Comprehensive High School Reform: The Lived Experience of Teachers and the Smaller Learning Community Initiative

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COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL REFORM: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF
TEACHERS AND THE SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

by

Richard K. Nye

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Education
(Curriculum and Instruction)

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2011
In an era of comprehensive school reform, it appears that the voice of teachers is seldom solicited or recognized in the process of planning and implementing school-wide reform. The primary purpose of this study was to report the lived experiences of teachers at Timberton North High School (pseudonym) as it related to the Smaller Learning Community (SLC) reform initiative. Research questions addressed how the faculty experienced the SLC initiative and how their experiences were different from their perceived notion of what SLCs were trying to accomplish and in what ways SLCs initiated a socially constructed understanding of educational purposes. This study utilized a social constructivist lens to identify the nuances of reform and the interplay of effects upon the social, historical, and cultural constructs as they existed on the Timberton North campus and in the minds of the faculty members who participated.

The lived experience of the faculty members who participated in this study could
be summed up in terms of frustration. The concept of frustration was manifest throughout the data as a unifying thread of a socially constructed understanding. Members of the faculty who formally and informally participated cited various evidences to substantiate their position of frustration, which proved invaluable to the success of this research. The theme of frustration, coupled with disaggregated subthemes, offers a hermeneutic understanding as to what was experienced on the Timberton North Campus. An additional theme of “hope” emerged from the data, as each of the faculty members expressed, in one way or another that something good would come as a result of their SLC efforts in the future.

There is considerable attention given in this study to the way the SLC concept was first articulated by the school and district and what was actually realized on the Timberton North campus. This further situates the lived experience within the context of the themes. The themes that were derived in this study have also been situated into the current literature that elaborates on issues of teacher emotionality, educational policy, administrative leadership, and educational reform in general. This particular study is primarily beneficial to those who participated. However, this piece of research will provide some breadth to the growing body of research that involves how teachers influence comprehensive high school reform agendas.

(164 pages)
Pursuing this doctorate of philosophy degree has required something more than what I could have accomplished by myself. While I have at times felt alone in this effort and naturally so given the nature of graduate studies, there have been influential voices throughout my experience. I would first like to express my deep and ever-abiding love to my family. Lara has gone beyond the call of a supportive wife as she has provided the foundational substance for my success. My children, Ryken, Kamryn, and Kelton, have all been remarkably supportive for their age. Each of them has been patient with me as I have explained on a number of occasions that I could not “play” with them at the moment. My heart was touched and saddened as I have found them sleeping outside my office door after a late night of studies. My wife and children bore with love the sacrifices that are attendant with obtaining an education. I would also like to express my appreciation to my parents who often suggested, when I was younger, that I needed to “focus” on what I wanted to accomplish.

I would also like to thank Dr. Barry Franklin for allowing me the opportunity to conduct research with him, publish with him, and teach with him. He has been instrumental in guiding me through the nuances of completing this dissertation. I am also grateful to my committee members as they have personally sought what was in my best interests as I completed this degree.

I would also like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to my coresearchers, who were the substance of this dissertation. Each of them has played a pivotal role as they freely gave of their time, talents, and various abilities in helping me understand what
it is like to work in an urban high school that is undergoing a comprehensive reform. The administration and faculty members at Timberton North were all supportive of this endeavor.

This work is dedicated to all those who care about education, but particularly to the teachers who strive to genuinely improve the lives of their students. I hope that the voice of teachers might be heard loudly in the future as we all seek to improve the current public educational system.

Richard K. Nye
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V. DISCUSSION ................................................................. 110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1.1: Frustration with Administration Both Local and District....... 113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1.2: Frustration with Colleagues, Teacher Buy-In .................. 119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1.3: Frustration with General Organization .......................... 123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Further Research ......................................... 126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES .......................................................................... 128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES ......................................................................... 134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Conceptual Model of Smaller Learning Communities........ 135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Bracketing Interview ........................................... 137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Initial Interview Questions ....................................... 142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Second Interview Questions ..................................... 144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Letter of Information ............................................ 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Absolute Priorities .............................................. 149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CURRICULUM VITAE ......................................................... 152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Summary of Participants</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Comprehensive secondary educational institutions in the U.S. are in desperate need of taking immediate corrective action to address such ominous issues as disparate academic achievement among various ethnicities and the alarming increases of children abandoning their educational pursuits. In response, there has been a growing trend in educational reform to make secondary institutions more personable and accessible to teachers and students by creating smaller campuses or dividing large institutions into smaller semiautonomous learning communities within the same campus. The latter has received considerable attention and has grown in national popularity.

The movement to purposefully create small schools or schools-within-schools (SWS) in answer to academic and social ills has grown tenuously over the course of the last century. Debates regarding curriculum, pedagogy, school organization, and class size, have all played varying roles in what is being experienced by today’s youth during their secondary educational experience. The small schools and the SWS movement have specifically evolved over the course of the last forty years (Oxley, 2005, p. 44). This model has been identified with several other similar movements. During the 1960s campus schools “where students are grouped in semiautonomous units” were suggested and in some cases created (Barker & Gump, 1964, p. 201). The 1970s saw the formation of magnet programs, career academies, and minischools which tried to replicate the benefits of small schools. The students in the 1980s and 1990s were given the opportunity to enroll in charter schools that espouse lower campus enrollment and
smaller class sizes. What was once considered to be an unsavory school model, small schools today and to some extent their SWS counterpart are being lauded as a reform movement with promise but this concept should be levied against similar efforts of the past.

This popularity has grown with the expanding body of research that suggests schools with smaller enrollments have produced benefits in academic achievement, social behavior, attitudes, satisfaction, student-teacher relations, and attendance (Cotton, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 2006, pp. 643-644). Given the nature of our current educational system being primarily constructed of large comprehensive high schools, the concept of dividing a large school into smaller career themed communities on the same campus has been more financially feasible. The boon for this movement has come from grants that have been awarded by private entities and the federal government to create these schools within schools or small learning communities. However, the SWS movement does not have a particular set of strategies for addressing how a comprehensive high school should redefine the educational experience. In fact, the terminology of referring to schools within schools or similar programs is incongruent as varying definitions are given to similar constructs. For the purposes of this study, the term schools-within-schools is used to identify the broader national trend to divide large comprehensive secondary schools into smaller semi-autonomous learning communities. The term “small learning community” (SLC) is used to denote Timberton City School District’s attempt to initiate an SWS design. The SLC format is one that has been used by many other schools across the nation and will be discussed in greater detail later.
Looking at various models of the SWS reform, the existing literature inadequately addresses the key issues associated with how this particular reform is experienced by faculty members. McQuillian (2008) suggested that further research is needed “to better understand those aspects of small-school reform that most effectively promote substantive change and improved achievement” (p. 1795). In this vein, Fullan (2007) noted “neglect of the phenomenology of change—that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended—is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms” (p. 8). Simply understood, an organization cannot change unless the individual members within that organization also change. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to understand how faculty members experience a comprehensive reform effort such as the SWS movement since teachers are the primary change agents of classroom instruction (Fullan, 2007, p. 129). An understanding of teacher’s experiences involves the articulation of what was required of them, how the reform was presented, and how the change affected them personally and professionally.

**Statement of the Problem**

High schools today have evolved around the factory model structure of the early twentieth century (Kafka, 2008, p. 1821). Educational institutions across the country most closely resemble assembly lines where children move along the proverbial conveyer belt of grades until they drop out or graduate (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 643). This assembly line concept was perceived as something that worked incredibly well for
industry in the late 19th and early 20th century. Early educational reformers sought to
duplicate this industrial practice in the school system (Tyack, 1974, p. 28). Toch (2003)
suggested that “…comprehensive high schools were created to do something quite different
from what we want, and need, high schools to do today” (p. 1). Adhering to the industrial
model approach in education for the last century has led some critics of today’s
comprehensive high school to suggest that

America’s high schools are obsolete. By obsolete, I don’t just mean that our high
schools are broken, flawed, and under-funded—though a case could be made for
every one of those points. By obsolete I mean that our high schools—even when
they’re working exactly as designed—cannot teach our kids what they need to
know today. (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2008, p. 3)

In addition to being perceived as obsolete our high schools have been accused of
promulgating social inequalities. The data received from standardized measures has shed
some light on the academic disparity among various subgroups and ethnicities within the
public schooling system (Cawthon, 2007, p. 484). This awareness has caused educational
stakeholders to look more closely at what is occurring within the classroom and the
curriculum as it is experienced by teachers and students. The curricular and
organizational model of the traditional comprehensive high school is further complicated
by the number of students attending such schools.

The number of children attending school in the U.S. has grown significantly over
the last century and will be elaborated upon in the following chapter. Children have been
pouring into the public schooling system. It has been observed that, “in the traditional
high school, the typical teacher may see as many as 175 students during six 50-minute
class periods. In such a context, teacher-student relations and the overall quality of the
academic experience invariably suffer” (Noguera, 2002). Lee and Ready (2007) suggested that “many high school students are unknown by their teachers and “fall through the cracks” as they move anonymously through school” (p. 6). This anonymity that students experience is more likely to occur on campuses where the ratio of students to teachers is high. This is further exasperated on campuses where teachers remain relatively isolated within the walls of their classroom. Student anonymity has been cited by Lee and Ready as contributing to academic and social calamities (p. 6).

The problems associated with today’s schools are complicated to say the least. Poor academic achievement, the achievement gap, and social inequalities, all seem to be exasperated at large comprehensive high schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) reported that during the academic year of 2006-2007 the graduation rate was 91.4% for Asian/Pacific Islander students, 80.3% for White students, 62.3% for Hispanic students, 61.3% for American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 60.3% for Black students. The NCES also reported that in the 2006-2007 school year students living in low income families were 10 times as likely to drop out of school to students from affluent families. Disparities in graduation rates, dropout rates, and the social wellbeing of children continue to be at the forefront of educational reform conversations. Various reform efforts including SWS have sought to correct the maladies that have been connected to the current high school design (Davis, Chang, Andrzejewski, & Poirier, 2010, pp. 346-347).

The problems associated with secondary educational institutions have been addressed by ongoing reform efforts of the past. This pattern of successive educational
reforms has led some educational stakeholders to view each new reform as something that will pass with time (Evans, 1993, p. 20). Indeed our public educational institutions have seemingly, in the past, been impervious to change, bending whatever new and improved policy into something unrecognizable (Elmore, 2007, p. 217). Seasoned educational stakeholders and the educational culture in which they serve have marched to a reform tune for so long that many have met new reforms with a sense of apathy. This anemic attitude toward new educational policy and reform has led some educational stakeholders, primarily policymakers and educational practitioners, down a path of procedural ignorance as elaborated by Elmore:

In its least desirable face, educational reform can become a kind of conspiracy of ignorance: policymakers mandating results that they do not themselves know how to achieve, and educators pretending they do know what to do but revealing through their actions that they don’t. (p. 217)

Educational reform is a complicated enterprise for a number of reasons. This chasm between policy and implementation is one reason that various reforms of the past have experienced a premature end.

In order to combat the “conspiracy of ignorance,” educational stakeholders who realize greater degrees of success generally garner a holistic view of the educational system as it currently exists and then seek to reform the system in its entirety rather than meddling with the minutia of an antiquated system (McQuillan, 2008, p. 1794). For new reforms to engender substantive change teachers must be at the forefront of the conversation and yet their voice and their lens of understanding are ever solicited (Goodson, 2008, p. 7). Perhaps if the voice of the teachers were heard in conjunction with educational administrators, policy makers, and the global community, this cyclical
process of reinventing reforms may actually yield substantive change (Levine, 2011, p. 31).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to report the lived experience of faculty members at Timberton North High School in relation to their adoption and implementation of an SLC reform initiative. This study has given teachers a voice regarding how they have experienced SLCs. It has been the primary intent of this study to “assure that the teacher’s voice is heard, heard loudly, heard articulately” (Goodson, 1991, p. 36). This study elaborates on the teachers’ life and work through a social constructivist lens. This was accomplished through the use of a number of interviews. To date there have not been any studies associated with the lived experiences of teachers and the SLC movement. A number of studies have been completed and have focused on a range of other issues.

As with many reform efforts, the SLC movement is outpacing the research to substantiate the concept. McQuillan (2008) noted in a study that there have been mixed reviews regarding the SLC movement and that creating smaller learning communities has not “consistently led to improved academic achievement or instructional transformation” (p. 1773). He does argue, however, that the SLC movement does provide a critical piece in altering a school’s culture by creating “a context for building trust and understanding…while enhancing students’ social capital by creating relationships with influential persons—teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors” (p. 1795).

Improving relationships among students and teachers has been one of the primary
objectives of any SLC design. However, in a study that analyzed connectedness, a concept central to SLCs, Maroulis and Gomez (2008), came to the conclusion that creating atmospheres where students build relationships with each other may be detrimental to a child’s academic success. Their argument is based on the premise that some students who chronically underperform may actually create an environment that breeds academic discontent (p. 1924). They recommend that reformers and researchers alike should carefully consider “the network structure of students’ relationships, particularly when examining the influence of peers” (p. 1925).

A similar study conducted by Ready (2004) analyzed, among other things, five schools that allowed students to select their affiliation with an academic community. Ready noted in his findings that student choice often created social and academic stratification within the learning communities (p. 135). Some communities were perceived as being better than others while other communities seemed to attract students looking for the “path of least academic resistance.” Districts and individual schools sought to create a balance that downplayed the interplay of academic rigor and social capital. Ready suggested that while the SWS model has the potential to increase campus stratification it also has the positive potential to maximize student success. He suggested that schools should carefully consider the process of designing their learning communities in order to formulate a rich and diverse blend of students thereby decreasing community stratification.

The studies associated with the SLC reform have added tremendous value in understanding some salient issues. However, understanding how teachers have
experienced this reform is a critical issue in understanding how this reform should proceed. This study will be of primary importance to those who participated in the study and secondarily to educational stakeholders who may be considering the adoption of an SLC model.

**Timberton North High School: A Case for Change**

A comprehensive urban school district located in the Intermountain West has also felt the pressure to do something more to address the issues surrounding academic achievement, graduation rates, student accountability, attendance rates, violence, substance abuse, and the achievement gap. As a result, the Timberton City School District has embarked on the laborious process of changing their comprehensive high school campuses. The impetus for this change was largely a demographic shift in enrollment that was bringing into the schools increasing numbers of at-risk, limited English proficiency students. Since the year 2000 the minority population in the Timberton school district has doubled (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). To understand the implications of this more fully, it is necessary to situate the district within the backdrop of the city of Timberton as a whole.

The community surrounding this district has become increasingly transient and impoverished. This was the result of a population change that began in the 1950s as the city’s industrial base began to weaken and many families began moving out of the city and into the suburbs. Over the course of the last few decades the city has become economically distressed. The U.S. Census in 2000 reported that Timberton’s median
family income was $38,950, which is 22% lower than the national level. In Timberton’s impoverished state, housing has become affordable for low income, Hispanic families. For several years now, Timberton has had the highest concentration of Hispanics of any community in the state. Between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic population of the city increased by approximately 138% (Franklin & Nye, 2010). The associated challenges of the community have been readily manifest in the Timberton School District. The Hispanic population at the district’s high schools has doubled in that same time period. This has presented additional problems for the district as 27% of Spanish-speaking adults in Timberton cannot speak English (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 9). This exasperates the issues surrounding student success as parents are limited in their ability to assist their children academically, which may be one variable associated with the higher drop-out rates experienced at Timberton North and Central.

The Timberton City School District’s two high schools, Timberton North High and Timberton Central High, have experienced some of the highest dropout rates in the state. The graduation rate for the two high schools has chronically been around 60%. Additionally, 44% of the district’s 9th through 11th graders did not meet language arts mastery/near mastery on the state’s criterion referenced tests (CRT). “Low academic achievement is disproportionately worse among economically disadvantaged and minority students” as “68% of Hispanic students failed to meet CRT mastery/near mastery level…failing at a rate of 18%-24% higher than students overall” (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 9). Timberton North has also failed to continually make annual yearly progress (AYP) with disaggregated results showing similar trends to the
language arts CRT.

In addition to CRT and AYP reports, Timberton North graduation rates show that while 80% of the Anglo student population will graduate, 66% of the economically challenged students will graduate, and 21% of the racial minority population will graduate (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The 2000-2001 demographics of Timberton North show that there were 1,594 students. Of those students 46% qualified for the free or reduced lunch program. There was a 34% mobility rate as defined by students enrolling and/or moving out of the school. There was also a reported 33% racial minority which has, according to administrators, grown since that time. Timberton North also has experienced student attendance challenges as administrators estimate that one third of the student body missed at least one class daily. Administrators at Timberton North have pointed out that many Hispanic students will miss 8 to 10 weeks of school during the year as they travel back and forth to Mexico. Also, half of the Hispanic students reported “a low commitment to school” (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 10). This has become fairly problematic for Timberton North considering a large portion of all the students are of Hispanic origin.

The domestic issues and violence that reign in the Timberton area have also infiltrated the district. Inner city Timberton has 71 gangs leading to the highest juvenile violent crime rate in the state and nearly one in six of Timberton’s youth belong to a gang (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 10). Delinquent behavior by area youth is also manifested in the form of substance abuse. It has been reported that minors in the Timberton area regularly engage in substance abuse activities where 58% report using
alcohol, 47% cigarettes, 35% marijuana, 22% inhalants, and 18% have experimented with sedatives. As a result, Timberton City has been identified as having the highest rate of juvenile substance abuse in the state (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 10).

As a result of the delinquent behavior the two high schools in Timberton have seen alarming rates of disciplinary action at each of their campuses. During the 2001-2002 school year there were 1,003 suspensions, nearly a third of all high school students (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 11). Teenage pregnancies in the Timberton area are the second highest in the state and the district referred 269 students to the city’s alternative high school as a result of pregnancies. The district’s challenges are not necessarily unique as many urban high schools have faced similar issues across the country. Many urban high schools have turned to comprehensive school reform to serve as a catalyst to promote change in their students’ lives (Levine, 2010, p. 277). Given the nature of these challenges and the alarming necessity to do something to help the area youth, the Timberton City School District felt that it was critical to adopt a comprehensive school reform that was centered on building positive relationships among teachers and students.

**Timberton Adopts SLCs**

The two high schools in the Timberton City School District have been adversely affected by the social ills of the Timberton area. The school district remains committed to addressing those social ills, particularly academic and social issues such as low graduation rates, the achievement gap between Caucasian and minority students, and the lack of student connectedness. As a result, the district hired a new principal for Timberton Central High in the year 2000. This new principal was hired for the exclusive
purpose of bringing about change to his school. During the interview for the position at Timberton Central he was asked how he would change the school, he responded by saying “I would take a look at the data, and based on the data, I would develop some action steps. And that is precisely what we did” (Franklin & Nye, 2010, p. 177). Once the district had secured their reform champion, they engaged in a self-study at Timberton Central and Timberton North. This was part of the district’s efforts to assess what could be done differently to raise student achievement at all of their schools.

The district’s self-study involved multiple aspects of determining what the problems were at each high school. Solutions were then sought to address the problems at each campus. As a result of the data it was determined that a move to an SLC model was in the best interest of the two high schools. In an effort to solicit SLC reform readiness the district engaged in survey research utilizing Likert scale responses. The scale ranged from 5, which equaled strongly agree, to 1, which equaled strongly disagree. The anonymous survey asked faculty members at both high schools to identify their levels of perception and willingness to participate in a variety of reform-related issues. Among the most notable readiness issues surveyed were the levels to which teachers “believe there is a clear and compelling case for the change to SLCs.” The faculty in the district responded with a mean of 3.9 or according to the scale a “somewhat agree” mentality. These results were disaggregated by each high school. Timberton Central’s faculty felt that there was a greater case for change with a mean of 4.1 as compared to Timberton North’s mean of 3.7. From these results the district concluded that “teachers generally believe there is a clear and compelling case for the change to Smaller Learning
Another aspect of the survey that is worthy of note is the category, “The principal is strongly committed to the creation of SLCs.” The district’s mean for the two high schools was 4.2 or a “somewhat agree” perception. There is a noticeable difference between high schools, however. Timberton Central’s faculty felt that their new principal was strongly committed to SLCs by ranking him with a 4.8 or “strongly agree.” This sentiment seems fairly intuitive considering the Timberton Central principal had been the one to write the SLC grants and obtain the funding to make the transition. The Timberton North’s faculty felt that their principal was less committed with a 3.6 rating. The district concluded that, based on the data, “Surveyed teachers agreed that their principal is strongly committed to the creation of Smaller Learning Communities.” These results are for contextual and illustrative purposes and are included in this study to assist in the understanding of the district’s approach. However, there is room for debate regarding these scores as it relates to the district’s conclusions. Interestingly, after two years of SLC implementation the Timberton North principal was replaced in 2005 with Timberton North’s current administrator.

After the self-study and the determination to move forward with a reform effort, the Timberton Central and Timberton North campuses organized school improvement teams comprised of administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community leaders to further study the prospects for reform (Franklin & Nye, 2010, p. 177). As federal grants were obtained largely through the efforts of the Timberton Central principal, the Timberton stakeholders were required to align their efforts with a comprehensive school
reform model. The Timberton Central principal once again took it upon himself to direct this effort and visited a number of schools involved with the High Schools that Work initiative. Among the schools that he visited, he was most impressed with those campuses that had divided themselves up into smaller learning communities. He appreciated the concepts that through SLCs, schools were able to create personable learning environments where students and teachers could build positive relationships and thereby increase student achievement.

It was not long after the Timberton Central principal visited the SLC schools that through his efforts additional grant money was secured in order to implement an SLC model. The district began sending teachers from both high schools across the country to visit similar schools that had adopted SLCs. As faculty members visited other campuses they felt enlightened by the potential of the concept. The faculty members from Timberton North reported feeling quite excited about the SLC concept since they had already been doing something similar for the last 10 years with the Freshman Learning Center on their campus.

The concept for the Freshman Learning Center came from a previous administrator of Timberton North, who in 1992 saw a need to help the freshman succeed in his urban school. He felt that if the freshman could have a better start in high school they would be more likely to graduate. The district saw the benefits of the program and despite two administrative changes at Timberton North the Freshman Learning Center continued to flourish. The concept was embraced so well by the faculty members that they too were willing to see it through despite administrative turnover.
The Freshman Learning Center was articulated in such a way that allowed ninth grade students to be separated from the rest of the high school in order to make the transition more comfortable. Ninth grade students had the same teachers for their entire freshman year. Teachers and students were able to build more substantive relationships by spending more time together. An English teacher noted that the Freshman Center led students to suggest they felt more connected to the school “because we had the same teachers and because we had the same kids. We felt like we were a community…. The teachers called on us. They knew us. We knew all the other kids, and we felt safe” (Franklin & Nye, 2010, p. 179). This concept was popular at Timberton North and many felt that this could be realized through the adoption of SLCs. Ultimately the district felt that adopting the SLC reform was a legitimate solution to the academic and social ills that plagued each campus.

After two years of planning and writing grants, the Timberton School District began implementing SLCs at Timberton North and Central in the fall of 2002. Timberton City School’s mission and corresponding goals were carefully articulated in the planning and implementation phase to address student achievement, create an environment that was conducive to learning, and involve educational stakeholders. The mission and goals became the structural substance for continuing the pursuit for grant money. Timberton City School District’s mission regarding smaller learning communities (SLC) stated:

The two-fold mission of the Timberton City Schools smaller learning communities project is to: (1) improve overall student achievement, thereby decreasing the achievement gap; and (2) provide more personal, productive, and safe learning environment where all students can realize their potential. (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 5)
The goals that assist in accomplishing this mission are:

Goal 1: Improve every student’s academic performance to meet high standards of excellence.

Goal 2: Prepare each student to successfully transition to the next stage* of his/her development (*Each 9th grader for high school; each 10th-12th grader for higher education or workforce.)

Goal 3: Improve student school-related attitudes and behaviors resulting in a more personal, productive, and safe learning environment.

Goal 4: Build Timberton’s capacity to create, support, and sustain more personal learning communities for students. (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 93)

Intended outcomes of the mission and goals of the Timberton District SLC reform initiative included the desire to “improve the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors of students, their families, teachers, counselors, and the community.” This sense of community informs the reform agenda by facilitating opportunities for diverse and invested stakeholders to discuss significant aspects of the smaller learning community reform.

The twofold mission statement and corresponding goals were translated specifically into what the district called “absolute priorities” as it pertained to strategies for improving the learning environment. These priorities were outlined in an SLC implementation grant, which was submitted to the U.S. Department of Education in 2003. These priorities (Appendix F) were designed in the planning and implementation phase with the intent of not being compromised through the implementation of the SLC reform. The absolute priorities were:

1. Common Academic Core Curriculum and Standards
2. Assigning Teachers to SLCs and Providing them with Appropriate Content and Knowledge Specific to Smaller Learning Community Implementation
3. Strategies for Assigning Struggling Students
4. Strategies for Securing and Maintaining Stakeholder Buy-In

The first “absolute priority” dictated that there would be “comprehensive curriculum guides” that would be “written for all subject areas…to define the scope and sequenced themes for each grade level to ensure evidence-based curriculum.” This priority also sought to provide “teaching strategies, instructional support and resources, learning activities, and student learning assessments” (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 23). The purpose of this priority was to align the curricular efforts in such a way that would seamlessly integrate academic disciplines. This approach was intended to assist students and teachers in recognizing the interdisciplinary value of understanding the state core curriculum.

The second “absolute priority” dealt primarily with support and resources for teachers. This was to be accomplished by allowing them to choose in which community they would teach based on their expertise and preference. The implementation grant narrative further stated that additional efforts “will be made to ensure that teacher quality is consistent among all SLCs. Additional teacher support was to be provided through “time and stipends for related planning and training during summer and non-teaching hours.” The grant also stipulated that “teaching teams will share a common daily planning period to enable them to attend weekly group training and also have time for individual planning” (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 24).

The third “absolute priority” was intended to provide assistance to struggling students in the form of “weekly advisory periods and ongoing academic planning meetings” (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 24). Additional resources were to be made
available through “extended library hours, open computer labs, after-school drop-in tutoring, as well as PSAT and GED exam preparation courses.” Other resources were to be made available through the Timberton community, professional business endeavors, and various other district related outreach programs.

The last “absolute priority” involved the buy-in of educational stakeholders in sustaining the SLC movement. These stakeholders were defined as “teachers, counselors, staff, students, parents, and community/business partners.” Members from this group would serve on one of two SLC Advisory Councils. These advisory councils would provide support and resources for each of the two high schools. Parents were uniquely identified for soliciting support of the SLC movement including parents whose primary language was not English. Parents would receive additional resources to help them connect better with the district and high school campuses. This priority also involved opening up communication channels through, “Project information and progress updates will be disseminated through monthly newsletter, student progress reports, Back-to-School Nights, orientations, and workshops” (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 25).

Commenting on Timberton’s reform effort a spokesperson for the State Office of Education stated, “The teacher commitment and administrative leadership have been strong, and the plan has convincing support from the Timberton community.” The impetus and pursuit to transform Timberton North and Central has been recognized locally and nationally. Despite the notoriety that these schools have received, the laborious work of transforming a comprehensive high school continues. Among the reform pains have been the evolution of what SLCs actually offer each campus.
At the outset of the SLC initiative it was determined that each high school would implement different programs and students could choose which high school they would like to attend based on their interests. This concept was short lived and never fully implemented as each school began to conduct their SLC efforts in a site-based approach each going their own way. Timberton North’s administration and faculty originally divided their institution into learning academies, which developed into five learning communities. These five learning communities were later reduced to a 10-grade learning center and three learning communities, which were organized around career-oriented themes. Students were allowed to choose to which career oriented community they would like to belong and teachers were generally given the choice of where to serve (absolute priority). Students remained as a cohort during an advisory period that was designed to address their needs over the course of their high school experience. Students were also allowed to take core courses in basic high school subjects that were related to the theme of their community as well as other school-wide extracurricular courses that were not tied to any particular community. Administrators and teachers have suggested that their customized design to smaller learning communities allows students to personalize their education.

Several Timberton North faculty members have also suggested that they are deeply committed to this reform due to its nature of addressing the needs of the “whole child.” Due to the faculty’s commitment, garnering an understanding of the lived experience of Timberton’s faculty has been uniquely beneficial considering the multiplicity of issues surrounding the implementation of an SLC reform. Timberton
North and Central have experienced challenges that may be viewed, at best, as mixed blessings.

Issues and challenges that have affected the implementation of SLCs include the passing of a $95.3 million bond election by the citizens of Timberton during the summer of 2006. This bond had actually failed to pass on two other occasions. From one teacher’s perspective the passing of the bond finally sent a message to the district and students that education really mattered in the eyes of the community. The bond has funded seven different projects within the district but the most noticeable has been the rebuilding of the two high schools. Timberton North is in the process of a major two-part rebuilding effort. The first part was finished in March of 2009 which included 25 new classrooms, and a new cafeteria with a commons area. The second phase is currently under construction and involves a new media center, office, and a “facelift” to the areas of the campus that were not replaced or rebuilt. The new design of the Timberton North campus is conducive to the SLC reform effort as there are three main halls where students and teachers are organized by communities. According to the principal of Timberton North the new design of his campus has left an indelible impression among educational stakeholders, including students, and has instilled a “new sense of pride and ownership” which has permeated through the halls. While construction has been ongoing the district’s academic struggles have persisted.

The Timberton City School District has struggled to address grade-level issues and chose to implement, in the fall of 2008, a grade configuration that moved the ninth grade into the newly formatted junior highs. The move of the ninth grade out of high
school affected Timberton North noticeably. As the ninth grade students and corresponding teachers were divided between two junior highs, the Freshman Learning Center ceased to exist. This change to the Timberton North campus represented, according to faculty members, the loss of the “only successfully operating SLC” on their campus. The shift of the ninth grade allowed the enrollment of Timberton North to drop from nearly 1,400 students during the 2007-2008 school year to just over 1,000 at the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year, a particularly small high school by comparison to other urban high schools. There has been some historic difficulty of the Timberton School District to quantify enrollment numbers at any given moment due to the transient nature of the community.

The evolution of what has been experienced in the Timberton School District has become two distinct narratives. The district’s mission and goals of SLCs were intended to be the same for the two high schools. However, the two high schools have experienced uniquely different stories simply because of the different individuals who were involved at each campus. The purpose of this research has been to document the lived experience of teachers as they have implemented the SLC initiative on the Timberton North campus. A previous research study conducted by Dr. Franklin and myself at Timberton Central serves only to add a contextual basis to the Timberton North study.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to better understand the underpinnings of comprehensive high school reform, it is necessary to explore the nuances of reform efforts that inform what has occurred, what is now occurring, and what the future may hold for secondary educational institutions (Labaree, 2010, p. 3). This is a complicated process and a brief synopsis is provided of some salient issues that have shaped public education. This will also shed some light on why there is a monumental movement at reforming public high schools.

Purpose of Curriculum

Public schooling in the U.S. has expanded rapidly in a relatively short period of time. The common school movement of the early to mid-nineteenth century marked the beginning of an organized and collective effort to educate the nation’s youth. This movement was the first attempt and arguably the only real successful reform that the educational enterprise has seen in this country (Labaree, 2010, p. 75). The common school movement grew from the desire to create responsible citizens for the promulgation of democracy for the new republic. However, even during this time there was another purpose of education that began to surface that was less concerned about citizenry and more concerned about consumerism in the form of personal opportunity. It was quickly realized that obtaining an education provided greater degrees of social capitol. This has become problematic for the great American educational enterprise as it seeks to promote and realize two seemingly separate objectives. The education system of the common
school movement provided access and advantage while at the same time promoting equality and inequality (Labaree, 2010, p. 3). This paradox of outcomes has given way to multiple reform eras.

The beginning of the twentieth century marked the advent of an educational furor that has yet to be resolved in its entirety today and is commonly referred to as the progressive movement. The questions of what should be taught, how content should be taught, and how children develop cognitively have been the substance of debate since the end of the nineteenth century. There were essentially four major movements that were vying for control of the American curriculum during the twentieth century. They were the humanist movement, the child study movement, social efficiency educators, and lastly the social meliorists group (Kliebard, 2004). Each of these movements has had some influence on what we see in education today. Reform efforts such as the SLC movement are the result of varying ideologies with roots grounded in the history of education in the U.S.

The humanist movement was championed by the U.S. Commissioner of Education, William Torrey Harris. The humanist curriculum that he espoused included a traditionalist perspective and preservation of Western civilization ideals. Harris suggested that a curriculum rich with “grammar, literature and art, mathematics, geography, and history—would remain the means by which the culture of the race would be transmitted to the vast majority of Americans” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 15). Harris and the humanist movement were vehemently disinterested in some of the reform attempts being purveyed by the child study movement to have the school curriculum reflect the interrelationship of
academic disciplines.

The child study movement as embodied by the National Herbart Society, a group of educational leaders, felt the curriculum should be interconnected. They directly challenged Harris on this matter given the auspices of his position. The child study movement felt that theirs was a scientific approach to the dissemination of knowledge. To them a child would make greater strides in developing academically if the curriculum was presented to them in such a way that mimics the way society or nature operates thereby “the natural power within the child could be unharnessed” (Kleibard, 2004, p. 24).

The social efficiency movement also viewed the curriculum and the child with a scientific approach. However, unlike the child study movement, the social efficiency perspective was best articulated with the notion that education could save society from moral degradation. Kleibard (2004) elaborated on this point by suggesting that “theirs was an apocalyptic vision. Society, as we know it, was flying apart, and the school with a scientifically constructed curriculum at its core could forestall and even prevent that calamity” (Kleibard, 2004, p. 24). The scientifically constructed curriculum of the social efficiency movement was carefully articulated in such a way that children would be prepared to assume adult occupational roles. They felt that the curriculum, as it existed, fell far short and lacked sufficient specialization.

Social meliorists, like the social efficiency movement, felt that society was corrupted. However, social meliorists felt that the answer to solving social ills could only be found as they were specifically addressed in the curriculum. The social meliorist
curriculum stressed an approach that directly addressed specific social ills with the intent of circumscribing their continuation. This group generally felt that too much emphasis was being placed on developmental psychology and more attention needed to be placed on the structure of the curriculum as it pertained to social issues. Social meliorists felt that the answer to societal ills “lay in the power of the schools to create a new social vision” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 25).

These groups tended to have some influence over the American curriculum although none of them gained widespread acceptance and implementation. Kliebard (2004) noted that “what became of the American curriculum was not the result of any decisive victory by any of the contending parties, but a loose, largely unarticulated, and not very tidy compromise” (p. 25). This compromise has resulted in cascading reform efforts of centralization or decentralization with regards to the curriculum, the needs of students, and the schooling environment. The early part of the twentieth century has been commonly referred to as the progressive period and has provided the nesting grounds for further reform efforts that our public schooling institutions have experienced and endured for the most part of the latter half of the twentieth century. Elmore (2007) elaborated on the impact of the progressive era by saying:

What is most interesting about the progressive period, as compared with other periods of educational reform, is that its aims included explicit attempts to change pedagogy, coupled with a relatively strong intellectual and practical base. Noted intellectuals—John Dewey, in particular—developed ideas about how schools might be different. (p. 15)

Although the reform efforts of the progressive era did not yield substantive or large scale change, we have learned from that era that educational change is possible and a worthy
During the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. federal government funded large-scale reform initiatives that Fullan (2007) has called the “adoption era” because “the goal was to get innovations out there, as if flooding the system with external ideas would bring about desired improvements. Huge sums of money were poured into major curriculum reforms…” (p. 5). The 1950s and 1960s reform efforts mirrored much of the same determination as the progressive era to change the curriculum in order to facilitate greater degrees of cognitive development among children. The National Science Foundation funded academic reform efforts that focused primarily on changing and strengthening the curriculum. The focus of these efforts was geared more toward content of the curriculum where the progressive efforts focused more on the needs of the child. Elmore (2007) noted that the efforts of the adoptive era were promulgated on the following premise.

If students are studying mathematics, science, or social science, they should actually engage in activities similar to those of serious practitioners of these disciplines and, in the process, discover not only the knowledge of the subject, but also the methods of inquiry by which that knowledge is constructed. (p. 21)

The reality of curricular change during the adoption era fell short, like the progressive era, of providing any significant changes in classroom practice or changes in curriculum on a large scale. These two reform eras did have a limited impact on the American curriculum situated among various states and districts with mixed results.

The desire to change the curriculum continued through the 1970s with a focus on civil rights. Alarmingly, data suggests that civil rights, in terms of achievement and economic gaps are still widening despite reform efforts of the 70s (Fullan, 2007, p. 6). The 1980s saw reform efforts focused on accountability and large scale reform. The
publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) caused national concern regarding the quality of public education and led to, as the name of the publication implies, numerous reform efforts. Currently there seems to be a renewed sense of urgency to engage in educational reform enlivened by NCLB (Labaree, 2010, p. 5). Our society is a global community and many critics of the educational system suggest that “it is now an undeniable conclusion that the education system and its partners have failed to produce citizens who can contribute to and benefit from a world that offers enormous opportunity” (Fullan, 2007, p. 7).

**Growth and Reform**

Amid reform efforts of the twentieth century, the American schooling system has grown exponentially in terms of student enrollment (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 7). Many children at the beginning of the twentieth century preferred working in the factory rather than attending public school (Kliebard, 2004, p. 6). However, growth in school attendance experienced a dynamic increase as society began placing a greater emphasis on education and many states began requiring that students attend public school. Tyack and Cuban (1995) expounded on this issue:

Statistics on high schools over the last century reveal striking trends. The most salient of these—and the one that most sharply differentiates secondary schooling in the U.S. from that in other industrialized nations—is the rapid increase of students enrolled and graduating. In 1900 one in ten of those aged fourteen to seventeen was enrolled in schools; in 1940 seven in ten were; and in 1980 nine in ten. There was also a sharp rise in the proportion of youth graduating from high school: in 1980 only 8 percent; 1920, 17 percent; 1940, 51 percent; 1960, 69 percent; and 1980, 71 percent. (pp. 47-48)
Lee and Ready (2007) offered additional perspective on how this growth influenced secondary education when they observed that “since 1930 U.S. public high school enrollments have grown by over 700%” and that the “number of public high schools increased by only 8%” (p. 7). With an eight percent increase in physical facilities and a 700% increase in enrollment, schools and districts changed the process by which education is experienced. The time period of the early 1900s to the 1960s has also become known as the “consolidation era” where over “119,000 local districts operated in 1937, fewer than 15,000 districts exist today” (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 7).

Given the nature of changing demographics, high schools grew to simply meet the needs of more children attending school. Elmore (2007) elaborated when he stated that “the emergence of the American comprehensive high school…was a largely structural reform designed to accommodate huge increases in enrollment…with only the thinnest of pedagogical theories behind it” (p. 212). Hampel (2002) suggested that “there was no single argument set forth to justify and celebrate large schools” (p. 358). Hampel argued that large schools grew from commonly held beliefs that evolved into “articles of faith rather than issues to explore.”

It has also been suggested that high schools have grown under the premise of the “economy of scale,” which simply states that it is more affordable to educate large numbers of children simultaneously (Ready, Lee, & Welner, 2004, p. 1989). Enrollment statistics and student demographics over the course of the last 50 years suggest that the system we have today is the product of greater enrollment figures rather than a paradigm shift addressing pedagogical purpose. Bearing in mind the context of public education at
the beginning of the twentieth century, rural schools with small enrollments were limited in their ability to deliver a rigorous and diversified curriculum and as such were generally looked upon with disdain by those who evaluated public education. It made economic sense to consolidate and grow schools and districts in order to provide for the educational needs of children.

**Small Versus Large High Schools**

Public schools during the first half of the twentieth century were viewed by some critics as being incapable of sponsoring an adequate education for youth. Small schools lacked the necessary resources and the diversity of curricular options that larger schools were able to offer at that time. In his widespread and influential report, Conant (1959), a proponent of large schools, researched over two thousand high schools and suggested that school districts needed to abolish small schools with graduating classes of less than one hundred students. His recommendation was based on the notion that small schools were incapable of offering a comprehensive curriculum. He asserted that small schools “are not in a position to provide a satisfactory education for any group of their students…” (p. 77). Conant believed that small schools did not adequately address the various needs of students as all students were expected to take the same courses with the same degree of rigor.

Contextually speaking, Conant argued that large high schools, which enrolled at least 400 students, were capable of supporting a more rigorous academic experience especially in the areas of foreign languages, math and science. Conant’s suggestion of
having a campus enrollment of at least 400 would certainly be, by today’s standards, a considerably small high school. A good comprehensive high school, he suggested, was better able to meet the diverse needs of a student body by offering a greater breadth and depth of curriculum. Conant’s influential report had far reaching implications and has certainly given impetus to the large school movement. However, it should be considered that Conant was more concerned with comprehensive high schools meeting three objectives:

First, to provide a general education for all the future citizens; second, to provide good elective programs for those who wish to use their acquired skills immediately on graduation; third, to provide satisfactory programs for those whose vocations will depend on their subsequent education in a college or university. (p. 17)

Conant believed bigger was better when meeting the three previous objectives and there has been considerable adherence to his assumption for good reason. So the argument of small versus large set forth by Conant is reflected more accurately in the rural versus comprehensive debate (Hampel, 2002, p. 359). Criticisms of small schools continued to mount and there seemed to be an overriding belief that bigger was better, although not everyone agreed.

In a less influential report, Barker and Gump (1964) investigated 13 high schools of varying sizes and determined that schools with smaller enrollments were just as capable as larger high schools (pp. 41-62) in meeting the academic needs of students. The variables that were measured in their study included “differentiation, population density, and scope and specialization of school offerings” (p. 41). Their general theory suggested that there is a “negative relationship between school size and individual student
participation. What seems to happen is that as schools get larger and settings inevitably become more heavily populated, more of the students are less needed; they become superfluous, redundant” (p. 202). Despite the Barker and Gump publication, districts and schools continued to move toward consolidation under the premise that large comprehensive high schools were more impressive in scope and purpose. The enrollment growth as it occurred under the rationale of pedagogical supremacy caused reports such as the one published by Barker and Gump to be less recognized or celebrated.

The suppositions that large high schools are better able to meet the needs of students has appeared to have fallen significantly short of meeting the diverse needs of students as evidenced by alarming statistics that report gross, demographically aligned inequalities in achievement and general dropout rates. According to the NCES (2009), during 2007 there were approximately 3.3 million individuals from 16-24 years of age who were not enrolled in school and who did not have a high school diploma or alternate certification. The NCES also reported that the status dropout rates for Caucasian students was 5.3% compared to Black students at 8.3% and Hispanic students at 21.3%. It is of critical importance that we evaluate our current high school structures and rethink the notion that large comprehensive high schools are better able to meet the personal needs of those whom they serve.

**High Schools Today**

High schools today reflect a complicated process of diverse efforts marked by curricular compromises and enrollment growth. As has been suggested, high schools
today reflect a structural format of organization that most closely resembles an assembly line of grade levels and curricular objectives. The current process by which children are educated in these institutions has led to some undesirable and unintended consequences. Such issues as the achievement gap, curricular specialization, and limited social networking, have led many critics to question the purposefulness of the current educational system (Lee & Ready, 2007, pp. 6-10; Meier, 1996, p. 12).

The negative issues surrounding the large comprehensive school model have been further exasperated by recent federal and state legislation requiring that accountability be assessed through standardized measurements with the results being disaggregated according to various subgroups and populations (Ravitch, 2010, p. 102). The data received from standardized measures has shed some light on the growing disparity among various subgroups with the intent of identifying issues to address (Borkowski & Sneed, 2006, pp. 506-507). Of course, one must first make various assumptions about the reliability of such standardized measurements to adequately sustain validity inferences (which are not within the scope of this particular study; Reynolds, Livingston, & Willson, 2009, pp. 125-126). This awareness has caused educational stakeholders to look more closely at what is occurring within the classroom and the curriculum as it is experienced by students.

The curriculum that exists in schools today was based on the premise that a large student body required a specialized and diversified curriculum for purposes of differentiation. This curriculum could only be accomplished in larger high schools due to the nature of funding. The lack of an integrated curriculum on a large and comprehensive
campus may lead students to experience and develop a fragmented understanding of the different disciplines that are taught. This seems to be the same argument that the child study movement made earlier in the twentieth century. Additionally, the curriculum that students experience today unintentionally promotes “within-school social segregation, as minority and low-income students are less likely to be placed in (or choose) advanced academic classes” (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 10). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be less inclined to engage in curricular activities with greater amounts of academic rigor for a wide variety of extensively documented social and cultural dynamics. As a result, many students choose to associate with those who share their same academic and social aspirations or lack thereof (Ready et al., 2004, p. 2007).

In larger high schools, students and teachers have limited opportunities to develop a socially constructed understanding of the applicability of scholastic purposes. Teachers in large high schools become “specialists” who generally serve comparatively few students in a very content specified way (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 9). Teachers and students ultimately become disconnected in larger high schools as informal opportunities for social interactions are limited. Such settings not only interfere with the quality of interpersonal relationships between teacher and students and among students, they also according to some educational critics, undermine student academic achievement (Armstead, Bessell, Sembiante, & Plaza, 2010, p. 366). This is a particular dilemma among students whose ethnicity, social class background, and family economic circumstances place them in categories of school failure (González & De Jesús, 2007).

The current design of our comprehensive high schools and associated enrollment
rates are associated with some groups of students being poorly served, as evidenced by
students leaving high school early, various minority populations who lag behind
academically, and the general number of students who chronically perform below grade

…the American system of education is highly accessible, radically unequal, organizationally fragmented, and instructionally mediocre. In combination, these characteristics have provided a strong and continuing incentive for school reformers to try to change the system, by launching reform movements that would seek to broaden access, reduce inequality, transform governance, and improve learning. (p. 11)

Many have recognized this and other problems associated with large, comprehensive, and impersonal high schools and have sought solutions to mediocre curricula, low student achievement, drop-out rates, achievement gaps, and general impersonality. Educational stakeholders have wrestled with issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and organizational structures resulting in additional cascading reform efforts (Tyack, 1991, p. 2).

**Educational Reform Today**

Educational reform is once again sweeping the country. Regardless of multiple perspectives, the belief that secondary education is in a state of disrepair is commonly held by diverse groups. The fervor for educational reform today also seems to be hastened by the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) or better known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2000 (Kafka, 2008, p. 1827).

NCLB essentially requires schools to account for the teaching and learning that occurs within their walls. The federal government now requires annual accountability
statements from each school, as reported by the state, that evidences student learning and achievement. Elmore (2007) noted that the “stark reality is that little more than a decade ago most states did not have the capacity to collect, analyze, and report data on individual schools” (p. 51). According to Hess and Finn (2004), NCLB has the potential to “create pressure on schools and districts to mobilize the resources to improve” (p. 30). Hence, states, districts, and schools are scrambling to adopt and implement various reforms designed to increase student achievement simply because there is a greater transparency within districts and schools, as illuminated by standardized assessments.

The pressure on public schooling has followed the ebbs and flows of time. Education has always been in a state of flux as we are constantly developing the curriculum, debating methodologies, defining a purpose, outlining a function, and analyzing the needs of our children. The reform efforts that we see today are largely functioning within the tenets of varying reforms and theories of the past. Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggested that “reforms have tended to layer, one on top of another…. The evolution of schools is in part the story of the interactions between these layers of change, whether they are deposited at lengthy intervals or accumulate in rapid succession” (p. 76). These layers of change are often remarkably similar in design due to the cyclical path of educational reform.

The nature of educational reform has led some educational stakeholders to view reform as something that will pass with time. This sentiment can be attributed to “the abundant possibilities and continuing cycles/waves of changes” (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 25). Seasoned educational stakeholders and the educational culture in which they serve
have marched to a reform tune for so long that they meet new reform with a sense of apathy. Indeed, teachers want their students to succeed but are often faced with another “5 year plan” or innovations that arrive with the appointment of a new administrator.

The number and variety of reform efforts that practitioners have experienced over the course of a career seem innumerable for many. The failure of an innovation generally has less to do with implementation and more to do with the volatility of 3-5 year plans. Our public educational institutions have seemingly, in the past, been impervious to change, bending whatever new and improved policy into something unrecognizable simply because the reform did not address multiple educational issues (Elmore, 2007, p. 217).

Over the course of the last twenty years there has been various “waves of reform” (Hall & Hord, 2001, pp. 23-25). These waves of reform have addressed certain social aspects and have broadened in scope with each passing wave. This is due in part because earlier waves of reform failed and as a result proponents of change suggest that reform efforts must grow in magnitude to be of effect (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 25). Writers, researchers, and policy makers are now suggesting that for substantive change to be realized there needs to be an overhaul of the entire educational structure (Noguera, 2002, p. 63; Oxley, 2005, p. 46). This is a notion currently held by the U.S. Department of Education evidenced by the number of grants available to districts and schools who implement large-scale reform.

The underlying intent of a comprehensive reform initiative is generally centered on a commitment to redefine the comprehensive high school into something that is more
academically and socially beneficial for students (Noguera, 2002, pp. 62-63). The task of reorganizing the entire educational structure seems to be gaining in popularity as numerous reform efforts target multiple levels of the educational system simultaneously. Of the many reforms that we see today, the small school movement and SWS movement claim to address issues of achievement and social development by redefining the comprehensive high school (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 2).

Small Schools Reform

Small school reformers argue that schools with smaller enrollments offer students an opportunity to personalize the rigor of their academic experience and enjoy the benefits of a congenial campus atmosphere. It is also argued that smaller schools are able to provide children a greater degree of social capital by providing more opportunities to build relationships among caring adults such as administrators and teachers (Kafka, 2008, p. 1828; McQuillian, 2008, p. 1795). This movement also aims to construct social networks that facilitate greater interaction among the constituents who ultimately craft a social understanding of the purposes of education. Elmore (2007) suggested that efforts of substantive reform should focus more on, “small schools, more schools organized into smaller subunits, more structures that create stronger group norms inside larger schools, more ways of connecting adventurous teachers with their less ambitious and reflective colleagues” (p. 33). The small schools and schools within schools movement embodies a set of promising ideals which seek to redefine the academic institution of the comprehensive high school within the context of the federal government’s newly
articulated role in education as defined by NCLB.

The challenges associated with our comprehensive high schools and their layers of reform seem to be exasperated by overwhelming campus enrollments. Lee and Ready (2007) asserted that “regardless of how “small” or “large” is defined, virtually no contemporary writer suggests that high schools should be larger than most currently are” (p. 12). A quantitative study completed by Lee and Smith (1997) analyzed nearly 800 schools in the U.S. and determined that student achievement was significantly greater in medium sized schools that enrolled between 600-900 students (p. 213). The benefits of smaller high schools is also argued by Darling-Hammond (2006) who referenced several sources that suggested, “smaller schools appear to produce high achievement, lower dropout rates, lower rates of violence and vandalism, more positive feelings about self and school, and more participation in school activities” (p. 643). In addition, Ready and colleagues (2004) also suggested that “the sociological evidence about high schools suggests that social relations are generally more positive in smaller schools” (p. 1993). Despite the positive evidences associated with this set of promising reforms, the ability to implement these programs has been compromised when faced with the limitations of educational bureaucracies.

**Schools-Within-Schools**

Given large enrollments, budget constraints, and general lack of resources, schools and districts have struggled with reducing enrollment and class size by tearing down large schools and building smaller ones (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 12). The desire to
replicate the benefits of small schools has given impetus to the SWS movement. Large comprehensive high schools have adopted the SWS reform initiative to create in part the design of small schools with large resources. Such communities are typically organized into themed units of one sort or another, career clusters being the most popular, serve from 200 to 400 students, draw their teachers from a portion of the faculty that once staffed the comprehensive schools of which they were a part, and possess various degrees of autonomy. The basic premise behind the SWS reform is that schools will improve social relationships, the social climate, and student increases in academic performance including retention and graduation (Appendix A).

The SWS movement has been categorized in a number of different ways spanning several decades. Oxley (2005) suggested that the SWS concept has been around for nearly forty years although the idea has been called by different names and has experienced an evolutionary process. Oxley provided what she considers the evolutionary chronology of the SWS movement as, “houses and schools-within-schools appeared in the 1960s; magnet programs, career academies, and minischools in the 1970s; charters, in the late 1980s and 1990s; and small learning communities, today” (p. 44). It should also be noted that “such labels as “houses,” “academies,” “blocks,” “small learning communities,” and subschools,” all refer to smaller organizational groups within larger schools” and all refer to the SWS reform initiative (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 15). What we see today is a recommitment to the smaller is better notion by private organizations and the federal government.

The federal government has embraced the notion that smaller high schools are
better able to meet the needs of children with more responsiveness and has allocated funding for schools wanting to adopt a SWS model. Funding, in the form of grants is awarded from the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Local education agencies (LEAs) may apply for grants that were legislated as an amendment (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2001) to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) to enable LEAs to receive funds on behalf of large high schools to enable those schools to undertake research-based strategies to develop, implement, and expand smaller learning environments. Strategies for recasting large high schools as a set of small learning communities include: (1) establishing “houses,” career academies, magnet programs, and other “schools within a school”; (2) instituting block scheduling; (3) developing personal adult advocates, teacher-advisory systems, and other mentoring strategies; (4) reducing teacher loads; or (5) using other innovations to create a more personal experience for students. (The program is authorized under Title V, Part D, Subpart 4 of the ESEA of 1965 as amended by NCLB 2001, 20 U.S.C 7249)

The primary organizational objective behind SWS is that large schools are divided up and organized into “smaller units within larger traditional high schools that are organized around a career-oriented theme” which are more capable of offering students a fluid curriculum (Noguera, 2002, p. 61). Children are said to succeed at a greater rate as teachers become more familiar with their students, having fewer of them (Oxley, 2005, p. 46; Supovitz & Christman, 2005, p. 649). Initial research findings suggest that the SWS reform does accomplish in part what the small high school research has suggested. Ready (2004) elaborated upon these benefits when he discussed the results of five high schools that adopted the SWS model, “long-term staff…reported that improved student behavior, attendance, and commitment to school, safer and more orderly school climates, and increased teacher satisfaction and feelings of self-efficacy
accompanied the school’s transition to the SWS organization” (p. 149).

There does appear to be a strong movement aimed at transforming all schools into smaller learning communities. For instance, “since 1990, more than half of the high schools in New York City have been transformed from large, comprehensive high schools into small schools or campuses comprised of small learning communities” (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 644). New York as well as Austin, Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Sacramento have made significant strides in implementing SWS in their educational institutions. Organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have financed several hundreds of programs investing nearly two billion dollars across the country making the SWS reform effort more feasible for financially strapped districts (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2008, p. 3).

Dividing comprehensive high schools into academic subunits is considerably easier said than done. Merely dividing high schools into smaller learning communities does not necessarily translate into improved relationships and academic success (Shear et al., 2008). SWS and SLC efforts that have seen significant success have required dramatic changes in the organizational structure of the school. Generally speaking, “small learning communities that have the most success with their students are the ones that serve as the building blocks of school organization and the center of school activities, not as add-ons to the existing school organization” (Oxley, 2005, p. 46). Districts and schools have difficulty implementing SWS effectively when existing organizational structures remain unchanged. Administrators often recognize this and may have wished “to wipe the instructional slate clean and start again” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 76) but are
confined to the bureaucracy of their profession.

Despite the reform effort and popularity of SWS, schools have experienced varying degrees of success with implementation for a number of different reasons, some of which are readily identifiable. For instance, there does not appear to be a model of SWS that can be promoted to fit the diverse needs of different schools. Lee and Ready (2007) noted that “even more than other educational reforms, the SWS movement is neither standardized nor unified. Multiple SWS models exist, with no central organization governing implementation or monitoring the status and prevalence of the reform” (p. 14). Schools that have received grant money to adopt the SWS reform have tailored the initiative in varying ways to be applicable to their specific needs. As a result there are significant degrees of successful implementation across the country as many institutions are left to their own devices to determine the best course of action.

The national popularity of this reform has grown, however some literature is beginning to suggest that the SWS design has not produced significant changes in student achievement particularly regarding minority populations (Shear et al., 2008, p. 2023). Research literature has also suggested that it may be too soon to determine the extent of effectiveness provided by the SWS movement. It would seem that this reform is proceeding without significant literary justification in order to do something to improve the numerous struggling secondary institutions in the face of legislated decrees. McQuillian (2008) suggested that “this reform needs to be analyzed over time to assess strengths and weaknesses and thereby inform practice” (p. 1795). Wyse, Keesler, and Schneider (2008) concluded based on their research findings that “until we have stronger
evidence with respect to raising achievement, especially for low-performing students in urban areas, decisions to create smaller schools should be made with caution” (p. 1895). Caution about whether or not to adopt a reform is sometimes thrown to the wind when schools and districts are faced with hurricane like issues such as academic achievement and dropout rates.

Educational stakeholders recognize that NCLB is driving accountability and classroom transparency has caused some districts and schools to embark upon the SWS reform effort unprepared. Noguera (2002) noted:

In the rush to do something about the failure of high schools, several school districts have attempted to require schools to develop small learning communities. Without understanding the reasoning behind this initiative, some administrators have required that changes proceed anyway, largely out of a sense of impatience. (p. 61)

This sense of impatience to do something has led many educational stakeholders down the “conspiracy of ignorance” path that ultimately arrives at the destination of frustration and apathy all in the name of meeting the requirements of NCLB and the standards based reform movement.

Despite ill-informed and under prepared attempts to initiate an SWS/SLC reform, it should be noted that the reason such attempts are made is partially due to the recognition that smaller learning communities, in part, complement the goals of NCLB. McQuillan (2008) offered a comparison when he said “in many ways, small schools make sense, offering a kinder, gentler complement to NCLB—same goal, enhancing student achievement, different means, improving relations among students, teachers, and administrators” (p. 1794). Indeed, NCLB does not address such issues as social relations
and the SWS movement is founded upon this principle making the two constructs seemingly agreeable.

It should be considered that there have been several studies that have analyzed various components of the SWS movement. McQuillan (2008) noted that there have been mixed reviews regarding the SWS movement and that creating smaller learning communities has not “consistently led to improved academic achievement or instructional transformation” (p. 1773). He does argue, however, that the SWS movement does provide a critical piece in altering a school’s culture by creating “a context for building trust and understanding…while enhancing students’ social capital by creating relationships with influential persons—teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors” (p. 1795). He further suggested that this SWS movement needs to be analyzed over time in order to better understand the commonalities shared by successful schools that have utilized this reform and have realized a substantive change in the form of academic achievement, rigorous curriculum, and improved relationships.

Hammack (2008) suggested that students felt a greater connection to the school which resulted in better student attendance, improved behavior, and stronger feelings of belonging but this should be tempered when considering what constitutes success. He elaborated when he said, “these behaviors produce higher graduation rates and lower crime statistic…yet there is scant evidence that the smaller schools that produce better behavior and attendance also produce higher test scores and higher levels of achievement” (p. 2070). Hammack suggested that the relationship between connectedness and academic rigor is at best tenuous as many educators begin to define
success in terms of social behaviors without pushing academic expectations. Understanding what teachers consider success in the process of transforming the culture of a high school institution is of paramount importance. As educational stakeholders implement an SWS reform with the intent of realizing the dual objectives of connectedness and academic rigor the question of how teachers define success is pivotal.

Currently there is some common agreement that this particular reform is proceeding without significant research to justify implementation. There has been some argument that the research on smaller schools is justification for the schools within schools movement. While some similarities exist in principle between the small schools movement and the SWS movement, which seeks to emulate small schools, the notion that the research documenting the benefits of small schools may be juxtaposed to the SWS reform may be a bridge too far. Nevertheless it would seem that schools and districts across the nation are proceeding with this initiative despite the lack of empirical research. Obtaining an understanding of the “lived experience” of faculty members in regard to SWSs may be useful in determining how this reform should proceed as it is articulated by the voices of teachers themselves.

**Summary**

The historical path of public education in the United States offers profound insights as to the complexity of what our educational institutions represent today. From the earliest attempts of organization in the eighteenth century to the education and accountability of the masses today, education has constantly been of the utmost priority
in this country. Decisions of how, what, where, and why our nation’s youth should be educated has been the source of lively debate and ultimately has culminated into various reform efforts at all levels.

Reform efforts that have grown in popularity at the beginning of this, the 21st century, seem to be centered on the notion of school size. Small school reform efforts have focused on reducing campus enrollments thereby creating a personal learning experience for students. Small school reform has enjoyed a relatively successful track record at improving student achievement and graduation rates. The SWS movement has been created to replicate what has been enjoyed by small schools. It is arguably too soon to fully understand the implications of how these reforms will play out in the future. However, regardless of how this piece of public schooling is viewed by others at a later date, it is imperative that we understand how our educators today are experiencing this large scale reform effort. It is, after all, the teachers who have the final say of what actually occurs in their classroom.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to report on how the Timberton North High School faculty experienced the extensive process of redefining the mission and vision of what a secondary educational experience should be like for students through the implementation of the SLC comprehensive school reform. As with nearly every educational reform the beginning and end of the experience rests with the teachers and what they do in the classroom (Fullan, 2007, p. 129; Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 7). Therefore, the study’s design emphasized the voices of teachers as obtained through the use of a qualitative research methodology.

Qualitative Phenomenological Case Study

Rationale

Through the use of this qualitative methodology, I was able to sift and tease out relevant data that exposed cogent themes as they occurred in their natural settings. Creswell (1998) listed characteristics of qualitative design that are applicable to this study:

1. Commit to extensive time in the field.
2. Engage in the complex, time consuming process of data analysis—the ambitious task of sorting through large amounts of data and reducing them to a few themes or categories.
3. Write long passages, because the evidence must substantiate claims and the writer needs to show multiple perspectives.
4. Participate in a form of social and human science research that does not have firm guidelines or specific procedures and is evolving and changing constantly. (pp. 16-17)
The preceding list gives some insight to the rigor that was associated with this phenomenological qualitative case study.

Ultimately, the qualitative work elicited the element of a narrative of lived experience regarding socially constructed perceptions that entail the implementation efforts of SLCs. McKie (2002) suggested that “qualitative methodology affords a means of providing distinct data and qualitative evaluation of theorizing problems and approaches” (p. 262). Other benefits she suggested are particularly suited for Timberton North when she said that a qualitative methodology “enables stakeholders and project recipients to highlight and reflect upon what worked and how this came about, and affords an opportunity to chart and reconcile multiple stories of a project” (p. 262). The study of Timberton North used a rigorous phenomenological methodology based on how faculty members experienced the SLC reform phenomena. Teachers are at the very heart of whether this or for that matter any reform is successful. Fullan (2007) poignantly suggested in this regard that “educational change depends on what teachers do and think—it’s as simple and complex as that” (p. 129). And central to understanding how teachers think about a reform such as SLC and how in response they act, are their lived experiences, not only within the immediate reform environment but in the larger setting and time in which they work. Fullan (2007) also suggested that “neglect of the phenomenology of change—that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended—is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms” (p. 8). Hall and Hord (2001) offered additional insight by suggesting the following:
Despite all the focus on structures and strategies and other features of schools that could be changed, little attention has been given to the most powerful factor: people. What change is really about is people and their implementation of new practices in their classrooms, schools, school districts, and states. (p. 27)

Therefore, it is essential to understand how this reform has been experienced by people in order to understand the nature of implementation and change through the perspectives of teachers. Developing a deep understanding of lived experience is best accomplished through the phenomenological research process. As van Manen (1990) suggested, “Phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (p. 10).

**Phenomenology**

Conducting a phenomenological study requires that a researcher understands the philosophical underpinnings of the methodology, particularly how people experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 54; van Manen, 1990, pp. 7-8). Therefore, I have included a brief contextual overview of phenomenology to assist the reader in understanding some of the philosophical nuances associated with this method. This overview consists of a concise treatise regarding the history of phenomenology, the nature of transcendental phenomenology, and an overview of lived experience.

The history of phenomenology dates back to the philosophical perspectives of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who is considered to be the father of phenomenology (Sokolowski, 2007, p. 227). Husserl was a German mathematician who wrote extensively on phenomenological philosophy (Creswell, 1998, p. 52; Moustakas, 1994, pp. 25-26; Sokolowski, 2007, p. 211). His philosophical concepts were broadly based and have been
used in numerous academic disciplines. Husserl was influenced by Descartes where “knowledge based on intuition and essence precedes empirical knowledge (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Husserl was also influenced by Franz Brentano and Carl Stumpf but according to Sokolowski (2007, p. 211), Husserl far exceeded their contributions. Husserl was overshadowed by Heidegger in the philosophical arena although Heidegger was influenced by Husserl’s writings (Sokolowski, 2007, p. 213). Heidegger pursued philosophy during his academic training whereas Husserl began his philosophical writings as a mathematician. Husserl also approached his philosophical writing through a scientific lens whereas Heidegger’s philosophy had religious undertones. Taken together, these two philosophers have largely shaped the way in which phenomenology is used today (Sokolowski, 2007, p. 215). For the purposes of this study Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is the incorporated methodology.

Husserl’s phenomenology emphasized the transcendental nature of what can “be discovered through subjective acts and their objective correlates” in human science (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). The use of phenomenology as a research design has long been accepted in the social and human sciences, particularly health care, psychology, sociology, and education (Creswell, 1998, p. 52; Moustakas, 1994, p. 43; van Manen, 1990, p. 4). Simply stated, a phenomenological study is intended to describe the meaning of the “lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or…phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51).

Phenomenological research in general is considered the human scientific study of phenomena. The phenomenon as experienced by individuals or groups becomes the
substance of understanding regarding the quality of the lived experience. van Manen (1990) further elaborated upon phenomenology as a science when he said phenomenology “claims to be scientific in a broad sense, since it is a systematic, explicit, self-critical, and an intersubjective study of its subject matter, our lived experience” (p. 11). Therefore, there is a generally agreed upon format for proceeding with phenomenological studies. However, this format has experienced significant variation in the interpretation of phenomenology as a methodology in human science research.

Using phenomenology to understand the lived experience of faculty members at Timberton North required me to search for the central underlying meaning of the experience. This is often referred to as the essential, invariant structure or essence of the experience. For example, the feeling frustrated is the same for everyone, although there are varying degrees of frustration that a person may experience. I also emphasized the intentionality of consciousness in the research process “where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning” of the individuals involved with the SLC phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 52).

The use of phenomenology also required that I suspend judgment, a concept often referred to as epoche that would preclude the experience of those involved from being purely expressed through the use of interviews. This is primarily accomplished through the use of the bracketing interview found in Appendix B and is elaborated upon in the data analysis section. The bracketing interview proved vital in obtaining the lived experience of the coresearchers as uninfluenced by my personal preconceptions.
Lived Experience

Phenomenology and lived experience may be viewed as inseparable in purpose. Through structural and textural expressions, phenomenology seeks to capture and convey what a lived experience may be like. It is in this vein that the study of phenomenon is viewed as human science research. van Manen (1990) suggested that phenomenology “is the descriptive study of lived experience (phenomena) in the attempt to enrich lived experience by mining its meaning” (p. 38).

Lived experience is the culmination of life’s totality and can only be understood as it is consciously compartmentalized and reflected upon. Some theorists would suggest that lived experience is of a temporal structure wherein “it can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence” (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). For example, as a new administrative intern I was acutely aware of my surroundings and I paid careful attention to word and voice when addressing the faculty for the first time. Over the course of time I became comfortable within the confines of familiarity and was only aware of experiential implications through the process of cognitive reflection.

The process of reflection becomes the zenith of lived experience since an appreciation of life is commensurate with a conscious construction of past phenomena. Lived experiences “gather hermeneutic significance as we (reflectively) gather them by giving memory to them. Through meditations, conversations, day dreams, inspirations and other interpretive acts we assign meaning to the phenomena of lived life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 37). The essence of lived experience then is to “capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is…holistic and analytical, evocative
and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (van Manen, 1990, p. 39). van Manen identified the following:

Lived experience is the starting and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflection of appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

Since lived experience is the “starting and end point” of phenomenology, it then becomes imperative to submit to the appropriate methodology which arrives at a textural description of lived experience. To understand and textually convey the lived experiences of the faculty at Timberton North High, I carefully constructed what I believe to be a compelling case study as understood with a social constructivist lens.

**Theoretical Framework**

The ideological lens used in this study is best articulated through the tenets of social constructivism. Social constructivism and social constructionism are theoretical terms that are occasionally used interchangeably (Gergen & Gergen, 2008, p. 173, Restivo & Croissant, 2008, p. 225). The ambiguity between terms is often promulgated due to the over emphasis of similarity when searching for common ground. As Restivo and Croissant pointed out, “One could perhaps argue that someone who advocates constructionism is a constructivist” (p. 225). It is not the intent of this study to provide a comprehensive discourse regarding the differences between these two theoretical frameworks. However, a brief overview should suffice in explicating my position for selecting social constructivism as a theoretical lens.
Social constructionist inquiry is loosely defined as “explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live” (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). This definition holds within in it some of the underlying tenets of social constructivism as well. Gergen and Gergen (2008) pointed out that “recent scholarship has made it increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction between constructivism and constructionism” (p. 173). The emphasis of demarcation between the two has more to do with the philosophical postulates of the process, whereby an individual accounts “for the world in which they live.”

For social constructionists, the epistemological process is manifested through an “exogenic perspective” where “knowledge copies (or should ideally copy) the contours of the world” (Gergen, 1985, p. 269). In other words, attaining knowledge has more to do with people functioning within the contexts of historical, cultural, and societal, constructs. Sparks and Smith (2008) elaborated on this point:

For scholars who favor constructionism, narratives are not viewed as embedded in the individual or their interiority…rather they are lodged within relationships and appropriated by individuals for use in various contexts. They are ongoing social practices that people perform and do in relation to others as opposed to something they have. (p. 299)

This position clearly begins to delineate the differences between constructionists and constructivists since the latter sees knowledge occurring within the interiority, endogenic, or cognitive state of an individual.

Social constructivists and “various phenomenologists have tended to adopt an endogenic perspective” where “knowledge depends on processes endemic to the organism” (Gergen, 1985, p. 269). This endogenic perspective has more to do with
cognitive structures of obtaining knowledge than a social constructionist would like to accept. McAdams (2006) suggested that social constructivists consider “the life story to be an internalized and evolving cognitive structure or script that provides an individual’s life with some degree of meaning and purpose while often mirroring the dominant and/or the subversive cultural narratives within which the individual’s life is completely situated” (p. 11). In other words, knowledge is internalized cognitively through social interaction and may be conveyed through narrative. The social constructivist paradigm has been essential in determining the lived experience of the faculty at Timberton North as the faculty cognitively reflects upon their experience with SLCs.

Gage and Berliner (1998) elaborated on social constructivism, “This perspective calls for a broadening of ideas about where knowledge can be found and how it comes to be learned by groups and individuals. Cognition, in this view, is shared—distributed across people and tied to the settings in which learning takes place” (p. 255). DiPardo and Potter (2003) stated, “Whereas it is widely recognized that students need both caring sensitivity and intellectual challenge, school reformers, theorists, and researchers, alike have been slower to recognize that the same could be said of teachers’ work and on-the-job learning” (p. 318).

This paradigm shift and the issues surrounding teacher’s lived experience is the lens that I incorporated into the study of SLCs at Timberton North High. This is accomplished by suggesting that the experience of implementing SLCs by faculty members is constructed socially, historically, and culturally, by several individuals and groups and that thinking is generally “moderated by the groups we choose to belong to”

**Social Context**

The faculty members of Timberton North have formed social networks where ideas, thoughts, feelings, and frustrations are exchanged as they pursue their attempt of establishing smaller learning communities. The SLC reform initiative has required something of everyone and the experience has been shared at many different levels within the larger social setting. The understanding and perspective about what occurred in regard to Timberton North’s reform process was decided in part through social construction. Gage and Berliner (1998) argued this point of social construction and suggested that learning is a social activity where “knowledge is not merely processed or constructed in some disembodied way; it develops in social settings and retains some of the characteristics of the social environment it came from” (p. 252). Gage and Berliner further elaborated that “what people learn is deeply embedded in the social relationships and physical environments in which the learning takes place. In other words, learning is situated. Communities have an important role in shaping our thinking” (pp. 252-253). Indeed, the learning process experienced by faculty members regarding the implementation of the SLC initiative at the Timberton North campus has been deeply embedded in and shaped by social activity. Despite the social inertia of traditional practices and socially constructed status quo, the Timberton North faculty have promulgated, reinforced, and in some ways redefined the culture of their institution.
Cultural Context

Timberton North High, along with seemingly all of our educational institutions, is defined by a unique set of principles encompassing the past, present, and in many ways a perception of the future and ultimately gives various campuses a cultural distinctiveness. A school’s culture represents an identity that embodies a sense of community. As the faculty, staff, students, and community of Timberton North have implemented the SLC initiative, there have inevitably been multiple intersecting ideologies concerning the campus culture. Vygotsky’s cultural theory suggests that “people learn to use cultural tools for thinking with the help of others more experienced with such tools” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 237). The complex lens of cultural contexts offered unique insights based in part on what Rogoff suggested regarding the magnitude of cognitive development and cultural contexts:

Cognitive development consists of individuals changing their ways of understanding, perceiving, noticing, thinking, remembering, classifying, reflecting, problem setting and solving, planning, and so on—in shared endeavors with other people building on cultural practices and traditions of communities. Cognitive development is an aspect of the transformation of people’s participation in sociocultural activities. (p. 237)

The objectives and research questions of this study were accentuated using a cultural lens to identify the processes that “surround all of us and often involve subtle, tacit, taken-for-granted events and ways of doing things that require open eyes, ears, and minds to notice and understand” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 368).

Historical Context

Social and cultural constructs exist based on the historical construct that has
preceded Timberton North’s quest of a comprehensive reform. Timberton has a rich and sentimental historic tradition that is commonly held by practitioners, students, and the community. This ambiance permeates beyond school and district boundaries and infiltrates diverse groups of people over a large geographic area. Recognizing this historical construct was essential in gathering the lived experiences of faculty members. The Timberton North faculty is traversing another road of reform and situating this reform into their lived experience required a historical lens of understanding of what has been experienced in the past. This lens of social constructivism is further manifest in a historical context as I pursued insights from informants that answered questions surrounding historical traditions and how the implementation of SLCs were perceived as impacting such traditions.

The implementation of SLCs involved several different stakeholders, all of whom played an integral role and have individually and socially constructed perceptions. The lived experience is understood in social, cultural, and historical contexts as it informs expectations, experiences, direction, and purpose of SLCs. Research and interview questions were carefully articulated to account for relevant issues associated with the social, cultural, and historical contexts of Timberton North.

**Research Questions**

This study consisted of the following overarching research questions.

1. How has the SLC reform been experienced by particular faculty members at Timberton North High School?

2. How did the faculty members perceptions of SLCs compare to the
intent of the SLC reform?

3. How has the SLC reform influenced socially constructed understandings of educational purposes at Timberton North High School?

Interview questions were articulated through the process of theoretical sampling (see Appendices C and D) in order to arrive at the complex answers to the research questions. Charmaz (2006) illustrated the importance of theoretical sampling when she stated, “theoretical sampling involves starting with data, constructing tentative ideas about the data, and then examining these ideas through further empirical inquiry” (p. 102). Therefore, the data was analyzed throughout the research process for theoretical elaboration and contextualization with the intent of pursuing further empirical inquiry.

Data Collection

The site for this project was selected because of the affiliation this high school had with another high school in which Dr. Barry Franklin and I researched the history of a comprehensive school reform. This school district is a garden of rich information highlighting comprehensive school reform given the urban issues that face the district. The economically distressed community of Timberton bequeathed greater numbers of Hispanic and low income families into the school’s stewardship. In fact 80% of Timberton City’s growth in 2000 was in the Hispanic population (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 8). As a result of these social shifts and the schools difficulty serving the needs of English language learners and students with severely limited resources, the Timberton City School District’s two high schools saw alarming declines in student academic achievement and graduation rates and staggering increases in dropout rates, student drug
use, and school related violence (Franklin & Nye, 2010, p. 176). Timberton Central’s principal was hired to initiate a change of some sort for the district and his procurement of grant money led the district’s two high schools to implement the SLC reform.

Initially it was decided that I would pursue this study at Timberton Central, the same site as our previous study. After spending time getting to know the faculty and circumstances at Timberton Central, it seemed natural to pursue and deepen our previous study. Unfortunately, the principal with whom we had been working retired and his replacement seemed less enthused about the continuation of the study. She was very cordial and several arrangements had been made to continue this study. The progress of the study halted and future dates were arranged for continuation but those dates also passed without her full commitment. The new principal assured us that we could pursue the study but felt that it was in her school’s best interest that we should pursue the research at some later date. It did not take us long to realize that perhaps we should broaden our perspectives and strengthen our understanding of this District’s attempt to implement SLCs by looking at what occurred at Timberton North. After a brief conversation with Timberton North’s principal it was further realized that there would be rich amounts of information which included a significantly different set of experiences regarding SLCs. After allowing the Timberton North administrators and faculty to peruse the Letter of Information (Appendix E) I decided to pursue this study by collecting data on the Timberton North campus with their blessing.

Data collection for this phenomenological case study was obtained primarily through the use of individual interviews. Additional information was obtained through
various documents that were reviewed to provide a greater sense of context through rich
description. Interviews were sought from those individuals who were directly involved
with the implementation of the SLC reform initiative at Timberton North. Initial contacts
with potential coresearchers were informal as I desired to build a relationship with each
of the coresearchers before pursuing delicate information. Potential informants were
allowed to review the Letter of Information and inform me as to their willingness to
participate. As relationships began to form with various faculty members I was able to
discuss, in some depth, the lived experience of each of the coresearchers in formal
interviews. Interviews were conducted with the understanding that the process was a
“behavioral rather than a linguistic event” (Mishler, 1986, p. 10). Two formal interviews
from each participant were conducted that lasted from 45-90 minutes. Each interview was
then followed up through electronic correspondence. Each subsequent interview was
verified for accuracy as participants were allowed the opportunity to review transcripts.
Emerging themes were also discussed with each participant. Participants verified the
accuracy of the emerging themes and were encouraged to offer any additional insights
relating to their lived experience.

The criterion for selection of participants was limited to those who had been at the
high school for at least 5 years. Participants were also identified according to their
involvement with various aspects of the program. Numerous individuals were contacted
for participation in this study. Some individuals were screened out of the study due to
their lack of involvement with SLCs or personal indifference. This process of selecting
informants was crucial to the success of this study due to the reflective nature involved
with a phenomenological study. Participants included those individuals who demonstrated a better understanding of the issues surrounding the implementation of the SLC reform based on their position or general experience. Given the nature of the in-depth interviews that this phenomenological research study required, interviews were conducted with only five subjects or as I refer to them, coresearchers. Interviews were also conducted with other members of the Timberton City School District to learn about contextual issues. Individuals who were included consisted of two building level administrators, a SLC district specialist, and three faculty members in the sister high school that were recommended to me given their overall involvement with SLCs.

Through the use of multiple in-depth interviews, detailed data was obtained which described how individuals experienced the SLC comprehensive school reform. Gerson and Horowitz (2002) suggested that “to unravel the complexities of large-scale social change, it is necessary to examine the intricacies of individual lives” (p. 201) This would, in our case, be the social change experienced by those individuals involved with the implementation of SLCs at Timberton North. Gerson and Harowitz elaborated further when they suggested, “Individual interviews provide the opportunity to examine how large-scale social transformations are experienced, interpreted, and ultimately shaped by the responses of strategic social actors” (p. 201). The use of this phenomenological human science research method afforded the faculty at Timberton North the opportunity to better understand what their lived experience had entailed during their involvement with comprehensive high school reform.
Data Analysis

The data from the interviews was analyzed throughout the study in order to continually bracket my preconceptions of the SLC reform. I chose to use the systematic Moustakas (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method for this study which has been identified as the process used most frequently in phenomenological research studies that are intent on describing lived experience (Creswell, 1998, p. 147). The process involved the following:

1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomenon (Appendix B).
2. From the verbatim transcript of your experience complete the following steps:
   a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience
   b. Record all relevant statements (obtained through transcripts).
   c. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience (horizontilization).
   d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
   e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
   f. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of your experience.
   g. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of your experience.
3. From the verbatim transcript of the experience of each of the other coresearchers, complete the above steps, a through g.
4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all coresearchers’ experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole. (p. 122)

Creswell (1998) noted that the “phenomenological data analysis steps are generally similar for all psychological phenomenologist’s who discuss the methods” (p. 54). I chose to use the previously before mentioned process due to the specificity of the analysis. However, this process follows the more general pattern of analysis which
incorporates the elements of horizontalization, clustering, textural descriptions, and structural descriptions.

Audio tapes were utilized in capturing interview conversations with subsequent transcriptions being reviewed for accuracy. Once the accuracy of transcriptions was verified they were reviewed several times to obtain a sense of understanding. The process of formal analysis followed the process of horizontalization which involved identifying the statements in the transcripts that were relevant to the research question. The relevant statements were then reorganized into clusters of meaning. The convergence of the clusters formed the substance of the general description of the themes as the phenomenon was conceptualized structurally and recorded texturally.

For illustrative purposes the following represents the process that I employed when using the Moustakas (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. Each individual interview, beginning with my own, was recorded and transcribed. Individual transcripts were then analyzed to determine significance to the related research questions (2a, horizontalization). The statements that were related to the research question were then categorized into broad meaning units with the titles, administrative issues (AI), curriculum issues (CI), organizational issues (OI), district issues (DI), and other stakeholder issues (SI). Unrelated statements, generally the “small talk” of the interview process, were set aside as background or contextual issues (BI), (2b, horizontalization). Relevant statements were then listed according to meaning units which were more specific than the previously mentioned categories (2c, horizontalization, clustering). The meaning clusters were sorted according to expressions of lived
experience and were categorized as organizational frustration (OF), faculty frustration (FF), leadership frustration (LF), and hopeful perseverance (HP). These units were then categorized into emerging themes and subthemes regarding the lived experience of SLCs and breathed the desired specificity of the lived experience into the process (2d, textural description). The resulting categories of themes are presented in Chapter IV. The structural and textural descriptions are further documented and elaborated upon in Chapters IV and V (2e, 2f, 2g, 4, textural and structural description). Other components have been identified in Appendix B which includes my own bracketing interview that details my understanding of the SLC initiative before this study was conducted. As was mentioned before, this was necessary in order to bracket my own preconceptions and how I might affect the research process.

The data from the interviews and transcripts was analyzed throughout the study in order to formulate additional questions which were designed to garner greater information about specific issues (Appendix D). The second set of questions focused the study to a greater degree as it pertained to the social constructivist interpretation of the social, historical and cultural contexts of SLCs. The Moustakas (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used after each formal interview and poured greater substance into the meaning units and eventually into the previously mentioned clusters and themes (step 3). This laborious process was essential in order to obtain an understanding of the lived experience of the participants.

Verification and Validity

Creswell (1998) identified eight verification procedures a researcher may take to
secure reliability and validity (pp. 201-203). He also suggested that a researcher may incorporate as few as two of these strategies in any given study. For the purpose of this study I chose to use his recommendation of using “triangulation among different data sources…writing with detailed and thick description, and taking the entire written narrative back to participants in member checking” to help facilitate a sense of verification and validity (p. 203).

Through the phenomenological qualitative research tradition I verified the accuracy of the themes that emerged through the process of triangulation with the understanding of intersubjectivity. “Only by comparing a series of interviews can the significance of any one of them be fully understood. And, in the long run, each interview will add to the final story” (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002, p. 211). Verification and validity of data was also obtained by allowing coresearchers to view the themes that emerged. I also allowed coresearchers to peruse their individual transcripts and offer clarification to issues or topics that were previously mentioned in order to achieve a sense of construct validity. In all of this, I carefully articulated through the reflexivity process described below my own philosophical, theoretical, epistemological and ideological frameworks that ultimately shaped the research.

The use of phenomenology as a research method required that I be acutely aware and ultimately cognizant of my preconceptions. Preconceptions were identified through the analysis of my own bracketing interview. The process of engaging in a bracketing interview is very similar to what the coresearchers experienced. My interview involved being asked similar questions regarding SLCs as were the coresearchers. I found that
having done some SLC research in a different study that my preconceptions were heavy laden. Understanding my preconceptions helped me articulate and conduct interviews that were generally free from internalized biases. General issues that were discovered in my interview was the preconceptions that the Timberton City School District was failing, teachers had a hard time adopting the SLC reform, lack of coherence among stakeholders regarding SLCs, and there was a similar experience between Timberton North and Central. I did feel after the analysis of my interview that if I was not careful I could compromise the lived experience of the coresearchers from being obtained through their own expressions and not through my interpretations. That is why I pursued member checking so thoroughly by allowing coresearchers to revisit transcripts and the themes that emerged. This process of identifying bias and preconception has also been called “reflexivity.”

Crabtree and Miller (1999) illustrated the importance of reflexivity when they suggested that “a field research design begins and ends with the reflexivity process.” They define this process as referring to “self-reflection, self-criticism, and is based on the premise that the engaged field researcher is an active part of the setting, relationships, and interpretations,” which they suggested entails, “Knowing yourself and how you affect and are changed by the research enterprise are central to field research and, ideally, occur throughout the research process” (p. 15). Through the admission of my preconceptions and being reflexive of my biases, I was able to move forward successfully in obtaining lived experience as viewed through the lens of social constructivism.

Through the lens of social constructivism and the systematic methodology of a
phenomenological qualitative case study, I am able to offer a holistic perception of the lived experiences of some faculty members who were intimately associated with the SLC reform at Timberton North. To further understand the lived experience of those associated with Timberton North, I have situated the results of this study into the larger body of knowledge that contains instances of other comprehensive school reform efforts. Literature that also documents the nature of reform, implementation practice, and diffusion of educational innovations, is also incorporated in Chapter V.

Participants

This section is intended to acquaint you with the individuals who were so pivotal to this study’s success. I have valued working with each person and out of respect refer to them as my coresearchers rather than research subjects. As coresearchers, we have been able to sift and tease out the relevant data which speaks directly to their lived experience regarding smaller learning communities. I have engaged my coresearchers with a social constructivist lens where intellect and affect are not viewed “as an isolated state within a state” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 336). Rather, cognition and emotions are viewed in this study as “the systemic context of human thought and action, and within the social cultural environments from which we draw the raw material of our inner lives” (DiPardo & Potter, 2003, p. 326). Having approached the study in this manner has allowed not only the consideration of what has occurred in these teachers’ intellectual daily lives, regarding smaller learning communities, but how they responded emotionally within the context of their professional and personal lives.
This study included five participants who were involved with Timberton North’s efforts to establish Smaller Learning Communities at their school. A summary of each participant is found in Table 1. Those who participated did so according to their own volition. The principal of the school along with other faculty members and counselors were consulted to provide names of those individuals who had been significantly involved with the SLC reform. Every faculty member on Timberton North was approached and many were informally interviewed but are not included in this study as many decided to opt out, largely due to personal reasons. The coresearchers that participated were very generous and accommodating, freely giving of their time and energies to the benefit of this study. Each coresearcher is introduced below using pseudonyms and pertinent descriptions of their individual circumstances.

Table 1

Summary of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years teaching at Timberton North</th>
<th>Subjects taught</th>
<th>SLC involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>AP History</td>
<td>Leader of Staff Congress, initial SLC site visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Hired as a SLC Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>24 total 10 at Timberton</td>
<td>Art &amp; German</td>
<td>SLC Instructional Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Family &amp; Consumer Science</td>
<td>SLC site visits, early adopter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Freshman Learning Center, SLC Instructional Coach, Site Visits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jim

Jim did not pursue a career as an educator until his mid-30s. He attended college immediately upon his graduation from high school and earned a degree in teaching. This he did more out of familial tradition rather than personal desire. His brother was an educator and his father was a superintendent in a local school district. Jim decided as a young adult that he could make more money in the private sector. As a young entrepreneur, Jim successfully harmonized his passion for horses and established a ranch where horses were trained professionally. He ran his horse training business for over 10 years, consistently putting in 10 to 12 hours each day. However, as Jim stated, horse training is “one of the professions where you are over the hill when you are 32 or 33, then you are done.” Jim began to realize that perhaps he should consider applying his collegiate training and pursue a career in education.

At the time, Jim was still not sure that he was ready to teach. Jim’s father knew the assistant superintendent in a neighboring district who informed him that there was a position teaching AP history in the Timberton City School District. This assistant superintendent suggested that Jim should apply. At his father’s insistence, Jim met with the Timberton North’s principal who happened to be Jim’s former football coach. Jim’s former football coach told him that he would do a good job and he would like to hire him. Jim responded by saying “I don’t really want the job. I’m just here to please my father.” The principal insisted that he give it a try. Jim was encouraged by the confidence that his former football coach had in him to be a successful teacher. Jim was also motivated by the insurance benefit package that teachers received. Jim relented and gave teaching a try,
but he and his wife had a good laugh when they received the first paycheck and realized that their ranch had one barn that made more money. Having the ranch made teaching affordable for Jim and his family.

Jim had spent the last 19 years of his life teaching AP history at Timberton North High School. He had “fallen in love” with teaching and considered it a “vacation” to the arduous work of running his ranch. Jim had been intricately and actively involved with numerous aspects of Timberton North. He had served on numerous committees and had served as a department head for most of his teaching career. Jim actively engaged his students and has been successful in procuring grant money to take his students to Washington D.C. every year to explore the richness of American history. Jim is considered by his administration and the district to be one of the finest assets to the education of the area’s children. Jim has received multiple administrative assignments because of his integrity and efficiency.

When the district received a grant to explore the SLC initiative, the principal of the sister high school began making suggestions to the district on how the SLCs could be implemented between the two high schools. The administration and faculty at Timberton North did not care for the ideas and approached Jim as their leader of the Staff Congress to “counteract” what the other principal was suggesting. Jim readily admitted that he “was pretty negative about the whole academy and small learning community” idea as it was presented by the principal of the other high school. As the leader of the Staff Congress, Jim was sent to schools across the country that had implemented smaller learning communities and had his mind changed. He suggested that “there was a lot of
potential.” He noted from his visits that he saw the power in SLCs to “develop good relationships” among students and teachers. As a result of his visits, Jim came back to the Timberton City School District and really “began to throw his weight around.” Jim suggested to the district that the concept was good but not as it was being presented by the other principal. Through the process of grant procurement and policy implementation the two high schools were assigned to create SLCs that were independent of one another largely because of Jim’s influence.

Emma

Emma had the least amount of tenure among our coresearcher having only taught for 5 years. Emma also entered the teaching profession later in her life. She was moved to become a teacher more out of necessity and security, although, she humbly admitted that she “kind of naturally wanted to be a teacher.” Emma faced some tough choices when she and her husband divorced. She was left as a single mother to three children, two daughters and one son. She was a successful realtor until the terrorist attacks of September 11. As money became scarce she and her children decided to move back in with her mom to save money and explore their options. She substitute taught in the local school districts to bring in extra income. She also served in her church as a teacher and began to realize that perhaps she should pursue a career in education. While she admits that she’s not too religious, she feels that she was guided in her teaching desires in a spiritual kind of way.

Emma’s choice to become a teacher required that she enroll in general education classes at a nearby university. She had attended very little college before she was married
and essentially started her collegiate experience from the beginning. She attended college for “four solid years, with no break” to earn her teaching degree in math and physics. Her student teaching assignment was at Timberton North. While there, for only a few weeks, she was approached by the administration with a job offer. She excitedly accepted the position so she could more capably supply the necessities of life to her children. She humbly suggests that the job offer was given to her more out of the school’s necessity to hire a math teacher rather than her abilities in the classroom. As a student-teacher from the university’s perspective and a full time employee from the district’s perspective, created additional challenges for her and she quickly recommended that people in teacher education programs should not pursue her same path.

Emma considered teaching at Timberton North an opportunity and in some instances a calling. She said that “Timberton North is a tough school. Timberton School District is a tough school district. There are easier places to be, and I have just felt time and time again, there is a reason I’m here. I don’t know what that reason is, because it is hard, but there is a reason I’m here, and this is where I’m supposed to be.” Emma was so invested in Timberton North that she purchased a home just two blocks away. She wanted her children to attend Timberton given the rich diversity and opportunity that she felt the school provided as opposed to the larger high school, in a rather affluent area, that her children were attending. Emma felt that Timberton North would provide her children a more realistic scenario of life experiences.

Emma also appreciated the concept of SLCs. In her job interview, she was asked questions regarding her knowledge of SLCs. She admitted that she did not know much
about SLCs but would like to know more. After Emma was hired she began to see the vision of what SLCs was all about and was enthusiastically “100% behind the idea.” As a parent of children who attend Timberton North, Emma has a dual perspective of SLCs and her contribution to this study has been invaluable.

Max

Max had been teaching for 24 years. He has spent all 24 years teaching in the Timberton City School District. He spent 8 years at one middle school, 6 years at another middle school, before spending the last 10 years at Timberton North. He always felt that he was a better fit for working in the high school and simply waited for the right opportunity to come along. Max did not decide to become a teacher until his junior year in college. He changed his major four times before coming to the conclusion that he would like working with students. He chose art education primarily as a way to continue what he enjoyed doing. He also saw art as a dynamic discipline that he could vary according to his interests. He also teaches German. Max spends half of his contractual time working as an instructional coach in conjunction with the smaller learning community initiative.

Having spent 24 years in the district, Max was very knowledgeable about the community and the prevalent issues associated with the district. He had spent the last 3 years serving as an instructional coach and had received intensive training regarding SLCs. Max was very reflective of his pedagogical practices and addressed his students according to their strengths and weaknesses. As an instructional coach, he worked with other teachers to find ways of implementing SLC constructs to improve the level of
instruction and learning on the campus. He worked closely with his administrators when seeking solutions to their comprehensive reform challenges. Max had been involved with SLCs since the inception and is continually trying to find ways to improve the concept on their campus.

**Kim**

Kim was one of our veteran coresearchers having spent 25 years teaching at Timberton North. She brought with her a wealth of knowledge and experience concerning “her” school. Her reason for staying at Timberton was simple, “I feel like the school needs me here, to do what I do.” While in college, Kim was not sure that teaching was what she wanted to do. She considered it a back up to whatever other thing she thought she would be doing. However, she fell in love with teaching as a student teacher and has spent a career teaching primarily home economics. She has also taught English and has served as the cheer leader advisor.

Kim felt that she really connected with each of her students. She prided herself on being able to reach out to the student who did not quite fit in. She described herself as being a good student in high school and “kind of a smart mouth.” As a self-described “brat” who was occasionally in trouble but able to maintain decent grades, she felt that she related to her students and could help them through the idiosyncrasies of high school. Kim liked to create a “fun” learning environment where children were encouraged to explore and discover personally meaningful application of the curriculum material. Kim opened her classroom to students who come and go freely before and after school and during lunch. When asked why she continued to teach as a career, she replied that “it’s
fun. I don’t know what it is, but it is fun.” Kim also enjoyed the support of her husband and family in making a career in doing what she loved.

When the SLCs were first introduced, Kim felt like the school needed to move in that direction. She admitted that there were many teachers who took longer to accept the concept but overtime she felt that everyone eventually became convinced of the merits of the SLC concept. Kim had also visited various schools in the country that had implemented SLCs and brought back with her a solid understanding of the purposes and reality of SLCs. Kim noticed that many of her senior colleagues became disconnected with the school and this new initiative and began retiring early. She considered it a great loss to lose veteran teachers. She labored through the reform pains with the hope of accomplishing what other schools had realized as a result of implementing SLCs. However, through the arduous work of planning and implementation, Kim became convinced that the concept that she bought into is not what the school was actually doing or would be able to do. She considered the concept of SLCs to be simple “window dressing” where the school is functioning like an SLC in name only.

Anne

As I conducted interviews, both formal and informal, the name that nearly everyone seemed to refer to me was Anne’s. Anne had been teaching for the last 12 years, all of which have been spent at Timberton North. She even went so far as to say that “she started here and I’ll probably die here.” Anne was hired into a unique teaching position where she taught in what they called “The Freshman Learning Center.” The Freshman Learning Center would be defined today as a smaller learning community.
Teachers shared the same students in the English, science, and geography departments.
As an English teacher, Anne was able to assign students a paper which threaded through
the disciplines of science and geography for which the students would receive a grade in
those classes for that assignment as well based on the applicable content of that
assignment.

When the district decided to make junior high schools and remove the ninth grade
from the high school, Anne chose to stay at Timberton North to teach 10-grade students.
Prior to the ninth grade move, the district adopted the SLC comprehensive reform
concept. The district was awarded funding through grants to adopt SLCs at the two high
schools. Anne knew the power of SLCs as she experienced it in the Freshman Learning
Center and immediately volunteered her services to implement SLCs at her school. Like
Max, Anne spends half of each working day serving as an instructional coach to the
faculty members in her community. Anne has also received intensive training in SLCs by
attending conferences, workshops, and visiting out of state schools.

As a teacher, Anne is committed to her students and felt that Timberton is the
place that she needs to be in order to make a difference. She understands that Timberton
has a rich diversity that is cumbered by urban issues. She has been involved with
numerous school and community projects to improve the school and the surrounding
area. Anne is torn with what she knows a learning community to be and what the school
has experienced. She suggested that she felt “stuck in the middle road right now.” She
felt that the Freshman Learning Center was a functional SLC and what the school is
doing now with SLCs is simply not working. She suggested that as an instructional coach
she has asked teachers to jump aboard the SLC boat without providing the paddles or resources necessary to make the concept move in a meaningful direction.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to report the lived experiences of teachers at Timberton North High School as it related to the smaller learning community reform. Additional research questions asked how their experiences were different than their perceived notion of what SLCs were trying to accomplish and whether or not SLCs initiated a socially constructed understanding of educational purposes. This chapter has been largely written using direct quotes from the coresearchers. The use of direct quotes has been done, in part, to provide the reader with a sense of “thick description” regarding lived experience. As Geertz (1973) suggested, “It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers” (p. 16).

This phenomenological study was designed to put “us into touch” with those individuals who have experienced implementing SLCs. Through the process of purposeful sampling five coresearchers were selected among many others because of their willingness to participate and their inclination to be reflective of their experience and have been introduced previously. The reader should once again bear in mind that while the participants of this study were still immersed in the reform process they were simply asked to give an account of their lived experience. Since, “Phenomenological
reflection is not introspection but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10).

It should be noted once again that this particular study utilized a social constructivist theoretical framework. Therefore, the following has been collected, analyzed, interpreted, and reported in the social constructivist lens. The lived experience of the coresearchers is viewed in this vein as “an internalized and evolving cognitive structure or script that provides an individual’s life with some degree of meaning and purpose while often mirroring the dominant and/or subversive cultural narratives” (McAdams, 2006, p. 11). The “degree of meaning and purpose” has been situated in historical and social narratives as well as the cultural narrative of lived experience as expressed by the coresearchers.

This study has been particularly beneficial for gaining a degree of analytic generalization rather than statistical generalization as it may pertain to “some broader theory” (Yin, 2009, p. 43). The broader theory of lived experience may prove useful to other comprehensive campuses considering the adoption of a SLC model and what effects the process may have on faculty members. Although, it should be reiterated that while a phenomenological case study may be tied to some broader theory through analytic generalization, the use of phenomenology “does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world” rather, phenomenology “offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Therefore, the substantive benefit is
primarily for those involved with the study. Secondarily, this study may also prove useful to other administrators or educators interested in the lived experience of a handful of faculty members who were involved with SLCs. The lived experience of comprehensive school reform as articulated by my coresearchers has been deduced through the data analysis process of phenomenology.

**General Themes**

Coresearcher interviews were framed around the overarching research question “how has the SLC reform been experienced by faculty members?” As was elaborated upon in Chapter III, the themes were identified through the previously mentioned Moustakas (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method for conducting phenomenological data analysis. The following themes were arrived at by following the procedures outlined in the second step of the before mentioned method. Through this process of horizontalization comments and verbal expressions were analyzed and clustered within individual interviews and among interviews. Other comments that were not prevalent across interviews were similarly clustered for further review. Further review of these clusters is also addressed as potential meaning units. Through bracketing my own preconceptions about the SLC reform I was able to approach each coresearcher cognizant of how I may influence the outcome of statements. In each primary interview and subsequent follow up interview I was able to elicit the coresearchers voices more clearly through the process of triangulation. From the convergence of these clusters of voice and expression the coresearchers and I identified the following themes.
1. The SLC reform has been a frustration for the following reasons:
   1.1 Frustration with administration both local and district
      1.1.1 Frustration over lack of leadership
      1.1.2 Frustration with not having a shared vision
      1.1.3 Frustration with administrative turnover
   1.2 Frustration with colleagues
      1.2.1 Frustration with Teacher Buy-In
   1.3 Frustration with general organization
      1.3.1 Frustration with student schedules
      1.3.2 Frustration with teacher schedules
      1.3.3 Frustration with curricular aims

2. SLC reform is threaded with hope.

**Theme 1.1: Frustration with Administration**

Each of the five coresearchers expressed frustration with the leadership in their building and within the district. They were respectful of their current and previous administrators and were appreciative of their efforts. However, each coresearcher felt that their building level administrators and district officials came up short when providing some essential direction, continuity, and resources for the SLC initiative to be fully realized. The expression of this theme was unsolicited directly by the researcher but was the direct result of questions regarding the social, historical, and cultural aspects of the faculty’s lived experiences. The central areas of frustration were lack of leadership,
frustration with administration for not building a shared vision, and administrative turnover.

**Lack of leadership.** This theme is directly related to an issue that many have perceived as being a problem for decades within the school and district and speaks directly to the historical and cultural contexts of the Timberton district. Jim stated it succinctly with a wrinkled brow a momentary sigh that to him “the biggest problem that the Timberton City School District has is the lack of leadership.” For Jim this frustration has been realized as a result of his involvement with the district. As the president of the Teachers Association, Jim approached the district’s superintendent and emphatically stated, on more than one occasion, that “We need to be led, we need to be given more direction.” Several times during the interviews, Jim would pause, take a big breath, and choose his words carefully that described his superiors and the district.

Once the decision was made to move forward and adopt the SLC initiative, the administration approached faculty members and said “we are going to do this—get it planned and get it done.” As Kim stated, the faculty’s collective sigh and response was “get what planned, and get what done?” The faculty did not understand what their leaders were suggesting they implement. For many faculty members this was simply another “fix” to the schools’ problems. The district’s response was to send numerous teachers across the country to different schools that had successfully implemented SLCs so their faculty could get an understanding of what they hoped to accomplish.

The teachers who went on these visits experienced the power of SLCs and brought back with them ideas for implementation at Timberton North. The teachers
began the laborious and time consuming process of articulating implementation plans as requested by their administration. However, to their chagrin, the administration looked at their ideas, and as Kim stated the administration’s response was, “Okay, ‘that is really good, but we don’t have that money, and we don’t have this, and we don’t have that. So could we make it work without?’ And we are like, well no!” This problem was further exasperated by the additional efforts of the faculty to “figure this out.” The teachers were requested by the administration numerous times to create a plan that was modeled after the SLC schools they visited. After having created numerous plans that addressed student and teacher schedules the administration would say “that’s not what we want.” This caused many faculty members to feel deflated and devalued in their professional efforts. Max felt that the administrators themselves did not actually know what they wanted. The teachers then pushed the administration by suggesting that if “they would lead, then they would follow.” Many faculty members did not want to spend any more of their unreimbursed time meddling with something that they had no control over and which was in violation of an absolute priority that ensured monetary compensation for time spent collaborating on implementation.

The coresearchers felt that their efforts were clearly not in harmony with the direction the administration would like to go and they were wasting their precious time. The problem faculty members felt was that the administration was not leading and failed to provide direction, but insisted that the faculty provide the direction. Kim summarized it best when she said that “we actually spent quite a bit of time, and we would submit these plans, and then they would say, “Oh, well, that’s not what we are doing.” And we
would say, “Why are you having us waste our time? Just tell us what you want us to do.” This angst caused Kim “five years of extreme frustration” and she suggested that it would have been better if the administration would have said “this is what we are going to do, this is how it needs to be done and then we could have just done it. It was really, really frustrating.” Kim realized something that an anonymous teacher stated, as quoted by Payne (2010), that “In schools, no good idea ever goes anywhere; it gets buried in endless discussion and power plays that make you sorry you ever got involved in the first place” (p. 39).

Lack of shared vision. Another common frustration that the faculty had was the perspective that their administrators did not do enough to build a shared vision. This perception and frustration was expressed in terms of unrealized expectations. From the coresearcher data, a shared vision is best defined when “a group of people build a sense of commitment together. They develop images of “the future we want to create together,” along with the values that will be important in getting there and the goals they hope to achieve along the way” (Senge et al., 2000, p. 72). Part of the dilemma of building a shared vision was the general lack of vision from the district.

Since the grant to pursue SLCs was largely realized through the efforts of Timberton Central’s principal, the district was perceived as not being in a position of support. Jim noted that the two high schools would have really benefited from having “…someone down at the district that catches the vision of smaller learning communities.” Jim felt that their efforts were encumbered at the building level because they were not receiving direction from the district. The Timberton City School District had been
operating on a site-based management model for 20 years and expected each school to plan, implement, and adopt, the SLC model that best fit each school’s needs. As a result, it was left to each building level administration and faculty to decide how they would implement SLCs.

The building level administrators are generally respected by the faculty at Timberton North. However, each of our coresearchers felt that more could have been done in building a shared vision. Jim suggested that his current administrator “has never really caught the vision of this, because he is in a position that he could have brought us all together, to talk about these things, but has never done that.” Jim admits that the administration certainly “talks the talk” to satisfy grant requirements but he suggested that there has not been any substantive change to how education occurs at Timberton North. Jim feels “frustrated that administrators won’t just admit and stop pretending that we are a smaller learning community.”

Emma shared a similar frustration about the administration and suggested that the reason the administration has never really approached the faculty to push the SLC agenda is because of the resistance of key faculty members “who have been around for a long time. This sentiment of frustration was also expressed by Anne who said that “visions started to change and there was a lot of head butting between teachers that had been here and said ‘no, that’s not how it works, you have got to run it this way.’” I think that is where we started to lose some of the true SLCs. Emma and Anne felt that it is the administrators’ job to build a vision and hold teachers accountable to that vision. Emma would have liked her principal to approach the faculty and say “Either you are going to
see the vision and help us with our vision to get there…or you are going to go find another district to work in.” Emma’s expectation of her principal caused her to lament that “he is unwilling to get into it with teachers. I’m just frustrated. Frustrated that I’m making a little tiny buck, busting my tail, and the guys who are making the big bucks, aren’t really doing their job.” For Emma the shared vision is lost on her administration because the reality of SLCs at Timberton North is simply “window dressing.”

Max’s experience with building a shared vision was magnified due to his position as an SLC instructional coach. Max felt that it was difficult to express to the faculty in his community what the direction of their SLC was since he was not sure of it himself, not having received a clear vision from the administration. He felt compromised in his position since he was viewed as a “pseudo-administrator” which is something he admits was not what he signed up to do. Max stated, “I’ve never really realized the impact that principals have on the school. I thought they were pretty much a nonentity, just a manager in the office…the tone that the principal sets for a school is more…impacting.” Max felt that the “tone” of the school was not emphasized enough by the administration to build a shared vision.

Kim went further and suggested that the administration would at times have a vision but that vision was lost in the dissemination and details. She suggested that there were those in “leadership positions that could see a really big picture, but they couldn’t do the details. And you have to have the details…they weren’t that type of people.” Anne felt that the SLC vision was articulated at times but the realization always fell short when the details of implementation were lost. For Anne, building a shared vision required more
time for teachers to acknowledge, plan, and implement the new concepts being presented. She was frustrated that the administration would attempt to “show us the light, but unless you can back that up with time for us to plan and create that light, it is not going to happen.” She illustrated by suggesting that when teachers “get back to our rooms, we have all these things to do.” Given the time constraints, Anne commented that “when I am overcome with papers and papers and papers, and lesson plans, there are just days where it is easier to fall back on what you have already done, because you know it will work.” Anne felt that the administration could have alleviated some of the frustration by providing a vision of hope and attainment, with the necessary resources to obtain that success.

**Administrative turnover.** There have been primarily three principals who have been associated with Timberton North’s quest for smaller learning communities. The first administrator had the vision of the Freshman Learning Center years before the school or district pursued SLCs. Without consulting any literature or research studies, he essentially drew up the plan in his mind, articulated it on paper, and sold it to the faculty. It was very successful and laid the foundation of expectations when the school began to implement SLCs across the campus years later. His successor was the principal when the initial SLC grant was awarded and the school began implementation. Kim said that during this time it was “nothing but frustration. The leadership was poor at the time.” He led the school for three years before being replaced by the current administrator. With the exception of Emma, who has only taught for 5 years, the other faculty involved with this study have seen numerous administrative changes prior to the before mentioned.
The turnover in administration caused several faculty members to view each principal as an idealist who brings in a vision that never comes to fruition before they move on and another administrator comes into the school with yet another vision. Jim suggested that the way in which their school initially decided to implement SLCs could not be done. Jim referenced research and personal experience that inferred the impracticality of the district’s vision of SLCs. Jim felt that the district brought in a new principal who may have had a variation of the SLC vision and gave them the charge of seeing it through at the building level. Jim stated that “It is frustrating to me because we switch principals every 4 to 5 years, and about the time they figure out that we can’t really do this, another one comes in saying that we can.” Anne expressed similar frustration when she suggested that as “administrators changed, visions started to change, and there was a lot of head butting.” Kim also noted her experience of seeing new administrators come into the building as they “were getting a principal about every 3 years and that was frustrating because they would come in with a new agenda. The teachers were the consistent ones.”

The idea of teachers being the “consistent ones” was a concept that was shared among the coresearchers. Each of them felt that teachers were capable of being included when articulating a vision of SLCs but were seldom consulted when a new administrator was hired. The administrative turnover and the SLC effort caused Max to have an awakening that perhaps administrators have a greater influence on the school than he once thought. He suggested that he “never realized the impact that principals have on the school.” Until the SLC reform was introduced. “I thought they were pretty much a non-
entity, just a manager in the office.” In relation to the SLC initiative he stated that, “I’ve seen how the different leadership style here of that progress is being made…the tone of the principal is more impacting, I guess.”

Jim would like to see the SLC concept retooled in a way that would work for their school but he feels this is compromised with administrative turnover not only at his school but throughout the district. He felt that if they were to “put some smart people in a room and get them to come up with some real solutions and then stick to it instead of throwing everything out every couple of years” then the Timberton campus could move forward in meaningful ways. The perception of our coresearchers that SLCs has not moved forward on their campus, in ways that were hoped for, has caused considerable consternation. Through flowing tears Emma expressed that the whole SLC experience has caused her to feel “angry and violated.” Since the administration keeps changing it is hard for her to “put herself out there” again. However, there are other reasons associated with these lived experiences and the SLC initiative that has caused our coresearchers to express frustration.

**Summary.** To their credit, each coresearcher voluntarily took upon themselves more responsibilities, without monetary compensation, in an effort to further SLCs on their campus despite their frustrations. Jim readily admitted that the reason he is the president of the Teachers Association is because he wanted to have the proper channels of communication to address the administration at his school and the district regarding SLCs. Max and Anne have taken upon themselves to be “pseudo administrators” to assist in the issues of administrative vision, turnover, and leadership. This has caused Anne
certain professional angst as she admitted to being “burned out” with responsibilities that she does not necessarily feel are hers. Kim, our longest tenured coresearcher, and Emma, our shortest tenured coresearcher, have also felt the pressure to do something more to bolster the effect SLCs are intended to make on the historical, social, and cultural, climate of the school. Each of the coresearchers have expressed, in one way or another, that the issues surrounding the administrative leadership has created undue burdens upon them in light of trying to adopt SLCs. This theme, as it describes lived experience, is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter within the context of unfulfilled expectations.

**Theme 1.2: Frustration with Colleagues**

Each of our coresearchers felt that the SLC concept had merit and was capable of transforming the way Timbertion North educated the community’s youth. This “buy-in” by the coresearchers was realized nearly at the inception of the SLC initiative. As a result, the coresearchers felt that their role was to help instigate this change process among their colleagues. While Max and Anne took upon themselves the “pseudo-administrative” role as instructional coaches, Jim, Emma, and Kim, have all played crucial roles in attempting to educate their colleagues about SLCs. Their roles could be defined as “opinion leaders” and “change agents” in the diffusion of the SLC innovation (Rogers, 2003, p. 26).

**Teacher buy-in.** Like many districts, Timberton Central School District is a grant seeking district that has pursued many different programs as funding has been sought after and awarded. As a result, there is some general consensus among faculty members
that programs will come and go regularly. When the SLC initiative was introduced, many faculty members at Timberton North felt like this was another program that would pass by, once the funding had been expended, and a different grant was awarded. This shared perception of the faculty was particularly troublesome to Emma.

Emma admittedly had not been teaching as long as some of her colleagues who chose to “dig in their heels” when the SLC reform had been introduced. She felt that perhaps her seasoned colleagues had grown cynical due to the cyclical nature of programs and program reform within the district. Emma attended faculty meetings with excitement as this comprehensive school reform was being introduced, but she grew wearisome of the faculty around her who would say “this is going to go away, just like all the other programs.” She also noted that several faculty members “made it known that they were not participating.” Emma lamented by saying, “I just sometimes want to tell people, can you suspend your disbelief and let’s just go and let’s just act like it is going to work?”

Unfortunately for Emma, she felt relatively alone in her ambitions and said “I feel sort of frustrated in that I’m one of the ones who was gung ho and excited at first, and decided to do everything I could.” Emma felt that her colleagues were just sitting back and waiting for that “I told you so” moment. She noticed that “there are some people at the school that will just say—"see told you.” It is like fingernails on a chalk board to me, because I think we never did it, how can you even say it didn’t work?” In Emma’s perception the reason it did not work is because the faculty never “got on board” with the reform effort. She even heard faculty members express to students and parents that the
SLC reform was a bad thing. Emma feels that the SLC reform is a dead project at their school and the thing that “killed us” was the teachers that talked “negatively about it to parents and to students and to each other in the faculty room. It cut us off at the legs before we could even really get going.” When asked about the future of SLCs at Timberton Emma could only say “Wow, it is gone. And I hate that. Oh, I hate it so bad.”

Jim’s experience was rather unique as he was called upon initially as the leader of the Staff Congress to fight against the SLC reform as it was being presented by the principal of the sister high school. Jim was called upon to travel to other schools in other states to see what this reform was all about. While visiting successful SLC campuses across the country, Jim’s mind was changed quickly and he readily adopted the idea. He subsequently sold the concept to his administrator but continued to rebuff the Timberton Central administrator on how it could be implemented.

Jim’s frustration with the other faculty members is primarily associated with his perception of their negativity toward change. He lamented the fact that if all of the faculty were able to see what was going on in successful SLC campuses then the work of implementation and teacher buy-in would be greatly enhanced. Jim felt that the faculty did not have a correct understanding or working definition of what an SLC campus actually looks like. He suggested that the faculty as a whole has negative attitudes…they don’t know what an SLC, or a smaller learning community, or an academy, or whatever you want to call it, they don’t know what that is. They don’t understand the whole implications, and I think if they went to a school where they had some of these, they would be shocked. Like, whoa, we are not even close to this.

The idea of not understanding the SLC potential is a common notion that the
co-researchers each expressed about the majority of their colleagues. Each of them attempted to model the concept of SLCs with varying results and mixed responses. Jim attempted to combat their ignorance by setting an example of collaboration with his peers.

Jim taught AP history and began to build a community within his SLC through collaboration with another teacher who taught AP English. Jim and Sue began the arduous work of arranging student schedules in order to share the same students. So that students in each class could receive assignments that were threaded between the two disciplines. However, a few students petitioned Jim and Sue separately to be allowed into their classes. Jim and Sue quickly realized that doing so compromised their SLC collaborative efforts because they did not share the same students any longer. Jim noted that “the minute that happened, we couldn’t share assignments. We both were stupid and gave in to a few kids…just a couple of kids killed it.” Jim felt that the SLC concept could not “be diluted at all if you want to have cross-curricular. You want to be able to share assignments and we dropped it after the first trimester. We stopped even trying to work together after the first trimester.” As a result of giving it his best efforts, Jim was frustrated that other teachers who observed the failure said “See, this too shall pass.” As Jim reflected upon the futility of his efforts, he is led to believe that SLCs is “just a joke…it is just another phase” largely because of the cold and negative reception of the faculty.

Max has exercised a great deal of patience with faculty members. Max has worked tirelessly as an SLC coach to help his colleagues see the potential of SLCs. His
interaction with the faculty members of his community has led him to suggest that he gets “frustrated at other teachers who don’t accept the strategy and the methods that we are trying to implement.” After he provided SLC professional development workshops for his community he felt the faculty would walk away from the meeting saying “yeah, yeah, yeah, and then nothing is ever implemented.” He wished that teachers would realize that the SLC reform cannot take hold on their campus until each individual accepts personal responsibility for changing themselves. Rather, he has heard all too often that common phrase of “just wait and see, wait and see this too shall pass.” While Max expressed his frustration with the negative and common attitude of his fellow faculty members, he realized that it has taken him a long time to get where he could speak intelligently about the concept and understands that the faculty may be frustrated with him.

Max has been particularly reflective of his experience and acknowledged that it has taken him some time to effectively respond to SLCs. He noted of himself that he has “been really frustrated with the slowness of change in myself, as well as the school.” This sense of reflection has given Max valuable insights when dealing with stubborn faculty members. On a number of occasions Max expressed his frustration with his colleagues and himself. In one particular interview he summarized his feelings rather succinctly:

I am frustrated with our growth, but I also have to look at myself. I have been an instructional coach. I have been going to national conventions for three years. I have been reading thousands of books and stuff, and honestly my practice is just starting to change after three years. So why am I expecting them (faculty) to do it after one workshop?

Max has asked poignant questions of himself regarding his SLC pedagogical practices. He desires that others would follow his lead and ask themselves what they could do to be
more open minded regarding the changes that SLCs requires. He has expressed to
whoever will listen that the “only way to invoke change is to accept change yourself.” He
readily admits though that change is difficult for many people. In some instances, those
who have not been able to change have left Timberton North, which has been extremely
disconcerting for Kim.

Kim had the most campus tenure having spent her entire 29-year career at
Timberton North. She has seen the greatest degree of program and school reform and has
weathered them successfully. She received the dubious title of “oldest” faculty member
after several of her seasoned colleagues opted for retirement, rather than being subjected
to the impending SLC reform. Kim mentioned that “a lot of them quit…it was frustrating
for a lot of people, it just got very painful.” Kim expressed that she felt somewhat
abandoned by faculty members since the implementation of SLCs. Kim saw this as the
antithesis of what SLCs should be all about.

She noticed that the new faculty members, which were hired to replace the older
faculty that quit, were left to their own devices. With the implementation of SLCs the
departments were disbanded under the premise that each new community would
collaborate and assist one another. It has been Kim’s experience that such collaboration
has not occurred at the level which is necessary for the SLCs to function properly. Kim
has expressed her frustration that most of the faculty does not know what SLCs are
intended to accomplish and what they look like in practice. She suggested that “calling it
SLCs isn’t the same as doing SLCs. So sometimes I wonder if people really know what it
looks like.” This concept of understanding what SLCs look like was shared by each of
our coresearchers but was elaborated upon to a greater degree by Anne.

As an instructional coach, Anne has tried to assist numerous faculty members in and out of her community. When asked how the SLC reform has affected her personally she simply replied “isolation.” Her isolation was the result of breaking up her department and being placed in a community which was “very, very resistant to change.” Faculty resistance meant more closed doors and less collaboration. Anne struggled to get teachers on board with the SLC concept. To her colleagues credit they collectively defined SLCs as having “common students, common teachers, and a common vision” for learning. Her colleagues noted that they “did not have any of that therefore, they were not an SLC.”

Anne had held several meetings with her community to figure out what it would take for everyone to buy-in to the SLC concept. She noted that “they will say, flat out in the middle of a meeting or training that I am doing, “but Anne, we are not an SLC. We are not a true SLC. How do you expect us to do these things?” Anne argued with her community that the definition of SLC could be realized if the faculty would give the concepts a try. During another one of Anne’s SLC meetings in which she detailed what they hoped to accomplish in their community, the faculty members began to challenge her regarding the resources necessary to move in that direction. She quoted one of her colleague members as saying “you want us to get in the boat, and take a trip across the ocean, but you haven’t given us a boat.” Anne has approached her administrators looking for help in alleviating some of the faculty’s frustrations but walked away feeling that the administration was tied in what they could offer. She felt that the administration wanted her to move forward without the necessary resources.
Anne’s experience has left her feeling that “if you don’t have teachers that believe in it, you shouldn’t be doing it.” Anne lamented that she has felt overwhelmed with how much effort she has given toward SLCs with minimal results. She said, “I am burned out. I am burned out…you take a beating as an instructional coach and I’m tired of that beating.” She also suggested that “Ironically, I think it is those who were all for it to begin with, are still all for it. And those who had their reservations, are still holding back…They are still not sure because I don’t think they have seen anything great and powerful happen yet.” This has been frustrating for Anne to see the “strong willed and strong minded” remain stubborn in their opposition to SLCs.

**Summary.** This theme was certainly the most powerful in how it affected each of the coresearchers. They each expressed how disconcerting it was that the majority of their colleagues refused to engage in the SLC concept. It was difficult for them to comprehend why their colleagues would refuse to open their minds up long enough to identify and embrace the benefits of doing SLCs. It was as though they expected to be burdened by the administration’s shortcomings, but they expressed that they were not prepared for how they would feel when faced with faculty resistance.

**Theme 1.3: Frustration with General Organization**

Each of the coresearchers felt that teacher buy-in was certainly frustrating yet each remained somewhat empathetic to their constituent’s complaints considering the reform pains that everyone was called upon to endure. The pains of reform were manifest in the school’s attempt to organize and implement SLCs. As a result of varying and
sometimes conflicting visions of what SLCs should look like at Timberton North, each of the coresearchers became frustrated with various organizational components as it related to their understanding of what SLCs should be given the “absolute priorities.” Frustration was primarily rooted in student scheduling, teacher scheduling, and curricular aims.

**Student scheduling.** The fundamental principle of smaller learning communities required that students are organized into different communities. These communities are nearly a sovereign entity that coexists with the other communities on the larger campus. Each community should have its own set of teachers in each of the academic disciplines. Additionally, the students in each community should not be taught by other teachers in different communities. Timberton has attempted to divide up the students according to the three communities but has fallen short of arranging student schedules that reflect their association to any particular community. This has required teachers to implement the SLC concept according to their own devices.

As was mentioned in the previous theme, Jim and the honors English teacher felt a need to implement SLCs between their classrooms, which Jim admitted was something more akin to cross-curricular integration, than meeting the needs of the SLC reform. However, they managed to share 80% of the same students and began to assign projects that would be completed for credit in both courses. Unfortunately, some students wanted to get into Jim’s honors history class that were not in the honors English class and other students wanted to get into the honors English class but did not want to take Jim’s class. Both teachers reluctantly allowed the students into their classes but as Jim recalled “the minute that happened we couldn’t share assignments,” which is one of the primary
concepts of SLCs. He went on to suggest that, “we both were stupid and gave in to a few kids…it can’t be diluted at all if you want to have cross-curricular. You want to be able to share assignments and we dropped it after the first trimester.” What Jim expected to see within his greater community was all of the teachers sharing the same students and sharing assignments.

Jim’s experience with collaboration and SLCs was something that reflected what had been occurring on the entire campus. Student scheduling was an issue that had not been resolved on the Timberton campus. Jim felt that realistically a campus may “achieve 80% if you are lucky.”

That 80% of the time students are in the smaller learning community. But what happens in that process is that kids get broken up so they are not with the same English teacher all year, they are not with the same math teacher all year, the same science teacher all year, or the same history teacher all year…we have diluted the small learning community way down in the 60th percentile.

Jim suggested that Timberton’s approach to SLCs is problematic, at best. He felt that the campus was trying to do more than what SLCs are capable of given the resources that are available. He felt that the administration’s approach of implementing SLCs “wall to wall” was fraught with conflicts. Jim has communicated his position that student scheduling will always be a problem since their comprehensive school offers so many elective courses. The elective courses serve the entire campus and in no way can the school offer individual electives per community. The problem of student scheduling was further complicated as each of the coresearchers felt that the majority of students would not be able to tell you the community to which they belonged.

Emma, who taught math, had been very vocal about the student scheduling
conundrum. She felt that if the campus was actually divided into thirds then she would be able to focus her energies on a smaller number of students. As it turned out, Emma started each school year with an average of 43 students per class. She suggested that because of the discrepancy of student scheduling that “we are absolutely nonfunctioning SLCs, so to me, the SLC is great on paper, and I’m actually 100% behind the idea. We don’t do that here.” She further suggested that “I love the idea of a smaller group of kids that I’m tracking. I love the idea that I have the same kids in common as my neighbor…we have just thrown that out—I’ve got 212 students all by myself.” She explained how frustrating it had been for her because she expected fewer students who she would work with as they progressed through high school. She imagined how powerful it would be to work with the same students as they progressed through high school. She felt so invested in the concept that she “volunteered about 100 hours and didn’t get paid” for being a teacher representative, someone who was involved with the implementation effort. She quickly realized that her time was better kept to herself as “it was really getting nowhere” and student schedules were not being addressed sufficiently to allow it to proceed in meaningful ways.

Max’s experience was very similar to Emma’s but he felt that perhaps the school did not need to pursue resolving the student scheduling conflict once the freshman class was removed from the high school and moved into the junior high. His own definition of SLCs suggested that “we really don’t have SLCs as far as student schedules with the same teachers.” He went so far as to suggest that the SLCs achieved maybe 30% of student scheduling that reflected the goals of SLCs. With the removal of the ninth grade
the school enrollment dropped below 1000 students. Max felt that perhaps all the effort with scheduling and SLCs would not be necessary anymore with Timberton being small already. He suggested that “to divide a thousand into 330 kids, you get too small. It sets the limits of possibilities. It limits interactions with other peers.” He even suggested that the whole SLC reform initiative may go away although he stopped short of recommending that the campus should drop SLCs. “If we were 1200 or 1500, there may be more reason to keep it…if it is not beneficial, then maybe the structure will go away.”

Kim shared similar sentiments about student scheduling, where “all of our kids are not common kids.” As a family and consumer science teacher, her coursework was considered an elective and she has struggled with getting the counseling department to schedule students congruently with the other teachers in her community. This struggle of student scheduling had passed the point of frustration for Kim and had reached irritation. Kim defined the SLC concept and Timberton’s relationship to those principles as follows:

The kids are supposed to be in common classes with common teachers, working on common curriculum. Their English class is supposed to be geared towards their career interest. Their math class is supposed to be geared towards—and it is not happening like that. That is not what is happening. The English class is doing the same thing the English class has been doing for 20 years…. I don’t know that we will ever truly have what has been defined as an SLC.

Kim felt that since students are not scheduled within their own community with common teachers that the concept has failed and that the school is an SLC “in name only.” This quote is one that Anne expressed almost verbatim.

Anne suggested that Timberton’s SLCs “is just in name and title only, and it is not functioning and it is not helping” the students. Anne’s experience with the Freshman Learning Center was rather unique where all of the ninth graders existed independently
on the Timberton campus. Every freshman had the same set of teachers for each of the academic disciplines and there were never any issues of “outside” teachers having a freshman student. This scheduling is something that Anne felt the school was trying to accomplish in each of the communities when the district adopted the SLC reform. Anne expressed that she is “Very sad. Very sad. I think had we been able to function as SLCs and make it work the way it is supposed to…what I experienced in the 9th grade. I think it would have benefited kids immensely, and teachers.” Anne felt that the lack of “sharing the common kids is a big stumbling block…I think that is our biggest frustration. Probably even bigger than the teacher time” issues.

**Teacher scheduling.** This subtheme is one that many teachers expressed as being frustrating under the design and intended purposes of the SLC initiative which were not being realized. Anne expressed her frustration with teacher time constraints as follows.

One of the issues with professional development that I have been trying to get our administrators to understand is that of time constraints…. You can go ahead and put us in any room you want, and tell us, give us the best treatment in the world for eight hours and show us the light, but unless you can back that up with time for us to plan and create that light, it is not going to happen. Because we get back to our rooms, we have 150 students, we have all these things to do, and you know what? When I am overcome with papers and papers and papers, and lesson plans, there are just days where it is easier to fall back on what you have already done, because you know it will work.

The issue of time constraints is a common lament among teachers, but it seemed that the coresearchers felt that such constraints were even more limiting in their scope when considering their school’s design of SLCs.

Kim felt that part of those time constraints involved the lack of teacher collaboration. She suggested that “They in-service us on all these things, and then there is
never any time to implement it, or integrate it into what we are already doing and it is very frustrating. We don’t ever, as a faculty get to sit down and talk enough…there is never enough time for that.” Collaboration time was an SLC principle that the faculty was told in the beginning would not be compromised. Teachers were told that there would be common preparation times with their colleagues for the express purpose of fulfilling the requirements being placed upon them by the SLCs.

As an instructional coach, Max noted that the “school system needs to be structured differently to give teachers more time to plan, to collaborate, to be effective…all teachers in the SLC would have common preps, and they don’t.” As a result there is a general consensus of frustration. Max noted that “there is hardly any cross-curricular going on because we don’t have common preps. We don’t have the time to plan that.” Emma noted that she actually did have some common preparation time with some of her colleagues but as she put it “we never talk. Our SLC meetings, they are just nonsense. I mean we don’t talk about cross-curricular stuff.” Since many teachers felt that there was not sufficient time for collaboration, and other teacher who felt that time was not well spent when they did have time, the coresearchers felt that the curriculum was compromised.

Curricular aims. The curriculum in each community, should in theory, be interconnected with the theme of the community and each academic discipline. Students would learn the core curriculum as it was threaded with the theme of their community and would be able to articulate a junior thesis that would evolve into a senior project prior to graduation. Max elaborated, “We have talked about senior projects, but they don’t
really come about and that to me is the frustrating part.” This is a significant piece of the SLCs curricular aims as it required students and teachers to produce a comprehensive piece of original work that illustrated the growth of the student. Max further suggested that senior projects “would give the smaller learning community, though it is a little diluted, a little more teeth.” Kim went somewhat further by saying “Until a graduating senior can pull a portfolio and show what they have done and how it is inter-related, I don’t think we are doing an SLC. I think that we look like we are, but we are not there yet.”

Much of the frustration with the curriculum also came about because of the lack of collaboration. As was mentioned before, teachers have been unable to effectively collaborate between disciplines and as a result the curriculum has not been integrated as first articulated. This frustration has left the Timberton faculty feeling that the SLC effort has fallen significantly short of what was intended. Anne suggested that perhaps “we jumped a little bit too fast…had we been able to slow down…I think it would be a little bit of a different story.” Fortunately, the story is not over as each of our coresearchers suggested that they still hold on to some hope that the SLC reform initiative may still come to fruition on their campus.

**Summary.** It has been difficult for the coresearchers to find meaning in SLCs as the campus has seemingly stalled in their efforts in working through some significant details. It has been deflating for them as they looked around, after giving so much of their efforts, to only see education “as usual” occurring in each class, including their own. The curriculum, student schedules, and teacher schedules, have not changed since adopting
SLCs and those three areas should be the primary target for change. The coresearchers felt that they had no better opportunity of building meaningful relationships with students and other teachers since nothing had changed. It seems counterintuitive, but the reform that was supposed to bring everyone together has done nothing more than separate and isolate. Our coresearchers have expressed feelings of abandonment and in some instances they have expressed feelings of betrayal.

**Theme 2: Hope**

The Timberton North Campus had been under construction as part of a remodeling bond that was passed by the Timberton community a few years ago. The architectural remodel was specifically designed to incorporate the concept of SLCs. The building was divided up into three wings, each having administrative offices in the front of those wings. The administrative offices included the counseling centers and were assigned specific duties within their own community. Administrative responsibilities were also divided among each assistant principal according to the community, with the principal of the building overseeing each community. The SLC design of the campus, among other things, has allowed the coresearchers to express that perhaps there is still hope for SLCs.

Emma expressed her feelings of hope, “we have an opportunity now, with our building to be done, to really put some things in place. I see this as an opportunity to really put smaller learning communities into place. Our physical facility is here. There is no more for the teachers to say, we can’t do it. You know, we have absolutely no more excuses.” Kim noticed that the building design may already be proving beneficial when
she stated “being in the building in the wings with our SLCs helped immensely because we were never able to do that…so having the building built this way is going to help.”

In addition to the building being completed other areas of hope include a general understanding of the length of time required for reform. As Jim suggested “sometimes it takes a lot of time, and I think once those relationships are developed, that is where we can help a lot of these lower end kids and probably give a little bit more concrete help to those upper kids too.” For Max, the primary objective of SLCs was to build relationships with students where he is better able to meet their diverse needs better for having known them longer. Max looked at the SLC reform as having benefits worthy of pursuit, even if those benefits are short lived.

Max commented that he was beginning to see some teachers work a little harder for the SLC cause, “I think we are trying hard, they are trying hard to make this thing work. They are trying hard to find ways that they can collaborate effectively or meaningfully with each other…that’s the kind of conversations that we are having now.” There seemed to be a lot of hope in Max’s voice when he spoke about the years to come. He suggested that perhaps teachers would be able to decide on and implement a senior project. Max also saw teachers realizing that they were “finally coming away from blaming students for their nonachievement, and moving a little more towards what did I do wrong that they didn’t develop?” For Max this was the crux in moving teachers forward toward SLCs for answers on how they might better prepare their students for success.

Anne holds onto the hope that the Timberton North campus will become self-
reflective of what has worked and what has not over the last several years, “I would hope we could see the road map and how we changed and revamped and made it work. Because I don’t think it is something that should be thrown out with the bath water, the baby, the whole nine yards.” Jim and Anne felt that if the right people were involved the solutions to their SLC problems could be identified. Anne felt that students needed to be hand scheduled into their communities. She had experience doing that in the Freshman Learning Center and felt the administration should say “we have got to hand schedule these kids, for at least these core classes, to get the common kids with that rotation.” Jim expressed that “there is surely some smart person who could figure out how to take a high school that is just regular and divide it up into smaller little mini-high schools, and still maintain the integrity of diverse programs.”

In summary, hope was a powerful principle that each of the coresearchers expressed. It seemed that while they have admitted SLCs are not occurring on their campus, the thought is that they may someday. Each of them expressed rather poignantly that this realization can only occur as the faculty moves forward with the arduous work of reform. Anne suggested “I still think it is possible, but I think it is going to take a lot more hard work on everyone’s part.” Kelly also remarked about the amount of work involved and exclaimed that he wished he knew “that it never got easier…The more we do this work, the more we realize that there is still a lot of work to be done. And so, that helps me because it says we are never really going to get there. It is more about trials and change.” The question that could be asked of the coresearchers and the Timberton faculty is, are they willing to move forward?
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The overarching research questions that guided this study were to determine what it is like to experience the SLC reform as a faculty member. The second question sought for an understanding of how the experience was different from the perceived intent of the faculty regarding the SLC reform. The third research question involved searching for ways in which faculty members developed a socially constructed understanding of educational purposes. In regards to this third research question, Fullan (2007) suggested that “Significant educational change consists of changes in beliefs, teaching style, and material, which can come about only through a process of personal development in a social context” (pp. 138-139). These three questions taken together provided the substance of detailing the lived experience of my coresearchers. The answer to these questions has been laid forth in the findings section. The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the complicated answers to the research questions as detailed in each theme. The concepts specific to this study are also connected to relevant literature.

The themes that were coconstructed based on my respondent’s “lived experience” involved frustration and hope. It was uncanny how each of the coresearchers used the word “frustration” or its derivative when describing what their experience had been regarding the implementation of SLCs. I also believe that it says something of my coresearchers that they hold on to some degree of hope in what they are trying to accomplish will someday come to fruition. It certainly was a work in progress, but as they have mentioned, their experience has largely been the culmination of unrealized
To understand the complexities of the answers to the research questions it is necessary to situate this narrative in terms of the “absolute priorities.” At the outset of the district’s pursuit of smaller learning communities it was well established, based on relevant literature and school visits, that there could be no compromise with various organizational components. The district readily identified “absolute priorities” that were intended to be the structure of their SLC efforts and could not be compromised in the least. These absolute priorities were the substance of what was communicated to the faculty members at both schools. Those faculty members that bought into the SLC concept did so according to their understanding of SLCs as outlined in the absolute priorities. The absolute priorities were:


2. Assigning Teachers to SLCs and Providing them with Appropriate Content and Knowledge Specific to Smaller Learning Community Implementation


Each of these priorities served as the nexus for change and the organizational approach to ensure that SLCs were a success. The frustration exhibited by the coresearchers may be traced to a violation of one or more of the “absolute priorities.” The violation of these priorities answers, in part, the second research question of what was actually experienced versus the intended experience. The third research question is also understood within the context of the “absolute priorities” as each of my coresearchers attained a socially constructed understanding of the educational purposes of SLCs, although largely
A perusal of the previous chapter offers insights into how the SLC reform was experienced by faculty members, which largely answers the first research question. However, a review of the themes as they are understood in context with the “absolute priorities” and how they are situated in the literature will assist in the understanding of what it must have been like to experience the SLC reform at Timberton North. The combination of the themes and “absolute priorities” offers valuable insights into how the research questions are answered. The themes are identified once again as follows:

1. The SLC reform has been a frustration for the following reasons:

   1.1 Frustration with Administration Both Local and District
      1.1.1 Frustration over lack of leadership
      1.1.2 Frustration with not building a shared vision
      1.1.3 Frustration with administrative turnover

   1.2 Frustration with Colleagues
      1.2.1 Frustration with Teacher Buy-In

   1.3 Frustration with General Organization
      1.3.1 Frustration with student schedules
      1.3.2 Frustration with teacher schedules
      1.3.3 Frustration with curricular aims

2. SLC reform is threaded with hope
**Theme 1.1: Frustration with Administration Both Local and District**

The nature of this theme provided valuable insight to the importance of leadership in this or any other reform effort. Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010) suggested “it is an accepted fact among educational reformers that principals are key levers for school based change” (p. 61). My coresearchers each found it very disconcerting that the leadership in their building and within the district had been less than adequate. There was common consensus, after reviewing the transcripts, that each of the absolute priorities was compromised in one way or another by the administration. This was particularly frustrating to the coresearchers since the administrators were primarily responsible for articulating the priorities.

It would appear that the administration sought a balance between top-down and bottom-up reform as the burden for implementation was left to the faculty. This creates something of an oxymoron since a mandate from the “top” is to be carried out from the “bottom” and may not be considered a bottom-up effort. While the intentions may have been to garner greater buy-in of faculty members the converse was actually realized. Hall and Hord (2001) suggested that “if administrators do not engage in ongoing active support, it is more than likely that the change effort will die” (p. 13). The coresearchers felt that the administration did not engage in “ongoing active support.” Hall and Hord further suggested that a “horizontal” approach should replace the vertical perspective (p. 10) for true change to be realized.

Emma was particularly concerned with the lack of the administration’s efforts to get people on board with the concept and moving in the right direction. Anne and Max,
our two instructional coaches, felt like their administration was not offering the resources necessary to move sufficiently forward with SLCs. For reforms to be successful “administrators…have to secure the necessary infrastructure changes and long-term resource supports if use of an innovation is to continue indefinitely” (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 13). The expectation of the coresearchers was such that they readily came to terms with what they were trying to accomplish, but ended up short in what they received in the form of administrative support. This lends itself to the vocalized thought of the coresearchers that their experience would have been different if the leaders were more engaged.

In the process of administrative foresight, a common vision was articulated that included, among other things, the notion that there would be common curricula, common teachers, and common students. This was to be accomplished through the realization of the absolute priorities. Developing a vision is the primary step in any reform effort. The second step in building the vision is bringing others on board and establishing a shared vision of those purposes. Building a shared vision was largely left to the efforts of the Timberton Central principal. This principal engaged in a vision building process by asking the educational stakeholders at both campuses something to the effect of, “is the current situation right? Is it fair? Is it just? If it’s not how do we aspire for it to be? And what do we do about it?” (Senge et al., 2000, p. 393). Through the district’s self-studies of the two high schools they asked similar questions to elicit the voice of those involved in determining what the current situation was and to what degree change was needed. This process has been referred to as “moral suasion” and “is the craft of creating a shared
vision” (Senge et al., 2000, p. 393).

The vision of what Timberton was hoping to accomplish was certainly shared by numerous stakeholders including my coresearchers. The frustration on the part of the coresearchers had less to do with the initial vision and had more to do with how that vision was replaced by inaction and misunderstanding. Fullan (2007) suggested that a shared vision should be seen “more of an outcome of a quality change process than it is a precondition for success” (p. 41). The coresearchers felt that the administration failed to secure a shared vision with the educational stakeholders, which is in violation of the fourth absolute priority. This also assisted in the understanding of the third research question where a common understanding of educational purposes was once attained and lost as the vision was compromised and as “quality change” was not realized.

It seemed that what the coresearchers desired was more of an effort of the administration to create a clear picture of what needed to be accomplished and how to proceed. The coresearchers expressed, on a number of occasions, how frustrating it was to articulate a plan and have that plan rejected by administration once it was presented. Kim felt neglected by the administration in her loosely articulated purposes. When she was first approached with the SLC concept her administrators asked her to implement the reform without informing her as to the details of what they expected. She felt that they could not actually articulate what it was that they wanted in the first place. Bryk and colleagues (2010) suggested in this light that “Broad-scale organizational transformation demands that leaders nurture individual agency and build collective capacity to support fundamental change. Key in this regard is a leader’s ability to inspire teachers, parents,
school community leaders, and student around a common vision of reform” (p. 63).

Robert Evans (2001), a clinical and organizational psychologist, suggested that clarity of purpose, as provided by educational leadership, is necessary for an organization to be successful (p. 207). He further suggested that “a shared vision is crucial to innovation, because it helps make organizational membership and work itself meaningful and thus inspires followership” (p. 207). Jim felt that he could not follow his leaders because they were not leading. Jim confronted his building and district level administration on a number of occasions saying “we need to be led.”

Evans (2001) further elaborated on the necessity of visionary leadership by suggesting that “the roots of vision are deeply personal, and a leader’s own commitment to a vision is vital to its adoption by followers” (p. 207). The coresearchers in this study would suggest that the “absolute priorities” never really constituted a shared vision simply because the administration was never really clear in their vision of how to accomplish the SLC reform. It was stated several times that the administration was good at telling people to accomplish something without actually communicating what it was that they wanted accomplished regarding SLCs. This was frustrating because the coresearchers understood the concepts of SLCs and would attempt to formulate a plan for implementation but were later rejected by administrators.

Administrative responsibilities regarding the SLC reform or any other reform effort are cyclical in nature if the change is to be realized. Once again, the coresearchers were frustrated with their administration’s lack of engagement in the process. Hall and Hord (2001) identified the components of the cyclical responsibilities of administrators as
follows:

- Developing, Articulating, and Communicating a Shared Vision of Change
- Planning and Providing Resources
- Investing in Professional Learning
- Checking on Progress
- Providing Continuous Assistance. (p. 109)

This list is very similar to the constructs found in the list of “absolute priorities.” Each of the coresearchers felt that the shared vision was not actually shared, there were not sufficient resources for implementation, and there were not opportunities for professional development. This represents a detrimental compromise of the second, third, and fourth priority. Frustration is further exasperated as the Timberton North campus had experienced an inexorable administrative turnover.

Administrative turnover in the Timberton City School District has usually meant reform disaster. Each of the coresearchers felt that the “shifting of principals” caused significant disruptions with previous reform efforts. These disruptions have tended to compromise reform on primarily two fronts. The first instance disrupts reform by retracting a good thing. Max identified this by alluding to the idea that a new administrator has “their own agenda” despite what has been “working in the past” and simply makes changes for the sake of making changes. The other front of disrupting reform by administrative turnover is the concept that an old reform is not working and a new administrator arrives and suggests that it should. Jim was particularly vocal along these lines by suggesting that as soon as the previous administrator realized that something is not working, a new administrator arrived and “starts the same process all over again.” A change in administration is not inherently wrong when a replacement is
needed to drive the reform in more meaningful ways.

In looking at two schools in the Chicago area, Bryk and colleagues (2010) noted that the building level administrator made all of the difference as to whether reform succeeded or failed (p. 11). They further suggested that “it is an accepted fact among educational reformers that principals are the key levers for school-based change” (p. 60). In reviewing the literature on administrative turnover, it appeared that there is not a significant amount of research that documents how turnover affects the SLC reform effort. Turnover may certainly be viewed as an effort to get the “right” administrator in the right reform situation. This may be the substance of further research. The literature does adequately detail the significance of having a transformative administrator in charge of leading an innovative reform (Evans, 2001, p. 183; Fullan, 2007, p. 159).

The SLC reform is intended to be comprehensive in nature and certainly takes more time to implement as compared to other reforms that are less involved (Oxley, 2004, p. 4). In this vein, it seems imperative that for the SLC reform to succeed, a building level administrator who is committed to the reform’s success should have tenure within that building long enough to realize that success. Timberton North has had two administrative changes since the implementation of SLCs and nearly had another but the teachers and parents petitioned the district to allow the current administrator to stay longer. This was attributed to the administrator’s ability to build meaningful relationships with teachers, students, and parents. The coresearchers hold their administrator in high regard but not for having anything to do with SLCs. Despite the administrator’s popularity, the benefits of implementing SLCs are still largely unrealized on the
Timberton North campus. The coresearchers suggested that the faculty may have more to do with that than the lack of leadership. Although the two are closely related as pointed out by Payne (2010) who elaborated further on this point when he suggested, “If we give people an enormously challenging task and only a fraction of the resources they need to accomplish it, sooner or later they start to turn on one another, making the job more difficult still” (p. 24). The faculty was a source of frustration for the coresearchers and lends itself to the validity of the next theme.

**Theme 1.2: Frustration with Colleagues, Teacher Buy-In**

Payne (2010) noted along the lines of this theme that “reform after reform fails because of nothing more complicated than the sheer inability of adults to cooperate with one another” (p. 6). The SLC reform as with any other reform effort or new program represents a change or a set of requirements that may imply change. The coresearchers in this study were cognizant of the magnitude of change that was going to be required to positively affect student achievement. Each of them hesitated to one degree or another about adopting the ideals of the SLC change. Labaree (2010) suggested that “teacher resistance to fundamental instructional reform is grounded in a deep personal investment in the way they teach and a sense that tinkering with this approach could threaten their very ability to manage a class effectively” (p. 154). However, each of the coresearchers would be considered “early adopters” where they all embraced the concept earlier than their colleagues (Rogers, 2003, p. 283). Regardless of attitudes about the necessity of making changes in the way Timberton North educated their students, it was apparent that
the toll of making those changes was too much for the majority of the faculty and became the substance of frustration for each of the coresearchers.

The SLC reform represented a change to Timberton North. Change is considered an everyday part of life and may simply be viewed as growth and/or renewal. It is an individual’s response to change that ignites conflict within us. It has been suggested that “There is a fundamental duality to our response to change: we both embrace and resist it” (Evans, 2001, p. 21). This seems only natural as there tends to be some excitement and uncertainty when confronted with change. Evans went so far as to suggest that the primary meanings of educational change “encourage resistance: it provokes loss, challenges competence, creates confusion, and causes conflict” (p. 21). This has been the case for the coresearchers and their colleagues. Several faculty members expressed that they were not on board with SLCs because it required them to learn a new system that conflicted with their personal way of teaching. Hall and Hord (2001) suggested in this vein that “when confronted with change there is a natural tendency to focus on how to defend ourselves from it instead of on how to use and succeed with it” (p. 3). The problems with educational change are further exacerbated when faculty are called upon to implement and endure change after change (Evans, 2001, p. 5; Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 25; Oxley, 2004, p. 3). Other faculty members who were not included in this study but were informally interviewed suggested that they had experienced reform too many times and had grown accustomed to just teaching the same way as they had “for the past 20 years” because it seemed to work and “reforms come and go.”

The coresearchers in this study recognized the implications of pursuing another
reform and felt some compassion for their colleagues who suggested that “this too shall pass.” Indeed, the Timberton City School District has a long history of pursuing reform efforts as grants were obtained. It seemed to the coresearchers and the faculty that the SLC reform would go away as another failed effort as soon as a new grant for a different reform was awarded. This has become an all too familiar reality in education (Oxley, 2004, p. 3). Our coresearchers sympathized with their constituents. However, each of the coresearchers grew weary of their colleague’s ambivalence toward the SLC reform and desired that they would “give it a chance.”

Giving a new reform a “chance” is a concept that innovators have struggled to help people realize is in their best interests. The idea that reformers must focus on individuals to realize change is a relatively new take on how to implement reform (Fullan, 2007, p. 8). In the past educational reformers would pay “little attention to the lived realities of the educators who must accomplish change (Evans, 2001, p. 91). It has been further argued that “overlooking and underestimating the human and organizational components of change has routinely sabotaged programs to improve our schools” (Evans, 2001, p. 91). The organizational components will be elaborated upon further in the next section. The failure of reform efforts has become cyclical in nature due to the extent in which faculty members buy-in to a reform.

Obtaining teacher buy-in is a complicated process that involves understanding the nature of how people react to change. As was mentioned previously, response to change is as diverse as the individuals who are called upon to implement the change effort. For this reason there are varying degrees of adoption among faculty members. Rogers (2003)
has categorized the adopters of innovations as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (pp. 282-284). In this light, the innovators would be those individuals who are responsible for the success of an innovation and would be, in this study, the building level administration. The coresearchers in this study could be considered “early adopters” since their attitude toward the SLC reform was positive and each of them sought to influence other faculty members in this direction. Rogers would consider each of the coresearchers as a “local missionary for speeding the diffusion process” (p. 283). According to the coresearchers, the rest of the faculty would fall somewhere between the “late majority” with a heavy emphasis on “laggards.” The term “laggard” simply implies that individuals are cautious or skeptical of an innovation and have “learned from the past” when remembering failed attempts of innovations. This is certainly the case as it applies to educational reform generally and Timberton North specifically. The laggard however may not be to blame for an innovations’ demise as organizational components must also be considered.

The lived reality of the coresearchers has left them feeling betrayed by their colleagues. It seems that the faculty at Timberton North gave up on the SLC reform before it really had a chance to be fully implemented. This has caused considerable consternation for the coresearchers. Teacher buy-in was recognized at all levels with some faculty members simply approaching the SLC reform with ambivalence, while other faculty members approached it with an attitude that bordered hostility. Anne felt like those who were for SLCs in the beginning were still for it somewhat, but those who were against it in the beginning were even more against it now. Reformers have found
time and again that there are frequently those who are willing to try new reforms and those who are not. Those who are willing to try a new reform are often labeled by their colleagues as a “faction” that can be disregarded. As was mentioned before, it seemed to the coresearchers that resources and teacher buy-in were in short supply for a full implementation of SLCs.

**Theme 1.3: Frustration with General Organization**

The frustration experienced by the coresearchers regarding the organization of SLCs is fraught with instances of failed expectations. Getting back to the “absolute priorities,” as previously outlined, have yet to be realized on the Timberton North campus. The coresearchers felt that what they have in the form of SLCs is simply a title or “banner” on the front of the school with no real substance within the school. Where the expectation was to have common students, common teachers, and a common curriculum, the reality has been a failure to secure common students, common teachers, or a common curriculum. According to Oxley (2004), a small community does not become a smaller learning community unless critical organizational components are in place. She suggested that “without the implementation of key SLC organizational structures, these investments are quickly dissipated, teachers become cynical, and the dismal history of school reform that faculty of almost every high school are familiar is repeated once again” (p. 3).

This sentiment of cynicism is how the coresearchers felt regarding the lack of necessary organizational structures. Components such as student schedules, teacher schedules, and curricular issues are what the coresearchers feel has been compromised.
According to SLC experts the SLC concept cannot exist without these structures in place (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 46; Oxley, 2004, pp. 3-15). In order to get common students within an SLC, the organization must assist students in identifying and scheduling their instructional time in such a way that allows them to have at least four core academic disciplines within their SLC. The best the coresearchers were able to do in this study was to organize cross-curricular units with one other teacher which soon failed after one trimester due to student scheduling. Oxley suggested that “students register little to no sense of community from two-course blocks” (p. 6). This explains why the coresearchers felt that students were completely unaware of which SLC community they belonged.

Initially, the Timberton City School District assigned both high schools with six learning communities. These were comprised of a freshman house, business marketing and computers, technology, science, social humanitarian, and arts and recreation. As students were given a choice of which community to belong it became apparent that students were choosing the community that their friends chose or the community that their parents wanted them to choose. This is not inherently problematic as friends generally have common interests and parental guidance is usually welcome. However, there began to be some in-school segregation along the lines of gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. This is a similar finding that Lee and Ready (2007) found in the five schools that they studied. For SLCs to be successful each community must be diversified sufficiently to realize the benefits of the communities. For this and other reasons, the two high schools adjusted their SLC offerings with Timberton North reducing their communities to three. This was also done to assist in teacher scheduling.
The substance of the second absolute priority involved teacher scheduling where teacher teams “share a common daily planning period to enable them to attend weekly group training and also have time for individual planning” (Implementation Grant, 2003, p. 24). The coresearchers felt that this has been compromised as they have not been able to regularly meet with one another and plan cross-curricular activities. The coresearchers felt that this mattered very little however, since they did not share the same students. Oxley (2004) cited several research instances where common planning time amongst faculty was “…linked to positive student outcomes. This is a nearly constant item on short lists of SLC practices necessary for maintaining a focus on instructional improvements” (p. 9). Collaboration with faculty members was not always welcome at Timberton North for the reason stated by Payne (2010) that “teachers frequently feel they don’t have time for all the collaboration they are being asked to do; it feels like an add-on…” (p. 32).

In her review of the literature regarding SLCs, Oxley (2004) found that researchers “repeatedly find that implementation of the structural elements of SLCs is incomplete” (p. 2). This appeared to be the case at Timberton North as each coresearcher identified their lived experience through terms of frustration at organizational components. They felt that without students sharing common teachers that the curriculum could never be realized as SLCs intended. The coresearchers also felt that there must be numerous other variables that attributed to the apparent failure of the reform. Oxley further summarized this concept by suggesting, “The effectiveness of implementation of practices on one dimension of educational organization depends on the implementation of
others in the same and other dimensions” (p. 5). Through the myriad of variables associated with implementing a comprehensive school reform the coresearchers hold on to some degree of hope that perhaps someday in the future they will have organized an effective SLC structure on their campus.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Comprehensive urban school reform is fraught with a multiplicity of issues that determine to what extent success is realized. For each of the coresearchers it is a shared notion that SLCs have not been successfully implemented on their campus at this time. They each shared instances where the whole process has “been nothing but frustration.” This frustration has affected them personally and professionally. The path moving forward would certainly include other instances of how reform is experienced generally.

From the experience of this study it would be helpful to look further into transformative leadership on successful SLC campuses. It has been well documented that strong leadership is necessary for large social change to be realized. Research that details how educational leaders have been successful in top-down reform would assist in the realization of perhaps greater success in school reform efforts. Research that documents academic achievement as a result of SLCs is also in short supply and would be a worthy research endeavor. Additionally, it would be beneficial to further identify how reform is experienced by faculty members to broaden the literature regarding this concept. Research relating to how successful school reform has moved forward as compared to failed attempts would also offer valuable insight for school reformers. Research studies
that focus on how school reform penetrates classroom walls and teacher instruction would also be beneficial.

It is my conviction that educational reform will not succeed unless we understand the implications of how reform is experienced by our teachers who ultimately determine what occurs in the classroom. Therefore, it would be of tremendous value to the educational enterprise if empirical studies could hone in on how school reform could reinvent the teaching and learning process thereby decreasing the gap between reform and classroom realization of reform ideals.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Conceptual Model of Smaller Learning Communities
**Figure A1.** Conceptual model of smaller learning communities (Lee & Ready, 2007, p. 46).
Appendix B

Bracketing Interview
Why did you decide to enter the field of education?

I felt that I had something to offer...I was told on several occasions that I was a natural teacher and leader. I never saw myself as a teacher or making that my career but I was drawn to the idea over time...I originally began my educational pursuits within CES. When that didn’t yield a teaching contract I enrolled in the Weber State University Master of Education program. My B.S. wasn’t in teaching but I was able to get a job in the Weber County School District as an eighth grade science teacher and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I chose to continue in education and firmed up my commitment to spend a lifetime as an educator of some sort.

What has your career in education entailed?

As I mentioned I began teaching in the CES program and did that for a year. At the end of the year I did not receive an offer for full-time employment. I was somewhat devastated but appreciated the opportunity to learn about teaching. I explored my options and felt that I could enter public schools as a teacher. Not having a teaching license I enrolled into the Master’s program at WSU. I also received an exemption to teach science at Rocky Mountain Junior High with the contingency that I would receive a teaching certificate. I only taught at Rocky for a year before moving to Arizona for my wife’s educational pursuits. I qualified for a teaching certificate in Arizona after passing their educator proficiency assessments. I was certified to teach general science, biology, and history. I received a job offer at Sahuaro Ranch Elementary in the Peoria Unified school district teaching 7th grade earth science and 8th grade life science. I taught there two years and during that time received a Masters in educational leadership from Arizona State University. As part of that degree I was required to perform administrative duties as an intern. I arranged to do administrative responsibilities at a local high school. I felt that I was going to be an administrator but at the same time I wanted to pursue a PhD in education and received the opportunity at Utah State University...and so here I am.

What do you know about the SLC initiative?

I know more now for having done some research as a graduate assistant with Dr. Franklin at Timberton Central. The concept is a fairly popular comprehensive school reform where large secondary high schools across the nation divide their campus up into small semi-autonomous communities designed to boost student achievement and decrease drop-out rates and the achievement gap by making the educational experience more personable. The design also allows students to choose among communities that are designed around career oriented themes. The classes cater to student interests as it pertains to the themes. Teachers are also encouraged to work collaboratively to make the
What do you feel necessitated the SLC endeavor at Timberton?

*I think that the city of Timberton is broke. I mean the city has been in decline and as I see it is a cancer that needs to be treated or it will spread. This cancer has found its way into the school district and has caused some real problems. I recognized this as a teenager in the area but attended a bordering school district. The district is destitute of resources and has a high concentration of low income families. I don’t feel that a low income family is inherently bad but Timberton’s low income families have real urban issues. The district also has a high number of minority students and I know that the achievement gap is pretty bad. I think the district went with the SLC reform to try and make a difference by providing greater academic and personal resources for the students and families. I think the district needed to do something and this is the best idea that they came up with...*

In what ways does the SLC reform address these issues?

*The way SLCs are designed I think that students have a greater opportunity to identify with a caring adult. The primary purpose of SLCs I think is to build relationships with teachers and students and student with other students. The relationship concept helps students know that someone cares about them and wants them to succeed. I also think that if teachers get to know their students better they can help them in other ways. I looped with students in Arizona and felt that the second year I was able to better meet their needs having gotten to know them and their families. I also know that SLCs try to pique students interests by having themes that students may have an interest in...I mean, think about it, if a student has an interest in medicine then perhaps if the history course they’re taking has a medical thread, they just might be more interested in history..crazy concept, I know...*

What was your initial response to SLCs?

*Hard to say, I was fairly open to the concept but really didn’t form any opinions until I was able to get more information and until I was able to see it in practice.*

How do you feel about SLCs today?

*Somewhat confused by what I’m seeing. I mean there is no model SLC for schools to look at and replicate. The concept looks differently across the nation. I think the concept has promise but feel that schools struggle to implement it effectively and get lost in the details.*

How do you feel the faculty responded to the implementation of SLCs?

*I have a pretty good idea of how Timberton Central responded since doing a previous study with Dr. Franklin, I imagine that the Timberton North responded similarly. I think there was some hesitation, in fact some faculty at Timberton Central took an apathetic
approach by saying “this too shall pass.” I imagine that Timberton North has a similar story where there were some that bought into it and others that didn’t care for it.

What have been some obstacles to implementing SLCs at Timberton North?

Again, having done the study at Timberton Central, I’ve noticed in looking at their data that teacher buy-in hindered the reform. Also, differing definitions of what SLCs was seemed to compromise the effort. There were also issues of curricular disagreement that caused problems. I think that student scheduling was mentioned repeatedly as being a concern. I don’t believe the students were on board with what the school was trying to accomplish. I think that any of these issues are probably similar to what is going on at Timberton North.

You mention a lot about Timberton Central and your experience there…how do you feel that will influence you as you do your study at Timberton North?

Wow, great question. I think that in some ways it will certainly help and if I’m not careful, I think it might compromise the study. I mean, I’m not going in blind as to what this district is trying to do. I have had a lot of experience looking at documents and interviewing people at Timberton Central about these very issues. I think I will be able to approach the faculty at Timberton North having sufficient background knowledge to carry on an intelligent conversation regarding SLCs. On the other hand I think that having too much knowledge about Timberton Central’s experience will influence how I approach Timberton North’s. In some instances I can see where I might be tempted to look for the same things that I found at Central…it would be easy to identify things that I’ve already seen. I also think that knowing some of the struggles that has faced Central will have an influence on me. I think it will be very important to lay aside my preconceptions of what their experience has been in order to let North tell me what their experience has been. I have looked at the research questions carefully and will approach the interviews in such a way that I’m aware of what I’m asking and how I proceed. I think it will be very important to do a lot of member checking to make sure that the themes that emerge are coming from the participants and not in how I perceive their lived experience. I think that this interview will help me know what I think so I can compare it with what I receive from the participants.

To what extent have you already had contact with Timberton North?

I feel that I have had just enough experience with North to get their blessing to do this research on their campus. I have spoken to their principal on two occasions. He seems to be eager and supportive of my efforts. He is a great guy. He said something to me that kind of caught my attention. He mentioned that he feels that his faculty has had a much different experience with SLCs than Central’s faculty. I think that was good for me to hear. I mean, I’m glad that I’m going to see another side of the SLC experience if he’s right. I haven’t talked with any faculty members yet but I know that the principal has sent around an email alerting his faculty that I will be approaching them. I’m excited...
Is there anything else you would like to say regarding SLCs?

_Honestly, I am really open to what I might find at North. I have read a lot of literature that has documented the SLC movement across the country. I have noticed in that literature that there has been varying degrees of success when it comes to planning and implementing this reform. That’s about it, I feel ready and well prepared to do this research..._
Appendix C

Initial Interview Questions
SLC Reform Interview Questions

Name:

Date:

Time:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. Why did you get into teaching?
3. How long have you been at Timberton North?
4. What brought you to Timberton North?
5. What subjects have you taught during your career?
6. What has been your involvement with the SLC initiative?
7. What do you feel necessitated this endeavor at your school?
8. What was your initial response to SLCs?
9. How do you feel the rest of the faculty responded to SLCs?
10. What have you done differently in your classroom as a result of SLCs?
11. What else have you been required to do as a result of SLCs?
12. What have been some of the obstacles to implementing SLCs and how have you overcome those obstacles?
13. How have your interactions with students been affected by SLCs?
14. In what ways has the change in administration affected you and SLCs?
15. How have your interactions with other faculty members changed as a result of SLCs?
16. Is there someone else you feel that I should talk with regarding SLCs?
Appendix D

Second Interview Questions
SLC Reform Second Interview Questions

Name:

Date:

Time:

1. How would you further describe your experience of the SLC reform?
2. What else has been required of you as a result of SLCs?
   a. What has that meant to professionally?
3. Social Construct
   a. In what ways has the SLC reform initiated a socially constructed understanding of educational purposes?
      i. What has this meant to you?
   b. In what ways has the SLC reform created or enhanced social networks?
      i. Relationships with students, faculty members, parents?
      ii. How has this affected you?
   c. How have faculty members defined the SLC movement?
      i. How has this affected you?
4. Cultural Construct
   a. How has your campus experienced a shift in culture (campus redefined) as a result of SLCs?
      i. What has this shift meant to you professionally?
   b. In what ways has your large comprehensive high school been redefined?
      i. What has this meant to you professionally?
   c. In what ways have you embraced and or challenged this shift in campus culture?
   d. How have the other members of your faculty accepted or rejected various components of the SLC reform?
      i. What have been the implications?
   e. How has your teaching practice changed as a result of SLCs?
5. Historical Construct?
   a. How would this SLC piece of Timberton North’s history be written at this point?
      i. How would this be written in 10 years?
      ii. How would this be written in 20 years?
   b. What does it mean to you to be a part of this piece of Timberton’s history?
   c. How would write the history of your own involvement?
6. Are there any other issues that we have not covered that would help me understand what it is like to experience a comprehensive school reform?
7. Is there anyone else who you feel would be particularly reflective of their SLC experience?
Appendix E

Letter of Information
LETTER OF INFORMATION
Reform and Comprehensive High Schools: The Lived Experience of Teachers and The Schools Within Schools Initiative

Introduction/Purpose: Professor Barry Franklin and Rich K. Nye in the Department of Teacher Education & Leadership at Utah State University are conducting a research study to find out more about the Smaller Learning Community (SLC) initiative and how it has been experienced by faculty members. You have been asked to take part because of your experience with the reform. There will be approximately twenty participants.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this research study, you will be asked to participate in an open dialogue regarding your experience with the SLC reform. Our conversation will be audio recorded and transcribed. You may be contacted later in the research to answer additional questions regarding initial findings from interview data. Initial interviews may last from 30-90 minutes with subsequent conversations lasting 15-30 minutes. You may withdraw from an appointment or interview at any time.

Risks: Participation in this research study may involve no more than minimal risk which means "the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life..." (The Common Rule, DHHS Regulations are provided in 45 CFR, Par. 46)

Benefits: There may not be any direct benefit to you from these procedures. The investigator, however, may learn more about the nature of how teachers experience comprehensive reform. This may lead to publications which may or may not be utilized by policymakers, school administrators, and various faculty members who may adopt a similar reform. Any information gained from this study may have either direct or indirect benefit to participants now or in the future.

Explanation & offer to answer question: Rich K. Nye has explained this research study to you and answered your questions. If you have other questions or research-related problems, you may reach him at 801-866-6156.

Voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw without consequence: Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without consequence or loss of benefits.

Confidentiality: Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with federal and state regulations. Only the investigator will have access to the data which will be kept in a locked cabinet in a locked room. Personal, identifiable information will be kept for three years and then destroyed with accompanying audio tapes.
LETTER OF INFORMATION
Reform and Comprehensive High Schools:
The Lived Experience of Teachers and The Schools Within Schools Initiative

IRB Approval Statement The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at USU has approved this research study. If you have any pertinent questions or concerns about your rights or a research-related injury, you may contact the IRB Administrator at (435) 797-0567 or email rrb@usu.edu. If you have a concern or complaint about the research and you would like to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Administrator to obtain information or to offer input.

Investigator Statement "I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual by me or my student researcher and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have been answered."

Signature of PI & Student Researcher

Professor Barry Franklin  
principal Investigator  
(435-797-1856)  
barry.franklin@usu.edu

Rick K. Nye  
Student Researcher  
(801-866-6166)  
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Appendix F

Absolute Priorities
Strategies for Improving the Learning Environment:
Absolute Priorities

(Implementation Grant)

**Absolute Priority 1**

Common Academic Core Curriculum and Standards

*Comprehensive curriculum guides* will be written for all subject areas and the Advisory Periods to define the scope and sequenced themes for each grade level to ensure evidence-based curriculum. These guides will include teaching strategies, instructional support and resources, learning activities, and student learning assessments. *Vertical Curriculum Teams*, comprised of discipline-specific 9th-12th grade teachers, district curriculum specialists…College of Education professors, and area business partners, will develop and coordinate curriculum within and across grade levels. The teams will meet weekly throughout the school year and frequently in June to evaluate curriculum practices, research best practices, organize discipline-specific training, and develop curriculum guides.

**Absolute Priority 2**

Assigning Teachers to SLCs and Providing them with Appropriate Content and Knowledge Specific to Smaller Learning Community Implementation

Teachers will be assigned to SLCs based on their area of subject expertise and personal preference; however, *efforts will be made to ensure that teacher quality is consistent among all SLCs.* In the Freshman House, four-person teaching teams (in English, math, science, and geography) will instruct the same group of students for the entire school year. Each Academic Community will be managed by a teaching team of three to five interdisciplinary teachers. The district is committed to investing extensively in developing the curriculum, instruction, advisement, leadership, and teaming skills needed to successfully implement and manage the SLCs; thus, participating staffs will receive *time and stipends for related planning and training* during summer and non-teaching hours. Teaching teams will share a *common daily planning period* to enable them to attend *weekly group training* and also have time for individual planning. Teachers can also access *reference materials located in a new professional library.*

**Absolute Priority 3**

Strategies for Assisting Struggling Students

All students will receive assistance during *weekly Advisory Periods* and at ongoing *Academic Planning meetings.* Any student needing extra academic assistance can utilize
academic support services, including extended library hours, open computer labs, after-school drop-in tutoring, as well as PSAT and GED exam preparation courses. Activities specifically targeting students at risk for academic failure include: (1) Summer Bridge Program for high-risk incoming 9th graders; (2) double dosing in core subjects (English and math); (3) Tuesday A.M. School for struggling students to meet with teachers for extra help, homework make-up, or re-test; (4) Saturday/P.M. School for absent or delinquent students to receive extra remediation; and (5) Credit-Recovery Summer School for students needing to make-up classes. Struggling students can also participate in small group/personal counseling as well as the Timberton At-Risk Student Outreach Program, which provides a 9th grade-college support system.

**Absolute Priority 4**

Strategies for Securing and Maintaining Stakeholder Buy-In

To secure and maintain widespread support for the Timberton SLC project, teachers, counselors, staff, students, parents, and community/business partners played important roles in the planning phase, including serving on School Improvement Teams, attending related parent/staff meetings, and completing parent/teacher surveys. All stakeholders have expressed great support for the proposed strategies. To further empower the school community to take ownership of the Smaller Learning Communities, these stakeholders will serve on SLC Advisory Councils (one per school). In order to secure input and involvement of all parents, including those whose primary language is not English, Timberton School District will continue to offer parents bilingual evening workshops, as well as implement Parent Resource Centers, evening ESL classes, open library hours, and extended computer lab hours. Parents will also be required to attend their child(ren)’s Academic Planning Sessions. Project information and progress updates will be disseminated through monthly newsletters, student progress reports, Back-to-School Nights, orientations, and workshops.
CURRICULUM VITAE

RICHARD K. NYE

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Education

2005-Present Teacher Education & Leadership, Utah State University
Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction expected in Spring 2011.
Dissertation: “Reform of The Comprehensive High School: The
Lived Experience of Teachers and the SWS Initiative.

2001-2005 School of Education, Weber State University
MEd. Curriculum & Instruction with an emphasis on curricular
analysis

2002-2004 Teacher Education & Leadership, Arizona State University
MEd. Educational Administration & Supervision

1995-2000 Weber State University
B.S. Major: History, Minor: Zoology

Professional Experience

2009-Present Adjunct Faculty, Utah State University. Developed and taught
courses with undergraduate (4210) and graduate (6040) students
that were designed to consider the various issues associated with
cognition, educational measurement, and effective assessment.

2009 Research Consultant, study of the direction of engineering
education, Utah State University department of Engineering
Education. Qualitative date analysis with recommendations.

2005-2009 Graduate Assistant, Utah State University. Instructor for pre-
service teachers and their science clinical experience (3200-4200).
Instructor of the Senior Seminar (5500) for student teachers.
Mentored secondary student-teachers as a University Supervisor.
2007 **Research Consultant**, Dr. Gary Carlston & the Utah System of Higher Education Board of Regents. Conducted qualitative research and analysis involving two institutions of higher education. Recommendations were presented to the Board of Regents and State Legislators.

2005-2007 **Research Assistant**, Dr. Barry Franklin’s study of Comprehensive High School Reform, Utah State University. Conducted interviews and provided qualitative data analysis throughout the study.

2004 **Administrative Intern**, Sunrise Mountain High School, Peoria Unified School District, Arizona. Assisted new and veteran teachers by analyzing and improving their instructional strategies, classroom management, and organizational behaviors. Mentored first year teachers in collaboration with the Instructional Specialist. Organized high stakes testing (AIMS) intervention for students who needed to pass the state exam in order to graduate from high school.

2002-2004 **Science Teacher**, Sahuaro Ranch Elementary, Peoria Unified School District, Arizona. Created a challenging inquiry based 8th grade life science and 7th grade earth systems science curriculum. Facilitated a first year teacher induction and mentoring program designed to help new teachers acclimate to the professional and the organizational culture of the campus. Coached the Science Olympiad team and the Boys Basketball team.


**Professional License**

Arizona Secondary Teaching Certificate  
Endorsements: Biology, General Science, History, ELL, Administration

**Publication**

Presentations


Honors

Phi Kappa Phi, 2004—
Standard Examiner’s Apple for the Teacher Award, 2002