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# Factors Influencing Student Placement Decisions in Elementary School Assignments

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FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENT PLACEMENT DECISIONS  
IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM ASSIGNMENTS

Laura Thorvilson

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education  
of the University of St. Thomas

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

2014

## UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA

## Factors Influencing Student Placement Decisions in Elementary Classroom Assignments

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative comparative case study examined three unique elementary classroom placement processes used within the same school district to place students in next-level classroom communities. Findings revealed participants used eight different student placement factors to place students into classroom groups for the next academic year. These included: (1) reading and mathematics scores (2) gender; (3) teacher data regarding students with behavioral challenges; (4) students identified for special education services; (5) parent requests for teachers; (6) data from either teacher or family members regarding previous family or student history; (7) teacher experience, specialization and expertise; and (8) student mobility. Interviews conducted with participants confirmed the connection between principal leadership style and the procedures used to create next-level classrooms. Principals adopted different approaches to decision-making, adopting a structural, human resource, political, and/or symbolic approach (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The decision-making style and processes adopted by principals affected the heterogeneity of classroom communities with varying degrees of success. A recommendation for elementary classroom placements included the importance of continued evaluation and assessment of student placement processes and the need for professional conversations to address this complex issue. Theoretical frameworks informing this study included theories related to leadership and organizational theory and critical pedagogy.

*Keywords:* elementary, student placement decisions, homogenous groups, and heterogeneous groups

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## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

As a ten-year veteran teacher in an elementary setting, I know how a variety of factors affect the learning of young students in formal educational settings. For example, teacher quality explains some differences in student performance based on teacher effectiveness (Konstantopoulos, 2009). Other factors also influence student opportunities to learn including: class size (O'Brien & Pianta, 2010), access to educational resources (Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006), parental and community support (Michael, Dittus & Epstein, 2007), and the diversity and composition of the students within a heterogeneous classroom (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007). The last factor, the diversity of students within a heterogeneous classroom, interested me the most.

Educational reformers advocate placing students in highly diverse classrooms for a variety of reasons, including: (1) an opportunity for cognitive modeling (Baker, Wang & Walberg, 1995), (2) the promotion of cultural knowledge and interactions between and among diverse people (Donahue, 2007), (3) the fair distribution of needs and abilities (Marszalek, 2009) and (4) the creation of inclusive and democratic classrooms (Brantlinger, Morton & Washburn, 1999). These claims indicate the composition of classroom communities serves an essential role in providing an environment for positive learning experiences. Determining the class configuration of students must be carefully planned (Konstantopoulos, 2009).

While some schools appear to value and support the goals of a heterogeneous mix of students in every classroom (and even adopt this as an official policy), the actual composition of classrooms failed to meet this standard due to a variety of factors, including parent requests

(Marszalek, 2009), teacher advocacy (Klem & Connel, 2004), and school politics (Cohen, 2007). Placing students with certain teachers affects their achievement rates: Konstantopoulos (2009) found teacher effectiveness influenced student achievement rates. Various factors affect student achievement rates. For example, when administrators or teachers place students in a high ability classroom group, their placement exerts a positive effect on student learning, related behavior, and reading achievement (Tach & Farkas, 2006). The decision to place children in certain classrooms affects students in positive, neutral, or adverse ways.

I decided to examine how teachers and administrators made placement decisions with regard to students in primary elementary schools (grades K-3). This included the way a class was “formed” and also the selection and assignment of teachers to a particular group of students. Learning about the process may shed light on how the placement process affects students differently. The placement of primary students in an elementary classroom requires a well-defined system for teachers and school administrators to address a variety of student behaviors and learning needs (Konstantopoulos, 2009).

Because of the importance of the placement process on students and teachers, and my personal experience with regard to placement decisions (positive and negative), I decided to investigate how decisions get made and to hold the process under a lens for close examination. Placement decisions take place behind closed doors (unless a lottery determines placement), yet placement decisions may potentially affect student achievement rate and success beyond a single academic year. Unequal placement decisions may further marginalize or privilege certain student populations (Konstantopoulos, 2009).

My study examined the process and results of placement decisions used at three comparison schools within the same district. The district adopted a policy of heterogeneous placement of students in elementary classrooms and sought to achieve “balanced” and “diverse” classrooms. I examined how key players, such as principals, teachers, and parents made placement decisions affecting the composition of elementary classrooms.

I paid close attention to the factors influencing placement recommendations as well as the outcome of this process. I conducted research related to two aspects of student placement decisions. First, I investigated the process involved in making student placement recommendations and decisions, examining how professionals interact and use data to make placement decisions. After examining the process, I then analyzed and determined the degree of heterogeneity found within selected elementary classrooms based on student placement decisions. My study illustrates how certain selection processes and priorities affected placement decisions. The findings expose the other values and factors affecting placement decisions beyond the goal of heterogeneity and diversity found within elementary classrooms.

### **Research Question, Purpose, and Significance**

I adopted the following question to guide my study of elementary placement decisions:

How do teachers and administrators make placement recommendations and decisions regarding elementary student assignments, including forming and placing students into a “classroom” group, and also matching a group of students with a specific classroom teacher for the next school year? The following related questions supported my study of placement decisions:

1. What factors and processes influence the placement recommendations of classroom teachers regarding placing students with teachers at the next-level classroom?
2. What principles, values or educational practices appear to influence placement decisions?
3. How do teachers perceive how placement decisions affect the actual composition of classes within a grade level with regard to the academic and behavioral learning needs of students?

The issue of student placement concerns professional educators and policymakers because placement decisions may create unequal educational opportunities (Konstantopoulos, 2009). The goal of my study involved gaining a better understanding of the process and concerns associated with various student placement decisions by examining the process first hand. School administrators and teachers implemented student placement procedures unique to their individual school. The findings reveal the various factors school professionals consider when making plans for student placement, as well as how placement decisions affected students. The differences in three student placement processes affected the ability of comparison schools

to achieve the district policy: creating heterogeneous classrooms of learners.

### **Summary**

Student placement decisions affect school administrators, teachers, parents and students. This case study offers a description of the process and an analysis of the influential factors influencing placement decisions. The placement processes used at three unique schools offer insight into the different methods used for student placement and shed light on this complex and important process. The results of my study can help educators and policy makers understand the forces influencing placement decisions and the potential impact on the lives of young children. School leaders can use the information found in this study to guide student placement processes and decisions, ensuring all students are placed in classrooms that promote individual success within the classroom community of learners.

### **Overview of the Chapters**

I introduced the topic of study and the research question and purpose in this chapter. The findings from my review of literature appear in chapter two. This includes a review of current practices affecting student placement and the beneficiaries of these decisions, and also theories used to form the conceptual framework for my study and analyze my findings. In chapter three, I describe my research methodology and process used to conduct a qualitative case study. I described procedures used to secure participants, conduct interviews and analyze data. Chapter four outlines the research process used at three different elementary schools, including a description about the placement meeting, interviews conducted, and principal and teacher experiences with current placement processes. The fifth chapter offers an analysis of the

universal placement factors and their application in three schools based on a variety of factors, including principal leadership. The final chapter includes the summary of my findings, implications of current placement processes used, and recommendations for consideration in future placements.

To clarify specific educational terms used throughout the study, I defined the following terms used in my study.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Disability:** A legal term referring to a physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, and/or developmental impairment (Waldron & McLeskey, 1998).

**Next-level placement:** A designated assignment with a group of students and a teacher for the next school year.

**Send-out program:** A delivery method used to serve individual needs requiring students to leave their classroom to receive services outside of his or her classroom (Martson, 1996).

**Inclusive program:** A delivery method used to serve individual student needs within the regular education classroom (Martson, 1996).

## **CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

I conducted a review of scholarly literature to examine the factors affecting student placement decisions from one grade level to the next in elementary schools. A variety of factors influence student placement, including the equal placement of high ability and high needs students among grade level classrooms (Praisner, 2003) and ensuring a balanced distribution of students based on economic, racial and cultural diversity (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007).

I organized my findings into five main areas related to classroom placement: (1) parent requests, (2) placement of students with special needs, (3) socio-economic factors affecting student classroom placement, (4) teacher-student relationships within a classroom of learners, and (5) school policies, procedures and practices related to placement decisions. I summarize my findings in the next section beginning with how parent requests influence placement decisions, and then proceed in order with the remaining three areas. I conclude this chapter with a review of theory used to frame my study and also analyze findings described in chapter five.

### **Key Players**

People make placement recommendations and decisions. The issue of student placement encompassed a variety of key players including teachers, students, parents, and school administrators. Teachers advocated for their students, ignoring the responsibility to create a balanced classroom in favor of making a favorable match between their student and the next level teacher (Klem & Connel, 2004).

Parents request teachers or stay removed from the placement process for a variety of reasons. A parent's classroom request for his or her child may have been beneficial for the

individual child, but according to Hetzner (2007), a parent's request may not be best as schools strive for classroom balance. While some parents believe they should select a teacher for their child (Marszalek, 2009), their requests may be based on limited contact or knowledge and may alter classroom placements, causing educators to go against generally adopted classroom guidelines (Marszalek, 2009).

Administrators follow duties and rules as they facilitate the placement process and their attitudes and prior experiences affect that process (Praisner, 2003). Some school administrators played a vital role in the issue of classroom placement; some administrators allowed teachers and parents to make placement decisions and avoided the conflicts associated with the issue. The result: the interactions and decisions of many may create unequal and unbalanced classrooms (Marszalek, 2009).

### **Parental Requests**

Some schools allow parents to express a preference, or even choose their child's next-level teacher (Hetzner 2007). Parents request school environments and classroom teachers for many different reasons. Although parents' self-reports suggest they use a variety of decision-making styles to aid in selecting a classroom placement for their child, analyses indicate few actual differences in their decision-making process (Galotti & Tinkelenberg, 2009). Parents reported their decision-making included five phases; setting goals, gathering information, structuring the decision, making a final choice, and evaluating the decision (Galotti, 2002). The decision-making process revealed parental concerns with regard to factors such as convenience, curriculum structure, teacher characteristics, class size, climate and environment (Galotti &

Tinkelenberg, 2009). However, convenience continued to influence parents after elimination of the other factors as choices.

According to Francis (2006), some parents request teachers who seem to excel in promoting student achievement, while other parents request teachers they view as good “role models”. A study of parent requests conducted in mid-size districts in the western United States with a student population consisting of 73% White students and 21% Latino students, revealed roughly 30% of parents requested a teacher each year (Francis 2006). Principals reported they generally honor almost all requests.

In a different study of parent requests, completed by researchers from the University of Michigan (2007), parents of low-income, minority and low-achieving children appeared less likely to make requests for specific teachers than other parents. In the same study, researchers also found a lack of established procedures for parent requests; parents individually submitted requests to principals before principals made class assignments.

Parental classroom requests may be beneficial for the individual child, but according to Hetzner (2007), parental requests may not be best as schools strive for classroom balance. Hetzner found parents requested teachers for a variety of reasons, and sometimes their requests benefitted some students and proved detrimental to others students. For example, sometimes a parent requested a teacher as a way to pair their child with other kids from the same neighborhood or to keep children separate from other children due to conflicts.

Schools in Menomonee Falls, Mequon, and Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin asked parents to fill out forms to provide insight about their children, such as learning and teaching style

preferences, using the information in the placement process (Hetzner, 2007). Typically about half the parents responded to the questions about their child's strengths and needs. In the Hempfield Area School District located in Pennsylvania, parents told the school board they should be able to choose a teacher based on if they think the teacher's personality will match the personality of their child, or on the teacher's reputation for being a particularly effective instructor (Pickels, 2008). Administrators argued about the school's role and responsibility in the placement process, emphasizing the need to guarantee a curriculum to students across the board, regardless of instructor. They also claimed every teacher employed was highly qualified, and opposed parents requesting a specific teacher (Pickels, 2008).

Researchers still question whether parental input into teacher selection represents a sound educational practice and benefits students (Marszalek, 2009). Children learn important life lessons, including how to be resilient and adapt to a range of situations when required to roll with the punches (Marszalek, 2009). Kids should see their parents cooperate in the process and parents must be viewed as people willing to follow the rules (Marszalek, 2009).

Controversy regarding parental involvement in the placement process appears as a consistent theme in the literature (Hetzner, 2007; Marszalek, 2009). The next placement factor considered concerns the challenge of placing students with special needs in "regular" education classrooms.

### **Placement of Students with Special Needs**

The second area of focus in research on classroom placement decisions of elementary students focuses on the special needs students receiving services in "regular" education

classrooms. Many issues related to the inclusion or integration of children with disabilities into regular classrooms deserve consideration, however, none appears more important than how placement decisions affect students' learning and social relations with classmates (Baker, Wang & Walberg, 1995).

The Issaquah School District, located in Washington State, adopted a service delivery model designed to educate children with learning disabilities in integrated classrooms (Madge, Affleck & Lowenbraun, 1990). Regular and special education personnel instruct students with learning disabilities jointly. Researchers found academic effectiveness of this program proved equal to or better than programs using resource room settings with specialists to instruct special education students and non-special education students (Madge, Affleck & Lowenbraun, 1990).

Backer, Wang and Walberg (1995) found special needs students educated in regular classes performed better academically and socially as compared to students in non-inclusive settings. Backer, Wang and Walberg (1995) examined the placement patterns of 57 high school students with severe learning disabilities. Overall, they found no statistically significant differences in the academic performance of students with severe learning disabilities for reading or mathematics with the exception of one comparison. Student achievement may not be heavily influenced by location alone (Baker, Wang & Walberg, 1995).

When placed in inclusive settings, students with mild learning disabilities performed comparably to their peers without disabilities (Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). Students with severe learning disabilities made comparable progress in reading and mathematics, regardless of the setting in which they received service (Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). Results from two

studies indicated placement of students with disabilities does not produce differences in academic performance, regardless of the choice to use inclusion or send-out methods (Baker, Wang & Walberg, 1995; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998).

Another study investigated the academic achievement gains of students with mild learning disabilities in a variety of inclusion programs (Manset & Semmel, 1997). They found little differences with inclusive programming. Students' academic success did not differ greatly, regardless of whether the schools placed students in an inclusive learning setting or a self-contained program (Manset & Semmel, 1997).

In a conflicting study, Salend and Garrick Duhaney (1999) found inclusion programs effectively met the educational needs of only some students with mild disabilities. Other students, performed better academically when they received instruction through traditional special education models such as resource rooms (Holloway, 2001). Holloway's research indicated that in many cases, general education settings did not produce desirable or acceptable achievement outcomes for students with learning disabilities. Martson (1996) examined the academic progress of students with learning disabilities in three instructional settings to determine which produced the greatest academic achievement. The first setting, an inclusion model, provided students instruction in a general education classroom from a regular teacher and a special education teacher. A "send-out only model", the second setting, offered students instruction exclusively from a special education teacher in a resource room. The third setting combined the two other models, and provided students with instruction in an inclusion classroom supplemented by periodic instruction in a resource room. Teacher assessments of the students'

achievement identified the combined-service model as the most effective and the inclusion-only model proved least effective (Holloway, 2001).

The placement decisions for special education students should serve the academic and social learning needs of the student (Hallenbeck, Kaufman & Lloyd, 1993). Placement decisions should also provide for a classroom of learners, allowing teachers to meet the educational and safety needs of all students (Hallenbeck, Kaufman & Lloyd, 1993). The decision for specific classroom placements can affect the self-concept of children who are either negatively or positively selected (Holloway, 2001).

Studies examined the behavior and attitudes of special needs students in self-contained and resource room settings. The consistent finding identified that students exhibited better attitudes towards themselves in more isolated settings (Walker & MacLaughlin, 1992). Children with sensory disabilities possessed a greater risk of developing social problems and acted uncommonly vulnerable, especially in the social sphere (Maes & Grietens, 2004). Therefore, teachers and counselors must focus on academic achievements, as well as the social skills of children with sensory disabilities, in order to optimize the benefits of placement in inclusive classroom settings (Maes & Grietens, 2004).

Principals and school leaders greatly affect the placement process (Hallenbeck, Kaufman & Lloyd, 1993). Positive experiences for students with disabilities and exposure to special education concepts associate with more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Praisner, 2003). Principals with positive attitudes and/or experiences will likely place students in less restrictive settings (Praisner, 2003). The placement processes of regular education students follow the same

pattern. The experiences of principals with all types of learners better served the teachers and students through the placement process, helping to create classrooms of learners that met the needs of teachers and students alike (Praisner, 2003).

Students with special needs affect the heterogeneous placement of students in regular education classrooms. A student's family background and socioeconomic status also affect an individual student's ability to receive an equal education.

### **Socioeconomic Factors Affecting Placement Decisions**

Family background plays a prominent role regarding educational attainment and in most cases directly relates to socioeconomic indicators, such as parents' education and family income (Teachman, 1987). Although some evidence suggested a decline in the influence of socioeconomic background on educational outcomes in industrialized countries, few would claim that it no longer has significance (Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006). Differential access to material resources generated differences in student performance (Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006). Wealthy families "buy" educational success for their children by sending them to expensive schools, purchasing houses in desirable school districts or paying for out-of-school tutors. In contrast, poor families lack an ability to afford even basic educational needs, such as student supplies and textbooks (Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006).

Socioeconomic background influence social relationships (Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006). These social relationships promote stronger connections between students, schools, parents, and the local community (Marks, Cresswell & Ainley, 2006). This in turn promotes educational successes. Children perform better in schools with a closely-knit network around

them, due to the positive interactions between parents, teachers, and the local community (Marks, Cresswell, Ainley, 2006). These relationships facilitate educational success. Networks happen more often in cases where families belong to middle or upper socioeconomic classes (Marks, Cresswell, Ainley, 2006).

Children in high socioeconomic classes lived in a home environment conducive to intellectual pursuits and the arts, which positively influenced student performance. Children from high status backgrounds became advantaged since they had similar cultural understandings to those underlying the education system, which judged them favorably by the system's gatekeepers: teachers, schools and assessment authorities (Marks, Cresswell, Ainley, 2006). Material, social, and cultural resources associated with educational outcomes likely contributed to socioeconomic inequalities in education.

Schooling serves as a fundamental basis for success in society (Parcel & Dufur, 2001). Successful students hold a strong advantages in future occupational endeavors and family resources promote their success (Parcel & Dufur, 2001). Home environments reflected parental investment in their child's well being. Investments in age-appropriate resources to stimulate cognitive activities and the general cleanliness and safety of the home environment promote positive child outcomes (Parcel & Dufur, 2001). Children also benefited from a stable two-parent home, and a home in which both parents maintained social connections with others outside the family group, such as neighbors, school personnel or work colleagues (Parcel & Dufur, 2001). Family resources proved essential for student success in school. Those resources include wealth to meet educational needs, stability in family make-up, or exposure to diverse

learning experiences. Educational success did not require wealth, but with money available, educational opportunities became more possible (Parcel & Dufur, 2001).

Wealth also affected the amount of involvement that parents demonstrated in their child's school. Middle class families tended to have more flexible work schedules and easier access to transportation than working class families. This made it easier for parents to be present at school and to volunteer or assist when needed. These opportunities to assist at school and to support their child's education benefitted the whole educational process (Anderson & Minke 2007). The socioeconomic status of a family affected a student's ability to receive an equal education. The classroom community and the relationship between a teacher and student also affected their child's education.

### **Teacher-Student Relationships and Placement Decisions**

The final area of focus in the research surrounding classroom placement of elementary students identified the importance of a student's relationship with his or her teacher. The classroom climate served as an essential role in promoting a positive learning environment (Klem & Connell, 2004). Four conditions contributed to student success, including: high standards for academic learning and conduct, meaningful and engaging pedagogy and curriculum, professional learning communities among staff, and personalized learning environments (Klem & Connell, 2004). The fourth condition, the personalized learning environment, involved the teacher's role in establishing the learning environment. Students needed to feel their teacher felt invested in their education and cared for them.

In a corresponding study on teacher-student relationships, Dobransky and Frymier (2004)

investigated student perceptions of control, trust, and intimacy as dimensions of teacher-student relationships, and the connection between these variables and reports of student learning.

Communication occurring outside of class promoted trust between the teacher and student (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004). This communication occurred when the teacher and student communicated as individuals rather than with regard to their respective roles or the cultural groups to which they belonged.

The fundamental human need of knowing another person genuinely cared for you formed the basis of teacher-student relationships (Lumpkin, 2007). Students wanted teachers to recognize, understand, and respect their unique abilities. When teachers focused on caring, they engaged students actively in the learning process. Caring teachers nurtured relationships with students by affirming students' efforts and talents (Lumpkin, 2007). These teachers realized that learning occurred when positive comments existed. Relationship building proved essential for teachers, establishing an environment of trust and learning with their students (Lumpkin, 2007).

The relationship between teachers and students proved essential to their success (Lumpkin, 2007). A healthy classroom climate helped people feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe, engaged and respected (Cohen, 2007). Students and teachers work together to develop and contribute to a shared vision in a community of learners. Cohen (2007) described the importance of teachers modeling and emphasizing the benefits and satisfaction from learning. Everyone contributes to the operations and educational needs of the community of learners.

The teacher's ability to establish a personalized learning environment for students proves critical for student success (Lumpkin, 2007). When teachers connect with students on a personal

level, students stay involved and engaged in the classroom community. Classroom placements promote positive teacher-student relationships, providing an ideal setting for student learning. School personnel use a variety of processes and consider different variables to match students with a next-level teacher. The decisions and match between teachers and students affect their success.

### **School Policies Regarding Student Placement**

Schools differ in the process and procedures used for next-level classroom placement (Hetzner, 2007). I examined a variety of processes and procedures used in making classroom placements to examine how those procedures affected the equality of classroom configurations. I found a gap in the research, specifically the lack of clear descriptions of specific processes and procedures used for next-level classroom placements. This became the focus of my study. Schools appeared to use “less direct” methods or procedures for classroom placement (Hetzner, 2007). These methods included a random selection of classrooms for next level placement, principal directives for student placement, teacher selections of students for the next grade level, and informal parent requests (Hetzner, 2007). Placement processes differed between schools within a school district, and also between grade levels at a school. I decided to investigate the next level placement procedures used in different schools within one school district to determine what factors affected student placement decisions.

### **Summary**

The research on student placement decisions generally described specific factors in the placement process. I found limited research regarding the placement process in its entirety,

taking into account all factors considered or ignored when placing students in next level classrooms. Many factors affect next-level placements, and in turn those factors affect students individually, as members of a class of students, and an assigned teacher. The requests parents make for their child's teacher can create classrooms to meet the learning needs of an individual child, but may not take into account the broader community of students in the classroom (Hetzner, 2007). The inclusion of special needs students into regular education classrooms may affect a teacher's ability to reach all learners effectively; yet, it may also provide a beneficial learning opportunity for an individual with special needs (Holloway, 2001). Socioeconomic status affects a student's ability to be successful in a classroom of learners (Marks, Cresswell, Ainley, 2006).

Finally, relationships between students and teachers play a critical role in the learning process (Klem & Connell, 2004). When teachers establish safe, comfortable and caring relationships with their students, they help to promote an ideal learning environment. Parents, teachers, peers and administrators serve as key players in the life of a child, including his or her educational success. The role played by all involved may influence the academic success of students as a result of classroom and teacher placements, the subject of my study.

The review of literature identified a number of factors influencing placement decisions; however, research regarding how the process actually takes place during the decision-making process appeared largely absent. My study examines how these factors interact and influence student placement decisions in elementary classroom assignments. I next turn to several theories to shed light on my literature review findings and later to analyze the findings from my study.

## **Analytical Theory**

I adopted two theories to explain and illustrate various aspects of the placement process. Critical pedagogy addresses the needs of at risk learners, including the role educational advantage and disadvantage plays in learning opportunities and placement decisions (Coates, 2007). This theory applies to the review of the literature findings concerning the potential adverse effects of some placement decisions on disadvantaged students. I also describe how I applied critical pedagogy in the methods chapter to analyze my case study findings regarding the placement process.

I also adopted Bolman and Deal's (2008) leadership and organizational theory as a general theory to explain how different perspectives and strategies influenced the decision-making process in placement decisions. Bolman and Deal, organizational scholars, described four organizational frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Using these frames, I describe how I examined and evaluated the placement processes adopted at three elementary schools, identifying the organizational focus found within each school's placement process. I begin with the first theory, critical pedagogy, focusing on the positions of advantage or disadvantage individuals hold, and also the unique needs of individuals as viewed through critical pedagogy theory.

## **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy refers to teaching and learning practices designed to raise a learner's critical consciousness regarding oppressive social conditions (Coates, 2007). It addresses the affective, emotional and lived dimensions of everyday life by showing how individuals belong to

groups and interact with others based on this group membership (Kincheloe, 2008). Critical pedagogy initiates the first step in a larger political struggle to challenge and transform oppressive social conditions to create a more egalitarian society (Freire, 1970). It resists the harmful effects of dominant power (Kincheloe, 2008).

Paulo Freire, the most well known critical educator, advocated for an effective education focused on the development of critical consciousness (Evans, 2008). Critical consciousness enables learners to recognize the connections between their individual problems and the social contexts in which they live (Evans, 2008). Critical pedagogy mandates good schools do not harm or blame students for their failures or the forms of knowledge they bring to the classroom (Kincheloe, 2008).

Freire (1970) distinguished between traditional forms of education built around the “banking theory” (a term describing the information *bestowed* by their knowledgeable teachers for student consumption) and a “problem-posing” education. The banking theory describes the process of unquestioned acceptance of the knowledge provided by teachers and society. Freire believed students should not simply be handed information to absorb like a sponge. Rather, he promoted a quality (problem-posing) education emphasizing critical thinking and discovery with a classroom community of learners. The teacher guides learners to uncover information and build knowledge rather than simply handing students knowledge promoted by others in an unjust world.

Proponents of critical pedagogy understand how all aspects of schooling and educational practices represent politically contested spaces (Kincheloe, 2008). Every minute that teachers

teach, they face complex decisions concerning justice, democracy and competing ethical claims (Kincheloe, 2008). Teachers constantly face choices regarding how they react and respond to individual students. When teachers value and empower students as vital members of the classroom community, the students learn to respect and appreciate each other.

A critical pedagogical vision focuses on the social, cultural, cognitive, economic and political contexts existing within schools (Kincheloe, 2008). Critical pedagogy explains the importance of students receiving a rigorous education, focusing on the complexity and value of individuals (Kincheloe, 2008). The education students receive connects to their part in the establishment of human services and community development when they enter society as adults (Kincheloe, 2008).

Although Freire initially focused his theory of critical pedagogy on class, critical pedagogy now includes categories with the potential to advantage or marginalize individuals based on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and age (Evans, 2008). Critical pedagogy empowers individuals to see the specific ways in which class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality and age cause them to think less of their individual and collective selves (Allen, 2004). Critical pedagogy seeks opportunities to fully develop the potential of all people. Coates (2007) argued if the optimal development of an individual's capabilities includes restrictions, then individuals cannot be free to reach or achieve their potential. Critical pedagogy inspires students to question the hidden political assumptions pertaining to racial, gender and class biases of schooling, and to question the abuse of power and its contribution to human suffering (Kincheloe, 2008).

Education liberates the oppressed by helping them achieve critical consciousness in a learning environment where teachers and students work and learn together (Freire, 1970). An education influenced by critical pedagogy raises an individual's critical consciousness regarding the world around them (Coates, 2007). To summarize: critical pedagogy concerns how educational processes and goals affect students differently based on their social location and promotes an awareness of how circumstances affect their success through critical thinking and a "problem-posing" education (Freire, 1970).

I next introduce organizational theory to show how different perspectives and goals affect the placement process, determining the processes used to assign "seats" to students in next level classrooms.

### **Leadership and Organizational Theory**

Four frames of organizations: structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames, reveal different perspectives, values, and actions adopted by people for accomplishing goals within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). A frame identifies a set of ideas or assumptions possessed by individuals, used as a lens and theory of action to achieve their goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The structural frame emphasizes goals, specialized roles, and formal relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The human resource frame views an organization as a type of extended family, focusing on ideas from psychology (Bolman & Deal, 2008). An organization acts as an arena of conflict within a political frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Finally, the symbolic frame draws on social and cultural anthropology, viewing interactions and decisions within a "culture"; the culture includes rituals, ceremonies, stories and heroes (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The process of “reframing” refers to using the four key organizational frames to consider multiple perspectives (Bolman & Deal, 2008). “Reframing” allows leaders to think about the same thing in more than one way and consider alternative strategies for leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2008). I summarize the dominant concepts and actions found within each of the four frames, beginning with the structural frame.

### **Structural Frame**

The structural frame focuses on goals, specialized roles, and formal relationships within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The structural frame promotes an orderly and systemic allocation of specific roles and responsibilities to its participants. Leaders then create rules, policies, and procedures to coordinate diverse activities into a unified strategy (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The main assumption of the structural frame reflects an understanding regarding how the formal plans and arrangements work together to minimize problems within an organization, maximizing performance and organizational success (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

According to the structural frame, organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives, and when organizations create a clear division of labor, increased efficiency occurs (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The goals of an organization assist in the design of the structure of the organization. When leaders analyze and evaluate the organizational structure, they avert or solve problems (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The structural frame provides the blueprint for formal expectations and processes within the organization, coordinating workers in a hierarchical and rules-orientated work environment. Individuals at higher levels coordinate and control the work of subordinates, implementing rules and policies (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Two issues, differentiation and integration, dominate the structural frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Organizations work to differentiate, creating a variety of specialized roles, to be filled by individuals within the organization. Organizations must then combine the many elements together; creating a structure that considers the organization's goals and strategies (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Organizations existing in stable environments typically require less complex structures (Bolman & Deal, 2008). On the other hand, organizations operating in rapidly changing environments need more complex and flexible structures (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Every organization maintains some type of structure as its members work together. The structure may be simple or complex and may support or hinder the effectiveness of the organization.

### **Human Resource Frame**

The human resource frame focuses on how the characteristics of organizations and people shape what they can do for each other (Bolman & Deal, 2008). People serve as a valuable asset to the organization and their skills, attitudes, and commitment prove vital to an organization. Organizations also energize and reward individuals for their contributions (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Because organizations exist to serve human needs, people and organizations need each other. A good fit between individuals and organizations benefits both parties (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Individuals find meaningful work and organizations benefit from the talent and energy individuals provide to the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Organizations adopting the human resource frame strive to hire the right people and retain talented people within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Organizations reward

individuals for their service and protect individual employees jobs (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Organizations invest in employees by providing education, sharing the wealth of the organization, and promoting from within (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

When an individual worker finds satisfaction in work, the organization profits from the effective use of the individual's talent and skills (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Success within the organization depends on the quality of interpersonal relationships between individual employees and the organization. While the human resource frame emphasizes collaboration, the political frame concerns the allocation of scarce resources and addresses the management of conflict between people with competing interests (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

### **Political Frame**

The political frame concerns the process of making decisions and allocating resources with issues of scarcity and divergent interests within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Leaders form coalitions, negotiate with employees, sets agendas, and map the political terrain to manage conflict (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Organizations provide arenas for political contests with active political players seeking to achieve individual agendas and gain control in the political frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The political frame views organizations as living political arenas with dynamic and complex individual and group interests (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Organizations act as coalitions of unique individuals and groups, vying for scarce resources and power. Goals and decisions within the organization emerge from bargaining and negotiation among competing employees (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Coalitions formed within political organizations serve members interests; people join together because they believe that they can do more together than apart (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Individuals obtain power when they work together for a common goal, gaining power from various sources (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Sources of power include positions of authority, information and expertise, the control of rewards, coercive power, alliances and networks, access and control of agendas, the control of meaning and symbols and/or personal power (Bolman & Deal, 2008, pp. 194).

The combination of scarce resources and divergent interests produces conflict, requiring the authority to resolve the conflict (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The political frame does not focus on resolving conflict however, but rather on the strategy and tactics used within the conflict (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The conflict does not go away, but the challenge for the leaders within the organization involves managing conflict (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Organizations provide arenas for political struggles and people seek to gain scarce resources and power within the organization, creating coalitions to gain support and strength (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Individuals who get and use the power become “winners” within the organization in a competition for resources (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The political frame concerns competing interests and scarce resources, while the symbolic frame addresses the human need for meaning (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

### **Symbolic Frame**

The symbolic frame concerns the human need to make sense of the world (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The frame includes the search for meaning, belief and faith, rituals and traditions,

and typical methods used to solve problems (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The symbolic frame encompasses several core assumptions. The first of these assumptions emphasizes the meaning of events rather than the “factual” recounting of what happened (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Individual events become more important for what may be learned or expressed, rather than what the event produced (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Events provide opportunities for multiple meanings based on the culture of people engaged in activities and how they understand and interpret situations differently. Events unite people with different backgrounds through their participation and experience of shared meaning, creating a shared organizational culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Symbols identify the culture of an organization. (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The symbolic frame includes rituals and ceremonies to support the culture within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Individuals within the organization unite through shared meaning and invest themselves in ideals represented in a shared organizational culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The four frames, structural, human resource, political and symbolic shed light on the decision-making processes and goals within schools. Different perspectives affect next level placement decisions. For example, a “structural” approach emphasizes efficiency and effective decision-making, while a symbolic approach emphasizes values and meaning (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The four frames illustrate how different perspectives and goals dominated next level placement procedures and results.

### **Summary**

I used critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and leadership and organizational theory (Bolman

& Deal, 2008) to analyze certain aspects of the next-level placement process. Critical pedagogy focuses on the needs of at risk learners, showing how certain placement decisions positively or adversely affected the needs of at risk learners and their access to educational advantage in learning opportunities (Coates, 2007). Leadership and organization theory examines how different perspectives and strategies used by principals, teachers, and parents influenced the decision-making process based on different assumptions and goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The review of literature findings exposed a gap in the literature regarding how decisions get made in the next level placement process. Two theories explained the results of the literature review, the effects of placement decisions on disadvantaged students (critical pedagogy; Freire, 1970), and also the importance of seeing how different perspectives influence the process used to make decisions (leadership and organizational theory; Bolman & Deal, 2008).

I explain my methodology in the next chapter, describing how I conducted a study of the placement process using case study methods. I also explain how I used theory reviewed in this chapter to explain my findings found in chapter four.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

Using qualitative research, I investigated and described the process and factors influencing student placement decisions in three elementary schools. I examined how teachers and administrators made placement recommendations and decisions regarding elementary student assignments, including forming and placing students into a “classroom” group, and also the process involved in matching a group of students with a specific classroom teacher for the next school year. In this chapter, I describe the methods used to conduct this study.

I begin by providing a rationale regarding why I adopted qualitative research, and why I selected a case study approach within the qualitative tradition (Creswell, 2012). After explaining the advantages of qualitative research, I then describe why I used a comparative case study approach to conduct my research. Following the introduction of general methodology, I present the overall strategy and procedures adopted, beginning with a description of the research sample, data collection and analysis procedures, and theory used in my analysis. I also describe ethical considerations, including the confidentiality concerns and procedures used to secure informed, voluntary participation in the study. Finally, I identify the limitations present throughout the study and how these limitations affected the results of my research.

### **Qualitative Research and the Case Study Approach**

I selected qualitative research to examine how various factors influence placement decisions in determining elementary student classroom assignments. Qualitative methodology allowed me to examine the classroom placement processes in depth, identifying the beliefs and values informing decisions, the policies and procedures followed, and the way competing values

influenced decision-making. The school setting and the administrators and teachers, who served as research participants, provided data regarding the “how” and “why” of the elementary placement decisions.

Qualitative researchers focus on understanding the meaning constructed by people regarding the management of complex human problems (Merriam, 1998). The goal of qualitative research involves the discovery of "patterns emerging after close observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of the research topic" (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003, p. 21). The case study approach allowed me to collect and analyze multiple sources of data within the “case” to identify the principles, practices, and problems encountered in making classroom placement recommendations.

I identified a gap in the literature regarding the specific processes and procedures that schools use to create next-level classroom placements and selected the case study approach to understand the specific processes and procedures used by three unique schools to create elementary classroom placements.

### **The Case Study Approach**

A case study provides an exploration of a “bounded system” or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context (Creswell, 2012). The "case" for this study involved teachers and administrators at three schools, making elementary placement decisions within the same school district. I adopted case study research to understand how a decision-making process resulted in elementary placement recommendations. “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a

contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). The case exists within a set amount of time; I conducted this study within a single school year to see how three schools made next-level placements.

I used multiple sources of information to collect data to construct an in-depth picture of current placement processes and procedures. I conducted a “collective case study”, investigating a phenomenon, population and general condition in multiple settings (Glesne, 2006). The opportunity to examine classroom placement processes at three different schools in the same school district qualified this as a “collective” case study because I studied multiple cases focused on the same issue of next-level classroom placements (Glesne, 2006).

I acted as a participant observer and in-depth interviewer. This required me to maintain objectivity (to the degree possible) in the research process and continuously reflect on the potential bias experienced as a participant in the process (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003). I noted the process and context for making decisions as well as the meaning assigned by the participants (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003).

I explored a “bounded system” of classroom placement decisions at three schools over time through detailed, in-depth data collection using multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2012). I investigated the placement process at three schools independently, using the information obtained throughout my research to determine if any common factors explained differences in classroom placement decisions.

To reduce bias and maintain confidentiality, I conducted my research in another

community, avoiding the community where I live and work.

### **Research Design Overview**

I examined decision-making practices with regard to next level elementary classroom placement procedures at three schools included in my study to identify the specific processes used to make placements. The three research schools resided within the same school district, sharing similar enrollments. No district-wide expectation for the process of classroom placement existed, allowing principals at each school to exercise authority over the final placement decisions. I learned how the process occurred at each school, making note of similarities and differences in philosophy, decision-making processes, and effects on the composition of students within classrooms.

I interviewed school principals and teachers involved in the classroom placement to identify the data and influential factors considered in making placement decisions. I attended one placement team meeting, observing the process for dividing students into next level classrooms. I also examined the results of the placement process to determine the level of heterogeneity found within classroom configurations, evaluating the effectiveness of the next level placement procedures with regard to criteria used in effective schools research (Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon, 2004).

### **Institutional Review Board and Research Sample**

I investigated the placement procedures at three schools. I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct research involving human subjects research. I received IRB approval after meeting the guidelines, gaining permission to conduct research within the district and also providing assurances in the methods used to conduct research and secure data used in the study. I obtained approval to conduct my study from the IRB and school district first (see Appendix A) and then recruited participants to conduct my study.

At each of the three schools, I selected participants purposefully using homogeneous sampling. I interviewed similar “sets” of participants, including principals and teachers, all sharing a common grade level assignment. This type of sampling selects similar cases to describe specific and related subgroups in depth (Glesne, 2006). Purposeful sampling increases the likelihood that variability common in any social phenomenon will be represented in the data (Maykut & Morehouse, 2003).

In the next section I provide details regarding the research participants, the procedures used for conducting the study and also the various sources of data collected.

### **Recruiting Research Participants**

The process of next level placement involves many key players within the school setting, necessitating the importance of including representatives of each group of key players within my research. A diverse group of research participants assisted with my study. Three of the individuals work as elementary school principals, serving approximately 350-450 students at each school. Ten teachers participated in the research, ranging in age and years of experience.

Females represented the majority of the teacher participants with only one male teacher participating. The following table lists participants by pseudonyms, gender, role and the years of experience in education.

Table 1

*Research Participants*

Name	Gender	Years of Experience
Brandy	F	28 years (principal)
Martin	M	9 years (principal)
Gregory	M	35 years (principal)
Rachel	F	22 years (teacher)
Bailey	F	7 years (teacher)
Tami	F	10 years (teacher)
Lillie	F	3 years (teacher)
Lana	F	15 years (teacher)
Jeanette	F	9 years (teacher)
Katie	F	14 years (teacher)
Lauren	F	13 years (teacher)
Brock	M	10 years (teacher)
Kim	F	17 years (teacher)

### **Data Collection Methods**

I gathered data through in-depth interviewing, using a semi-structured interview format and adopting a set of questions to use as a starting point (see Appendix C for questions). As each individual responded to the questions I prepared, I used follow-up questions and additional questions, following the individual's response to the topic of classroom placement. I directed the conversation, while still allowing the interviewed individual to freely and openly share his or her opinions, perceptions and attitudes toward the topic of classroom placement throughout the interview process (Glesne, 2006).

In addition to principal and teacher interviews, I also examined the student placement card used by all three research schools. The research card gathered individual student information from sending teachers to assist in next-level placement decisions. I requested an opportunity to review district policies for creating elementary student placements, however with the exception of the student placement card, district-wide policies did not exist. Finally, I obtained student data, including gender, behavior and academic ability, from the receiving classroom teachers in an effort to determine the level of heterogeneity within each classroom.

I first interviewed principals at three research locations and then asked the principals for recommendations regarding the teachers that I should contact to interview to gather further information on the next-level placement process at each school.

### **Principal Interviews**

After obtaining district approval to conduct research, potential principal candidates received my initial letter of inquiry, requesting their willingness to participate in my study (see

Appendix B). I contacted each potential principal candidate by phone one week after they received my initial letter. During this phone call, I answered any questions and determined their interest in participating in the study. I knew some of the participants as professionals in the community; however, I had not formed a professional or personal relationship with any of the participants at the selected schools. Principals saw a benefit in my research assisting in future decisions made with next level placement procedures and agreed to participate in my research study.

After the initial phone conversation, I set up a time to meet with the principals at their schools for an interview regarding their school and my research project. I provided each principal with a timeline for my study and my plan for contacting teachers to request their help with my research. I asked principals to sign a consent form, indicating their willingness to assist with this research project and reviewed the voluntary nature of their participation and safeguards for confidentiality. I interviewed principals, asking in-depth questions regarding how they create next-level classroom communities at the school where they work (see Appendix C). I asked principals to identify their role in the placement process, and other key players in the process of creating next-level placements. I asked principals to share their ideas and opinions on the effectiveness of the placement process, identifying strengths and challenges. At the end of the interview, I asked principals to nominate teachers for the next phase of interviewing. Each principal interview lasted approximately one hour.

In preparation for my upcoming teacher interviews, I asked principals for ideas on how to be most effective and efficient when working with the teachers at that school. I requested nominations of teachers who might be willing and able to assist with my research. Following my meeting with each principal, I sent letters to approximately four teachers in each school

nominated by the principal and invited those individuals to participate in the qualitative study (see Appendix B). I called each teacher one week after he or she received my letter to determine interest and availability for participation in the study. One of the teachers I contacted preferred not to participate, but the teacher provided me with the name of a different teacher to contact for possible availability. I sent teachers a copy of the research information and the request for participation letter (see Appendix B).

### **Teacher Participants**

After obtaining permission to conduct research, interviewing the principal participants and identifying the teacher participants in my study, I began the teacher interviews. I first met with each teacher for approximately ten minutes to explain my research plan and the teacher's role in the research. After indicating their willingness to participate, I asked each teacher to complete the consent form and provided each teacher with a timeline and plan for my study. I wanted the teachers to clearly understand my plan and expectations prior to signing the consent form.

I allowed the teachers to choose the time and location for our interview, ensuring the interviews took place in a safe and relaxed environment. All of the teachers requested we meet at their school. We met at varying times of the day, depending on their schedules. Each teacher interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. I assigned pseudonyms for each school, principal and teacher to ensure confidentiality and I also provided a variety of protections described later in this section.

### **“Sending” Teacher Interviews**

I interviewed the "sending" teachers, identified as the individuals designated to provide input to the new class configurations for next level placement. Sending teachers provided input

and recommended students at their grade level during the time of placement decisions. I adopted a set of standard questions (see Appendix D) to follow, designed to address the experience of sending teachers. I also sought additional information as necessary to understand a specific perspective or idea from an individual, recognizing the unique experiences and knowledge of teachers. I asked the sending teachers to describe the different processes and procedures regarding classroom placement used at their school. Learning about this process from his or her viewpoint served an important role: I gained knowledge about the factors influencing decision making from the participant's perspective. The interviews focused on current classroom placement procedures used at the specific school, and provided a high level of detail regarding the input provided and the methods used to make placement recommendations. After asking teachers to describe classroom placement procedures, I then invited them to share their opinions regarding the effectiveness of the procedures used.

I sought to understand each individual's perspective on a heterogeneous classroom throughout the interview to determine their view regarding the value of diverse classrooms. I recorded interviews and made observational comments during the interview to identify important points or areas for more investigation. After summarizing my notes from each interview, I asked participants to read through their interview notes to ensure the words accurately represented their perspective and experience. I assured them I would make changes, however the participants requested no changes

### **“Receiving” Teacher Interviews**

I conducted the second round of teacher interviews with the teachers who received a class of students from the previous grade level. The sending teachers identified the “receiving teachers” for interviews, naming the teachers who received a group of students from the previous

grade level. The group included teachers with different experiences in the placement process. Some receiving teachers had been involved with the placement of their current students into their classrooms from the previous grade level. Other receiving teachers obtained their class list for the following school year with no involvement in creating the list.

My purpose for interviewing the receiving teachers focused around my third research question. I wondered how placement decisions impact the actual composition of classes within a grade level with regard to the diversity and learning needs of students. In my interview, I asked the receiving teachers to identify the level of need for the students in their class. I did not record any individual identifying information. I used a coding system to identify student levels of need by numerical rating within the classroom based on teacher nominations, observation and discussion. Each receiving teacher rated the students in her class on a three-point scale in two areas: behavior needs and academic needs. A teacher rated a student at a “3” if he or she consistently required additional support throughout the day for behaviors or academics. A rating of “2” indicated that the student sometimes required extra support. A teacher rated a student at a “1” if he or she required very little behavior or academic support. Teachers selected a “3”, “2” or “1” to most closely match their opinion of the child’s behavior or academic needs. I totaled the behavior numbers for each student in the class and also the academic numbers. I then compared the number totals to the other receiving classrooms at the same grade level at the school. By obtaining this information, I sought to determine the level of heterogeneity within each classroom throughout a grade level.

Following this numerical rating of student needs, I asked the teachers to describe the needs of students representing significant challenge and the strategies used to manage the diverse needs of students their classrooms. I then compared the different classrooms to determine the

distribution of high needs students among the classrooms at a specific grade level. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

I later contacted teachers by e-mail for more data about student needs to better analyze the heterogeneity of the classroom communities. I asked receiving teachers to identify the number of male and female students in the class, the academic reading levels of the students, and the number of students receiving special education services through an Individual Education Plan (IEP). After I combined this additional data with the numerical ratings, I formed a more complete picture of classroom diversity. Finally, I ranked the classrooms in order of greatest to least amount of student need. This process allowed me to determine the general outcome of the placement process, ranging from a highly diverse classroom with greater diversity of student need to less diverse classroom based on a concentration or absence of students with significant learning challenges.

### **Data Coding**

Interviews with the principals and teachers provided important data for my research study. I began the data analysis by reviewing the information gathered throughout the interview process and transcribing the interviews. I read and reread transcribed interviews to refresh my memory and focus on the specific ideas discussed with principals and teachers. I reviewed the axial coding (Creswell, 2012) information that the receiving teachers provided based on their current students. Axial coding allowed me to identify central characteristics of the placement process by gathering information that focused attention on the relationship between the placement process and the newly developed classroom communities (Creswell, 2012).

During the interviews, I learned the educational opinions and ideas related to the placement process, including the reasons for “distributing” students within a grade level and the

beliefs and educational practices that influenced those decisions. After combining and analyzing the interview data, I uncovered important themes and patterns influencing the classroom placement process.

I determined the effectiveness of the procedures by coding individual student needs, to understand if student distribution occurred among the classrooms in the way intended. Although I looked for patterns in my research, I did not attempt to reduce the multiple interpretations to a norm (Glesne, 2006). I became familiar with classroom placement procedures at each school. I recognized my goal in conducting qualitative research: to understand patterns, rather than determine a final answer to my research question(s) and goals.

After a lengthy process of coding and analysis, I made an initial discovery: three different schools adopted three distinctly different methods to make classroom placement decisions. The differences involved the types of data accessed, the number and level of involvement of participants in the process, and the effects of this process on the next level class composition. After summarizing these different approaches, I then analyzed how these different decision making models affect student composition in next level classrooms.

I identified all the factors affecting placement decisions used in the research schools and examined the results of placement decisions in two ways: (1) the class composition and (2) teacher and principal beliefs and satisfaction with regard to the process. I described the classroom composition based on student need and diversity to link the decision-making process to the spectrum of student needs found in next level classrooms.

After explaining the placement factors and decision-making models used in three

different schools, I then share the results of my analysis regarding classroom heterogeneity or diversity.

### **Data Analysis**

My findings involve three main areas of focus: (1) classroom placement factors, (2) principal decision-making styles and models, and (3) the effects of placement decisions on students and teachers with regard to classroom composition. I analyzed the use of classroom placement factors and the effects of decisions on students using critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). I analyzed principal decision-making styles and models using leadership and organization theory, showing how various “frames” influenced decision-making (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

#### **Critical Pedagogy: Placement Factors and Effects of Decisions on Students**

Critical pedagogy refers to teaching and learning practices designed to raise a learner’s critical consciousness regarding oppressive social conditions (Coates, 2007). Critical pedagogy can be understood as the first step of a larger political struggle to challenge and transform oppressive social conditions, in order to create a more egalitarian society (Freire, 1970).

I used the critical pedagogy lens to examine classroom placements and the procedures used to make student placement decisions. I selected this theme for the data analysis because of the connection that exists between classroom placements and class, race, and ethnicity. I analyzed classroom placements to determine if or how class, race or ethnicity plays a role in determining student placement decisions.

I sought to gain an understanding of how students receive placement within a specific classroom at each research site. I paid attention to how class, race and/or ethnicity affected

decisions in the placement process. I wondered if schools attempted to create heterogeneous classrooms of students, taking into account class, race and ethnicity. I analyzed the placement decisions and effects of these decisions on class compositions. I looked for how students from oppressed social conditions were treated during the placement process using a critical pedagogy perspective and analyzed the decisions and results using this theory.

### **Leadership and Organizational Theory: Principal Style and Decision Making**

Leadership and organization theory examines how different perspectives and strategies of individuals influenced the decision-making process based on different assumptions and goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The four frames, structural, human resource, political and symbolic shed light on the decision-making processes and goals within schools (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Different perspectives affect next level placement decisions.

I utilized organizational and leadership theory (Bolman & Deal, 2008) to examine next-level placements. I selected this theory because of the connection between a principal's leadership style and the procedure that schools used in the placement process. I wished to understand if the organizational structure within a school affected the way that principals and teachers developed next-level classrooms.

I analyzed next-level classroom communities, with an attempt to understand if the principal leadership and organizational style (Bolman & Deal, 2008) promoted the development of heterogeneous classrooms. I examined the results of next-level classroom placements and gained understanding of individual perceptions of the placement process. The four frames of leadership and organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008) illustrate how different perspectives and

goals dominated next level placement procedures and results.

### **Ethical Treatment and Confidentiality**

I conducted this study after obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and my dissertation committee members. I received approval to conduct research in the school district. I advised participants of their protections, ensured them of confidentiality, and informed participants of their right to end their participation in the study at any time. I followed the guidelines established by the IRB regarding human subject research.

I interviewed adults, including principals and teachers at three different schools. Each school, principal and teacher received a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. I reviewed student information as presented by the classroom teacher, but did not work directly with the students and did not use any identifying information, such as names, for any children. I asked teachers about the general composition of their classroom and its influence on meeting student needs. I maintained records and transcripts in a locked file cabinet. I will destroy all transcripts and notes two years after the approval of my study by the IRB.

### **Reliability, Validity and Limitations**

Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to adapt methods as the study progresses. I remained open to what I found through my research and modified the process as necessary, staying within the limitations of my research proposal and approval from the IRB. This proved beneficial as a part of the qualitative research method. Data and information guided my research project as I learned throughout the process. When using qualitative methods, Marshall and Rossman (1989) wisely advise it is far better to have an approximate answer to the right research

question than to have an exact answer to the wrong research question. I sought to learn from my research participants and asked additional questions needed to better understand the placement process.

The research participants helped me learn important things with regard to elementary student placement and understand their personal experiences and perspectives related to elementary classroom placement. I avoided a final answer or definitive result, but instead gained understanding of the process through the identification of major themes and experiences of individuals with relation to classroom placement decisions.

The reliability and validity of my research revolved around the trustworthiness, rigor and quality of the research (Golafshani, 2003). The strength of my research depended greatly on the principal and teacher participants as well as my ability to accurately understand and record their experiences with classroom placement. It proved essential to secure voluntary participation. I advocated voluntary involvement and encouraged active participation in the study. The interview process took valuable time from the participants, and they had to be willing to devote the time to produce an in depth analysis of the process and its effects on teachers.

The quality of my research depended on my ability to accurately combine the data, identify patterns and recurring themes in the classroom placement process, and interpret these findings using various theoretical perspectives. I engaged multiple methods of data collection in my research, including interviews and data recording. The diversity of these research methods helped to ensure valid and reliable research (Golafshani, 2003). As I incorporated different research methods, I also looked to seek themes across the research methods utilized (Golafshani,

2003).

I hoped to better understand the process of student placement decisions in elementary classrooms and also the involvement of key players in the placement process. However, as a researcher, I attempted to leave my own experiences behind and focus on the experiences of the individuals in the schools where I conducted my research. Prior to conducting this study, I viewed the next level placement process in elementary classrooms as a teacher participant and wished to observe this process from an objective perspective. Each school completed the next level placement process in their own way, and through this case study process, I gained understanding of the process used by three separate and specific schools at this time. I identified patterns and themes to clarify student placement processes, noting how this process influenced the final result.

The process of next level placement proved important to understand because of the way it affects students, teachers and schools. I learned more about the dynamic factors influencing student placement decisions from one grade level to the next in three elementary schools. I describe my findings in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE CLASSROOM PLACEMENT PROCESS**

I examined how classroom placement factors and decision-making processes affected the assignment of students into “heterogeneous” classroom groups. I set out to identify the factors influencing placement decisions, and their relative weight in assigning students to classroom “seats” for the next academic year. I examined how factors, such as reading levels and academic achievement, gender, and whether students receive special education services, influenced student placement decisions, and ultimately, the composition of the class. A second goal of my study involved describing and comparing decision-making processes used in three different schools within a single district; the schools within the district shared similar goals and policies regarding student placement decisions. I examined placement decisions in three schools to learn how different priorities, student and staff composition, and decision-making processes affected the goal of achieving heterogeneous classes for the next school year.

I first describe factors used in determining elementary placement decisions and then show how these factors and decision-making procedures affected elementary placement decisions. I then describe the placement results based on the goals associated with “heterogeneous grouping” and show how various decisions affected students, teachers, parents, and administrators as stakeholders in the elementary classroom placement process. Finally, I analyze these decisions using effective schools research and critical pedagogy.

### **Placement Factors**

Participants used eight different student placement factors to place students into classroom groups for the next academic year. These included: (1) student reading and mathematics scores based on academic achievement tests; (2) lists of students sorted by gender; (3) teacher data regarding students with behavioral challenges; (4) descriptions and reports of students identified for special education services with Individual Education Plans (IEP); (5) parent requests for teachers; (6) data from either teacher or family members regarding previous family or student history with a next level teacher; (7) teacher experience, specialization and expertise in teaching (such as teachers with expertise in reading or managing behaviorally challenged students), and (8) student mobility.

#### **Academic Achievement: Reading and Mathematics**

The first of these factors, the academic abilities of students, included student achievement scores derived from the school district adopted mathematics curriculum and the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Reading Assessment (2010). Test scores and achievement data helped teachers make comparisons regarding students' ability to learn and complete work successfully in school. School personnel accessed the results from school-wide academic achievement tests and teachers' individual academic records to evaluate student capacity and accomplishments with regard to student achievement. Teachers assessed student reading levels and mathematics skills throughout the school year, documenting growth and areas of challenge. The combined school and classroom data helped teachers identify the current academic abilities of students and also predict future student achievement.

**Student Gender**

The second factor considered for classroom placement involved the gender of students. A color-coded student placement record assisted teachers and administrators in dividing male and female students. Boys received a blue student placement record card and girls received a yellow card. Teachers and administrators balanced classrooms of students with nearly equal numbers of boys and girls.

**Student Behaviors: Teacher Data**

Teachers considered students with behavioral challenges during the placement process, including students identified by the teacher as someone with difficulties in conforming or complying with classroom rules and behaviors. Essentially this group included students without an Individual Education Plan (IEP), required when students receive special education services. Teachers identified students with daily challenges in making appropriate behaviors decisions in the classroom, and during the placement process, “sending” teachers divided these students between the next level classrooms. Teachers believed the separation of students with behavioral challenges helped to minimize the number of behavioral issues likely to occur in next level classes.

**Special Education Services: IEPs**

Teachers considered students identified for special education purposes, examining the type of disabilities identified and the interventions needed. Individual Education Plans (IEPs), provided for special education students, describe specific learning and behavior needs requiring additional support. Plans provide support to students with a learning disability, behavior

challenges, speech and language concerns, or health impairment. Teachers and administrators divided the students with IEPs between next level classrooms, carefully considering the classroom placement likely to provide the best support for individual students. Sometimes administrators or teachers placed students with similar IEPs in the same classroom to effectively utilize paraprofessional support. The opposite approach also occurred: administrators or teachers placed students requiring high levels of service with IEPs into separate classrooms to create heterogeneous learning communities, and also distribute the responsibility for extra support needed among the grade level team of teachers.

### **Parent Requests**

Parent requests for teachers affected the placement process. Some schools allowed and encouraged parent requests. Administrators invited parents to be actively involved in selecting the next level classroom for their child by actively soliciting information from parents. Parents either submitted requests in writing to the principal's office or verbally communicated a request directly to the principal or "sending" teacher. Other schools discouraged parent requests, and avoided parental involvement in the placement process.

### **Family Relationships with Teachers**

A previous relationship between a family and teacher served as a factor in the placement process. If an older sibling previously attended a teacher's class, teachers and school administrators sometimes placed the younger sibling with the same teacher, building on an already established positive relationship. When a teacher and family experienced challenges working together in the past, administrators placed the younger sibling with a different teacher,

offering all concerned a greater chance of success with a new relationship.

### **Teacher Expertise, Experience and Specialization**

The placement process considered teacher expertise, prior experience, and educational specialization in the placement process. Teachers known to excel with certain students used their expertise to provide a more favorable learning environment for students with specific educational needs. For example, teachers with highly structured classroom environments provide an ideal learning space for easily distracted or frequently off-task students. A classroom teacher with experience as a special education instructor received a higher than average number of students with IEPs. Administrators used teacher expertise, experience and specialization to best serve unique student needs.

### **Student Mobility**

The final factor observed in the student placement process involved student mobility. The information, or sometimes lack of information about new students at the time of enrollment affected the placement process. New students often enrolled in school after the placement process ended. The placement challenge involved matching students with an already established classroom of learners with insufficient data about a student regarding behavioral challenges, special interests, or personality and special abilities. New students vied for classroom seats late in the process under less than ideal conditions because other factors, such as student gender or classroom size, affected their opportunities and placement within grade level classrooms.

### **Student Placement Record**

No directions regarding how to make specific classroom placement decisions existed for

elementary schools within the district. Teachers carried out the only universal requirement: completing the “student placement record” prior to the classroom placement process. The “student placement record” included some of the information factored into the placement process, including information regarding student behavior and academic achievement.

Teachers ranked student behaviors using a Likert scale from one to five on the student placement card to represent the level of “behavioral challenges”: (5) a distinctly superior student; (4) a very good student; (3) an average student; (2) a student with frequent problems, and (1) a student with consistent (and frequent) problems.

In addition to the behavior rankings, the student placement record contained information from sending teachers to describe the types of classroom support that the student received. For example, different types of support included: an Individualized Education Plan, speech services, supporting English Language Learners, counseling, paraprofessional support, access to Title 1 service and Reading Recovery (a literacy program).

The final category for the “student placement record” focused on the student’s reading level. Teachers indicated the year-end reading text level for each student, based on the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark continuum (2010).

The “student placement record” provided written academic and behavioral data for each student, assisting in the placement process by creating a uniform placement tool used by all teachers and schools in the school district. School administrators used the “student placement record” with varying degrees of value and importance to guide the placement process in different ways.

### **Unique Placement Processes**

These eight placement factors affected the classroom placement process in the three comparison schools. Administrators and placement teams members emphasized and used these placement factors differently based on the relative value and importance assigned to these factors during the decision-making process. For example, one school might emphasize academic scores as the top priority in placement decisions. Another school might view teacher's expertise and experience as most critical in the placement process. Still another school might use parent requests as the most important factor affecting placement decisions.

Data used for student placement decisions included information from district achievement results, information found on student placement cards, and also anecdotal information regarding teachers, students and their families. I next describe (1) how placement factors affected placement decisions as well as (2) the process used to make placement decisions in three different schools. Following this description, I describe the results of placement decisions and how these decisions affected the goal of achieving a "heterogeneous classroom" of diverse, mixed-ability students. I begin with the process used at George Washington Elementary School, a school adopting a collaborative approach to placement decisions.

#### **George Washington Elementary School**

The principal of George Washington School, Mrs. Brandy, facilitated the next level placement process by asking classroom teachers to complete a "student placement record" card for each student. After the data-gathering period ended, Mrs. Brandy scheduled a classroom placement meeting. The "sending teachers", the "next level" receiving teachers, and school

specialists, including the special education teachers, speech teacher, music and physical education teachers attended the meeting. Mrs. Brandy started the meeting and facilitated the process of placing students in classroom groups for the next academic year.

I observed the placement process. The placement team gathered around a large table in the school conference room. Mrs. Brandy created nameplates for the three next level teachers to provide a visual cue throughout the placement process. The nameplates, placed in a line across the center of the table, helped the placement team keep track of students and assign them to different classroom groups during the placement meeting. Teacher nameplates represented third grade teachers for the following year, including Mr. Brock, Mrs. Kim, and an unknown new teacher hired during the summer months to begin next fall. The team formed the classroom group before learning about the background and expertise of the unknown teacher.

Mrs. Brandy began the process, asking the sending teachers to identify specifically “challenging students” from the current classes. Teachers discussed students with severe learning or behavioral challenges first. Mrs. Lana and Mrs. Jeanette, second grade teachers, discussed a pair of twin students, one in each class. The twins exhibited challenging behaviors. The placement team discussed the best placement option for the twins and decided to place one student in Mr. Brock’s third grade class and the other twin in Mrs. Kim’s third grade class.

The sending teachers shared the names of other challenging students from their current class, and the team discussed the students individually before making a decision and placing a student’s placement record card by the nameplate of the receiving teacher for next year. Next, Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Jeanette, second grade teachers, described two current students receiving

daily support from a paraprofessional. The placement team decided to group the two boys together in the same next level class, allowing one teacher to access paraprofessional support for two students in one classroom.

Mrs. Lana described a group of three boys in her current class as “good old boys”. These boys acted as a unit and relied on the decision making of the group, rather than making the best choice as an individual. Mrs. Lana asked to separate the students for the next level third grade classes. The placement team agreed, and they placed each of the boys in separate classrooms for the following year.

Mrs. Jeanette shared her concern about one of her students. The young boy’s mother passed away during his second grade school year. Mrs. Jeanette felt the young boy needed to be placed with a female teacher, and also requested a placement with a current teacher rather than with the “unknown” new teacher. Mrs. Jeanette wanted her young student to meet his teacher before summer vacation started. The team selected Mrs. Kim, a soft-spoken third grade teacher, and placed the boy’s student record card next to Mrs. Kim’s nameplate on the table.

If a receiving teacher had worked with a student from the same family in the past, the receiving teacher would sometimes accept the current sibling into his or her classroom. Mr. Brock, a third grade teacher, received a young female student because he taught her older brother two years ago and had already established a positive relationship with the family. Mr. Brock also taught the older sister of a different second grade student. This time, however, Mrs. Brandy, the principal, placed the younger sibling in the new teacher’s class. Mrs. Brandy did not explain her decision, but simply placed the student record card under the new teacher’s nameplate.

A receiving teacher with expertise, such as working with a certain learning or behavioral challenge, often received students requiring the specific support or intervention provided by the teacher's special expertise. Mrs. Jeanette suggested the placement of two male students with Mrs. Kim because of her highly structured classroom environment and the boys' need for clear boundaries.

As the placement meeting continued, the placement team took into account the other students in the classroom, discussing if students would work well together as a positive and productive community of learners. Mrs. Brandy shared her concern about one student's placement, saying, "His mom will call and fuss if the boy is sad." The placement team selected Mrs. Kim for the boy's next level placement, deciding he would be content in her room.

After placing the most challenging students with regard to behavioral concerns, the placement team moved on to place students advanced in their academics or behavioral maturity. The placement team discussed each student and the "sending" teacher often made recommendations for a teacher with the best match for a specific student. The placement team balanced the heterogeneous make-up of each classroom throughout the process. Mrs. Katie commented on the new teacher's next level class, "This class needs more high boys". Mrs. Lana then added another of her high ability male students to the class.

After placing the most challenging students and the gifted students, the placement team completed the process by placing students with typically average academic ability and behavior. At this time, more consideration was given to gender make-up and the placement team attempted to balance the number of boys and girls in each class. The placement team also discussed

student friendships and relationships, identifying students who might work well together in the same class, or separating students who might struggle to get along in a classroom setting.

As in the case of the female sibling, occasionally the principal would place a student's placement record under a receiving teacher's nameplate without giving a detailed explanation or reason for the placement. The rest of the placement team did not question the placement, deferring to the principal's decision, and continued to place the next student without comment.

In another situation, Mrs. Brandy suggested a student be placed with Mr. Brock because the student's father was "tough on women teachers", and Mrs. Brandy felt Mr. Brock would work best with the father.

The placement team referenced a spreadsheet of student academic information, attempting to balance academic skills and create classrooms of students with a heterogeneous mix of academic ability throughout the placement process. Special education teachers identified specific needs of their students for consideration and the team used the information to make decisions. For example, two children required an amplification system because of hearing challenges; they received the same classroom placement. Two children diagnosed with Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) received placements in separate classrooms.

After the team divided students between next level classrooms, the number of students in each class was nearly equal with the number of boys and girls in each class close to even. The team divided students with specific academic or behavior challenges between the classrooms.

The final step of the process took place after the placement team left the table. The principal and one special education instructor generated a computer list of the new classes of

students for the coming year. They used the academic data from the current year to color code the classes of students. Students with severe academic challenges were coded as “red”. Students with some academic challenges were coded as “yellow” and students without academic challenges were coded as “green”. The principal and special education teacher reviewed the next level class lists again, to guarantee the classes would be academically heterogeneous communities of learners.

The placement team met early in the month of May. After the final review of the class lists by the principal and the special education teacher, the receiving teachers received their list of students for the following fall. On the last day of the current school year, Mrs. Brandy organized a “Meet Your Teacher” event. During this time, students met in their new class groups with the new receiving teacher. The children and teachers spent the afternoon together in the new class communities.

### **Placement Successes**

I interviewed four classroom teachers after the placement meeting to learn about individual experiences with the placement process and their personal views on the success of placements into next level classrooms at George Washington Elementary. All four teachers responded positively to the placement process. Mr. Brock, a third grade teacher at George Washington, commented, “The process is authentic. The people making the decisions care about the kids.”

All of the teachers appreciated the way they felt included in the process and their opinions valued. They shared their concerns about individual students and the concerns affected

the child's next level placement. Mrs. Lauren, a second grade teacher, shared her thoughts on the student placement record cards used throughout the school district, believing the discussion about students provided more valuable information. "The cards are not important for the placement process at George Washington Elementary". Sending teachers talked about their current students and shared their views regarding the next level placement with the rest of the placement team. Discussions of students influenced decisions rather than school leaders relying on a written student placement record card. Mrs. Katie, another second grade teacher, provided an example of how teaching specialists, such as the music teacher, also had the opportunity to provide specific information on each child. "Specialists have the chance to participate in the placements and share their ideas," positively affecting placement decisions.

The receiving teachers also played an important role in the placement process. Mr. Brock said, "Receiving teachers can speak up about their experiences with a family," allowing the team to take previous experiences into account and to plan for the best educational next level experience for a young student. The placement process at George Washington Elementary did not include parents. However, the principal, Mrs. Brandy, allowed parents to "pass on a teacher" if they had a previous negative experience with the teacher. Parents did not expect to request a teacher for their child, and because of this established precedence, Mrs. Katie commented about the end result of the placement process: "Mrs. Brandy sets the stage for parents not to complain."

The sending teachers and receiving teachers appreciated the opportunity to use their professional knowledge to make placement decisions without parent requests of a certain teacher or classroom interfering with placement decisions. Mr. Brock spoke about how the placement

team “used data and individual school experiences with each student” to plan for the next level placements. With the exception of Mrs. Brandy’s option of “passing on a certain teacher”, the placement process did not include parent opinions.

### **Placement Challenges**

The principal at George Washington Elementary, the sending teachers and the receiving teachers expressed positive feelings about the placement process. However, challenges still existed. Mr. Brock discussed one of these challenges. During the placement team meetings, Mrs. Brandy, the principal, made placement decisions without consultation or explanation. A sending or receiving teacher shared an opinion about a student or gave a placement suggestion for a student. During my observation of the placement team meeting, even with the sending or receiving teacher’s information, Mrs. Brandy sometimes placed a student with a teacher, contradicting the placement recommendation. Mr. Brock questioned Mrs. Brandy’s reasons for completing a placement in that manner. “She must have her own information,” Mr. Brock suggested, trying to figure out why the principal made the decisions.

Mrs. Lauren shared a similar example of Mrs. Brandy’s placements. At times, Mrs. Lauren felt Mrs. Brandy must “know more than she tells us”, placing students where she saw fit without sharing the details. Mrs. Lauren wondered if Mrs. Brandy avoided explanations “in order to avoid hurting the feelings of anyone on the team”. Mrs. Jeanette, a fellow third grade teacher, trusted Mrs. Brandy “to make decisions independently”, when necessary, for the betterment of everyone involved.

The movement of families and students during the summer months presented additional

challenges for the placement process at George Washington Elementary. As new students enrolled in the school during the summer months, Mrs. Brandy made placement decisions. She added new students to classes without the same careful consideration used by the placement team. These circumstances challenged the placement process. Mr. Brock stated, “Those new students add somewhat of a wild card,” as to how the community of learners will work and learn together in the fall.

Another challenge of the placement process at George Washington Elementary involved the intentional lack of parental involvement. Parents lacked opportunities to participate in the placement process, but sometimes parents possessed the best information about how to help their child find success in school. Mrs. Jeanette shared, “Parents sometimes discuss their concerns” for the next level placement with the sending teachers, but a formal process for parents to request or be involved in placement decisions did not exist. Avoiding parental requests and conflict likely assisted the school team in successfully creating heterogeneous classrooms of students, but at times parents might have known the placement with a teacher or students would not be ideal for the child.

The goal of the placement process at George Washington Elementary involved creating heterogeneous classrooms of learners and providing a positive learning community for the teacher and students. A team approach involving educational professionals focused on student success describes the placement process at George Washington Elementary School.

I next describe a different process used at King’s Elementary School involving primarily an individual decision making process by the school principal, Mr. Martin.

### **King's Elementary School**

Mr. Martin, the school principal, made student placement decisions by using the data available on student academic achievement, gender, and behavior. He analyzed the data and made placement decisions independent of teacher, specialist, or parent input. "It is a very important job," Mr. Martin commented, as he explained the process and his rationale behind placing students into next level classrooms at King's School.

The placement process started in May, when the "sending" teachers completed "student placement records" for each student, as required by the school district. Mr. Martin used the information from the student placement records and a school-generated spreadsheet listing the academic scores and progress for each student throughout the school year. Teachers met monthly during the school year to update the academic spreadsheet for their students. Mr. Martin identified the importance of the academic data. "We know the kids so much better," he explained. Mr. Martin coded students based on their academic performance, rating them as proficient, at risk, or possessing severe academic challenges on the school-generated spreadsheet.

Based on the academic information, Mr. Martin then examined student placement records and the gender of the students, "processed the data," and created classrooms of students for the following school year. He first divided students based on academic successes or challenges, as identified from the spreadsheet. Mr. Martin shared examples of what he considered as he reviewed the student data, "Sometimes it is possible to group kids with specific learning challenges in the same class, in order to better use paraprofessional resources". He considered student needs and teacher expertise. "I take what I know about the kids and the teachers," Mr.

Martin shared, as he explained the process of creating next level classes.

After he considered academic abilities of students, Mr. Martin divided them among the next level classrooms and then reviewed student behaviors, balancing classrooms by distributing students with high number of behavior needs with students who consistently behaved well.

During the school year, grade level teams met monthly to discuss student behavior concerns.

The teams recorded and kept the information on file. Mr. Martin reviewed the records as he completed the placement process. Mr. Martin considered gender balance and adjusted the class lists to ensure approximately the same number of boys and girls appeared on classroom lists.

Mr. Martin did not encourage parent requests. He included a note in the school newsletter, asking parents to refrain from requesting a next level teacher. However, if a parent had a strong concern, Mr. Martin allowed parents to submit their concern in writing to the principal's office. Mr. Martin reported he received approximately 30-40 requests. He received most requests from families Mr. Martin identified as "experienced families": these included families with older children and families with a prior connection to the community at King's School. Mr. Martin reviewed parent requests and concerns, but did not necessarily grant them in the placement process.

Although teachers had a larger role in the placement process in the past, Mr. Martin believed teachers appreciated having one less thing "on their plate and to not have the classroom placement responsibility during the busy school year". Mr. Martin gave examples of teachers devoting large amounts of time to creating classroom placements in the past. "Teachers spent time on the lists and then there were major changes. The lists were always evolving. It wasted

teachers' time and they lost their trust [in the process].”

Mr. Martin completed the student placement process at King School during the summer months. Students and teachers learned about placement decisions on the Sunday evening before the first week of school. Mr. Martin made the final placement information available to parents and students by posting the class lists on the school doors at 10:00 p.m. on Sunday evening.

“Regardless of the time of day, teachers, parents and families are waiting at the school to see the classroom placements,” Mr. Martin commented. Mr. Martin waited until the start of the school year to announce placements, not wanting parents, students or teachers to request changes.

Student academic achievement, student gender and student behavior provided the data used by Mr. Martin to divide students into next level classrooms. He based his decisions on academic ability, gender and behavioral data, distributing students evenly into heterogeneous classrooms with some exceptions to facilitate effective use of personnel.

### **Placement Successes**

Mr. Martin believed the placement process proved effective at King's Elementary because concrete data affected placement decisions. Miss Lillie, a first grade teacher at King's Elementary, agreed, “The process is less stressful for teachers because we just compile our data like we normally would.” Mrs. Lana, another first grade teacher at King's Elementary, believed classroom placements became easier or more simplified as children grew, “It is easier when kids get to third or fourth grade because we have had four years to get to know them.” This extra information resulted in better decision making for next level placements.

Mr. Martin established a placement process without the personal influence of teachers

during the decision making process. He believed this benefitted teachers because it saved them time needed to create next level class placements. When teachers previously invested in the process, the class lists changed significantly during the summer months when new students enrolled in the school. Mr. Martin explained that when he engaged teachers in the process and the class lists changed, teachers felt as if they had wasted time creating the original lists. They lost trust in the principal when the lists changed without their input during the summer months.

Miss Lillie and Mrs. Lana trusted Mr. Martin and his role in the placement process. Mrs. Lana shared, “We still feel like we are involved, because we are filling out all the data”. Miss Lillie agreed, “It seems to go very smoothly on our end.” The student record cards provided “objective” data used to make decisions. Miss Lana felt confident Mr. Martin had the information needed to successfully place students in next level classrooms. “We give all our data to the principal, and then he places the students. Now that the principal has all the academic data on the spreadsheet, that really helps,” said Miss Lana.

As new students enrolled at King’s Elementary during the summer months, Mr. Martin used similar academic data to make placement decisions at King’s Elementary School. Mr. Martin explained this allowed him to balance classrooms effectively because data determined placement decisions, and uniform data allowed him to make effective decisions.

### **Placement Challenges**

The placement process at King’s Elementary also faced challenges. One of the obstacles with the current placement process at King’s Elementary involved the limitations of the three data sets used to place students. Limited data failed to tell the whole story about young students.

“You never really know how it will work until you get the new group of kids together in class,” Mrs. Lana observed. Mr. Martin did not know many of the students on a personal level and made placement decisions based nearly entirely on academic, gender and IEP data. Mr. Martin possessed limited information on the personality type of a specific student or knowledge about student learning styles. Mrs. Lana discussed the importance of “sending” teachers including as much written information as possible on the student record cards. However, depending on the teacher, teachers submitted varying amounts of information.

Mr. Martin reduced the extra teacher time commitment by taking over the placement process. However, teachers no longer used their professional judgment about a student to match students with ideal receiving teachers for the following year. Miss Lillie and Mrs. Lana felt mentally and emotionally removed from the placement process. Once they completed student placement records cards, they did not concern themselves with the placement of their current students for the following year.

The goal of the placement process at King’s Elementary involved creating heterogeneous classrooms of learners, dividing students equally among the receiving classrooms based on student academic achievement, student gender and student behavior data. While principals at George Washington and King’s Elementary avoided parent request for classroom “seats”, Mr. Gregory at Blue Elementary School encouraged it.

### **Blue Elementary School**

Mr. Gregory, the school principal at Blue Elementary School, allowed and encouraged parents to request the teacher for their child’s next level placement. Mr. Gregory fulfilled

requests from parents and placed students with teachers as desired by their parents. “If parents are going to be an active part of their child’s education, they also need to have the opportunity to help decide the teacher that will provide that education,” Mr. Gregory explained.

Mr. Gregory encouraged and honored parent requests for classroom placements, asking parents to submit requests at the end of the school year. “We want parent input,” Mr. Gregory stated. Mr. Gregory asked for written requests submitted to the school office. Parents could request a specific teacher for any reason, and Mr. Gregory typically granted the request. Mr. Gregory identified the type of parents typically submitting a request:

We have families; typically middle upper class, which have had prior relationships with the school. They may have older children that have already been a student at the school, or the family may have lived in the school neighborhood long enough to know the school and the teachers at the school.

After completing parent requests, classroom sending teachers, special education teachers and Mr. Gregory utilized the “student placement cards”, to provide academic, gender and behavioral data for each child. The placement team added any student not yet placed due to a parent request to a classroom, attempting to balance academic ability, student behavior, and gender. Mr. Gregory encouraged classroom sending teachers and special education teachers to collaborate to create the classroom placements with an attempt (as Mr. Gregory stated) not to “load up” one classroom.

After forming the first class lists, Mr. Gregory adjusted the classroom placements throughout the summer months as needed. The Blue School saw a high student turnover during the summer months. Approximately 30% of the student population changed before school began in the fall. The location of the school affected the high rate of change. Blue School, located, near a university and also a part of the city with a high number of apartment buildings,

experienced a mobile student population.

Mr. Gregory explained teachers at the Blue School changed from year to year due to a resident teacher program offered at the local university. The university placed three to seven resident teachers at the school each year. Resident teachers included first year teachers working full-time as classroom teachers, while also completing coursework toward a Masters degree in Education. So many novice teachers posed challenges.

Mr. Gregory identified the challenge of the resident teacher program, “It is sometimes difficult to place certain students in the classroom of a resident teacher.” For example, Mr. Gregory placed highly challenging students in the classroom of a veteran teacher, rather than a resident teacher. Mr. Gregory explained, “We want the best people to work with the toughest situations,” causing him to place challenging students with experienced teachers.

Teachers, students and families learned of the final classroom placements the day before school started in the fall. Mr. Gregory encouraged teachers to avoid placing student names on desks or lockers until after the first day of school, “because of changes that can occur even after the school year begins”. Although children rarely experienced a change in placement after the school year started, occasionally Mr. Gregory made adjustments to balance students and create heterogeneous classrooms.

Mr. Gregory allowed and encouraged parental involvement in their child’s education by requesting a next level teacher at Blue Elementary. Mr. Gregory fulfilled requests from parents and filled the classrooms with students based on the “seats” desired by parents. After he granted parent requests, sending teachers worked with Mr. Gregory to balance student academic ability,

gender and behavior, attempting to create heterogeneous classrooms for the following school year.

### **Placement Successes**

The placement process at Blue Elementary proved successful in many ways. Parents actively involved in their child's education, understood their child and sought teachers with skills to best support the child. Mrs. Tami, a kindergarten teacher at Blue Elementary, explained, "Parents often request a teacher that they are familiar with or a teacher that they have worked with in the past". She explained the process, "Parents send requests to the office. Parents write the name of the teacher they request at the top of the enrollment form. Sometimes parents included a reason for their request, but at other times, parents simply included the name of the teacher they wanted their child to work with the following year." Regardless of the reason for the request, Mr. Gregory explained parents making requests knew the Blue School well and had prior relationships with the teachers at the school.

Parents submitted a request and felt confident in the person they chose to be their child's teacher. Parents possessed positive attitudes, and were supportive of their child's educational experience. Mr. Gregory commented on the goal of having all parents involved in their child's education. In Mr. Gregory's opinion, "If parents are going to be an active part of their child's education, they also need to have the opportunity to help decide the teacher that will provide that education." Parents sought out ways to be involved in their child's learning and embraced the opportunity to select a teacher for their child.

## **Placement Challenges**

The placement process at Blue Elementary also exhibited challenges for the principal, teachers, students and families. According to Ms. Rachel, a first grade teacher at Blue School, parent requests for teachers made classrooms unbalanced, failing to create heterogeneous groupings. Ms. Rachel explained the challenge of creating heterogeneous classrooms after honoring a multitude of parent requests. Parents specifically requested teachers resulting in certain classrooms filled nearly to capacity after honoring parent requests. On the other hand, other classrooms with new or unknown teachers received few, if any, requests. Ms. Rachel provided an example of the current second grade classrooms. The second grade consisted of one male teacher and two female teachers. Many parents requested that their child be placed in the male teacher's classroom. Because of the high percentage of female teachers, the opportunity for a child to learn from a male teacher in elementary school proved desirable. The previous year, the principal placed 13 of the 18 students in the male teacher's classroom, to honor parent requests. When the principal granted all the requests for the male teacher's classroom, the action compromised the goal of heterogeneous classrooms at Blue Elementary.

Mrs. Bailey, a second grade teacher at Blue Elementary, discussed how teachers attempted to evenly balance students in next level classrooms, based on gender, academic ability and behavior. "We try to even out the groups, meeting academic needs and behavior needs. But, it doesn't always work out that way. If parents have a request, there should be a good reason," Mrs. Bailey commented. Mr. Gregory disrupted the creation of heterogeneous classroom groups when he granted parents' requests. The goal of balancing gender, academic ability and student

behaviors between the next-level classrooms proved impossible when granting all parent requests.

Parents advocated for some students' next-level placement, researching teacher personality types and skills to best serve their child. However, other students did not have a parent involved in requesting a teacher leaving them to fill in the gaps during the placement process. Students without a parent request found themselves placed in the classroom of a teacher not well known or well liked, because the classroom had not already been filled by parent requests. Mrs. Tami observed that during the placement process, "sending" teachers had specific ideas about where they would like to place their students, however, teachers had to place students based on availability, instead of with the teacher best suited for each student. Mrs. Rachel spoke about her experiences with placing students, "If you think that they are kind of a needy kid, as far as academics, my thought is that I always try to give them to a seasoned teacher. Then I know that they will continue to get really good reading instruction." The opportunity for "sending" teachers to plan for students' next level placement followed the first priority of granting parent requests at Blue Elementary.

Parent requests for a teacher affected a child's learning opportunities. It also affected a teacher's perception of themselves and their colleagues. Mrs. Rachel commented, "I just hate it. I hate that," regarding the opportunity for parents to drive the placement process through requests. "We wish it were different and that we could talk to the parents and tell them that their request maybe isn't a good fit for the child," Mrs. Rachel said. A teacher thought to be highly qualified and successful in her teaching career received many requests. A teacher assumed to be

less skilled at her job or less successful with her students did not receive requests. Mrs. Rachel shared her frustration with not receiving many parent requests for her classroom, “Sometimes parents won’t request me, because they heard maybe one thing that happened in twenty-two years of teaching.” Mrs. Rachel has taught at Blue School for many years, yet the community did not view her as one of the highly qualified or accomplished teachers. Mrs. Rachel’s class became a group of “left-overs”; students that needed a placement after parent requests filled other classrooms. Mrs. Rachel wondered, “Oh why didn’t they pick me.” Student placement became a popularity contest for teachers, with the teacher receiving the most requests assumed to be the best.

The placement process at Blue Elementary attempted to create heterogeneous classrooms of learners with students divided equally among the receiving classrooms. However, parent requests dominated the placement process. After completing parent requests, the principal and the “sending” teachers sought to heterogeneously balance the classroom communities by dividing the remaining students between the classrooms. Mrs. Tami explained, “We converse as a team, so that a classroom isn’t all stacked. We all come to the meeting with it kind of how we would like, where we see these kids going. Does this student go to Teacher A or Teacher B? We just kind of look at their teaching styles with the way the student learns and what will work best.” Mrs. Rachel commented, “It’s not a scientific thing, believe me, it’s just ‘we’ll see how it goes’.”

During the summer months, the principal and secretary changed class lists as new students enrolled in the school, providing additional challenges for the placement process. Mrs.

Rachel observed, “It’s frustrating. Things get shuffled in the office and new kids come in. We should not let the secretary have that power, because she isn’t an educator. And the principal too, needs to know the kids better and should trust the judgment of the teachers sending them.” As class lists evolved during the summer months, the placement process continued with teachers removed from placement decisions. The principal completed final class placement decisions, just before school began in the fall.

Parent requests dominated the placement process at Blue Elementary. After granting requests, the “sending” teachers and school principal attempted to create heterogeneous communities of student learners. Mr. Gregory wanted parents to be actively involved in their child’s education, yet teachers experienced frustration by the lack of control in creating positive learning opportunities for all students.

### **Summary**

The placement processes at George Washington Elementary, King’s Elementary and Blue Elementary proved varied and unique. The school district utilized “student placement records” to provide the general format for classroom placements, but the individual principal at each school established the specific process and plan for classroom placements. Reading levels and academic achievement, gender, and whether students received special education services, influenced student placement decisions, and ultimately, the composition of the class. Teacher expertise and experience, parent requests and student mobility also dominated placement decisions. The level of priority for each of the placement factors varied based on the principal’s established placement plan. The unique decision-making processes at each school affected the

goal of achieving heterogeneous classes for the next school year. The individual personalities and diverse educational beliefs of the three principals guided the use of placement factors and the entire placement process at each school.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS

Principals and teachers in all three elementary schools included in this elementary placement case study described a variety of influential factors affecting the placement of students into classes for the next grade level. All three schools used the following data to inform placement decisions, including (1) results from reading and mathematics achievement tests, (2) lists of students sorted by gender, and (3) teacher anecdotal reports of students with behavioral challenges requiring higher levels of support and/or class management. However, other factors also affected the placement decisions made by elementary principals, changing the distribution of students into heterogeneous classes based on the importance assigned to additional factors.

Additional factors affecting placement decisions included, (4) parent requests, (5), students receiving special education services, (6) areas of teacher specialization serving students with unique characteristics and needs, (7) student mobility (largely late registrants), (8) prior history and relationships between teachers and families (favorable or unfavorable), (9) teacher experience/mobility (novice teachers or new employee), and (10) principal “insider” knowledge and judgment regarding individual teacher characteristics and performance (generally made without explanation to teacher or placement team). The relative weight of factors combined varied based on principal values and also special conditions affecting individual schools.

For example, a belief in parental involvement may result in a principal placing higher priority on parent requests instead of evenly distributing students into classes based on student achievement test results. A special condition affecting a school might involve a high rate of student mobility or the lack of resources to meet a variety of student needs. While all three

principals agreed with the goal of diverse students placed in heterogeneous classes, other beliefs and practical realities affected their decisions.

Table 2

*Factors Affecting Student Placement Decisions*

Factors	George Washington Elementary	King Elementary	Blue Elementary
Achievement Data	X	X	X
Student Behavioral Data (Requires Higher Levels of Support and/or Class Management)	X	X	X
Gender	X	X	X
Special Education Services	X	X	X
Parent Requests			X
Teacher Specialization	X		
Student Mobility		X	
Teacher Experience (Novice teachers)			X

Prior History and Relationship with a Teacher	X	
Principal Knowledge and Judgment	X	X

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The above table illustrates how the research schools selected and also distinctively emphasized different factors in the placement process. George Washington Elementary considered the most factors when making placement decisions, incorporating seven of the ten factors in the placement process. Student mobility and principal judgment affect decisions at King's Elementary. The principal at Blue Elementary also considered teacher experience to decide next level placements. Although King's Elementary and Blue Elementary considered the same number of placement factors, several factors served unique roles at each school.

### **Principal Perspectives, Organizational Frameworks, and Placement Decisions**

The student placement processes at George Washington, King and Blue Elementary worked in different ways because of the unique organizational structures operating at each school. Principal perceptions regarding the variables affecting enrollment and their response may be examined using Bolman and Deal's (2008) four organizational frames. The four frames, structural, human resource, political and symbolic, illustrate alternative ways to view how individuals and schools functioned within each school community (Bolman & Deal, 2008). A frame describes a set of ideas or assumptions possessed by an individual within an organization. The dominant or preferred frame offers a perspective of reality and an implied theory for action.

For example, the structural frame emphasizes efficient and effective practices to reach high levels of productivity (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Principals adopting this perspective view the school as a system and emphasize effective allocation of human and capital resources. Bolman and Deal (2008) emphasized “framing” and “reframing”, using multiple perspectives to think about “what’s really going on” and considering alternative approaches to leadership. I next describe and apply dominant frames to analyze the actions and decisions of three principal in making student placement decisions. The frame adopted shows how principal perspectives affect this process and decisions. I end this section with a description regarding how principal values and perspectives may be understood from the symbolic frame, interpreting how meaning and values influenced their action.

### **King Elementary and The Structural Frame**

The structural frame focuses on goals, specialized roles and formal relationships within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). In the structural frame, an organization allocates specific responsibilities to its participants. Mr. Martin, King’s elementary principal, adopted the structural frame as his preferred decision making method. Mr. Martin emphasized using data to make decisions and established data collection routines and analysis to create next level classroom placements. Structural leaders in the organization create rules, policies and procedures to coordinate diverse activities into a unified strategy (Bolman & Deal, 2008). At King’s Elementary, Mr. Martin required sending teachers to record academic and behavioral data for the students. Sending teachers did not provide opinions or input for next level placements for their students. Mr. Martin used classroom data to place students, attempting to balance academic

skills and student behaviors to create heterogeneous classrooms of students.

Leaders adopting the structural frame believe formal plans and arrangements work together to minimize problems within an organization, maximizing performance and organizational success (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Mr. Martin viewed the effective distribution of students, based on student data, as a way to promote successful next level classrooms.

According to the structural frame, organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives, and when organizations create a clear division of labor, increased efficiency results (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Mr. Martin regarded the distribution of students as a method of effectively utilizing teacher and student resources, and approached this task using the structural frame.

The structural frame provides the blueprint for formal expectations and processes within the organization, coordinating workers in a hierarchical and rules-orientated work environment (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Mr. Martin coordinated the learning needs of students by going with the numbers and placing data scores as the most essential factor in classroom placements.

Two issues, differentiation and integration, dominate the structural frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Organizations work to differentiate, creating a variety of specialized roles, to be filled by individuals within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). At King's Elementary, Mr. Martin used student data to understand the learning needs of different students and to place students in heterogeneous classrooms. This resulted in classrooms of students that exhibited a heterogeneous mix of students with regard to academic and behavioral data, but Mr. Martin disregarded placement factors, such as student mobility, teacher specializations, prior history and relationships between teachers and families and parent requests.

Organizations in stable environments typically require less complex structures (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The educational environment of King's Elementary remained fairly stable from year to year. The goal of creating heterogeneous classrooms of learners stayed constant. However, the needs of specific students and teachers changed from year to year and the changing environment required a flexible structure. Another principal, Mrs. Brandy, primarily embraced the human resource frame to make placement decisions (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Mrs. Brandy used the human resource frame to establish a practice of placing individual students in favorable environments to facilitate student learning.

### **George Washington and the Human Resource Frame**

The human resource frame focuses on how characteristics of organizations and people shape what they can do for each other (Bolman & Deal, 2008). People skills, attitudes, and their commitment serve organizations, just as an organization can be energizing and rewarding for individuals (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The human resource frame dominated the placement procedures at George Washington Elementary.

The human resource frame assumes organizations exist to serve human needs (Bolman & Deal, 2008). People and organizations need each other and a good fit between an organization and an individual benefits both the organization and the individual (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Mrs. Brandy established a placement team of educators at George Washington Elementary, empowering individuals to work together to create effective communities of learners. During the placement process at George Washington Elementary, the educator team selected specific teachers to work with certain students because of a teacher's individual expertise or past

experience. The placement team also considered student strengths and deficiencies, matching students with teachers and classroom communities to most effectively meet the learning and behavioral needs of students.

Organizations focused on the human resource frame strive to hire the right people and to retain those individuals within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The placement team discussed the “receiving” teachers’ strengths in detail, identifying ways in which the receiving teacher might work effectively with a specific student. The receiving teachers shared ideas and opinions throughout the placement process, identifying families they had previously worked with and children they would like to work with the following year. The placement team valued the knowledge and opinions of the receiving teachers. The human resource frame emphasizes ways to empower employees and invests in them (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Teachers at George Washington felt vested in the placement process, working as education professionals to provide optimal learning opportunities for all students.

When an individual worker finds satisfaction in his or her work, the organization profits from the effective use of talent and skills (Bolman & Deal, 2008). At George Washington Elementary, teacher experiences and expertise affected decisions made throughout the placement process. Success within the organization depends on the quality of interpersonal relationships between individual employees and the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). As the teachers at George Washington felt valued by the school organization, they offered talents and skills to positively affect students and the school. This created classroom communities emphasizing students and their learning needs. Discussion of how to foster personal growth for students

dominated daily instruction.

Mrs. Brady used the human resource frame to gain value from employee input and build ownership for decisions. However, Mr. Gregory, principal of Blue Elementary, primarily adopted the political frame to guide placement decisions, responding to his constituents and pursuing his value of parental involvement (Bolman & Deal, 2008). I describe this next.

### **Blue Elementary and the Political Frame**

Mr. Gregory, principal of Blue Elementary, focused on building relationships with parents, encouraging parents to be involved in their child's education and providing opportunities to request a favored teacher for their child's next level placement. The political frame addresses the process of making decisions and allocating resources with issues of scarcity and divergent interests within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Operating within the political frame, leaders build coalitions, negotiate with employees, set agendas, and map the political terrains to manage conflict and distribute resources (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Mr. Gregory established coalitions with parents, encouraging them to be actively involved in their child's education. He allowed and encouraged parents to select their child's next level teacher. Parents, and indirectly students (represented by their parents) served as political contestants, vying for seats with favored teachers.

Organizations serve as arenas for political contests with active political players seeking to achieve individual agendas and gain control (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Parents at Blue Elementary entered the arena by requesting next level teachers for their children based on personal or political information. Parents used personal knowledge and experience to request teachers.

Sometimes parents positively view their child's experience with a teacher and requested the same teacher work with a younger sibling. Parents also requested teachers based on their reputation, using a report within the community of a certain teacher being highly qualified or talented as the reason for their request. The gender of the teacher also became part of the political arena. Parents requested a male teacher for their child because of the rare opportunity to have their children experience a male classroom teacher in elementary school.

Parent requests dominated the classes of some teachers at Blue Elementary. Other teachers received few, if any requests. When requesting parents vied for the same highly sought teachers and Mr. Gregory assigned students based on these requests as a top priority, an unequal (non-heterogeneous) distribution of students resulted. After honoring parent requests, Mr. Gregory and the sending teachers worked to heterogeneously divide and distribute the remaining students. The opportunity to create heterogeneous classes of students became compromised after filling the high number of parent requests with favored teachers.

Goals and decisions within the organization emerge from bargaining and negotiation among competing employees in the political frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Requests for highly favored teachers caused conflict at Blue Elementary, primarily for the teachers receiving few, if any, parent requests. Teachers lacking parent requests felt less important, desired and/or talented in the teaching community. This caused resentment and increased competition among employees, adversely affecting teacher morale and school culture.

While highly requested teachers earned status and power within the community, less favored and requested employees felt diminished. Mr. Gregory ignored the conflict created by

parent requests and placed the ultimate value on parental power and decision making in their child's education. Parents requested the mostly highly qualified and successful teachers for their children. Individuals who gained and used power become the "winners" in organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The power belonged to the parents and students at Blue Elementary with insider information, resulting in favorable placements. Power parents accessed the most qualified teachers in the competition for scarce resources. Favored teachers received students who benefited from parents actively involved in their child's education. The parents understood the importance of advocating for their child's next level teacher and also involved themselves in their child's education throughout the school year. Teachers lacking parent requests worked with more disadvantaged families, already lacking insider information and in some cases, educational resources based on their eligibility for free and reduced lunch. Parental parents using insider knowledge gave some students an unearned advantage in the placement process.

The structural, human resource and political frames describe the unique placement processes at each of the three research schools. Each school also utilized the symbolic frame as a secondary factor to guide next level classroom placements. I next describe how the symbolic frame revealed hidden values and meaning associated with principal perspectives and beliefs.

### **The Symbolic Frame: George Washington, King and Blue Elementary**

The symbolic frame emphasizes how humans make sense of their world, and includes the central themes of meaning, belief and faith, and favored ways of solving problems based on a shared culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The principals of all three schools created next-level

placement processes based on their (1) individual beliefs and ideas about leadership in their role as principal, and also (2) the principles and practices associated with effective or quality education. For example, one principal may value efficiency and objective use of data, while another principal may argue parental choice fosters greater family involvement in education. The symbolic frame contains several core assumptions. The first of these assumptions explains that what is most important is not what happens, but what it means to people within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Symbols help to identify the culture of an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). These symbols include values, actions, rituals, and ceremonies to support the culture within the organization. The symbolic frame focuses on the appearance of the organization and promoting belief in organizational values (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Different values informed the selection of dominant organizational frames as viewed through a symbolic lens. I describe how principal beliefs and values influenced the decision making as a “secondary” frame used to make or support decisions.

Mrs. Brandy, principal of George Washington Elementary, organized a team process to make next level placements. Believing in empowerment and democratic decision-making, Mrs. Brady valued teacher input and professionalism in making student placement decisions. Her emphasis on professionalism earned the trust of faculty members, and also resulted in more thoughtful and individualized student placement decisions.

Events have multiple meanings because individual cultures of people understand and interpret situations differently, and it is those different cultures that unite people within the same

culture and hold an organization together. (Bolman & Deal, 2008). At Blue Elementary, the process of securing parental requests yearly served as a event symbolizing the importance of parent involvement in their child's education. The event and practice revealed how the principal (and school) valued parental participation and choice to foster student academic success, The principal symbolically formed school partnerships with parents and families through the parental request system.

The culture of an organization, revealed through its symbols, includes rituals and ceremonies (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Mr. Martin, principal of King's Elementary, created a symbol of equality as he created next level classroom placements based on "objective" academic and behavioral data. King's Elementary documented the development of heterogeneous, next-level classrooms by distributing students equally using student gender, academic and behavioral scores. Mr. Martin acted as a neutral and objective next-level placement coordinator as he divided students into classroom communities, basing his decisions on each student's individual academic and behavioral data. The placement process at King's Elementary avoided favoritism for specific students. Each student obtained equal consideration based on individual scores. Mr. Martin also valued the time of the teachers at King's Elementary. He did not ask teachers to spend additional time beyond their teaching day to create next-level placements. After teachers submitted student data, Mr. Martin completed classroom placements during the summer months.

The four frames, structural, human resource, political and symbolic, affected decision-making processes. These frames guided next level placement processes within the three research schools and they affected the student placement process in different ways. The structural frame

dominated student placement decisions at King's Elementary. Mrs. Brandy focused next level placement decisions using the human resource frame at George Washington Elementary. The political frame drove student placement decisions through parent requests for Mr. Gregory at Blue Elementary.

At King's Elementary, Mr. Martin valued an efficient and effective next level placement process. In order to achieve this, he used concrete achievement data, behavioral data and student gender data. The structural frame provided the organizational structure that he desired to avoid favoritism, establish equality for students and create heterogeneous classrooms of next level students.

The human resource frame supported Mrs. Brandy's organizational goals at George Washington Elementary. Mrs. Brandy empowered teachers to work together to create effective next level placements that would provide optimal learning opportunities for each individual student. Throughout the placement process, the placement team matched specific student needs with next level teacher strengths and areas of expertise.

Parent involvement and satisfaction guided the political placement process at Blue Elementary. Mr. Gregory encouraged parents to be involved in the placement process, selecting the teacher that they felt would best match their child's learning needs. This opportunity for parental choice helped Mr. Gregory to build relationships with parents and avoid conflict with parents in the community.

The placement processes at the three research schools supported students and teachers in different ways. Each of the principals intended to create heterogeneous classrooms of students,

however, other factors affected placement decisions. Placement processes and decisions affected student learning and educational needs in both positive and negative ways. I next analyze my findings using critical pedagogy, a theory describing teaching and learning practices designed to raise the learner's critical consciousness regarding oppressive social conditions (Coates, 2007). I adopted this theory after examining how the placement process adversely affected individual students in their fight for social justice, despite the well-intentioned efforts used by principals and teachers in three schools.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy serves as the first step of a larger political struggle to challenge and transform oppressive social conditions to create a more egalitarian society (Freire, 1970). The placement processes at King's and Blue Elementary Schools lacked awareness regarding how certain classroom placements affected students and their understanding of the world around them. The placement decisions at King's Elementary followed the structural frame, focusing on academic and behavioral data, ignoring the personal and social consequences of labeling students by accomplishment or behavioral challenges. The placement process at King's Elementary advocated for an equal distribution of data scores within each next level classroom, but did not address more specific student learning needs encountered by disadvantaged students, such as the need of matching individual students with skilled teachers to address specific learning needs.

Parent requests dominated classroom placements at Blue Elementary, allowing only certain students to receive careful placement consideration. This happened indirectly through parental requests. Highly requested teachers received classrooms dominated by students with

involved parents, giving students unearned advantage. Parents sought teachers because they were known to be especially talented or experienced. Other novice teachers or less talented teachers received fewer parent requests, creating classroom communities of students with less powerful parents, adversely affecting their chances for a quality education. This unequal distribution of students affected the heterogeneous mix of next level classrooms, creating classroom communities for the privileged, and assigning disadvantaged students to less capable or frequently, inexperienced teachers.

Critical pedagogy empowers individuals to see the specific ways in which class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality and age cause them to think less of their individual and collective selves (Allen, 2004). The human resource frame utilized by George Washington Elementary adopted a critical pedagogy stance, making student and teacher matches to benefit the learning needs of individuals. As advocates for the success of all concerned, the process fostered social justice within classes and the entire school. The placement team created classroom communities after considering the whole child, including individual student learning needs within a group of students using information beyond achievement and behavioral data and gender. The placement team reflected on the academic and behavioral needs of each student, but also considered each student's position in the classroom community and the factors favoring their success.

Every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice are politically contested spaces (Kincheloe, 2008). The placement team at George Washington Elementary recognized the multitude of factors that affect a child's learning and therefore considered critical

pedagogy themes throughout the placement process. The placement team sought to create next-level classroom communities that would provide a solid education for each student, with justice and equality (Kincheloe, 2008). Throughout the placement process, teachers were asked to act in a way that would push the students to new levels of social and cognitive achievement (Kincheloe, 2008). At times, teachers at George Washington Elementary unintentionally considered critical pedagogy with regards to next level placements, selecting an appropriate next-level classroom for each individual child as they considered the whole child and the placement that would serve that child best.

According to Freire, an effective education focuses on the development of critical consciousness (Evans, 2008). This critical consciousness enables learners to recognize the connections between their individual problems and the social contexts in which they are embedded (Evans, 2008). The teachers on the placement team at George Washington Elementary established heterogeneous next-level classrooms. These classroom communities provided students with the opportunity to expand their individual critical consciousness. As students entered the next-level placement with immature and naïve thinking, within the diverse learning community they could rethink their own ideas and assumptions, bringing about the possibility of change (Freire, 1970). This provided the beginning of real consciousness (Freire, 1970).

The placement processes at King's Elementary and Blue Elementary each considered specific aspects of each student (academic and behavioral data, as well as parent insight through parent requests), but the processes lacked intent to focus on the whole child, therefore creating

classrooms of students deficient in the heterogeneous classroom goal. Without a heterogeneous classroom community, students lacked essential opportunities to increase individual critical consciousness, the reconsidering of their own previous understandings and ideas (Freire, 1970). If the optimal development of an individual's capabilities is restricted, that person is not free to reach his or her full potential (Coates, 2007). When next-level classroom placement procedures created non-heterogeneous learning communities, the opportunity for all students to grow in individual critical consciousness was denied.

The principals at George Washington Elementary, King's Elementary and Blue Elementary did not create placement processes with the intent to focus on critical pedagogy and the goal of critical consciousness for all students. Yet, the process for next-level placements at George Washington Elementary supported social justice and an education rich in critical pedagogy.

### **Summary**

I analyzed placement procedures and results using four organizational frames: structural, human resource, political and symbolic (Bolman & Deal, 2008). I described ways in which the three schools in this comparative case study functioned, including the decision-making processes and the effects of their decisions on students and faculty. The frames reveal the assumptions made by principals regarding the purpose and method for making placements. While all three schools shared the same goal, placing students in heterogeneous groups, their beliefs and methods produced substantially different results.

The data and subsequent analysis reveal a factor largely ignored in the literature, the

placement process involves more than simply “student achievement data” to make informed and sensitive placements. Other complex and dynamic factors affecting placement decisions, including parent requests, student mobility, teacher expertise, and principals’ knowledge and judgment about teachers and students entered into the decision-making process.

King’s Elementary primarily utilized the structural frame for next level placement decisions. Blue Elementary made next level placements through parent requests, granting parents a role in the political school system. The human resource frame guided placements at George Washington School and resulted in student placement within a larger social justice framework. Instead of distributing students merely on achievement data, conversations regarding student needs, strengths, and learning styles also entered the conversation. Placement decisions affect student learning and the frame adopted greatly affects the composition of next-level classroom communities. I summarize my study and describe the implications for practice in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

I investigated next level placement processes used at three different elementary schools located in the same school district. I interviewed school administrators and teachers, seeking to understand the process used to make placement decisions and individual perceptions of the process. I also evaluated the results of the decision-making processes used at three schools to determine the degree to which the process resulted in establishing the desired heterogeneous classrooms. I summarize my findings and then discuss the implications of my findings on professional practice. I also recommend changes in the placement process and areas for further research.

I first describe the factors considered by three schools in making placement decisions. I then follow with a description of how individual schools prioritized the relative merit and weight of these factors in the placement process and its effects on class composition. Finally, I describe how principal beliefs and unique school circumstances affected the process and decisions made in determining next level placements.

The school administrators and teachers at George Washington, King and Blue Elementary Schools identified the goal of creating heterogeneous classrooms of learners. However, a close examination of the factors considered and their relative weight reveals how principal beliefs about placement and effective conditions for student learning affected placement decisions and results.

### **Class Placement Factors and Decision-Making Processes**

All three research schools used student achievement data, student behavior data and student gender to make classroom placement decisions. However, the schools placed priority on unique factors during the placement process. At George Washington Elementary, individual

students were placed in next-level classrooms based on holistic learning needs. The placement team balanced the individual academic and behavior needs of each student with the skills and expertise of the receiving teachers. At King Elementary, student academic and behavior data drove placement decisions. Students received their next-level placement based on data recorded in their previous years of education. Parent requests dominated placement decisions at Blue Elementary. After fulfilling parent requests, academic and behavior data helped decide the placements for the remaining students.

The next-level placement process at George Washington Elementary created classrooms of young learners, taking into account the individual learning and behavioral needs of each student. School professionals considered specific student and teacher combinations, seeking to match the learners with an ideal classroom community. Coordinating the learning needs of students with the teaching styles and areas of expertise of the teachers proved effective in the placement process, however, the process appeared to interfere with creating a true heterogeneous mix of students. This occurred for a variety of reasons. First, the placement team only considered students currently enrolled in the school. During the summer months, as new students enrolled, they became members of already established classroom communities, adding unknown personalities and learning needs. The principal, Mrs. Brandy, occasionally added students to a specific classroom without explanation during the placement process. She seemed to have specific reasons for a student's placement affecting the heterogeneity of the classroom community. Finally, the placement team focused on relationships first. The team considered how teachers and students would work and learn together, matching each student's academic scores and behavior abilities with the teacher best qualified to meet the student learning needs. The heterogeneity of classroom communities proved secondary to the goal of effectively

matching learning personalities with teaching style and expertise.

At King's Elementary, Mr. Martin relied on student academic and behavioral data to decide classroom placements. Children received next-level placements based on their current achievement data. This process of next-level placements focused on numbers and the equal distribution of students' abilities across the next-level classrooms. As new students moved to the school, the principal considered their academic and behavioral data to equally distribute student abilities and behavioral needs. The placement process at King's Elementary created heterogeneous classroom communities based on available academic and behavioral data. However, young student learners often lacked large amounts of individual recorded data, limiting Mr. Martin's ability to accurately know and understand each student's next-level classroom needs. Mr. Martin failed to engage teachers in a discussion, creating a missing link between a student's unrecorded academic and behavioral challenges and successes in the classroom. This lack of teacher input during the placement process affected next-level placements. Mr. Martin successfully utilized gender, academic and behavioral data to create next-level placements, however unwritten student data affected the heterogeneity of next-level classrooms.

At the final school, Blue Elementary, parent requests dominated the placement process. Mr. Gregory encouraged parental involvement in their child's education by allowing parents to choose their child's next-level teacher. These prioritized requests created challenges for the principal and sending teachers as they attempted to balance gender, academic abilities and student IEPs to create heterogeneous classrooms of students for the next-level placement. Parent requests compromised the heterogeneity of classroom communities at Blue Elementary.

The principals held specific beliefs regarding the best practice for creating next-level classrooms. At George Washington Elementary, Mrs. Brandy encouraged professional

conversation and collaboration among the teaching professionals. The best education for students occurs matching students with a teacher whose experience and expertise match the student's needs. The placement team at George Washington Elementary included a diverse group of teachers with a broad base of knowledge, working together to effectively match students with teachers to create positive learning communities for the following school year.

Mr. Martin, the principal at King Elementary, depended on sending teachers to provide accurate student data. After submitting the data, Mr. Martin excused teachers from the placement process, believing teacher time could be utilized in better ways. Mr. Martin utilized academic and behavior data to heterogeneously divide students among the next-level classrooms, believing the best education for children comes from learning in a diverse classroom. Data proved essential for Mr. Martin.

At Blue Elementary, Mr. Gregory focused on the knowledge and opinions of parents, giving parents the top priority in the placement process. Mr. Gregory encouraged sending teachers to be involved in the placement process as well, but only after parents had completed their requests. This method provided parents with an active role in their child's education. A child's best education occurs with a positive and supportive family structure. However, teachers carried differing opinions on the process, depending on if they were a "requested" or "non-requested" teacher and students without a parent request filled in the gaps for the next-level placements.

All of the schools attempted to create heterogeneous classrooms of students, but when the placement process occurred, sometimes other factors took over. I next describe my recommendations based on the findings.

## **Recommendations**

This study identified the importance of the continued evaluation and assessment of student placement processes and the need for professional conversations to address this complex issue. Many universal factors affect the placement of students in elementary classrooms, some of which include; student academic abilities, student behaviors, parent requests, student gender, special education services, previous family history with a teacher, teacher experience, specialization and expertise and student mobility. Teachers and administrators must understand these factors and plan for how student placement decisions affect classroom diversity.

The task of creating heterogeneous classrooms seems nearly impossible, and perhaps, may not serve as the most desirable option. For example, teacher expertise and/or efficient use of limited resources for special needs students may prove equally valuable in delivering a quality education. I recommend education professionals consider which of the placement factors may prove most critical for placement decisions at their specific school, and create placement processes to consider those key factors as school priorities. Universal factors affect student placement decisions, however, placement factors affect specific schools in varying degrees. A more comprehensive and dynamic view of placement decisions should take place. Factors affecting student, teacher, and family relationships or delivery of special services deserve consideration.

Principals and teachers seek to create the best learning environment for all students. This type of learning can occur when leaders adopt a more holistic view regarding children, teachers and the entire school community. I recommend other data, beyond student behavioral and academic data, be considered to make sensitive placement decisions. Considering a student's record of past successes and challenges provides important information for the future.

I also suggest the knowledge of principals, sending teachers, receiving teachers, specialist teachers of music, physical education, and special education, and other specialties be included when considering next-level placements. The professionals working directly with children provide invaluable information and insight regarding student needs and their success.

I recommend that the ideas of parents for their child's next-level teacher be considered when relating to academic or behavior concerns. Parents can offer a unique perspective on their child's needs. However, I recommend parent requests be considered, not guaranteed. School professionals, evaluating the placement of individual students within the entire next-level placement process, should determine the final placement decisions based on a wide range of priorities for an effective education.

The cost of education and the scarcity of resources affect placement decisions. Principals may place students in next-level classrooms based on the resources available within that classroom, ignoring other placement concerns. I recommend principals and teachers focus on the learning and behavior needs of each individual student first, matching students with the classroom community best suited to a child's individual needs.

School administrators should consider teacher success throughout the placement process. Teachers must be able to use their experiences and areas of expertise to effectively teach students. Teacher experience, knowledge, and expertise should be used in the placement process, and considered when matching student needs with teacher strengths.

Overall, I recommend that the whole child be considered throughout the placement process, balancing individual concerns and potential success within the classroom community of learners. A heterogeneous classroom may not be the end result, but a classroom community best supporting teacher and student growth likely promotes an equitable and effective education.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study examined three elementary schools within the same school district. The placement processes at each of the schools proved unique. Further research at other schools, in other cities or states, would provide examples of effective or ineffective next-level placement processes. A study examining how next-level placements affect the behavioral growth and academic achievement of students within a classroom community would shed light on the importance of the next-level placement process.

### **Summary**

My interest in next-level classroom placements evolved throughout my career in education. During my first years as an elementary teacher, I understood next-level placements to be somewhat of a random event, believing student placements occurred randomly without sufficient knowledge. I now recognize the complexity in the placement process. Although not always identified, organizational theory and critical pedagogy theory dominate placement processes and next-level placement decisions. School professionals must work together to ensure individual student needs receive priority, while at the same time recognizing the complexity of accomplishing this task and the importance of the classroom community as a whole.

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# Appendix A



[Redacted]

*A Great Place to Grow and Learn!*



Mission Statement:  
To Provide Opportunities for All Students to Develop Their Maximum Potential

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

November 1, 2010

[Redacted]

To Whom It May Concern:

Laura Thorvilson has submitted the following research request, which was approved by [Redacted] Assistant to the Superintendent of the [Redacted] on August 27, 2010.

**Research Title:** Elementary Classroom Placement

**Description of Research:**

Laura Thorvilson will be studying classroom placement procedures. She will study how children are moved from 2nd grade to 3rd grade classrooms and the process and procedures that are used for those teacher/class placements. She will examine the procedures that are used in three different schools [Redacted] at one specific grade level. Laura will look at how the 2nd graders are placed into 3rd grade classrooms at three different schools - comparing the process at each school and the results of those classroom placements.

Three current principals, [Redacted] have agreed to allow Laura to look at the processes their schools use for classroom placement.

Participation by the principals and teachers is completely voluntary. This study will be a qualitative research study, so Laura will use interviews with the principals and teachers as her main research tool.

Laura Thorvilson will not have any direct contact with any students. She will not be using any identifying information (including school names, student names or teacher names) in any of her research.

Sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]

Assistant Superintendent

*Providing Equal Opportunities in Education and Employment*

## Appendix B

17209 300<sup>th</sup> Ave. SW  
Euclid, MN 56722  
DATE

Dear Educational Professional:

My name is Laura Thorvilson. I am a doctoral student at the University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis, MN. I will be conducting research on classroom placement procedures used in elementary schools in this school district. I would like to invite you to be a part of the study. I am asking you to participate because I believe that your knowledge and ideas about classroom placement would help me better understand classroom placement processes and procedures. The benefit to you of doing this study is that you may learn some new things about the processes and procedures used for classroom placements.

If you agree to participate in the study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Sign and date the consent form, indicating your agreement.
2. Allow me to interview you for approximately 30 minutes, regarding your experiences with classroom placement procedures at the school where you work.

Your involvement in this study will be confidential. Unless you share your involvement, I will be the only person that knows that you are participating in this study. Anytime I use the information that you give me, I will always identify you with a pseudonym. I would like your permission to digitally record the interview and take notes during the interview to remind me of specific ideas you shared. After I have finished this study, all of the recordings and notes will be destroyed.

You can decide not to participate in this study or stop participating at any time. This decision will not affect any future contact that you may have with me or with the University of St. Thomas.

I hope you are willing and interested in participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Laura Thorvilson

University of St. Thomas Doctoral Student

## Appendix C

### Principal Interview Questions

1. How many years have you served as a principal at this school? How many years have you served as a principal throughout your career?
2. Please explain the process that this school uses to complete student placement decisions for the elementary classroom assignments. What is your role in the placement process? What is the role of the teachers in the placement process? Are parents involved in the placement process? If so, how?
3. Is this a process that you have implemented or one that was in place prior to your tenure at this school?
4. Tell me about some of the benefits of the process used for student placement decisions.
5. Tell me about some of the challenges of the process that this school uses for student placement decisions.
6. In your opinion, how are teachers affected positively or negatively because of the process used for making student placement decisions?

7. In your opinion, how are various students (special needs, average or talent students) affected positively or negatively because of the process used in making student placement decisions?
  
8. Do you see the placement process at this school as an effective process or one that needs change? Explain your answer. If you would like to see change, what changes would you like to see?
  
9. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me, or anything that you think I should know about student placement?

## Appendix D

### Teacher Interview Questions “Sending Teachers”

1. How many years have you served as a teacher at this school? How many years have you served as a teacher throughout your career?
2. Please explain the process that this school uses to complete student placement decisions for the elementary classroom assignments. What is your role in the placement process? What is the role of the principal in the placement process? Are parents involved in the placement process? If so, how?
3. Tell me about some of the benefits of the process used for student placement decisions.
4. Tell me about some of the challenges of the process used for student placement decisions.
5. In your opinion, how are teachers affected positively or negatively because of the process used for making student placement decisions?
6. In your opinion, how are various students (special needs, average or talent students)

affected positively or negatively because of the process used in making student placement decisions?

7. Do you see the placement process at this school as effective or one that needs change?

Explain your answer. If you would like to see change, what changes would you like to see?

8. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me, or anything that you think I should know about student placement?

## Appendix E

### Teacher Interview Questions “Receiving Teachers”

1. Please tell me about the young learners in your classroom. What types of challenges do they face and how do those challenges affect your classroom community?
2. How are student learning and/or behavior challenges taken into account during the classroom placement process?
3. What was your knowledge of challenging students prior to them entering your classroom at the beginning of the year based on student behavior or academic records from previous school years?
4. What outside factors contribute to student challenges in the classroom?
5. Please help me code your students using assigned numbers and/or pseudonym. If a student requires a high amount of academic or behavior support in the classroom, please code the student as a “3”. If the student requires an average amount of academic or behavior support in the classroom, select a “2” rating. If the student requires a minimal amount of academic or behavior support in the classroom, please assign a “1”. Please share reasons for your reason for making this determination *as you assign a code to each student* using a classroom seating chart (and no

student names).

6. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me, or anything that you think I should know about student placement?