and adaptive expertise that allows teachers to make judgments about what will likely work in a given context in response to students’ needs. (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AICTE], 2009, p. 1).

**Student Performance**

Over the last 20 years, studies have provided educators and researchers with many opportunities to make scientific observations in reduced class sizes and collect data on
student performance. Reduced class sizes have been thought to be successful when students exhibit improvements in learning. According to O’Connor (2000), there are three simple steps to improving student performance. “Forget the silver bullets, these steps are straight forward and simple. However, as you will observe, simple does not mean easy” (pp. 1–2).

The first step O’Connor notes is: “Build a common understanding of great instruction.” When instruction is guided by curriculum, rigorous research-based strategies, and continuous assessments to guide instruction, there is improved student performance.

The second step is to “change teacher practices.” In order to change teacher practices, greater responsibility has to be placed on school leaders. Central office staff and principals should be leading the charge to change practices. Then, leaders must provide support and direction for teachers.

The third step is to “Quit doing stuff that does not help.” Activities that do not impact student learning should be tossed out. O’Connor concludes that “some activities clog the teachers’ professional lives and waste their time.”

Some studies indicate that teacher preparation and qualifications are important indicator of student performance (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ferguson, 1991; Goldhaber & Brewer 2000; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). However, research on this topic does not always produce consistent results. For example, Hanushek (1986) found that there was no strong evidence that teacher–student ratios, teacher education, or teachers’ experience have an expected positive effect on student performance.
In contrast, Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996) found that teacher variables like academic ability, teacher education, and teacher experience show very strong relations with student performance. In addition, in recognition of the problem of teacher effectiveness and its impact on student performance, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) includes provisions mandating that all teachers must be highly qualified in the subject they teach by the end of the 2005-06 school year.

There are several studies that attest to the effects professional development contributes to student performance and teacher quality. Particularly, any professional development that has been aligned to the curriculum and concentrates on instruction is shown to have continual positive impacts on student performance in mathematics and science at both elementary and secondary levels (Cohen & Hill, 1998).

Another study points out that one of the 12 teacher practices is teacher content knowledge that positively links student performance in elementary schools, increasing reading, math, language scores (Schacter & Thum, 2004). What’s more, the quality of the assignments teachers give to students is positively associated with student performance in elementary grades relating to math (Newmann, Bryk, & Nugoka 2001).

Cawelti (1999) observed six diverse but yet very successful schools. They all had five common factors that increased student performance. These factors showed clear and high standards, multiple changes in classrooms, and collaborative teams. The leadership of the teachers was strong, and there were teachers committed to educating students.

One study using periodic assessments as a meaningful tool indicated that small class size improved academic performance among at-risk students (Street, 2001).
Wong and Wong (1998) argued that the key difference that increases performance in some schools is what is stressed. Successful schools “stress practices” whereas unsuccessful schools “stress programs.”

In successful schools, the resources are invested in teacher effectiveness. Teachers teach basic academic content and they consistently improve pedagogical practices. In unsuccessful schools, most funds are exhausted in programs and quick fix ideas.

Kaplan and Owings (2002) suggested that what made a difference in student performance was not just what a teacher knew but also how well a teacher could convey what he or she knew to students, indicating that to be an effective teacher, a teacher needs subject knowledge as well as pedagogical knowledge. Other researchers also share these similar ideas. While subject matter knowledge is an important prerequisite for effective teaching, subject matter knowledge alone does not result in increasing the quality of teaching performance (Ferguson & Womack, 1993).

Darling-Hammond (2000) found that the most consistent highly significant predictor of student performance in the subjects of reading and mathematics in all years and at all grade levels was the variable of well-qualified teachers (teachers with full certification and a major in the subject they teach). The findings illustrated that the combination of strong subject content knowledge and strong pedagogical content knowledge by far is the most important determinant of student performance.

Kaplan and Owings (2000) recommended that after carefully reviewing the literature on the relationship between teacher quality and student performance, principals should “hire teachers with majors in their fields and full professional certification” (p. 5).
Chapter II Summary

In Chapter II the literature has been reviewed on reduced class size and its effects in some states, both positive and negative. Some of the studies reviewed confirmed that teachers and their perceptions in reduced class sizes play an important role in the success of the program. There were some successful reduced class size programs in other states.
CHAPTER III
METHODS

In this study I employed a qualitative phenomenological approach that involved interviewing teachers who have been in the program of reduced class sizes in the Albany School District for at least three years. This chapter discussed the methodological issues used in this study including the (a) research approach; (b) population, sample, and site; (c) data collection; (d) instrumentation; (e) data analysis; (f) reflexivity; and (g) delimitations.

Research Approach

A phenomenology is “a school of thought that emphasizes a focus on people’s subjective experiences and interpretations of the world” (Trochim, 2006). According to Welman and Kruger (1999), “The phenomenologist is concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (p. 18).

A researcher applying phenomenology is concerned with the experiences of the people involved with the issue being researched. (Green, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Krueger & Whitmore, 1998; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2001; Robinson & Reed, 1998).

I chose the phenomenological approach for this qualitative study because it was important to understand the teachers’ experiences in the reduced class sizes. This approach assisted in developing a deeper understanding about the themes of this phenomenon.
van Manen (1990) remarked that the phenomenon identifies the experiences of learning about the practices taking place in the study.

The aim was to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon without bias, yet summarizing the facts. As noted by Welman and Kruger (1999), “The phenomenologist is concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of people involved” (p. 18).

**Population, Participants, Site**

A sample of 12 kindergarten through third grade elementary teachers who participated in a reduced class size program were included in this phenomenology. Ten teachers in the Albany School District who were still employed in the district and were willing to participate were included. They included teachers from Mason and Cooper Elementary Schools and two teachers who were in the program but are no longer employed by the Albany School District.

The teachers from the reduced class size program were asked to take an introspective look at their pedagogy to understand student performance and determine if they made meaning of the aspects of the reduced class size program.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Permission was obtained from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board of Western Michigan University to assist in safeguarding the rights of the participants (see Appendix A). Participants were informed before the interviews that a written transcript of the interview would be emailed to them to check for accuracy.

Teachers were contacted by both telephone calls and e-mails. E-mail information of all the teachers in the Albany School District was available on the district’s website.
address book. After the teachers that were part of the reduced class size program agreed to be interviewed, a location for the interviews was agreed upon at their respective school campuses before or after school hours for approximately one hour.

These teacher interviews served as the primary unit of analysis (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000), with their “informed consent” (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bailey, 1996; Street, 1998).

Reminder e-mails were sent to the teachers involved in the interviews a week before the interviews began. The location of the interviews was at a predetermined place on site in the Albany School District to ensure participants were comfortable in the setting.

After obtaining permission from the teachers to be interviewed and dates and times were set, all interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees.

Easton, McComish, and Greenberg (2000) cautioned that equipment failure and environmental conditions could harm the research interviews. They advised researchers to make sure that the equipment is working and there are backup materials such as tapes, batteries, and other equipment available.

I conducted phenomenological interviews with the teachers who were in the reduced class size. Each question was “directed to the participant’s experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions about the topic in question” (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 196). Data were gathered about how the teachers “think and feel in the most direct ways” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96) about their experiences with reduced class sizes.

Data collection was from in-depth interviews with specific questions for all teachers that worked in the program for at least three years. It was recommended by
Polkinghorne (1989) that the researcher interview from 5 to 25 individuals who experienced the same phenomenon. Boyd (2001) regarded 2 to 10 participants or research subjects as sufficient in order to reach saturation. Creswell (1998) recommended “long interviews with up to ten people” (p. 65) for a phenomenological study.

Kvale (1996) commented that during the qualitative interview relative to the collection of data “it is literally an inter-view, an exchange of views between two persons, conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (pp. 1-2).

Each interviewee was assigned a different alphabet character (e.g., participant A). The digital tape was labeled with the assigned interview code after each interview.

**Instrumentation**

Interviews were conducted on teachers’ lived experiences of the reduced class sizes in Cooper and Mason Elementary Schools. Polkinghorne (2005) commented that the most widely used approach to the production of qualitative data is interviews with participants. I wanted to gain a full and detailed account of the teachers’ lived experiences with the reduced class size program. I wanted to know how the teachers made meaning of classroom structure, dialogue, management, and teacher quality.

Each participant had a set of “structured” (set questions) and unstructured (speak freely) questions during the personal interviews (see Table 3).
Table 3

*Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How did teachers make meaning of classroom structure in the reduced class size program?</td>
<td>Tell me about your classroom structure during the reduced class size program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How did teachers make meaning of teacher–student dialogue in the reduced class size program?</td>
<td>Tell me about your experience with teacher–student dialogue in the reduced class size.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How did teachers make meaning of classroom management in the reduced class size program?</td>
<td>Tell me about your experience with classroom management in the reduced class size.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How did teachers make meaning of teacher quality in the reduced class size program?</td>
<td>Tell me about your experience with teacher quality in the reduced class size.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How did teachers make meaning of the changes in students’ test scores during the reduced class size grant?</td>
<td>The MEAP scores went up significantly during the class size program. Tell me about your understanding of that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How did teachers make meaning of the challenges in the reduced class size program?</td>
<td>What were the challenges with your reduced class size experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How did teachers make meaning of the opportunities in the reduced class size program?</td>
<td>What were the opportunities with your reduced class size program?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) considered analysis as the “systematic procedures to identify essential features and relationships” (p. 9). Through interpretation of the phenomenon, data are then transformed.
At the root of the phenomenology, according to Bentz and Shapiro (1998), “the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms—to provide a description of human experiences as it is experienced by the person herself” (p. 96).

Qualitative researchers often begin their data analysis by reading and rereading the completed information that has been collected, including interview transcripts and field notes, to get a better understanding of the entire phenomenology (Creswell, 2007).

Lofland and Lofland (1999) suggested that field notes in qualitative research should be analyzed as soon as possible because the human mind may forget the information.

As soon as possible, after each interview, within 24 hours, I listened to the recorded information, reviewed the field notes, and made notations.

Foss and Waters (2007) suggested that when analyzing data, coding is a critical step because it involves identifying units of analysis that are important to the research questions. They suggested that “you pick out those aspects of your data that are most relevant to answering the research questions” (p. 186).

The following steps were used to analyze the data (Foss & Waters, 2007):

1. First, I collected the data from the 12 teachers who consented to be interviewed. Each participant was given an outline that was developed from the research questions to guide the interviews. Teachers were asked a set of interview questions and then given the opportunity to speak freely regarding the lived experiences they had with the reduced class size program.

2. Next, I created codable data by transcribing the interviews within a week after each interview. With each transcription I made an additional copy to use later
for editing. While I was looking for excerpts that contained units of analysis based on how teachers made meaning from classroom structure, management, dialogue, and teacher quality, I marked them with a code in the margin.

3. I identified units of analysis, which included specific kinds of examples that came from the research questions. According to Foss and Waters (2007), these units might be a concept, idea, or action that illuminates the significant features of the data so that the questions can be answered.

4. To code the data, I looked at all the pages of data by reading and rereading each page to devise a code that captured the idea. Each time a specific example came up from the research questions, I marked the beginning and end of the excerpt from that unit. When statements were made regarding the details of how the teachers made meaning of the reduced class size program, the units were marked and an alphabet code was placed in the margin. I also examined my field notes when examining the units of analysis.

5. In order to sort the codes, after coding all the data I cut out the excerpt into piles according to which codes seemed to go together. Then, I sorted the codes into their proper piles. Dey (1993) suggested that creating categories and clusters of data becomes the organization and conceptualization of the data.

6. Checking codes ensured that all the piles were relevant to the labels I had given them. When the codes appeared more than 60% of the time, these codes became major themes. Some excerpts had to be moved from pile to pile, making sure that each pile shared significant characteristics. The sub-themes
or excerpt piles were created when the codes came up less than 30% of the time.

7. I created an explanatory schema by typing key words from the codes on a sheet of paper and putting them in envelopes. I also reviewed field notes and made connections with the participants’ body language and actions. The goal was to take repeating ideas that have something in common and group them together in themes in the envelopes. These ideas were repeated at least 60% of the time to become major themes.

8. Writing up the analysis included dividing the chapter up according to the categories created in the explanatory scheme, making units of meaning into general themes. Each envelope was organized into themes and sub-themes. The excerpts were evidence that supported the data and assisted in telling the story about how teachers made meaning of the reduced class size program.

The information obtained from the interviews was coded and prepared for findings. The central idea in coding, according to Auerbach (2003), was “to move from raw text to research concerns in small steps, each step building on the previous one” (p. 35).

The units were divided into concrete and manageable units. As the data were examined, the units of analysis were marked off from where they started to where they ended (Foss & Waters, 2007).

Using the research questions, the data were analyzed by highlighting important statements and quotes that provided information about how the teachers viewed the reduced class size program in the Albany School District.
I developed clusters of meanings from the quotes and statements that supported the themes that were the focus in this phenomenology. The themes were used to write a description of what the teachers experienced in their common and shared phenomenon, called structural description (Moustakas 1994).

I took precautionary steps to ensure that I drew accurate inferences from the data by giving the transcripts back to each participant to review for accuracy and allowing two outside teachers to review my analysis for validity and reliability. Also, I triangulated the data by examining evidences from the participants. Creswell (2003) regarded validity as a strength of qualitative research and suggested that the researcher should identify strategies like triangulation to check for accuracy.

**Reflexivity**

After spending eight years as an elementary school teacher in three different districts, I still have the same concerns as when I first began teaching. One of those concerns is the complex job of educating students and meeting the needs of at-risk students in urban settings.

I have also been a Title I teacher, where some of the funding to assist students was used for intervention strategies. Additionally, I have had 18 years of experience as an elementary principal and two years of experience as a director of the elementary principals.

As I viewed it before the grant, the vision in the Albany School District was the same as those in surrounding districts, but other districts were more successful. Something was missing in the Albany District before reduced class sizes. I believe that the reduced class size grant was a good experience for me as an administrator in the
district. To find another way to meet the needs of the at-risk students in the early grades gave me a different perspective as a leader.

The years of experience in elementary education have created a desire in me to know if reduced class sizes and the attitudes and perceptions of teachers make a difference in student performance.

I anticipated the following would be revealed from the themes. As the five ideas were examined and a review of the literature was examined, the teachers in the reduced class size program might note the themes below as reasons for indicators of success in the class size reduction program.

I anticipated that:

1. Teachers would show there would be many variations, and often overlaps as well, in the way a classroom is structured for successful learning and there would be more usage of color, organization, and routines.

2. Teachers would show that teacher–student dialogue, which is sometimes referred to as the relationship builder in the classroom, would show strong and trusting relationships between the teacher and students. It would also show better communication between teacher and students.

3. Teachers would show a focus on improving the learning environment so that they would be able to focus on learning and have fewer behavior disruptions.

4. Teachers would reveal a change in teacher practices to increase student performance. There would be more enhanced activities. It might also show that sometimes the outcome is good, but sometimes the outcome is that there is no change in student performance in the reduced class size setting.
5. Teachers would reveal a change in how students responded to the teachers in reduced class sizes.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations, as described by Dusick (2011), are those “characteristics selected by the researcher to define the boundaries of the study” (p. 1).

This study was delimited to the 12 teachers in the Albany school district who participated in the reduced class size grant between the years of 2005 to 2011. Participants in this study were delimited to teachers who (a) taught kindergarten through third grade in reduced class sizes, (b) taught in the Albany school district, and (c) were in the reduced class size grant for at least three years.

The study was delimited to the examination of teachers who were teaching in the reduced class sizes and exploring how (a) classroom structure, (b) teacher–student dialogue, (c) classroom management, (d) teacher quality, and (e) student performance influenced their perceptions.

The results of the study on teachers’ experiences in reduced class sizes is not generalizable to teachers who have previously been in the Albany school environment.

**Chapter III Summary**

This chapter described the qualitative research methodology of the study, including the research approach, data collection, instrument, and data analysis. This phenomenology inquired into teacher experiences with reduced class sizes. The participant group included 12 teachers who were a part of the reduced class size grant for at least three of the five years. The data were gathered through interviews of each participant for approximately one hour to understand their perceptions and feelings.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

This chapter was a description of the 12 participants and an analysis of the interviews with each participant. The interpretation of the interviews was the outcome of inductive data analysis as described by Foss and Waters (2007).

The purpose of this research was to understand and examine the lived experiences of 12 Michigan elementary teachers who participated in a reduced class size program, each with a minimum of three years experience in the reduced class size program. I wanted to understand how they made meaning of the classroom strategies used in the reduced class size program and have them describe and interpret the lived experiences they had while in the program.

For the study, the following seven research questions were examined:

1. How did teachers make meaning of classroom structure in the reduced class size program?
2. How did teachers make meaning of teacher–student dialogue in the reduced class size program?
3. How did teachers make meaning of classroom management in the reduced class size program?
4. How did teachers make meaning of teacher quality in the reduced class size program?
5. How did teachers make meaning of the changes in students’ test scores during the reduced class size program?

6. How did teachers make meaning of the challenges in the reduced class size program?

7. How did teachers make meaning of the opportunities in the reduced class size program?

**Unit of Analysis**

The participants in this phenomenological study were contacted by both telephone calls and e-mails. After the teachers that were part of the reduced class size program agreed to be interviewed, a campus location and time was determined for the interview. All interviews took place after school hours for approximately one hour. These teacher interviews are the primary units of analysis (Creswell, 2007).

All 12 teachers who agreed to be interviewed participated and answered all of the questions. Each of them also added additional comments that were not solicited but included in the interviews.

**Participants**

The participants in this study have a wide range of ages, but similar demographics. To protect the anonymity of the 12 participants, a summary table of their characteristics cannot be provided.

Of the 12 participants, 10 were females and 2 were males. Eight came from Madison Elementary School in the Albany School District and four came from Cooper Elementary School. Four of the teachers were in the 22–30 years of age range. Four
teachers were in the 31–41 age range, three teachers were in the 42–52 age range, and one teacher was in the 53–65 age range (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Age of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range in Years</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22 – 30</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 – 41</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 – 52</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53 – 65</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 displays the highest level of attainment earned by teachers at the beginning of the reduced class size program. Four teachers started their careers in education after earning a bachelor’s degree. Three of these teachers were new and just beginning their careers in education. Six teachers had obtained a master’s degree in education, and two teachers had education specialist degrees.

Table 5

*Level of Degrees*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.A. or B.S.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed.S.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 shows the grades taught and the years of experience of each teacher at the beginning of the reduced class size program. To protect the anonymity of the participants, a summary table has been provided using alphabet letters for teachers’ names.

Table 6

*Years of Experience and Grades Taught*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Grade Taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers A, C, and K had no experience in teaching at the inception of the reduced class size program. These teachers taught kindergarten, first, and third grades. Teacher B had three years of teaching experience and taught third grade. Teacher D had five years experience and taught second grade. Teacher E had four years of teaching
experience and taught second grade. Teacher F had six years of experience and taught second grade.

Teacher G had three years of experience and taught first grade. Teacher H had 10 years of experience and taught first grade. Teacher J had 12 years of experience and taught kindergarten. Teacher L had 23 years of experience and taught kindergarten. Teacher M had 25 years of experience and taught third grade.

**Analysis of Themes**

Following the research interview questions with the 12 teachers involved in the reduced class size program who agreed to participate in the interviews, I listened several times to the tapes and transcribed them. The transcribed information was given back to each interviewee and I requested that they read the transcripts to check for meaning and accuracy. All of the teachers returned the transcripts with few corrections.

After reading and rereading each transcript, I coded data, sorted codes, and cut out all relevant excerpts into piles. Then, I checked them again for relevancy. I found six major themes that emerged from the interviews with the teachers using an inductive approach. In this approach, I analyzed the interviews to find the themes instead of answering the research questions individually. Each time an idea came up, I was able to sort the teachers’ responses using the Foss and Waters’ process. I also found associated sub-themes that are summarized in Table 7 and discussed in this chapter.
Table 7

*Distribution of Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Organization of room</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Round tables</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Spacious</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Communication</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Building trust and relationships</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Happy times</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Confidence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Discipline and Management</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Like a family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Enjoyed teaching</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teacher effectiveness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Modify instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Quality instruction</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Changes in test scores</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Not a surprise</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Profiles</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Challenges and mandates</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Funding</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Playing catch-up</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Absent students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Opportunities and successes</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Personal relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Leadership</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Parents</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following six major themes were extrapolated from the transcripts of each teacher’s lived experiences in the reduced class size program:

1. Organization of the Classroom
2. Building Trust
3. Discipline/Management
4. Teacher Effectiveness
5. Challenges and Mandates
6. Factors Influencing Opportunities and Successes

The teachers spoke freely in the semi-structured interviews, giving specific examples of how they felt and describing their lived experiences while in the reduced class size program. The open-ended interview questions allowed the participants to include key information that was used in my discussion. There were some responses that covered multiple questions during the interviews, especially when they discussed the opportunities they experienced in the reduced class size program. When the teachers reported their feelings about teacher quality, they talked about their personal accomplishments while in the reduced class size program. Some teachers expressed their experiences of emerging as a leader while in the reduced class size program.

At the end of each interview, each teacher made additional comments that will be discussed at the end of the themes and sub-themes.

**Theme Related to Research Question 1**

**Theme 1: Organization of the Classroom**

After some preliminary conversation about each participant, the teachers were asked to respond to the first research question: *How did you make meaning of classroom*
structure during the reduced class size program? Some of the teachers indicated that it was important to have the classroom organized for success. Teacher G stated, “I felt comfortable in the classroom with less furniture, but the room was set up for maximum usage.”

The ability for students to move around with ease was important for Teacher J. It made a big difference for her because the centers were rotated every 20 minutes in this kindergarten classroom. She continued by stating, “Space kept down confusion and directions were easier to follow.”

When discussing his experiences, teacher B stated:

The experience I already had in teaching was an advantage in the smaller class size room because I organized the room better. I placed the carpet near the back of the room for quiet reading times, and I had the centers near the front of the room so the students could see the board and know what center to go to.

Teacher D stated, “I had five years experience in a regular classroom with 30 students, so my classroom was set up in groups of small round tables with four to five children in each group.” Teacher M admitted, “I like structure,” so it was easy for him to organize his classroom with fewer students.

Teacher E commented, “I often rearranged my classroom probably monthly to give it a different feel.” Teacher F, with more than six years of experience, noted the big difference in having 17 students the first year of the program versus 30 students she had in prior years. This difference in numbers made organization of the classroom easy.

Teacher H informed me of her use of color for more structure. She stated, “All my tables were color coded and my room had different colors for each center. I enjoyed using
color for a more successful and brighter classroom.” Teacher L had everything organized with daily routines for more structure.

**Sub-theme 1.1: Round tables.** A sub-theme that came out of the interviews as it related to classroom structure and organization was the use of round tables in the reduced class size program. As part of the program, some of the teachers felt compelled to use round tables in their classroom organizational structure. Teacher A indicated that “round tables instead of desks gave the room more organization and structure.” She felt this form of structure gave the students an opportunity to sit in cooperative groups. Cooperative groups allowed students to support and assist students who were English Language Learners and also support those who were struggling with a particular concept or idea.

“I remember having about five round tables and one U-shaped table for reading group sessions,” replied teacher C. She indicated that the grant was big on cooperative groups and that is why the teachers had to use round tables. She also mentioned that students worked well in the cooperative groupings and they were allowed to choose their own seats. Teacher J reported, “round tables allowed the students to move in and out of centers with ease.”

**Sub-theme 1.2: Spacious.** A second sub-theme that emerged from the interviews dealing with organization and structure was using additional space. Teachers were excited about the new structure they were setting up as part of the reduced class size program. Two of the teachers, F and K, stated, “The room was so spacious with fewer students.” The discussion on space for all of the teachers was positive due in part to the fewer number of students. But the extra space also gave some of them room for other
important areas like reading corners, drama sections, science labs, technology areas, and writing centers. More space also allowed for ample materials.

**Sub-theme 1.3: Communication.** A third sub-theme in the area of organization and structure throughout the reduced class size program was communication, which was mentioned in some form by all the teachers. Teacher D remembered her experience in communication by stating, “We had discussion time each morning with a prompt question for each table. It felt good to see the students interact in small groups.”

Whenever you allow the students to get to know each other better through dialogue and communication, it is a win-win situation, as expressed by Teacher E. She continued by stating, “In the reduced class size program, students were encouraged to express themselves using language. I would often tell them to look at the word wall and use some of those words in their conversations.” The word wall consisted of all of the new words that had been introduced during the school year in alphabetical order. Depending on the grade level, the list could get very extensive.

See Table 8 for a summary of teacher responses to research question 1.

**Table 8**

*How Teachers Made Meaning of Classroom Structure in the Reduced Class Size Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organized for success</td>
<td>~ room set up for maximum usage (teacher G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I organized my room better because of my years of experience (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I had groups of students with small tables (teacher D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I had everything organized with daily routines for success (teacher L)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Round tables</td>
<td>~ gave the room more organization &amp; structure (teacher A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ students moved with ease in/out of centers (teacher J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>~ I like structure so it was easy (teacher M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Excited about new structure, my room was spacious with less students (teachers F, K)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Students could see and know what to do with structure (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Rearranged room monthly (teacher E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>~ better communication and students got to know each other better (teacher E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ We had discussion time each morning (teacher D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative groups</td>
<td>~ less furniture made groups ease (teacher G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ U-shaped table was used for cooperative reading groups (teacher C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using color</td>
<td>~ All my tables were color coded and my room had different colors for each center (teacher H)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme Related to Research Question 2

Theme 2: Building Trust and Relationships

When asked about research question 2, *How did teachers make meaning of the teacher/student dialogue?*, 10 of the teachers made comments about building trust and relationships. They felt it was important to build trust with children. Teacher K put it this way: “I had more time to talk and listen to my students which built trust and relationships.” Teacher D was concerned with trust and voiced, “I wanted students to be comfortable around me so that they would trust me and come to me with their concerns. I wanted to influence them in a positive way.”

I also found that Teacher G had a lot of shy students in her first grade classroom. She replied, “I allowed them time to talk and express themselves to feel more
comfortable in my room. At first it was slow so I would pair them up with talkers, but in a short period of time, everyone felt more comfortable speaking.” Teacher M suggested that the only way for students to gain more confidence was through building trust. He stated, “By having ongoing dialogue and wait time, students gained more self confidence and more trust in me became apparent.” He also shared that he observed students coming up to him at the beginning of the day to talk to him about different things that had occurred because they felt comfortable with him.

Teacher E confirmed my findings on building trust by acknowledging that her students showed caring and respect for each other because she allowed them to trust her and each other. She summarized, “I was able to know the strengths and weaknesses of all my kids because of the trust I had established. They shared many things with me.” Also, in regard to trust, Teacher B described his response this way: “There were times when we had to meet as a class and iron out concerns. Allowing students to dialogue about their concerns without judgment built trust in my classroom.”

Teacher J had 12 years experience and stated:

When coming into the reduced class size program, I wanted all my students to feel comfortable and trust me, so I spent individual time with them the first few days so that I could get to know each one of them better. I love children and recognized how important it was for them to be able to come to me about anything. This level of respect built better relationships and formed more confidence while building trust.

Teacher H responded,
I really spent a lot of individual time with the students which helped them to trust me. They shared their real feelings with me and we even had an opportunity to cry together. One of my students lost a parent which really made our relationship stronger. When something bad happened, we were all sad together. My students and I had open dialogue daily.

Teacher A admitted that this was all new to her at the beginning of the reduced class size program because she was a new teacher. But she also felt that “I had an opportunity to get to know all my students and their families. The kids loved to talk and tell what they learned at the end of the day. It gave them confidence and built trust in all 17 of them with me.” Teacher C also talked about building her own confidence. She stated, “I gained more confidence in the reduced class size program. You see, I was a new teacher and was scared about this new program.”

**Sub-theme 2.1: Happy times.** A sub-theme in the area of teacher–student dialogue pertains specifically to building trust and relationships, and the daily interactions the teachers had with their students. When discussing dialogue with Teacher H, she included trust as part of the dialogue process. She felt that younger children would not speak freely unless they trusted her. She stated, “It was such a happy time during the reduced class size program. I was able to meet with each one of my first grade students on a regular basis.”

Teacher J reported, “All of my students had a great relationship with each other. When something good happened, we were all happy together.” I found that many of the teachers in the kindergarten and first grade classes took time each morning for sharing. Most of those times were “happy times.” The teachers believed that they were in the
business of building relationships and these relationships lasted a lifetime. Teacher A shared how some of her kindergarten students would come back when they were in first, second, and third grades to talk to her because she had built that kind of relationship with them in the beginning of their educational journey. These were some of the happy times she remembered.

**Sub-theme 2:2: Confidence.** A second sub-theme in the study was a little surprising because it involved teachers who were new to education and the idea that the reduced class size program helped to build their confidence. Teacher C was starting her first year as a teacher in the Albany School District. She had been assigned a first grade classroom in the program but had no experience in any size classroom. She summarized her feeling this way:

At the beginning of the school year, I was scared because I was new and it was a very important program. There were so many things to learn and stay on top of. It was exciting yet frightening. I had a good support team and they were constantly giving me reminders of what I need to do. This was great and I started to feel more comfortable around the second month of school, October. My confidence really soared in March, when I was able to present information on the reduced class size program at a staff meeting. The teachers asked me some questions and I was able to answer them. The program really did help to build my confidence.

Another first-year teacher, Teacher A, felt the confidence of the students became stronger during the program and this gave her more confidence. Seeing her students excel at a higher level was rewarding for her.

See Table 9 for a summary of teacher responses to research question 2.
### Table 9

*How Teachers Made Meaning of Teacher–Student Dialogue in the Reduced Class Size Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Building trust          | ~ I talked and listened to students to build trust (teacher L)  
                            ~ Wanted students to feel comfortable around me so that they would trust me and come to me with concerns (teacher D)  
                            ~ I allowed students to talk about their concerns without judgment to build trust (teacher B)  
                            ~ Gain more confidence through trust (teacher M)  
                            ~ I love children and knew it was important for them to trust me (teacher K)  
                            ~ I really spent a lot of individual time with the students which helped them to trust me (teacher H) |
| Influence               | ~ I wanted to influence them in a positive way (teacher D)                                                                                                                                                 |
| Feeling comfortable     | ~ Students came to me to talk about anything because they felt comfortable (teacher M)  
                            ~ I spent individualized time with them so they would feel more comfortable (teacher F)  
                            ~ I allowed them time to talk and express themselves, even the shy ones so that they could feel more comfortable (teacher D) |
| Caring and respect      | ~ My students showed caring and respect to each other (teacher E)                                                                                                                                            |
| Shared feelings         | ~ They shared their real feelings with me. We even cried together (teacher H)  
                            ~ I spent time getting to know them by allowing them to share because kindergarteners like to talk (teacher A)  
                            ~ We had ongoing dialogue daily (teacher M)                                                                                                                                                          |
| Happy times             | ~ It was such a happy time during reduced class sizes (teacher H)  
                            ~ When something good happened, we were happy together (teacher J)  
                            ~ Happy times (teacher A)                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Confidence              | ~ It gave them confidence – all 17 of them (teacher A)  
                            ~ The reduced class size program gave me confidence too because I was a new teacher (teacher C)                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Strengths/Weaknesses    | ~ I was able to know the strengths and weakness of all my kids because of the dialogue we experienced (teacher E)                                                                                                                                                  |
Theme Related to Research Question 3

Theme 3: Discipline and Management

A third theme identified in the study was discipline and management. Each teacher had similar comments on this topic. The teachers’ thoughts on their lived experiences for this theme follows.

When discussing discipline in the classroom, Teacher J stated,

Since there were only 16 or 17 students in my classroom, I had no noticeable management or discipline problems. It was so easy, because I could peruse the room and see everyone in a glimpse. If someone was where they should not be, I just stated where they should go. No problem, they just did what was requested of them.

Teacher G acknowledged the same sentiment: “There were so few students that there were fewer distractions to interfere with learning. So, ideally classroom discipline was not an issue. Directions were followed and I had many opportunities to extend the lesson because everyone was focused.”

“I was so proud to be in the reduced class size program,” stated teacher C, who was a new teacher at the beginning of the reduced class size program, because, “discipline and management was easy. I had 17 students and less behavior problems than some of my friends with 28 and 30 students. I learned the students’ names quicker and discipline was at a minimum.”

Teacher M shared, “Management was so easy. After teaching for more than 25 years with double the size of the class, I felt very excited everyday to come to work.” He recalled an experience when he was out for the day and there was a substitute teacher
who left a note saying, “Call me anytime, it was a pleasure teaching in your classroom.”

He added, “There were no discipline problems in my third grade classroom.”

Teacher D was certain that her experience in reduced class size was awesome due in part to no discipline problems. She stated:

The management was easier with fewer students. I got a chance to know the different behaviors of each student so I could deal with the behaviors quicker in terms of controlling them and keeping them engaged in activities. I was never challenged with my discipline because in the smaller class size there were less behavior concerns.

Teacher F suggested that smaller classes gave more instructional time due to management. “The best thing I can say about reduced class size is that it was a lot easier because there were no major discipline issues.” Teacher A reported how wonderful her classroom was every day because it required little management of students:

I was able to get to every table during center time because there were no discipline problems. I remember thinking at the end of the day how great it was to keep track of each student and plan my next lesson because of how well the students managed their behaviors.

Teacher B stated:

I was always in favor of reduced class sizes, because all my days in the classroom were good. I was able to watch the class and monitor all behaviors. I dealt with fewer issues because I identified the problems quickly and resolved them. Many days in the beginning of the year we ran out of work because everything went so
I had to adjust my instruction due to the lack of discipline problems and less time spent on redirection.

Teacher L admitted,

I would wonder sometimes how I made it through the day before I became a part of the reduced class size program. Teaching has become a joy again. This is why I am still here because I have more the 25 years in the system. I was able to use instructional time to the fullest in my smaller class because everyone got the attention they needed and I knew every parent. We were more like a family.

The challenge now in reduced class sizes is not discipline or management but moving at a faster pace. Teachers E and H stated, “We were ahead of the other teachers in our grade levels due in part to fewer discipline problems.” Teacher H added, “My classroom was managed well.”

**Sub-theme 3:1: Like a family.** Many of the teachers made reference to the support they received from the parents about concerns with the students. The parental support was wonderful in and out of the classroom. There were occasions when the parents would drop in to see if they needed help with anything and there were always enough volunteers to take field trips. Specifically, teacher F stated:

If I had a concern about a student, I would call the parent and she would come to the school right away to check on the child. Once this one particular parent was there, we would have her get involved with some kind of project. It had gotten to the point that she was coming every other week, just to check on her child. It was a positive experience because she was an extra pair of hands during center time.
and her child made the necessary adjustments to be more successful. These connections made us more like a family.

**Sub-theme 3:2: Enjoyed teaching.** A second sub-theme in the area of discipline and management the teachers talked about was how they enjoyed teaching in the reduced class size program. Teachers were asked about how they made meaning of classroom management in the program. Five of the 12 teachers stated that teaching was a joy, a wonderful experience, and an awesome time in their teaching careers. Teacher C felt that “it was a wonderful experience to teach and not having to stop ever few minutes to correct some inappropriate behavior. I enjoyed teaching.”

Teacher L was one who had difficulty with management before she became a part of the reduced class size program, but she found the program to be incredible and enjoyable. She felt that “I met the need of all my students and individualized lessons for each one because I enjoyed teaching. I knew this was the best situation I could ever be put into with only 18 students to give instruction to for more than five years.”

Table 10 summarizes teachers’ responses to research question 3.
Table 10

*How Teachers Made Meaning of Classroom Management in the Reduced Class Size Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No problem</td>
<td>~ Discipline was easy with 17 students (teacher J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Classroom management was not an issue (teacher G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Discipline and management was easy (teacher C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Management was so easy (teacher L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Required little management of students (teacher A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Management was easier with fewer students (teacher D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I adjusted instruction due to less discipline (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ No major discipline issues (teacher F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Little to no discipline problems (teachers E and H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Breaks were not disruptive (teacher K)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolved issues</td>
<td>~ I identified problems quickly and resolved them (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Dealt with problems and controlled them (teacher D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy teaching</td>
<td>~ Teaching is a joy in smaller class sizes (teacher L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Teaching was a wonderful experience (teacher C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ All my days in the classroom were good (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I felt very excited everyday to come to work. (teacher M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ It was an awesome experience. (teacher D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional time</td>
<td>~ I was able to get to every table during instructional time and center time (teacher A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Smaller classes gave more instructional time (teacher F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I had to adjust my instruction (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest teacher</td>
<td>~ A pleasure teaching in your classroom. (teacher M)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme Related to Research Question 4**

**Theme 4: Teacher Effectiveness**

The fourth major theme that emerged from the research question dealt with teachers being effective. The research question was: *How did teachers make meaning of teacher quality in the reduced class size program?*

Teacher A was serious about this subject and made these statements:
I don’t believe that a teacher is more effective by the number of kids they have in their classroom. I believe that in my experience, a teacher’s success is based on two factors. The years of experience they have in education and their innate ability to do the job.

Teacher B suggested, “In the reduced class size program all the teachers were effective because we were allowed to think outside the box, be more creative and provide great instructional lessons to every child in our classroom.” Teacher G was amazed at how much she got done each day. She stated, “I met the daily goals and the students turned in quality work. I felt very effective because at the end of each day, I wanted to return the next day and be more productive.”

Teachers C and J added comments that reflected the same ideas. Teacher quality comes with tenure. The longer they teach, the better they become. Certainly they mentioned that smaller classes helped, but even in the reduced class sizes, the longer they taught in the program, they became better teachers overall.

“I changed my practices to increase the performances of my students. I could not use dittos or busy work anymore. I had to show there was some depth of knowledge in my instruction,” stated teacher F. After teaching for more than 8 years, Teacher D admitted, “I was able to make changes quickly because of the smaller numbers. I had more enhanced activities for the students, and this made me a better teacher and I became more effective in my instructional delivery.”

“Activities, projects and reports enhanced my quality of teaching,” admitted teacher M. “The hands-on activities got the students involved in learning. My specialty
was science activities and projects. We had a lot of fun with our projects in my classroom.”

**Sub-theme 4:1: Modifying instruction.** There were a number of reflections on this sub-theme in terms of teachers being effective in the reduced class size program. Teacher L added that there were many times when she had to modify her instruction during the daily lessons. She said,

> The students just picked up the information much quicker and there was no need to stay on the same material. I recalled a science lesson where the students were already familiar with the vocabulary words. I immediately went to the next chapter and introduced those words.

Teacher E commented,

> I was able to spend more time on research based activities. This supported my effectiveness in the classroom. I individualized and differentiated information when needed. For example, one of my students was dyslexic and needed math numbers spelled out rather than written numerically. This is one of the ways I modified the instruction for him.

**Sub-theme 4:2: Quality instruction.** When speaking about teacher effectiveness, another sub-theme was identified from the question on teacher quality. This theme was on quality instruction. Teacher G said,

> I think it was the most rewarding job but it was also a lot of work if your quality of instruction was where it should be at all times. Our administrator was supportive and visible throughout the day. She would enter your room at different times of the day just to check in on the students. But, I believed she was noticing
the quality of my instruction also. Because it was a new program, she often would bring others in my room to see how the program was going. I wanted to be on top of my game at all times and impress everyone that came into my room. My instruction had to be high quality and I received many positive comments from visitors.

In addition to demonstrating high quality teaching, it was important for some of the teachers to be self reflective. Teacher H mentioned:

I was constantly doing self reflections. How can I make this better for the students, I would ask myself. Questions that continued to make me push myself to becoming better. This is how I made meaning of teacher quality and became more effective.

Table 11 summarizes the teachers’ responses to research question 4.

Table 11

How Teachers Made Meaning of Teacher Quality in the Reduced Class Size Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years of experience</td>
<td>~ Success is based on years of experience (teacher A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Teacher quality comes with tenure. The longer you teach the better you become (teachers C and J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ After years of teaching, I was able to make changes quickly because of the smaller numbers (teacher F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being effective</td>
<td>~ I spent more time on researched based activities (teacher E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ All the teachers were effective in reduced classes (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I felt very effective because at the end of the day, I wanted to return the next day (teacher G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Constant self-reflection made me better and more effective (teacher H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>~ Success is based on innate ability (teacher A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I individualized and differentiated instruction to be more successful (teacher E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Modifying instruction made me successful (teacher L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>~ We had more enhanced activities (teacher D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Activities were a lot of fun (teacher M)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme Related to Research Question 5**

**Theme 5: Changes in Test Scores**

Through my analysis, I found that in theme 5 the discussion was on changes in test scores of students in the reduced class size program. *How did teachers make meaning of the changes in student’s test scores during the reduced class size program?* was the research question that related to this theme. In addition to every teacher stating that the growth of each student was above all expectations that they could ever hope for, they discussed the successes each student demonstrated. Teacher D commented, “Because I was able to spend more time using resources and ability groupings, the students’ understanding of the concepts was greater which increased student achievement, which increased MEAP scores.”

“I was not surprised that our MEAP scores were higher,” echoed Teacher G, “because all of the daily concepts were understood and we were able to move at a faster pace each day. We had so many opportunities to be successful. It was kinda like unreal.”

Basically, according to Teacher A, “It was a building mechanism of skills that happened over the years of the reduced class size program that lead to the increases in
test scores.” Teacher L believed that because she covered more materials and introduced more concepts, the results produced an increase in the test scores and better instruction.

“In the early years, we built foundations and because these foundations were strong in the reduced class size program, the scores had to get better,” according to Teacher B. Teacher M felt, “I never lost a child during instructional time and this led to more comprehension and more positive results on the test scores.” Teacher H shared, “Yes, I understood why the changes in test scores were higher. I worked with my students as much as needed because I had the time.”

“No children were able to slip through the cracks,” explained Teachers A and C. “We identified the concerns quickly, which lead to better instruction and better test scores.” These teachers, A and C, felt they were still growing but made an impact on their students while in the reduced class size program. Teacher K noted,

At first, I did not understand all the fuss over our MEAP scores because we worked hard to build strong foundations with our students and the results followed. But, after looking at the scores in some other districts, I knew we had something very special with the reduced class size program.

**Sub-theme 5.1: Increases in student performance was not a surprise.**

According to Teacher G, it was not a surprise to see an increase in test scores in the reduced class size program. Teachers were focused and engaging students in ever content area. The students made connections quickly and retained the information because of the attention they received. The teachers felt that growth and achievement just came naturally. Teachers E and F expressed it this way: “Our scores were the best in the district
and it made us feel good. We were able to do more because of the sizes of our classes and we got better results.”

**Sub-theme 5.2: Profiles.** Another sub-theme that emerged from the changes in test scores was that there were profiles created for students noting their strengths and weaknesses. Teacher H indicated that it was very important to her to have this kind of information on each of her students. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the students allowed her to set goals and differentiate instruction for greater success. She concluded,

I worked on strengths and weaknesses by setting up profiles on each student. When there was a strength, notes were made to move forward on the student’s profile. When there was a weakness, notes were made to revisit concepts, do more drill and practice and do individualized instruction if all the other students understood the information. It was a very productive time in my life of teaching.

Table 12 summarizes the teachers’ responses to research question 5.

Table 12

*How Teachers Made Meaning of the Changes in Students' Test Scores During the Reduced Class Size Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above expectations</td>
<td>~ The growth of every student was above all expectations that we could ever hope for (teachers A - M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Able to do more because of smaller classes (teachers E &amp; F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not surprised</td>
<td>~ I was not surprised that our MEAP scores were higher (teachers E, F, K)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best in the district</td>
<td>~ Our MEAP scores were the best in the district (teachers E &amp; F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>~ We had an administrator who supported the reduced class size program and this helped me to work harder to produce better test scores (teacher J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profiles</td>
<td>~ I created profiles for each student to work on their strengths and weaknesses (teacher H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Built strong foundations</td>
<td>~ We built strong foundations in the reduced class size programs and the scores had to get better (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ Never lost a child during instructional time (teacher M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ It was a building mechanism of skills (teacher A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ We worked hard on building a strong foundation (teacher K)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>~ I covered more material, introduced more concepts and this gave my class better test scores (teacher L)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>~ I worked with students as much as needed because I had the time (teacher H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I spent more time using resources (teacher D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ This was a very productive time in my life of teaching (teacher H)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme Related to Research Question 6**

**Theme 6: Challenges and Mandates**

The sixth research question, *How did teachers make meaning of the challenges in the reduced class size program?*, is addressed in this next section. All of the teachers responded to this question with similar views.

Teachers D, E, F, G, H, J, and M stated the same ideas. They felt there were “no challenges” for them with the students in the reduced class size program.

Teacher A explained her challenges this way:
It was like playing catch up some days because if the students grasp the concepts, you were continuously trying to bump up your instruction. I was a new teacher so this was a challenge. I was not use to changing the pace instructionally daily. It was difficult to stay on top of everything.

Teacher C, who was also a new teacher at the beginning of the reduced class size program, stated,

I think the biggest challenge for me was that everything had to be done daily. You could not let anything slide, especially with the little ones. You could not use anything like “worksheets” it was important to be more creative, and inventive continually. There were times when I ran out of ideas and had to collaborate with colleagues to stay on top of everything.

Sub-theme 6.1: Funding. Teacher B reported that one of his major challenges in the reduced class size program was funding. After the first three initial years of the reduced class size program, the district had to resubmit a report in order for funding to continue. Teacher B wanted to stay in the program and became concerned about the renewal every time the district resubmitted the report. He felt strongly about the program and expressed it this way: “I was always concerned about funding in the program. This was a yearly challenge for me.” As we continued to dialogue, I found out that teacher B really believed in smaller class sizes and this is why he was so concerned about funding.

Sub-theme 6.2: Playing catch-up. One participant, Teacher K, expressed her challenges by informing me that there were times when she just could not keep up with the pace. Teacher A indicated that trying to get everything done in one day was a challenge, and that it was an overwhelming adjustment because everyone had to keep
moving to stay in the program. However, Teacher C noted, “I believe that it was because we were new to the classroom coupled with starting a new program is why we had some challenges.”

**Sub-theme 6.3: Absent students.** Teacher L spoke with conviction and stated:

This is a hard question for me emotionally. I did not have many challenges but maybe the greatest challenges were when the students were absent and or they moved away. I remember one time when I was teaching third grade in the program. The student moved to a different district that had larger class sizes. Her mom called me and said her child was getting in trouble because there were too many kids in her classroom. I wanted her to return to our district because she was doing well with me in the reduced class size program. I wanted her to have another chance to be successful.

Table 13 provides a summary of the teachers’ responses to research question 6.

### Table 13

*How Teachers Made Meaning of the Challenges in the Reduced Class Size Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No challenges</td>
<td>~ There were no challenges for me in the reduced class size program (teachers D, E, F, G, H, M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New teacher</td>
<td>~ I was always playing catch-up as a new teacher so this was a challenge (teacher A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I was a new teacher and it was a challenge to get everything done daily (teacher C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ keeping up the learning pace was a challenge for me (teacher K)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students absent</td>
<td>~ The greatest challenge was when students were absent or moved away (teacher L)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>~ I was always concerned about funding each year for the program. I wanted reduced classes to stay forever. This was a yearly challenge for me (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worksheets</td>
<td>~ I could not use anything like worksheets to make it easy (teacher C)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme Related to Research Question 7**

**Theme 7: Factors Influencing Opportunities and Successes**

The last theme that came out of the interviews related to class size reduction was the opportunities the teachers and students had being in the program. The research question was: *How did teachers make meaning of the opportunities in the reduced class size program?* Teacher E stated:

There was never a time during the day that I could not give individual attention to students even those who were IEP or special education students. New concepts in math only required some drill and practice but the students always got the main ideas before the class period was over.

Teacher K reported,

I am reminded of an experience I had with a student in my third grade classroom, it was early afternoon and he was tired. We were doing a writing activity. We stopped, stood up and played a wiggle game for five minutes. It was quite funny but afterwards the kids sat down and began to work again on the writing piece. It was not a disruption but just a break. Everyone went back to work and wrote at
least two paragraphs on the topic. I was amazed at the success we accomplished that day. It was an opportunity I could not have taken with 30 to 32 students and experienced the same results.

Teacher G discussed her views this way:

I saw my students improve in every content area. I felt that, the curriculum and creative activities supported this improvement. When I compared the grades from the beginning of the school year to those at the end of the year, I knew that it was because of the opportunities in the smaller class size program. We took advantage of every opportunity every day.

Teacher A felt very strongly about her successes. She reported that, “With reduced class sizes, it allowed me to cover more materials. This strengthened the foundation of skills they learned so that they would be ready for the next grade.” She continued by saying, “I was always monitoring for success. I took every opportunity to go and visit each student’s table and ask higher order thinking questions during an activity. It was refreshing to hear kindergarteners articulate so well using vocabulary words we had covered.”

Teacher L thought she was a successful teacher. She stated, “When I heard those little kids say, ‘I got it’ I knew the light bulbs were on in their heads. This is what success was all about for me.” Teacher B shared that he enjoyed the field trips and the personal relationships he formed with the students. Every opportunity I got to take the students on a trip was rewarding to me. When we returned, there was always time to debrief and talk about what we saw and
learned. The success came when they remembered what they learned on an assessment.

Teacher C commented, “The creative part of the program was excellent. The kids would do Reader’s Theater and became more fluent readers.” Reader’s Theater was described as an opportunity for students to act out the characters in a story or play. The teacher would script the information on each character and allow the students to be creative in the way they presented the character. If the character was a man, the student may put on a hat or jacket. If the character was an animal, the student would make the sounds of the animal and be on the floor on his/her hands and knees.

“My opportunities included having more time to develop students’ higher order thinking skills,” voiced Teacher M. For example, “I could work on a particular learning goal and strengthen that goal at 3 levels: The lower level would be to engage students. I would bring it to the higher level and exercise their thinking and mastery.”

Teacher J added these comments:

I found that using more hands on materials was easier to do. You could teach and show the students how to use the material and have all of their attention. I also developed a closer relationship with the parents in my classroom. It was refreshing to have them ask me what they could do to support my classroom.

Smaller class sizes provided more opportunities to use different materials while allowing her to keep her eyes on all the children, which was one of the comments Teacher D shared with me. She continued by saying: “We used all kinds of materials including sand and food for taste, touch and feel activities. This was a very successful time.”
Teacher C made these statements:

I had an opportunity to show more leadership and be more creative. Sharing planning time with other teachers gave me the opportunities to express the successes we were having in the reduced class size program. My leadership role included, facilitating grade level meeting, presenting at the professional development workshops on RCS. I was also helping my district be more successful by developing a stronger curriculum for first grade teachers.

Some of the successful strategies used in the reduced class size program were incorporated in the activities of the district’s curriculum.

Table 14 summarizes the teachers’ responses to research question 4.

Table 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual attention</td>
<td>~ All students got attention even the IEP students (teacher E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>~ I enjoyed the field trips, they helped me form personal relationships with all my students (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I visited every student’s table during the activities. This made the activity more personal (teacher A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better instruction</td>
<td>~ more time to develop student’s thinking skills. (teacher M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I utilized more hands on materials (teacher J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I covered more materials every day because of the smaller class sizes (teacher A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>~ I took the time to show all the students how to use the materials (teacher E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>~ The creative part of the reduced class size program was excellent (teacher B)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 14—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Successful| ~ I felt successful as a teacher while in the reduced class size program (teacher L)  
|           | ~ I showed more leadership and expressed how successful the reduced class size program was going. (teacher C)  
|           | ~ I was amazed at the successes we accomplished each day (teacher K)  
|           | ~ I helped my district be more successful in the reduced class size program (teacher C)  
|           | ~ I saw my students improve in every content area (teacher G)  
| A game    | ~ We stopped, stood up and played a wiggle game. An opportunity I could not do with 30 students and get the same results (teacher K)  
| Parents   | ~ I got to know all the parents in my class. We connected at both levels, home and school (teacher D)  
|           | ~ The parents were more involved in homework and school work (teacher M)  
|           | ~ I develop a closer relationship with the parents of the students in my classroom (teacher J)  

Sub-Theme: Additional Comments. At the end of each interview, I asked the participants if there was anything else they wanted to add to their comments. Overwhelmingly, they stated “yes.” Table 15 displays their comments regarding the reduced class size program and their lived experiences. There were no changes made to these comments.
### Table 15

**Additional Comments Teachers Made at the Conclusion of the Interview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>I think that smaller class sizes are excellent for at-risk students. They already come to school with a level of concern but, because you have fewer students to work with, you have more time to work with them and build capacity. I think it is important what type of school you are going to put smaller class sizes into, as well as the administrator of the school. The type of leadership you have will shape the direction of any program in the building. Leadership is the road map to success. It is a connection to a successful working relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>I loved the reduced class size program. It should not have ended just because of funding. The data proved that it was working every year and the students were learning so much more. Sometimes I wonder if they want the schools to really be successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>It was a blessing for me to start my career in the reduced class size program. Along with the two weeks of training I received, the program allowed me to plant my feet and become a great teacher. Yes, I said it. I believe that after eight years in the program, I became a great teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>I wish we could do it over again. Even in the upper grades. I think we could really close the gap quicker with smaller class sizes. The larger class sizes contribute to a large number of students who are struggling especially in urban communities. We have to take another look at educational funding and put a priority on where the needs really are in every state. I am grateful for the administrator that we had during this program. She allowed us to be creative and provided us with many opportunities to become leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>The training was a good foundation for us because we had no idea what to do differently in the reduced class size program. The quality was excellent and I implemented many of the strategies that I learned in my first year with reduced class sizes. I would love to be in another program just like this one and possibly do some of the training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>I wish we could bring back reduced class sizes. I like being able to work with smaller numbers. Smaller numbers allows you to bond with the students and parents. It was easier to keep the communication lines open with the parents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 15—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Teaching has certainly changed and so have the students. This is why I am in favor of reduced class sizes. We could still make progress even though the students and parents had change. If we are going to meet the needs of the students socially and educationally the class sizes must be adjusted. The students come to us with so many more needs now and there is just not enough time in the day with 30 – 32 students to be effective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>I believe in reduced class sizes. Not just the numbers but the whole concept of working with students at their level. Students took ownership of their learning because they felt comfortable with me and all the other students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>I am so glad I was in the reduced class size program. I will always be an advocate for smaller class sizes because they make a difference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>I believe that I would not be the teacher I am today had it not been for reduced class sizes. I was a new teacher when placed in the reduced class size program. It really was an opportunity to learn and teach students at the same time. I wish they would bring the program back. There are so many things to learn and do as a new teacher so being in a smaller class setting made it easier for me my first few years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Well, it was great while it lasted and good for the students. So, I enjoyed it while I could. I only have a few more years to go so I’m just happy to have been a part of such a dynamic program. I am not trying to be funny, I just felt empowered and free to teach like I wanted to and accomplish great things with my kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>I have a lot of experience in education, but this program helped to change my perspective on education. The freedom, creativity, and skill I used during the reduced class size program will never be forgotten. When is it returning?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teacher description of the reduced class size program housed in the Albany School District was a candid reflection of how they felt about the program. All of the
teachers were strongly motivated while voicing their opinions about returning the RCS program to the school and they were committed to sharing their comments with the Board of Education membership in the Albany district.

**Chapter IV Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe and interpret the lived experiences of 12 teachers who participated in the reduced class size program in two of the elementary schools in the Albany School District in the state of Michigan. This chapter included a description and understanding of how the teachers made meaning of the experiences in the reduced class size program. The themes and sub-themes were developed from analyzed interviews instead of answering the research questions. These themes and sub-themes revealed the teachers’ feelings as they were interviewed. These responses and lived experiences were stated in Chapter IV.

There were seven main themes that addressed the seven research questions:

1. How the teachers made meaning of classroom structure in the reduced class size program was addressed by the theme *organization of the classroom.*

2. How the teachers made meaning of teacher–student dialogue in the reduced class size program was addressed under the theme *building trust.*

3. How the teachers made meaning of classroom management in the reduced class size program was addressed under the theme *discipline and management.*

4. How the teachers made meaning of teacher quality in the reduced class size program was addressed under the theme *teacher effectiveness.*
5. How the teachers made meaning of the changes in students’ test scores during the reduced class size program was addressed under the theme *changes in test scores.*

6. How the teachers made meaning of the challenges in the reduced class size program was addressed under the theme *challenges and mandates.*

7. How the teachers made meaning of the opportunities in the reduced class size program was addressed under the theme *factors influencing opportunities and successes.*

The final section was not solicited but made by the teachers as additional comments. They all wanted to express how the program had influenced their lives.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

In the first chapter, I introduced the research study and explained the importance of the study. According to research, teachers in the reduced class size program provided a more supportive plan for students’ learning (Biddle & Berliner, 2002), and teachers were also rated as better monitors of students during observation times. The goal of this study was to describe and interpret the lived experiences of 12 teachers who participated in the reduced class size program. Two elementary schools in an urban city in Michigan were chosen for the study.

For eight years the Albany School District implemented a state grant that reduced class sizes in the kindergarten through third grade classes to almost half the size of the regular class sizes, around 17 students in each classroom. As a participant in this grant, I found the experience valuable because it provided new information for teachers, especially new teachers to the profession.

Generally, research on reduced class sizes strongly supports giving students a good start in the early years in order for them to be successful later in school (Achilles & Finn, 2000). I wanted to find out how the teachers experienced working in the reduced class size program. The study was set around seven research questions related to reduced class sizes and how teachers made meaning of the eight-year program in their district.

The questions were:
1. How did teachers make meaning of classroom structure in the reduced class size program?
2. How did teachers make meaning of teacher-student dialogue in the reduced class size program?
3. How did teachers make meaning of classroom management in the reduced class size program?
4. How did teachers make meaning of teacher quality in the reduced class size program?
5. How did teachers make meaning of the changes in students’ test scores during the reduced class size program?
6. How did teachers make meaning of the challenges in the reduced class size program?
7. How did teachers make meaning of the opportunities in the reduced class size program?

This study was important because teachers sometimes feel that they are not being heard and their feelings are not validated. The National Association of School Psychologists (2007) suggest that one powerful tool to helping teachers accomplish great things is to validate how they feel and acknowledge their concerns. Subsequently, if we find out how teachers feel in reduced class sizes, these findings can be used to support teachers in any class size program.

In Chapter II, I explained the effects and impact of reduced class sizes relative to classroom physical structure, teacher–student dialogue, classroom management, and teacher quality. It was revealed that reduced class sizes affected student performance and
test scores in the classroom. I was able to explain the effects and impact of class size through a review of the relevant research literature.

Chapter III provided the research methodology explaining how the research would be obtained. In this study I employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, which involved interviewing 12 teachers who have been in the program of reduced class sizes in the Albany School District for at least three years. This chapter discussed the methodological issues used in this study, including the (a) research approach; (b) population, sample, and site; (c) data collection; (d) instrumentation; (e) data analysis; (f) reflexivity; and (g) delimitations.

I conducted phenomenological interviews with the teachers who were in the reduced class size program. Each question was “directed to the participant’s experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions about the topic in question” (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 196). Data were gathered about how the teachers “think and feel in the most direct ways” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96) about their experiences with reduced class sizes.

Data collection was from in-depth interviews with specific questions for all the teachers in the program for at least three years. It was recommended by Polkinghorne (1989) that the researcher interview from 5 to 25 individuals who experienced the same phenomenon. Boyd (2001) regarded 2 to 10 participants or research subjects as sufficient in order to reach saturation, and Creswell (1998) recommended “long interviews with up to ten people” (p. 65) for a phenomenological study.

The transcripts were read and reread multiple times and statements were sorted in units of analysis. These units of analysis were then sorted into themes that emerged from the interviews using an inductive approach. I used the Foss and Waters’ (2007) process
for the analysis and found several sub-themes that also emerged, which were described in Chapter IV.

The seven major themes that emerged from the research questions were:

1. Organization of the Classroom
2. Building Trust
3. Discipline/Management
4. Teacher Effectiveness
5. Changes in Test Scores
6. Challenges and Mandates
7. Factors Influencing Opportunities and Successes

Each theme and sub-theme was explained in Chapter IV as it related to the seven research questions and the 12 participants that were interviewed. There was one additional set of responses that each teacher felt they needed to add as part of their interview. This sub-theme was based entirely on volunteer comments that each teacher wanted to include as part of their interview.

**Summary of Major Findings**

The major findings of the research are discussed in this section. The focus in this study was on how teachers made meaning of reduced class size practices. The emphasis is on the teachers’ description of their lived experiences while in the reduced class size program. This study provides new insights on teachers’ feelings in the smaller class size settings. Also included in this section are the teachers’ feelings about the reduced class size program that have not been presented in prior studies.
Table 16 is organized according to the seven research questions, showing the previous research and connecting the current findings by Snow.

Table 16

*Comparison of Research and Relationship of Results to Existing Studies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison Results Between Snow (2014) and Previous Research</th>
<th>Previous Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization of the Classroom</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Round tables gave more organization and structure</td>
<td>Affirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Organized with daily routines</td>
<td>Johnson (2011) found one of the major factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Maximum structure with organization</td>
<td>that affect student performance is physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Spacious room with fewer students</td>
<td>structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Students moved with ease in/out of Centers. Teachers felt</td>
<td>Adds to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good about set-up.</td>
<td>Burgio (2012) found effective classrooms have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>structure and routines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building Trust and Relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found more individual time to talk with students</td>
<td>New Find:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>which built trust.</td>
<td>No previous research found, thus Snow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>provides new insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers recognized strengths and weaknesses in students</td>
<td>Affirms:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>through dialogue.</td>
<td>Bransford, Brown, &amp; Cocking (2000) found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that effective learning involves active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>participation by the learner and produces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>better results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found the RCS dialogue time gave them more</td>
<td>New Find:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confidence as new teachers.</td>
<td>No previous research found on new teachers’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>confidence in RCS, thus Snow adds new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>insight.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 16—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison Results Between Snow (2014) and Previous Research</th>
<th>Previous Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discipline and Management</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers adjusted instruction daily due to smaller class sizes and fewer disruptions.</td>
<td>New Find: No previous research found, thus Snow provides new insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found that when they identified the problems quickly and resolved them, management was easier.</td>
<td>Affirms: Bear (2008) found that if you have mutual respect, creating a positive classroom, you have fewer problems. Froyen &amp; Iverson (1999) found that teachers should focus on encouraging self-control in students for better management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found that breaks were not disruptions in RCS.</td>
<td>New Find: No previous research found, thus Snow provides new insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Effectiveness</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found they spent more time on research-based activities in RCS.</td>
<td>Adds to: Finn (2002) found that teachers give more attention to students and their activities in RCS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found constant self-reflection made them more effective in RCS.</td>
<td>New Find: No previous research found, thus Snow provides new insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found that modifying instruction made them successful.</td>
<td>Affirms: Zahorik, Halbach, Ehrle, and Molnar (2003) found that RCS alone does not always lead to higher student performance; teachers must practice effective teaching strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Changes in Test Scores</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers spent more time using resources.</td>
<td>Affirms: Wong &amp; Wong (1998) found that in successful schools the resources are invested in teacher effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers held the attention of all the students during instruction RCS program.</td>
<td>New Find: No previous research found, thus Snow provides new insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found they could build stronger foundations in RCS.</td>
<td>Adds to: Cawelti (1999) found that good teachers were committed to educating students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 16—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges and Mandates</th>
<th>Previous Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>~ Experienced teachers found there were no major challenges in the RCS program.</td>
<td>New Find: No previous research found, thus Snow provides new insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found when students were absent or moved out of RCS, challenges existed for new teachers.</td>
<td>No previous research found, thus Snow provides new insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ New teachers found challenges in getting everything done in RCS.</td>
<td>Affirms: Lewis et al. (1999) found new teachers are less prepared when implementing curriculum. Darling-Hammond (2002) found new teachers were less prepared when they had no exposure to educational programs prior to teaching.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities and Successes</th>
<th>Previous Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found parents are more involved in RCS and there was a better connection between home and school.</td>
<td>New Find: No previous research found, thus Snow provides new insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers formed closer relationships with students in RCS.</td>
<td>Affirms: Black and Wiliam (1998), that teachers who are effective has a strong bond with their students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found they showed more leadership in RCS.</td>
<td>Adds to: Cawelti (1999) found leadership in teachers was strong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers visited every center every day in RCS.</td>
<td>New Find: No previous research found, thus Snow provides new insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers used more hands-on materials.</td>
<td>Affirms: Bradford (2005) found successful teachers create learning opportunities and hands-on activities. Involving students is critical for successful programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ Teachers found more time to involve students in activities in RCS.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Interpretation of Findings

As Table 16 shows, I found nine new findings. The most striking of these nine are the following findings: Experienced teachers in the reduced class sizes (RCS) found there were no challenges for them. This was surprising yet refreshing to know that veteran teachers had no challenges due to smaller class sizes; new teachers found when students were absent or transit, new challenges existed because the students lost ground and missed many assignments in the fast pace RCS program. This finding was striking because it revealed that RCS teachers covered more content and used more materials. Also, teachers found constant self-reflection made them more effective in RCS. This was striking because in my 20 years experience as an administrator, teachers made changes only when new initiatives were mandated.

Also, as Table 16 shows, I added to the literature five times. The following findings are the most striking of those additions. Teachers found they showed more leadership in RCS, which adds to Cawelti’s (1999) finding that leadership in teachers was strong. Also, teachers found that success in teaching is based on innate ability, which adds to Shen and Poppink’s (2003) literature that claims that those who teach can improve on their practice.

Finally, as Table 16 shows, I affirmed the literature eight times. Most striking are the following findings. Teachers found that modifying instruction made them more successful, which affirms Zahorik et al.’s (2003) finding that teachers must practice effective teaching strategies. Also, teachers spent more time using resources, which affirms Wong and Wong’s (1998) finding that in successful schools the resources are invested in teacher effectiveness. In addition, new teachers found challenges in getting
everything done in RCS, which affirms Lewis et al.’s (1999) finding that new teachers are less prepared when implementing curriculum.

**Research Findings #1**

How did teachers make meaning of classroom structure within the reduced class size program? While conducting the interviews, the concepts that emerged from every teacher about structure was that *it was easier with fewer students*. Johnson (2011) reported that a major factor in student performance is the physical structure of the classroom. In my study, teachers felt that because of reduced class sizes, classroom structure contributed to their overall success and made their jobs easier.

For some of the teachers in my study, this was a new experience because it was their first year teaching. Presumably, if smaller class sizes aided in the success for all the teachers and gave students more freedom to move around during center time, it would be important to use this information to assist new teachers as they start their educational journey in the classroom. This new insight added to the existing literature.

In my study, teachers reported being excited, using room organization to the maximum, and having more discussion time as all part of being successful within the reduced class size program. In a review of the literature, the above concepts were not present in other reduced class size studies.

**Research Findings #2**

How did teachers make meaning of teacher–student dialogue within the reduced class size program? During the interviews, a major concept that emerged from this question was building trust and relationships. A new finding from my study indicated that teachers *were able to build trust with every student and spend individual time in*
meaningful dialogue daily. Teachers and students share their true feelings and spent meaningful time getting to know each other. The reported behaviors of both teachers and students produced trust and better relationships.

Teachers talked about letting students discuss their concerns and express their feelings, and they would feel more comfortable with them. This strengthened their relationships and because the teachers were willing to listen without judgment and trust was built.

Also, in forming relationships, teachers expressed that ongoing dialogue helped students gain more self-confidence. I was able to confirm that dialogue allows students to gain more self-confidence. Bransford et al. (2000) found effective learning involves active participation by the learner. This information from reduced class sizes adds to that literature.

**Research Findings #3**

How did teachers make meaning of classroom management within the reduced class size program? In this study, teachers stated overwhelmingly that *management of students was easier or not an issue at all within the reduced class size program*. Teachers talked about feeling excited and happy to come to work and having a wonderful experience every day in the reduced class size program. A new finding from my study indicated that when the teachers and students took breaks from instruction, i.e., lavatory breaks or transition breaks, there were no disruptions in reduced class sizes. This information adds to the work done by Gump (1982), who found that effective teachers model acceptable behaviors and reinforce positives behaviors.
Another interesting finding was during instructional time new teachers were adjusting their instruction daily due to a lack of management concerns. At the beginning of the year, teachers were able to get through reading lessons quicker and had to extend learning through projects and activities because there were fewer disruptions in the reduced class size program. These data show that the new teachers in the reduced class size program actually made adjustments in their teaching because there were fewer discipline concerns.

**Research Findings #4**

How did teachers make meaning of teacher quality within the reduced class size program? When teachers were interviewed, many of their thoughts relative to teacher quality centered around *being a more effective teacher while in the reduced class size program*. This was evident in my study by several of the teachers expressing their feelings on being successful. The expressions were from teacher quality being the love of teaching from all the teachers in the reduced class size program. Teachers felt they were more effective in this program. It was also evident in the assessment data that they were more successful.

Teachers in my study were often doing self-reflections to improve instruction, which was a new finding. This concept allowed the teachers to become more effective and make more meaning of teacher quality in the reduced class size program. My findings add to the research regarding teachers’ self-reflection during RCS.

**Research Findings #5**

How did teachers make meaning of the changes in students’ test scores during the reduced class size program? During the interviews and inquiry to question 5, every
teacher made one statement that was similar: the growth of every student was above all expectations that they could ever hope for in the reduced class size program. Teachers reported that they were building stronger foundations with the lower elementary students and this affected the positive test scores over the years. By spending more time with each student, teachers felt that this was a benefit to the students. This is in line with previous research that reveals both teachers and students can benefit from smaller class sizes and teachers have more time to work with each student individually.

**Research Findings #6**

How did teachers make meaning of the challenges within the reduced class size program? In my study, 7 of the 12 teachers stated *there were no major challenges for them in the reduced class size program*. The 7 teachers felt that there were concerns throughout the program but none that they could not handle because of their experiences. In a review of the literature, the concept of no major challenges in other reduced class size program was not present in the studies.

A second finding with research question 6 was that *when students were absent or moved away it created a challenge for new teachers and students*. When students were absent, they missed a large amount of daily work and new concepts. Trying to catch them up presented challenges for some teachers.

**Research Findings #7**

How did teachers make meaning of the opportunities within the reduced class size program? A significant finding regarding this theme was how most of the teachers felt more successful while in the reduced class size program. The data showed their perceived
successes in the program as documented by improved student test scores and improved individual opportunities for participating teachers.

Another finding in this theme was that teachers had more opportunities to show leadership. By developing new strategies and presenting them to grade-level members, there were more leadership opportunities. For example, one teacher became a presenter at district workshops. Another teacher was chosen for the advisory team, a leadership role. Still another teacher became grade-level chairperson in the school. This was another leadership opportunity.

These teachers had not had these roles before. Due to their interest in this new initiative in the reduced class size program, they were selected by the administrator to pilot this program. Some of the teachers in the program also used their leadership skills to support their administrator.

**Conclusions**

As a principal, I gained a deeper understanding of the reduced class size program in the Albany School District and I believe that principals must play an active role in programs such as this one for the programs to have the greatest successes.

I think the fact that veteran teachers had no challenges in this reduced class size program and new teachers continue to struggle regardless of the number of students was a big surprise to me. I expected that with smaller class sizes, teachers would have fewer struggles. I also never expected that there would be no concerns or challenges for veteran teachers in RCS.

Additionally, the teachers in the RCS program did constant self-reflections, which made them more effective. This, too, was a surprise to me because after being an
administrator for more than 20 years, I personally expected that teachers hardly had the opportunity to reflect upon and change their instructional paradigm.

Another surprise to me was that there was more parent participation and involvement in the RCS program because the teachers had more time to connect with the home and kept parents abreast of all activities. A constant and recurring problem for parents in this Midwestern state is to keep parents involved in school activities.


Health and Education Research Operation Services (HEROS). 2011. heros@telink.net.


Student Achievement Guarantee in Education. SAGE (1999).

To close the gap, quality counts. (2003, January 9). *Education Week*.


Appendix

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Letter of Approval
Date: March 14, 2014

To: Sue Poppink, Principal Investigator  
   Brenda Snow, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 14-02-45

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Teachers’ Make Meaning of Reduced Class Size Practices: A Phenomenology” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 13, 2015