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## Successful Urban Adolescent Writers: A Study Of A Collaborative Model Of Teaching Writing

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SUCCESSFUL URBAN ADOLESCENT WRITERS: A STUDY OF A COLLABORATIVE  
MODEL OF TEACHING WRITING

by

ERIN J. MANDER  
B.A. Wheaton College, 2000  
M.S. Walden University, 2005

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education  
in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership  
in the College of Education  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, FL

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2012

Major Professor: Randall Hewitt

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## **ABSTRACT**

The goal of the research study was to explore the cognitive, social, and affective factors that contribute to the development of 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill. The central research question for this study was: How does a collaborative model of teaching writing prepares students for high achievement on Florida Writes? The researcher successfully answered this inquiry by asserting the following supporting questions: How does school culture impact teacher collaboration and student engagement in teaching writing? What is the relationship between engaging in a collaborative model of teaching writing and improvement of writing skill in middle level students?

The study determined how and why the writing skill was developed at an urban, rural middle school in a Central Florida School District. The rationale for completing research at Horizon Middle School was to provide an exemplar in the teaching of writing skill, a phenomenon. Horizon Middle School presented a learning community that was entrenched in the same challenging demographics, but distinctly showed a high level of academic achievement in writing. Instead of teaching through a formulaic, test-generated approach, students learned through discovery, personal relationship, and engagement. Not only did 97% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students passed the Florida Writes examination, but in the process of preparing for the standardized assessment was an embedded foundation laid for students and their future learning. The review of literature focused on: school culture, models of teaching at the middle level, models of teaching writing at the middle level and the standardization found within the FCAT Writes.

Data collection was completed through classroom observations, one-on-one interviews and participation in faculty meetings. Data analysis was completed by addressing each research

question through the conceptual framework. The study determined that this was a model for developing the writing skill for all middle level students, an exemplar within the field. Suggested uses for the study included the development of future studies focus on successful schools that were challenged by the same demographics and consideration of the partnership that Horizon had with the University of Central Florida as a model for other educational communities to consider.

I dedicate this endeavor to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It was His strength and mercy that sustained and guided me through this journey. The continued sacrifices made by educators abroad do not go unnoticed by Him.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to recognize a select group of individuals who provided wisdom, support and direction throughout this endeavor. First, I acknowledge with gratitude my parents and their value of education which has afforded me the opportunity to grow my heart and mind. Thank you also to the man that I respect and love the most here on Earth, my husband Jay. It was his unwavering loyalty and kindness that carried me through. Thank you also to my committee for their time and expertise, especially Dr. Carolyn Hopp. It was her unselfish resolve that taught me the meaning of a shared responsibility. I am eternally grateful for her willingness to pour into me as a professional and a person.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“I am an alien in my own classroom”, I said. One of the students piped up and responded, “What do you mean?” I stood there surefooted, tall and said, “You do not know me and I do not know you.” The students just sat there confused and worried that they did not understand what I wanted from them. What they did not know was that it was not that I wanted something different from them, but I wanted something different from the very profession that I called my own—teaching. I could not believe that I had just said it out loud, but it had been building. It was as is always the case when something is building in that the statement resonated with me, but seemed out of context for the audience. Isn’t it justifiable to finally say something to those that you care most about? Well, maybe not to students, I don’t know. It was like a mosquito bite that burns a little under the skin initially, but once scratched it becomes enflamed and the only way to ease the sensation is to continue itching.

It was the second week of 8<sup>th</sup> grade English in Orlando, Florida and my students knew what my class was about, essay writing. Better yet, it was FCAT writing. This year-long process of preparation would put all of my students in a place to succeed in this snapshot assessment that would define their writing progress for the year. We would work through each aspect of the five-paragraph essay. First, it was the infamous “hook”, knowing and teaching that every good writer starts with an interesting item to gain a reader’s interest. It seemed like a good tool; one that pushed students to think a little differently about how to start a piece of writing. Most students settled into something generic such as a question or quote that would bode well when compared to the state writing rubric. It seemed workable as I crossed one skill off my checklist of standards for the year and moved forward. Each part of the writing process went just this way. I would demonstrate with examples and non-examples, students would gain just enough of the skill to

prove proficient, then off to the next skill. I tried to make it interesting and not allow too much of my passion for life to get in the way of student progress. In looking back, it was teaching in this way that created that sense of “building” inside that I alluded to earlier.

As the class moved quickly through each part of my checklist, I always felt a separation of mind and heart. As a middle school student years earlier, I remember always feeling that the writing process was an open road, a place for all different kinds of vehicles even those that were rusted and slow. Writing was a place for self-discovery and reinvention. A place where no one could determine who you were or where you were going, but this understanding did not apply to what I was taught in college and certainly did not apply to the pressure that my students were under due to FCAT writing. For some reason, throughout teacher training this disconnect never seemed apparent until now. This was a wedge that splintered me from my learners. It appeared to be a splintering of not what is done for student learning, but what should or could be done for student learning.

The formula was clear and my target was set. High FCAT writing scores would hail me as an excellent teacher and my students as academic achievers. In the past, my students had scored well and I had been pleased that they were seen as top performers and I was seen as a top teacher. But, this year was different, something had been festering. Maybe it had been a couple years since I had starting teaching middle school students and what I had thought was initially endearing had worn off. Maybe I was burnt out; I knew that this was often the case of professionals in my field, especially in the state of Florida. Maybe I was not skilled enough in providing this type of test preparation for 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Maybe, maybe, maybe...

My heart and mind told me different. It was not that I could not corner another group of students into executing a specified set of formulaic writing skills or that I was just simply burnt

out from teaching. I loved my students and my profession—maybe that was a major part of the problem. Just as soon as I made this declaration to my students, the groundwork had been laid to discover another way of going about this teaching of writing. There had to be an alternative approach to teaching this precious gift of writing to students while achieving the same results. There had to be some way of making the writing process relevant, engaging, and authentic. I had reached a tipping point... a new crossing was on the horizon. What had begun as a proclamation (a loud, irritating itch) to my students had become a journey to understand the burning sensation under my skin. What I longed for was most succinctly addressed by Deborah Meier (1995) in saying, “What is needed is not just new information about teaching/learning, not just more course work, but a new way of learning about learning” (p. 140). In the context of my situation, to learn more about learning would mean that I would have to explore another middle school with a unique set of writing teachers that was supported by a different kind of culture than what I had experienced. The school would have to be similar to the one that I had taught at previously in regards to the constraints of the Florida Writes standardized test, but one that pursued the teaching of writing skill differently.

### **Problem Statement**

Graham and Perin (2007) state that there was a significant lack of studies focused on low-income, urban, low-achieving adolescent writers. Research focused on low-income, urban, low-achieving adolescent writers bridged the gap in relation to the provision of studies that focus on these populations and their writing development. However, there remained a need for research that focused on this specific population and their success as writers. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the cognitive, social, and affective factors that contributed to the

development of success in the development of 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill. The study determined how and why the writing skill was developed at Horizon Middle School (HMS). The rationale for completing research at Horizon Middle School was to provide an exemplar in the teaching of writing skill, a phenomenon. Horizon Middle School presented a learning community that was entrenched in the same challenging demographics, but distinctly showed a high level of academic achievement in writing. Instead of teaching through a formulaic, test-generated approach, students learned through discovery, personal relationship, and engagement. Not only did 97% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students pass the Florida Writes examination, but in the process of preparing for the standardized assessment was an embedded foundation laid for all students and their future learning. How exactly did this occur? To determine if this was a model for developing writing skill for all middle level students, a study needed to be developed for observing, participating and analyzing this writing process.

The purpose of this study was to explore the cognitive, social, and affective factors that contribute to the development of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill. The central research question for this study was:

- How does a collaborative model of teaching writing prepare students for high achievement on Florida Writes?

The following supporting questions were examined:

- How does school culture impact teacher collaboration and student engagement in teaching writing?
- What was the relationship between engaging in a collaborative model of teaching writing and improvement of writing skill in middle level students?

## **Literature Review**

Writing today was not a luxury for the chosen few, but an essential for the masses. Graham and Perin (2007) reminded that "...young people who do not have the ability to transform thoughts, experiences, and ideas into written words are in danger of losing touch with the joy of inquiry, the sense of intellectual curiosity, and the inestimable satisfaction of acquiring wisdom that are the touchstones of humanity." (p.1) This idea was supported by leading literature on middle level writing development such as the work of Robert Balfanz and Michael Kirst through the American Institute for Research. As a middle level writing teacher and thinker, my experience was that all students do not have the luxury of developing their writing skill. The type of transformational writing instruction in which I was referred to was that which empowered students to develop and share their ideas, thoughts, and passions about the world around them. Therefore, the disparity between those that received this type of instruction and those that do not was compelling. This was only compelling to the point that it drove the researcher to discover educational literature that offered alternatives which addressed this assertion as a need for all students. This review of literature focused the reader on the central research question: To what extent does a collaborative model of teaching writing prepare students for high achievement on the Florida Writes standardized writing assessment? To answer this central inquiry of concern, the researcher addressed two supporting questions in looking at the literature: How does school culture impact teacher collaboration and student engagement in teaching writing? What was the relationship between engaging in a collaborative model of teaching writing and improvement of writing skill in middle level students?

Therefore, the researcher looked at this set of inquiries and found four specific areas surfaced: school culture, models of teaching at the middle level, models of teaching writing at

the middle level and the philosophy behind educational reform leading to standardization found in the middle level today. While each aspect alone was critical to grasping this topic of collaborative teaching of the writing skill at the middle level, there was a connection between each topic which grounded the focus for this review of literature. If writing was to be an essential for all students, an understanding of the trends in each of these four areas was foundational for examining how this could and should be accomplished at the middle level.

Every school had a distinct culture that dictated the tone of each participant in the learning community. This was the distinguishing feature of every school whether it was positive or negative in relation to student learning and teacher professionalism. School culture was the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which characterize the school. When conceptualized, this was the shared experiences that created a sense of community, family, and belonging. School culture was the landscape, the starting point by which every part of the school developed meaning and value. Beyond these descriptors, school culture was the unspoken rules that governed how teachers and students interacted, problem-solved and made connections within the educational setting. The ideas of school culture were so deeply imbedded that to some extent they operated sub-consciously within the walls and participants of the school. The three key areas that contributed to a school's culture were leadership, the learning process, and student engagement (Duffy, 2003).

A school's culture either supported or destroyed the student learning process. Meier (1995) asserted three key aspects that supported the process of learning: arrangement of the school and students, participant's voice, and a set of general assumptions about learning. An understanding of these three components provided a basis for consideration of the impact the learning process had on all middle level students which separated different types of learning



environments from one another. The first aspect of a school culture that supported learning was found in the arrangement of the school and the students that reflected the students, their needs, and their accomplishments. The second finding was that school culture that supported learning had leadership, teachers, students, and parents that each played a vital role in the process of deliberation. Each stakeholder had a voice in the process of learning through schooling. The third key idea was that school culture which supported learning made three general assumptions about learning: all students want to learn, parents wanted their children to learn, and parents were partners in education.

The organization of middle level instruction was complex and there was not any one model that focused on every dynamic aspect critical to middle level writing development. The Carnegie Corporation of New York established the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in 1986. This council developed an in-depth examination which was known as Turning Points focused on how to improve the middle grades based on developmentally appropriate standards. After this initial publication which focused on the construct of middle level improvement, was Turning Points 2000 which focused the researcher and practitioner on the specific applications of the framework. The report was published as a book provided up-to-date research on how and why school improvements at this level were most successfully implemented. Within this later publication, the authors explored more than a decade of formal/informal observations, research studies, and interviews. The text asserted three models for organizing instruction at the middle level. While providing three models, the researchers noted that there was not one definitive model for organizing instruction at the middle level. The report defined the three models as: authentic instruction, WHERE, and differentiated instruction. Each model desired to meet the needs of middle level learners and the professionals that supported

their endeavors. Teaching writing at the middle level was a complex task that required a tremendous level of patience and skill in relation that met the needs of all learners. Therefore, it was critical to examine what research revealed on the teaching of writing skill at the middle level. Rief (2006) pointed to the key aspects of an achievement-oriented writing program. Her work was grounded in John Dewey, Shelley Harwayne, Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell and Tom Romano. First, writing was thinking. For students to be able to think critically, they wrote. For students to be able to write, they also thought. Therefore, the model of teaching writing at the middle level focused not only on thinking, but also writing as to understand the relationship between these two variables. Next, there was not any process that clearly defined how all writers write. So, it was valuable to consider the model of writing at the middle level in terms of different processes and different products. Since it is true that the process was different, then, equally students at the middle level worked through the process of writing with varied strategies that encouraged difference based on the learner. To learn in a research-based model of writing, students had the opportunity to write for real audiences. Students writing for real audiences means that they were empowered to make choices about the kinds of topics that were interesting to them in reading and writing.

After reviewing academic literature on school culture, models of teaching, and teaching writing at the middle level, the review fell short without an initial understanding of the history of high-stakes testing and the philosophical assumptions that supported and opposed this type of school-wide practice. This part of the literature review showed that the researcher was informed in relation to the history and philosophy behind the current practice realized at the school level. Therefore, there was an intentional shift to focusing this part of the review of literature on history and philosophy. As society and policymakers examine the process of schooling, there was a

constant discussion and evaluation of the outcomes related to the current system. Different methods adopted as practice were viewed by society, policy-makers, and educators as either advantageous or problematic in regards to student growth. One current-day practice that can be examined in relation to educational reform was high-stakes testing of writing.

High-stakes testing was the cornerstone method used by educational reformers to improve the educational system today. It was a yearly, defined assessment taken by students that carried heavy consequences based on their results. In the state of Florida, the Florida Writes standardized writing assessment was an example of one such high-stakes testing apparatus faced by all 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Students who and schools that excelled on these assessments were rewarded while students who and schools that floundered on these assessments were punished. So, there were direct consequences for those that passed and those that failed. The test, in and of itself, was not characterized by high-stakes rather it was the consequences of the outcomes that bore the characterization of high-stakes (Braun, 2004). An understanding of the arguments made by those who supported and those who opposed this practice within the American public school system provided the reader with an understanding of whether this practice was an advantage or a problem for student growth and learning.

### **Conceptual Framework**

According to Glesne (2011), a conceptual framework was a set of ideas, beliefs, theories, and definitions which informed the researcher. Within the context of this study, the conceptual framework focused on the purpose of the study which was to explore the cognitive, social, and affective factors that contributed to the development of 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill. So, ideas, beliefs, and definitions which informed these areas applied to the study, illuminating what was observed

by the researcher. The conceptual framework was constructed and not found in the literature. Therefore, it was not in adopting one complete model for application of this study, but more succinctly of applied aspects of varied frameworks that provided an informed lens for viewing the context of the study. The construct of care provided by Noddings, the assumptions of Personal Theorizing asserted by Cornett, and the principles of Mindful Learning analyzed by Strahan gave the researcher the varied tiles for assembling this mosaic of a conceptual framework.

The construct of care realized by Nel Noddings informed the researcher in relation to analyzing the affective domain and how it played a role in the process of teaching writing through a collaborative model in a middle school setting. Cornett's presentation of personal theorizing informed the researcher in examining the teacher's personal practical theories which played a social, affective, and cognitive role in developing practice within the classroom and within developing school-wide decision-making. The principles of Strahan's Mindful Learning informed the researcher in relation to the cognitive development of the writing skill and how this development either empowered or destroyed the process of student development of the writing skill at the middle level. All three aspects outlined in the conceptual framework for this study enlightened the reader in relation to the learners, teachers, and the learning which made up Horizon Middle School's culture.

### **Significance**

Horizon Middle School had similar demographics as those suggested in the study conducted by Graham and Perin (2007). The learning community in this study consisted of the following demographics:

- 48% Hispanic, 35% White, 11% African American, 8% Asian/multi-racial/Native American
- 70% of students on free & reduced lunch
- 58% mobility rate
- 27% English Language Learners
- 4% living in temporary housing or homeless

The stark difference was found when Horizon Middle School students were compared to students within the district and at the state level based on achievement levels. This comparison was not based on schools with similar demographics, but with all schools in the county and in the district. An examination of the 2012 FCAT Writes scores supported this claim. According to the Student Achievement Profile published by Horizon Middle School showed that the Mean Combined Essay Score of 3.5 was above the state's mean score of 3.3 and the school's district mean score of 3.4. The percentage of students that scored a 3.0 or higher was 84% which was above the state's percentage of 78% and above the district's percentage of 80%. Horizon Middle School percentage of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students scored 3.5 or higher was 64% which was above the state's percentage of 52% and the district's percentage of 60%. Finally, Horizon Middle School percentage of students scored a 4.0 or higher which was 47% which was above the state's percentage of 33% and above the district's percentage of 42%. These remarkable levels of achievement demanded an examination of the collaborative writing process employed by the learning community. Significance of this study was found in representing Horizon Middle School as a case study which exemplified success, a story that must be told.

## **Methodology**

The qualitative research strategy chosen by the researcher was a case study. It was qualitative in terms of the process: posted a problem, defined a research population, collected and analyzed data, and presented outcomes. It was a case study because it was inquiry-based research focused on exploring a specific phenomenon. To understand any phenomenon within the context of qualitative research, one must understand the common denominator, the systems that made up the whole of the school culture. School culture was the ideas, assumptions, and beliefs that created a system of processes that are carried out throughout the school day and through the school year. To understand the cognitive, social, and affective factors that contributed to the development of 8<sup>th</sup> grade writers, the researcher had to have an understanding of the systems that determine how and why students learned through this unique collaborative model of teaching writing. This examination provided the researcher and the field with a sense of how this kind of achievement can be fostered within these struggling populations.

This was a mode of inquiry that facilitated a process of exploring a specific setting, Horizon Middle School, and a research team that was made up of professionals that were intimately involved in this school setting. For this study, the research team was made up of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing team. The purpose in using these professionals as the research participants was based on exploring and understanding the relationship between Florida Writes student scores and the process by which students were prepared. Therefore, a close view of these writing teachers proved appropriate and effective in examining this connection. The link between Horizon Middle School and the researcher was found in the role of Dr. Hopp at the University of Central Florida. She was and continued to have a multi-year relationship with Horizon Middle School as a partner school of the University. In this role, she provided ongoing professional development and

a multi-faceted lens of building and sustaining culture that was congruent with best-practices in education at the middle school level. More specifically, she focused on school culture that met the needs of the learning community participants. Therefore, she was the entry point for the researcher in this study and her relationship and reputation with the school and its current staff created a bridge for establishing trust between the researcher and the school and its staff. It was the strength of the relationship between Dr. Hopp and Horizon Middle School that created a scenario for the researcher to come onto the campus as a trusted person.

Therefore, the role of the researcher was welcomed as a member of the learning community at Horizon Middle School. The researcher observed first-hand and took field-notes through a research journal while on the campus. These recordings included information such as: a description of the setting, participants, dialogue, events, activities, researcher's thoughts and feelings, questions, and connections between ideas. By recording data in this way, the researcher had an organized, thoughtful way of understanding and making connections within the educational setting during the phase of data collection and during the phase of data analysis. Then, following best-practice in qualitative research, the researcher consistently reviewed field-notes and reflected throughout the process of data collection.

This was an effort focused on avoiding a disjointed relay of information observed at Horizon Middle School, rendering a thoughtful glimpse at this phenomenon. The more often the researcher observed within the context of the school, the more clarity there was on what questions needed to be asserted to ultimately answer the central research question. Continued, reflective observation led to what must be further observed to answer the inquiries outlined in the study. Beyond observation and record-keeping through field-notes, the researcher conducted interviews with the research team which comprised of the collaborative writing team at Horizon

Middle School. The interviews were conducted one-on-one and within a focus group. The interviews focused on the research participant's opinions, behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions. The coupling of observation and interviewing as a data-collecting procedure provided the researcher a place of immersion, a closeness to the subject that naturally led to building connections and developing themes. The process of data collection was fixed to the time period of May 1, 2012 to September 1, 2012.

### **Summary**

The researcher started with her roots as a middle level teacher, a place where meaning was found. An analysis of her experiences compared to those of Horizon Middle School created a platform for a conversation, a dialogue about what could be in the mind of the researcher. After visiting this school site, the researcher asked a central question: How does a collaborative model of teaching writing prepare students for high achievement on Florida Writes? This question was answered by addressing of two supporting inquiries: How does school culture impact teacher collaboration and student engagement in teaching writing? What is the relationship between engaging in a collaborative model of teaching writing and improvement of writing skill in middle level students? The purpose of the study was to explore the cognitive, social, and affective factors that contribute to the development of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill. A review of literature focused on school culture, models of teaching at the middle level, teaching writing at the middle level and the history of standardization that led to FCAT Writes. The literature pointed to the need for studies that focused on schools that showed academic achievement, but faced the same challenging demographics that were representative of low achievement levels.



To understand the phenomenon, the researcher constructed a conceptual framework that gave her tiles to form a mosaic. Nel Noddings' Construct of Care, Strahan's Mindful Learning, and Cornett's Personal Theorizing each shed light on the case that was examined. Field notes, teacher observations, faculty meetings, and interviews provided the framework for thoughtful methodology. In final analysis, the literature asserted the need for a study and the researcher's experience validated it. What both parties longed for was a success story. This was a story characterized by a chapter by chapter examination of an exemplar, one that inspired both the researcher and the field—inspiration that was only drawn by becoming a member of the Horizon Middle School community.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the cognitive, social, and affective factors that contributed to the development of success in the development of 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill. Therefore, the researcher fulfilled this purpose by intentional analysis of four critical areas within the educational literature: school culture, models of instruction, writing in the middle, and standardization. Each of these four areas pointed to research studies that aligned the purpose of the study with the central research question: How does a collaborative model of teaching writing prepare students for high achievement on Florida Writes? This question was answered by the addressing of two supporting inquiries: How does school culture impact teacher collaboration and student engagement in teaching writing? What was the relationship between engaging in a collaborative model of teaching writing and improvement of writing skill in middle level students? Therefore, these four critical areas embodied a foundation for an examination of Horizon Middle School. School culture acted as the underlying feature, a silver lining, one that defined all educational institutions in some facet. Models of instruction represented the myriad of possibilities that were explored in how to organize and arrange learning at the middle level. Writing in the middle directed attention towards how to teach writing in a research-based environment. Finally, standardization outlined the history, psychology, and ideology that led to the FL Writes at Horizon Middle School. It was an understanding and cross-referencing of all four sections that informed the case study.

## **Why Middle School?**

The middle level was a significant time of growth and development and the focus on preparation for the future was founded. Williams and Hartel (2010) conducted a study of 303 middle grades schools in California. This team coordinated hundreds of interviews with principals, teachers, and superintendents with focused questions on determining policies and practices that make some middle schools more successful than others. Three separate surveys pointed to ten distinct schools, therefore, those schools were chosen for the study. Beyond the surveys, the study analyzed the school and district scores on standardized testing when compared to school-wide practices. After examining the data, the schools chosen were viewed as exemplars. After the exemplars were analyzed, the study asserted that there were three reasons why the academic preparation for middle level students was of great importance. It was this basis that pointed to the significance of Horizon Middle School and the academic achievement students showed.

Why was the middle level such a significant place to consider when doing an analysis of student achievement and developmental level of schooling? First, the study pointed out that the middle grades was the place where most students started to lose ground in key content areas. Furthermore, the study noted that the middle grades identified itself as the best place to identify and intervene in relation to student academic achievement. If student identification and intervention occurred, then, students statistically showed higher levels of achievement in high school. The third reason why the middle level was paramount in relation to a student's educational journey was that student grades in the middle school continued to be an excellent indicator of future success in high school. These three reasons undergirded the value of an examination of Horizon Middle School from the relationship between developmental level and

academic achievement. The researchers asserted the value of these grade levels, then, suggested that not only was the middle school a critical time of growth and development academically, but that there was an implication to the aspect that mostly greatly affected middle school student's academic achievement.

Therefore, Williams and Hartel (2010) pointed to the idea of school culture and how it was the primary predictor of student outcomes at this stage in development. The study found that each exemplar chosen exhibited high expectations for academics and then provided the support for such rigor. The coupled ideas of high expectations and support for all participants in the learning community translated into a specific type of school culture. So, the existence of school culture and the role that it played in student outcomes was broadly supported historically by educational thinkers (Goodlad, 1975). If the middle level played a paramount role in relation to development and school culture strongly predicted the academic achievement for all students; then, an examination of the academic literature that showed the relationship between these two components was a logical next step in the analysis of educational literature.

### **School Culture and the Leadership**

The academic literature bore much literature on school culture and middle level development. So, the recognition of the foundational place where school culture was embedded proved helpful. The leadership of a middle school set the tone of the school's culture. Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel (2002) conducted a study of seven high-achieving, high-poverty urban middle schools. The study focused on determining how high-performing, high-poverty middle schools improved student performance. The study noted that every school in the study was found to have a leadership structure that focused on two key aspects: equity and high

achievement. These two specific values were instilled through the process of dialogue, actions, and symbolic gestures. Dialogue referred to the leadership that set high expectations for all professionals within the learning community. For some schools, this was supporting a professional while in other schools this was a dismissal for those professionals that did not embody this value. In all cases, dialogue inferred the idea of opportunity for all participants within the learning community. Next and an equal contributor to a school's culture, the leadership in all seven schools embodied the expectations that they had for the professional community that they led. The example provided by the leadership was viewed as paramount in relation to day-to-day functioning of the school's climate. Leadership within this structure showed respect and value for the clear, consistent expectations placed on teachers and staff. Finally, the leadership of every school used symbolic gestures to further implement and support school culture that translated into equity and high achievement. Each school chose a different way to show these gestures. For some schools the leadership provided stipends while other schools provided a simple affirmation in front of the whole staff. This study showed that leadership was at the forefront of an understanding, recognition and implementation of distinct school culture. It was the groundwork by which school culture either flourished or diminished.

Fullan (1992) asserted through an analysis of change and school culture that there were key components that must be integrated into the tapestry of the leadership and learning that took place within the school setting or the school culture simply did not adapt to change rapidly and harmoniously. These were the components that provided a foundation and connection to all members of the learning community through intentional leadership. Within the study, the three populations that were analyzed were the students, the parents and the school leadership. The following components were paramount: captivating vision and mission, district flexibility and

support, strong support from parents, data-driven decision-making systems, strong leadership, multiple opportunities for sharing culture, curriculum that is linked to vision and mission, quality time for teachers and students to learn and prepare, and supportive relationships. A school's vision and mission provide direction, consistency, and a sense of accomplishment. When a school feels empowered and supported by the district, the flexibility needed to innovate and allow schools to grow was granted. The ability for schools to receive school achievement data, process it, and contextualize it remained invaluable in relation to growing positive school culture. Due to numerous standards and objectives, schools have been stretched to teach curriculum with breadth and not depth. So, if a school exhibits enduring school culture, it strived to engage in learning that ensured critical thinking and depth of understanding in relation to standards and objectives. Finally, relationships were the lining that linked many tangibles and intangibles within school culture.

After these components were integrated into the school's embedded functioning, one easily experienced and observed key pieces. Deal and Peterson (1990) analyzed school principals and how their role shaped the school's culture. The study found that for the type of school culture to exist, one saw the following components when visiting a school. First and foremost, students were engaged in meaningful learning. Next, the expectations for all members of the learning community were high. This was viewed through classroom materials, student behavior, and school structure. Finally, there was multiple ways to learn and difference was valued within these schools. If the leadership of the middle school was viewed as the soil of a school, then the learning that took place within each middle school was the harvest.

## **School Culture and the Learner**

Beyond the role of the leadership and the learning process, research pointed to the learner as playing a key role in determining the school culture (Atwell, 1998). Wang and Holcombe (2010) conducted a longitudinal study of students examining the role that students played in a school's culture. The researchers surveyed 1,024 students with a diverse set of backgrounds. They asserted that a student's role related to school culture when there was a consideration of a student's perceptions of the school environment, the student's own engagement, and his or her academic achievement were pivotal parts of measuring a student's academic achievement. They also asserted that each one of these components played a critical role in producing motivation and achievement in a middle level student. A student's perception was a conscious or sub-conscious reality of the thoughts and feeling a learner had when he or she was engaged in the learning community. This study cited that a student's perception about the learning community and his or her identity within it either increased or decreased motivation for learning.

If motivation for learning was increased, academic achievement was increased. If motivation for learning was decreased, academic achievement was decreased. A student's engagement within the context of this study represented the involvement by which students had in relation to the process of learning. When students had a sense that they were a critical part of the engagement in learning, then, their motivation was increased and achievement level increased. The study further asserted that in the case of a positive perception of schooling and high engagement level by the student measured, that student's academic achievement was higher. Therefore, students played a pivotal role in the school's culture. Growing from school culture was the notion of the model of teaching at the middle level, the organization by which middle level students and professionals function.

## **Models of Instruction**

Middle level instruction was a complex place in which to unpack the varying modes of delivery in relation to instruction. Therefore, when the educational literature was reviewed, the researcher pointed to three umbrellas that housed and protected distinct styles and leadership models for teaching. Because the middle level is a complex place in the k-12 continuum of analyzing how professionals model their instruction, there was not one clear model that represented all models of instruction reflective of leaders, teachers, and students. The following three models of instruction were asserted: authentic instruction, WHERE instruction, and differentiated instruction (Graham & Perin, 2007). There was tremendous overlap between all three models. The first model for the organization of instruction at the middle level was authentic instruction. This type of organization was defined by three specific criteria: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school. These three criteria represented what was valued within this type of model of instruction.

First and foremost, the construction of knowledge by the learners, teachers, and leaders of the school was valued. Knowledge was interpreted by the individual and respected and encouraged by the learning community. Therefore, learning activities were viewed by teachers as a platform to build wisdom and encourage reflection for all learners. Next, there was a vast space for exploring the unknown and the assertion of inquiries of oneself and those around him or her. The second criteria that acted as a representative of this model was disciplined inquiry. This was the integrated process of developing the intellect and the logic required to examine problems, create further inquiries and delineate reality. Finally the idea of value beyond school was a hallmark of authentic instruction. This was the recognition, appreciation, and development of skills and concepts that do not fit within the day-to-day curriculum at a middle school. Therefore, if a



student was to identify a need within the community, this was upheld and students were empowered to become engaged.

The second model of organizing instruction at the middle level was supported by the acronym, WHERE, which focused on five key statements when the design and organization of instruction was deliberated at the middle level: Think about where the group of learners was headed, how they will become hooked on learning, how each subject will be explored, how they developed skills and concepts, how each student rethought their own work and ideas, and evaluated results. These five critical inquiries guided the cycle of design, implementation, and assessment of the curriculum. This type of organization model was focused on the work of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. Within this model, teachers determined the final goals at the onset. The goals for the day, unit, or year facilitated a process of constant evaluation of student development. Next, teachers focused on gaining the interests of students for learning. If student's interest was captivated, then, the learning process naturally unfolded. If student's interest was not gained, then, the learning process was hindered.

The third critical aspect of this organizational pattern was found in the idea exploration of subject matter and the equipping of skills and concepts for student development. Students at the middle level must be introduced, developed, mastered, and reviewed a myriad of concepts and skills. So, after a hook was placed in a student for learning then he or she must be entrenched in the process of skill and concept development to thoughtfully move within this model. The next step in the process of development was reflection, the consideration of individual work and work of those within the learning community. This was the aspect in this model that encouraged the learner as that was consistently asking inquiries. Finally, the last step was to evaluate the results

of the learning. This was the step that successfully answered the question as to the acceptable evidence of mastery (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

The third model of organizing instruction at the middle level focused on differentiated instruction. This type of organization was grounded in the work of Carol Ann Tomlinson. Her primary argument through her design was that in most heterogeneous classrooms, especially at the middle level, students struggled because of the one-size fits all model of teaching found in a vast majority of classrooms and schools. In the case of this model, teachers acted as facilitators in providing many avenues for diverse learning. She based this kind of organization on a student's level of readiness of a skill or concept, a student's interests, and a student's learning profile—how each individual student learned best. Each one of these components required a different set of plans from the teacher within the model.

Initially, teachers developed evaluations and assessments that measured exactly where a student's abilities lied. This was a detailed process that required a tremendous skill level and attention to detail in order to set a baseline for learning for each student within the classroom. The second crucial step was the determination of a student's interest. This piece provided invaluable material for a focus on how to best approach each skill and concept within the curriculum. The identification of a student's interest improved the rate at which students became engaged in the process of learning. Finally, after a teacher had developed these foundational pieces, a final step was taken. The hallmark aspect was the teacher's determination of how each student learned. This was known as recognition and implementation of a student's learning profile. The integration of all three steps equaled a learning environment defined as differentiation (Tomlinson, 1999).

## **Writing in the Middle**

Beyond the recognition of components that made up a high-quality writing program in the middle, it was critical to point to the contribution made by Atwell (1998) in her seminal work. As a middle level reading and writing teacher, the author was able to speak to an audience of teachers with a practical lens. Her approach focused on the notion of the workshop and the importance of student engagement in the process of meaningful work while developing their writing skills. This process style of learning to write was best supported by a sense that writers had their own voice and voices around them that cared intimately about the evolution of their ideas as individuals and as a group of learners. The notion of feedback was the building-blocks for the implementation of writers equipped with the tools and techniques they needed as writers. Assessment of writing was a focal point determined by the movement of writers progressing in development of their voice and presence behind the writing document. So, as students were given feedback about their writing, there was a constant relay of addressing weaknesses with solutions. Effective teachers of writing at the middle level asked questions of writers which in turn helped students ask their own questions about their writing and the writing of others within the learning community.

In final analysis, writing was reading. Students could read without being able to write, but students that could write were always able to read. In schools, where academic achievement was noted, teachers were engaged in a model that included a majority of these attributes. These characteristics supported learning to be a successful writer not only in the middle grades, but also beyond the middle grades the middle.

## **Standardization**

Those who supported high-stakes testing of writing within the American public school system asserted that this type of high-stakes testing was a means to greater student learning and growth through the following arguments. The first argument made for this practice within the American public school system was that high-stakes testing led to greater student achievement. Through the implementation of high-stakes test of writing, students wrote at a higher academic level than before. The second argument for high-stakes testing of writing was that students must be held accountable by the American public school system to show merit before passage to the next grade level. This was supported by the notion that a high-stakes writing test was the best indicator for showing student growth and learning of writing skill after a given school year. In the case of this position, this high-stakes test was viewed as a credible tool to measure student growth and learning. The third argument espoused by those that supported this practice was that the implementation of this assessment created high expectations for all writers. This argument hinged on the idea that these same high expectations for all students naturally led to greater academic writing gains for all students (Labaree, 2004).

Conversely, those who opposed high-stakes testing made the following arguments and assumptions about this practice in the American public school system. First and foremost, one single assessment should not be used as a reliable tool for measuring a whole year of student learning within the context of writing skill. Many studies showed that how well students scored on these assessments was based on external factors: stress over taking the test, amount of sleep, distractions at the testing site, time of day, emotional state, and others. Therefore, this was not a worthwhile indicator of student growth and learning. Those that oppose high-stakes testing further argued against this practice on the basis of curriculum narrowing, meaning that if the

teacher spent a majority of his or her day focused on a formulaic test preparation model, the curriculum was limited to these ideas. The practice of high-stakes testing now predicted the dominant curriculum for all students and educators. By this done, what was of ultimate worth for student writing and learning in this subject matter was the test (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2005). The effect on the curriculum was a mandate of a one size fits all solution, a specified set of standards and objectives given to the school system (Callahan, 1962). Finally, those that opposed this practice argue that through the adoption of this practice in the American public school system, students lost the ability to make choices based on their personal interest for writing. This was problematic for students due to the direct relationship between student choice and motivation for learning. Certainly, the motivation for learning by students was stifled if they are not able to have a voice in relation to the ways in which the writing process unfolds in each individual student's learning (Duffy, 2003).

In surveying the American public school system, one easily viewed the consequences of high-stakes testing writing and quickly determined how student learning and growth were affected (Ravitch, 2010). To start, research pointed to a lowered morale level among learners, especially in disadvantaged schools. This meant that the students within society who have the least opportunity available in regards to developing writing skills were the least encouraged by this practice. To further support this claim, Glass, Nichols and Berliner (2005) showed that increased pressure created by a high-stakes testing environment does not show any greater student achievement in writing. So, not only do these students feel discouraged, but they also have not gained any greater levels of academic achievement. This showed that the chief argument used to uphold this practice was not credible when applied to the American public school system. Finally, for students, one of the most detrimental effects was the indoctrination

process that was learned as he or she travelled from one grade to the next in terms of development as a writer and learner. Students naturally learned through experience that what was important in school was to pass the test. Students perceived this assessment as vital to their growth. Therefore, they did whatever was necessary to pass the test with the recognition that their value within the educational community was either validated or cursed based on the results. As a result, history showed a wide range of cheating scandals and negative student response(s) linked to the pressure brought about by a high-stakes testing environment.

These were only a few of the detrimental effects of this practice which was a problem within the American public school system. One further note before moving forward, since the implementation of high-stakes testing in writing the research was definitive on the detrimental effects of this practice on student growth and learning, but the proponents then and now do not feel a strong sense to defend or counter the arguments made by those that oppose this practice. Therefore, this lack of discourse aimed at defending high-stakes testing of writing urged the researcher to be unrelenting in unpacking a case study that represented an exemplar within the context and culture of standardization and the development of 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill. It is in understanding this current context of standardization that created a lens for examining the collaborative model chosen by Horizon Middle School that taught the writing skill to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Beyond a recognition of those that opposed and supported high-stakes testing, an understanding of the history which relates ideology and psychology that led up to the Florida Writes at Horizon Middle School provided a foundation for an examination of this case study.

Historically, the high-stakes testing found at Horizon Middle School was not an unfamiliar acknowledgement when compared to early history. From the turn of the twentieth century, different perspectives were asserted on the topic of how the learner should be conceived,

but those who held the power and prestige made the lasting decisions, thereby laying out the parameters according to which schools and society have followed over time. An outline of the history behind the conception of the learner gave the reader a clear sense, not an exhaustive examination of the problem at hand and the immense nature of the phenomenon found within this historical context at Horizon Middle School. To understand this conception of the learner, historical context was developed as an initial step which led to this success story.

With an examination of a public institution as complex as education, it was critical to point out that the history was not traced through a streamline set of events that led from one to the current conception of the learner. Rather, this history entailed a complicated set of issues faced by a vulnerable set of school administrators dating back to the early twentieth century and beyond. At the beginning of the twentieth century, urbanization, immigration, and industrialization all placed significant pressures on the American public school system and those involved in creating a public school that was democratic and supported by a developing society. Therefore, the country was in a struggle for the heart of American education and how the school would be constructed for future generations—how would the learner be conceived? Those involved in this process started with questions about the aim and purpose of education and schooling, and then assumptions about the nature of knowledge and thus the learner followed. Then, what kind of school would be built around this conception? Understanding the struggle between the ideas of two particular groups showed how questionably the most well remembered educator, John Dewey, and his ideas were left in the shadows while the ideas of others made a clear mark on the conception of the learner found within American public schooling system.

Tyack and Cuban (1995) defined the first group of reformers dating back to 1900 by saying that by, “Occupying key positions and sharing definitions of problems and solutions, they

shaped the agenda and implementation of school reform more powerfully from 1900 to 1950 than any other group has done before or since.” (p. 98). This initial set of reformers believed education was the primary way to direct social evolution and were known as administrative progressives. Therefore, they believed in differentiation and standardization within the school system. They were a group of mostly white men that had the same set of values and had positioned themselves in places of power across the nation: superintendents, state officers, and college professors. Their educational ideology consisted of efficient management, professionalism and progress through science. The administrative progressives desired to form a governance of public schools, meaning that their desire was to have as much control as possible by trained experts who would discourage local school boards from intimately having a voice in making decisions. They believed that if America was to combat the challenges of the day successfully, the organization of schooling must be built on a larger size of school with an emphasis on central control. Therefore, they strongly supported top-to-bottom structures (Callahan, 1964). The business model of planning was introduced and supported. Administrative progressives believed that education should be “scientific” which would exemplify efficiency, and could be defended to the businessmen asserting their weight on public education. They regularly argued that it was scientific planning that would help change society through schooling, therefore, dealing with social challenges such as poverty. The administrative progressives pushed for a restructuring of school governance which in turn would provide more control for the elite and weaken the influence of the common. The voice of the community and the learner was marginalized as a valuable piece of assessing the school system. The primary psychologists used by this group were Thorndike and Hall who both viewed the curriculum as the substance of learning, not as a medium for developing mental faculties (Labaree, 2004).



On the other hand, the pedagogical progressives were a group that wanted to determine a new way of teaching and establishing the classroom as an alternative approach to their opponents. Their values were found in the idea of using a child's natural sense of wonder and inquiry, then, building the curriculum around these generic traits. They envisioned learning as a process of building on a student's interest and developmental capabilities. One of the central tenets was a child-centered learning environment, meaning that a good system of schooling would be one that would stimulate the learning process by tapping into the student and the learning focused around the individual. Within this vision, students play a central role in the process of growth and discovery. They wanted the teacher to intentionally get out of the way so that children could learn and not be stifled by control and/or authority. The pedagogical progressives argued that a stratified curriculum would actually discourage student stimulation and would hinder the student's ability for equal opportunity. In contrast to the administrative progressives, this group was much smaller in size. The thrust of this group was found in the notion of envisioning education as a means of questioning the social structures of the time and not reproducing them. Its primary leader was John Dewey and some noted followers of the time were Counts, Rugg, Bode, and Kilpatrick (Labaree, 2004).

After this widely contested debate of reform, there were two critical events that deepened the current trajectory seen in American public schooling: the Smith-Hughes Act (1917) and the NEA report known as *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* (1918). These events shaped the trajectory, and also showed how education was a political process that was deeply affected by the ideology of those parties making the decisions at the time. Both the legislative act and the NEA report were representative of the ideas outlined by administrative progressives. First, the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 was established to define vocational education based on the terms

provided by administrative progressives. Dewey considered this legislation to be a mistake, citing that if there was separate curriculum between vocational curriculum and academic programs, this would only lead to a less democratic society. The struggle would be between educational and industrial needs. Then, the NEA report outlined the principles of social efficiency as the role of American education. It is of critical importance to point out that this report used the word “democracy” or “democratic” 40 times; using this word as a torch that would light the way for education. Not only did the authors of the report assert themselves as the experts in addressing educational issues, but also were able to draw public support for the ideas being asserted by administrative progressives. To make this point clear, the words used by the original Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 states it most succinctly by saying, “...education in a democracy, both within and without the school, should develop in each individual the knowledge, interests, ideals, habits and powers whereby he will find his place and use that place to shape both himself and society toward ever nobler ends.” (p. 3). It can be easily deduced that social efficiency experts viewed education as an environment technically speaking, education was a process that entailed an environment which readies individuals to take their place in society; this was a conception of the learner as one within a factory being groomed to fit a specific purpose or place. Conversely, it does not assert the learner as one who should be treated as an individual with a different set of experiences, backgrounds, perceptions, gifts, and realities that should be accounted for when creating a public school system (Callahan, 1964).

The debate was set, ideas presented, sides drawn, and lasting decisions made. So, how did the administrative progressives end up outweighing their counterparts for the heart of American education? First and foremost, the administrative progressive’s plan was appealing to policy makers and to those within positions of power at the time. Their plan was more simplistic,

utilitarian and seemed to provide the most clear-cut answers to problems of the day. So, the administrative progressives set up programs that integrated their ideology into the American public school system, but also employed the notion of social control in relation to the opportunities given to students because there were separate tracks for learning—no true integration from those who would participate in an academic setting for schooling and those who would be trained for a vocation. This pointed to the notion of same, but not necessarily equal for all which is what commonly defines democracy. As it may not have been apparent what the long-term effect would be of creating separation of tracks for students, the answer was endorsing economic productivity over a system with many voices given equal access to the decision(s) being made.

Next and closely tied to the first reason for victory was the notion of the utilitarian perspective as a political position. Naturally, it was much easier to sell a utilitarian vision than a idealistic vision especially when considering an institution that was as costly as public schooling. Therefore, from this standpoint it was not difficult to understand why policymakers staked their plan in one that was utilitarian and “efficient”, basing the advancement of schooling as one focused on simple accounting. Administrative progressives did an exceptional job presenting their side as one that was backed by data and science while painting the other side as one full of romantic ideas and utopian views of how schooling should or could be established. Expanding on this idea of science and data, they used their ability to determine a student’s ability along with how to classify him or her as bonding points as to the accuracy of their position.

Another reason that was argued as one of the seminal reasons for the administrative progressives winning the battle can be traced to when John Dewey, the undeniable leader of the pedagogical progressives, left the lab school in 1904 to join the philosophy department at

Columbia in 1904. As the leader and primary thinker for this vision, his departure from the world of educational practice into philosophy was dramatic. His leaving contrasted with the participation at this same time of his counterparts who were doing everything possible to become embedded in the school system: completing surveys, creating tests, and writing curriculum—the loss of his presence in an actual education department was not quantifiable. Even though it was not quantified in the discussion, it can surely be qualified due to the overwhelming circumstances facing education at this date in history. John Dewey leaving the lab school may not be the ultimate reason for defeat, but was certainly a strike to the pedagogical progressives and the leadership thereof.

Finally, from conception to implementation there was not any stage that can be more valued one to another. But it can be argued that those who implement or force implementation had power. So, in the case of the administrative progressives, they formed a strong organizational plan around administrators. These were the feet and the authority on the ground that believed in this new vision and legislation for American public schooling, this in turn creating a mechanism for control. While pedagogical progressives were focusing their energy on teaching and learning communities, their ideas were only being implemented by teachers who chose their values and mode of operating. Therefore, the organizational structure attracted more administrators and this top-to-bottom type thinking while leaving individual teachers who employed Dewey's thinking isolated within the system with a fragmented organization in which to draw strength for school reform (Labaree, 2004).

After surveying the figures, ideas, and visions laid out since the beginning of the twentieth century, it was simple to see the results of the decisions that were made for American public schooling: a differentiated curriculum that ensured stratification, a system that acted from

a vocational position encouraging schooling for the purpose of human capital development, and a tracking system by social class that warranted social control. The background provided for this section would fall imminently short without a discussion beyond this brief historical context. This history creates a basis for a conception of the learner that was most efficient for those in power, while ignoring the implication of how the learner should be conceived as an individual that ensures justice for all viewed in turn leaving detrimental effects on schools and society. Four areas provided a lens for reviewing the challenges created by this conception and ensured the reader one step closer to the problem.

From the context of psychology, one of the influential concerns with this factory model based on efficiency of schooling discussed by Francis Duffy was that it entailed paradigms that permeated and resisted change within the school system that were both detrimental to schools and society. Duffy (2003) defines a paradigm as a set of rules and regulations—written and unwritten. So, for the sake of this analysis those definitions will be applied. Therefore, if the paradigm that has been adopted is the factory model of schooling, what are the results of this paradigm choice? The result is four sub-paradigms that can be easily seen within the American public school system: group-based teacher-centered classrooms, authoritarian-bureaucratic organizational design, crisis-oriented management, and fragmented change strategies employed by educators.

From a macro-discussion of the ideology, psychology, and history, there was a narrowing of focus based on the specific research study. What was found within history drew a stark contrast to what was experienced at Horizon Middle School. Standardization was a steadfast reality within the Florida public school system. The specific assessment faced by Horizon Middle School students was the Florida Writes. Therefore, a brief historical analysis of this

assessment created context for this case study. This was a standardized writing assessment that 8<sup>th</sup> grade students state-wide took in the spring of the school year. The Sunshine State Standards started in 1995 as a basis for raised expectations for all students. The standards laid the foundation for standardized testing of the specific objectives through what was known as the FCAT. The test was field-tested in 1998 by grades 4, 5, 8 and 10 in reading and math. During this same year, the Florida Writes exam was given to grades 4, 8, and 10. Initially, the standards tested simply the standards. Since the birth of this standardized assessment, its intention expanded and since inception addressed varied aspects. For example, in 1999 these test scores started to become part of a school's grade. Therefore, these scores affected wide populations of students, teachers, and leaders. Another unexpected growth of this standardized assessment was the connection to funding. Schools that scored well on the assessment were rewarded with funding and those that did not score well were regulated and eventually sanctioned. Students through the Florida Writes take a 45-minute timed exam once a year. Their composition was graded on a scale from 1-5. A passing-score when the test was first implemented was a 3, and currently a passing-score was a 4.

## **Summary**

The researcher unpacked the models of instruction in the middle grades, the models of teaching writing in the middle grades and the history of standardization within the middle grades that led to the FCAT Writes, there was a sense of understanding of the research that was conducted. It was in this understanding that brought a greater context for the significance and context of this study of Horizon Middle School and the phenomenon that took place at this educational setting. As a potter works clay, he or she was constantly reminded of the hands that

mold the current masterpiece. It was these hands that acted as the molder. So, in the context of middle level writing, who were the hands? What made the difference for all middle schools? Was it the way in which the school was organized? Was it the model chosen for writing skills to be taught? Was it the history that clearly led to standardization? Was it the philosophy behind those that supported or opposed this practice of high-stakes testing at the middle level? Was it the prevailing ideology of the day? It was not one of these components alone, but all of these that made up the clay by which the hands used for molding. The hands were the school culture—the determining factor by which every other aspect took shape. In the case of Horizon Middle School, it was the school culture that wrote a new chapter in the history of standardization.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to explore the cognitive, social and affective factors that contributed to the development of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill. Qualitative research required the statement of a purpose, the position of a problem, definition of a research population, collection and analysis of data, and presentation of outcomes of research. More specifically within the construct of being qualitative, the researcher in this study sought to understand the how and why behind a specific phenomena. This was a study designed to gain clarity on the beliefs, attitudes, values, and culture that painted a picture of Horizon Middle School beyond high test scores representative of academic achievement. The philosophical assumptions that supported this specific type of qualitative research were focused on an advocacy/participatory worldview. This was a position that asserted itself during the 1980's and 90's which was a result of the structural laws that were being placed on marginalized groups. Basically, this viewpoint felt that the constructivist vantage point did not go far enough to create platforms for those that were disenfranchised. This philosophy supported qualitative research because it contained an agenda for change within institutions, professionals, and learners. This position focused on the use of this case study as an exemplar for other middle schools, specifically those that faced the same challenging demographics.

This worldview was furthermore appropriate for this study because Horizon Middle School had distinct student demographics. The total student population was 1,630. The breakdown of the student body was 48% Hispanic, 35% White, 11% African-American and 8% Asian, multi-racial, and Native American. More than 20% of the population was categorized as English Language Learners (ELLs), and 70% of the students were on free and reduced lunch. Almost 4% of the students at Horizon Middle School were living in temporary housing or were



considered homeless. The mobility rate was 58%. National research showed that within these specific demographics, academic achievement varied and was not always easily accessible (Meier, 1995). However, in the case of Horizon Middle School, 97% of all eighth grade students consistently passed the Florida Writes standardized writing assessment yearly. This was extraordinary which pointed the researcher to a further investigation of this phenomenon. In the midst of mass standardization across the curriculum and challenging demographics, students at Horizon Middle School achieved. To understand the gravity of this educational juxtapose, the researcher intentionally created methods for exploring and understanding to further facilitate integration and focus for this study.

The qualitative research strategy chosen by the researcher was case study. This was a mode of inquiry that facilitated a process of exploring a specific setting, Horizon Middle School, and a research team that was made up of professionals that were intimately involved in this school setting. For this study, the research team was made up of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing team which included: Janine Bracco, Brian Capley, Christine Edel, and Alexandria Lovegrove. The purpose in using these professionals as the research participants was based on an exploration and understanding of the relationship between the Florida Writes student scores and the process by which students were prepared. Therefore, a close view of these writing teachers was appropriate and effective in examining this connection. The link between Horizon Middle School and the researcher was found in the role of Dr. Hopp at the University of Central Florida. She had a multi-year relationship with Horizon Middle School as a partner school of the University. In this role, she provided ongoing professional development and a multi-faceted lens of building and sustaining culture that was congruent with best practices in education at the middle school level. Therefore, she was the entry point for the researcher in this study and her relationship and

reputation with the school and its current staff creates a bridge to establish trust between the researcher and the school and its staff. It is the strength of the relationship between Dr. Hopp and Horizon Middle School that created a scenario for the researcher to come onto the campus as a trusted person.

Therefore, the role of the researcher was welcomed as a member of the learning community at Horizon Middle School. The researcher observed first-hand and took field notes through a research journal while on the campus. This included information such as: a description of the setting, participants, dialogue, events, activities, researcher's thoughts and feelings, questions, connections between ideas, and interrelated themes. Because the data was recorded in this way, the researcher had an organized, thoughtful way of understanding and making connections within the educational setting during the phase of data collection and during the phase of data analysis. Then, following best-practice in qualitative research, the researcher consistently reviewed field-notes to reflect throughout the process of data collection. This was an effort focused on avoiding a disjointed relay of information observed at Horizon Middle School (Glesne, 2011). The more often the researcher observed within the context of the school, the more clarity there was on what specific questions needed to be asked and answered to address the supporting questions which undergirded the central research question. Meaning that continued, reflective observation led to what must be further observed to answer the inquiries outlined in this study. Beyond observation and record through field-notes, the researcher conducted interviews with the research team which was comprised of the collaborative writing team at Horizon Middle School. The interviews were conducted one-on-one and within focus groups. The interviews were focused on the research participant's opinions, behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions. The coupling of observation and interviews as a data-collection procedure

provided the researcher a place of immersion, a closeness to the subject that naturally led to building connections and developing themes. The process of data collection was fixed to the time period of July to October, 2012.

To understand the phenomenon that was Horizon Middle School, the researcher constructed a conceptual framework that informed the data collection and interpretation. The conceptual framework acted as a mosaic. Each part was a piece of a larger vision or piece of art. When each part of the conceptual framework was connected to the others, there was a deeper sense of meaning and understanding. The first aspect of this framework was Cornett's idea of personal theorizing. Cornett (1990) defined personal practical theories (PPTs) as the systematic set of beliefs which guided teachers and are based on their prior life experiences that came from non-teaching activities and also from experiences that occurred as a result of designing and implementing the curriculum through instruction known as practice. The following list of interview questions was used to determine the personal practical theories of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing team at Horizon Middle School:

1. Tell me about your teaching experiences and how you arrived at Horizon Middle School.
2. Tell me about your experiences in teaching writing.
3. Do you have a specific method for teaching writing?
4. What are your most important beliefs in terms of teaching writing?
5. What do you teach throughout the day?
6. How would you describe your students?
7. In the context of FL Writes, what kind of decisions do you make about how you teach writing?

8. How do you make decisions about the curriculum?
9. Do you make adjustments within the curriculum?
10. Have you received your FL Writes results?
11. If I were to come in your classroom, what would I see or hear about what you believe about teaching and learning?

The eighth grade writing team who were volunteer participants answered these questions which provided a rich tapestry for understanding the theories that shaped and guided their own individual teaching. Many of the responses were enlightened through an understanding of the teacher's personal experiences and background before coming to Horizon. Answers also provided examples of how their personal theories played out within the classroom decisions that were made on a day-to-day basis. Finally, the answers to these interviews shed light on the sources behind each teacher's personal theories. When their answers were synthesized and combined, there were a resulting set of beliefs about students, the process of teaching writing, and the foundation behind student achievement at Horizon Middle School. Because the interview questions were intentionally chosen to focus on the teacher's personal theories, the following list of sub-questions were answered simultaneously:

- What are the personal experiences that have shaped your beliefs in teaching writing?
- What are the resulting beliefs?
- How do you see those playing out in the classroom?
- What are the practical or professional beliefs that have shaped your teaching of the writing skill?
- How do you justify those beliefs?
- What is the origin of those beliefs?

- How do your Personal Practical Theories affect your pre-planning, teaching and reflective aspects of teaching writing at Horizon Middle School?
- What are the values that support your collaboration with other members of the writing team at Horizon Middle School?

Also, the following questions were used to interview the school leadership:

1. Tell me about your experiences and how you arrived at Horizon.
2. Describe your philosophy of leadership and how that translates to day-to-day practice.
3. Tell me about the students at Horizon.
4. Tell me about the teachers and staff at Horizon.
5. In the context of Florida Writes, how does the FCAT fit into the curriculum?
6. If I were to come in your school, what would I see or hear about what you and your teachers believe about teaching and learning?

Based on Glesne (2011), a case study was best understood as a place with a common denominator. In the case of Horizon Middle School, it was the systems that were in place that made up the whole of the school culture as it related and supported the teaching of the writing skill to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. This collective case study investigated the notion of the whole with a dissection of the parts that make up the interlocking school culture. Therefore, after data-collection, the researcher coded field- notes and drew themes which represented connections within the data. The basis for interpretation and validation was an examination of the: researcher's personal experiences, literature, field-notes, and questions to be further examined.

In regards to anticipated ethical issues of this study, it was the desire of the researcher to respect the needs, values, time, and desires of the participants of the research. The following safeguards recommended by Creswell (2009) were placed to ensure trust and ethical

discernment: the research objectives were given to the participants verbally and in writing, participants agreed verbally to the research study, participants were interviewed and gave verbal permission to be audio-taped, an exemption from IRB was obtained, data collection was given to participants for review, the participant were given first rights to decisions made in relation to the report of data, and anonymity rested solely with those voluntary participants involved in the study.

After the data was collected, the researcher used a coding system (Appendix H) to ensure credibility of the study by answering the central research questions. The following process was conducted by the researcher. First, all of the data was read through for an initial sense of data that was collected. Then, after an initial reading, the researcher highlighted salient points throughout the data. After this strategic step, the researcher read back through the data and made notes in the margins in relation to the highlighted sections. After notes were made, the researcher reread the notes and determined key ideas expressed through the data by putting the comments into a singular phrase or idea. These singular phrases and ideas were then translated into codes which included a code, an abbreviation of the code, and a descriptor of the code. Finally, once the codes were determined, the researcher separated data by codes which were applied to the research questions informed by the conceptual framework.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The first part of the conceptual framework which informed the researcher on the topic of a collaborative model of teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill was Nel Nodding's construct of care. Nodding's argument begun with the idea that caring should be at the foundation of ethical schooling. She built this argument by pointing to the innate desire, ability, and longing for care

to be given and received by individuals within society and within the school setting. Her vantage point lent itself to the idea that education should be at the center of creating a society that was caring. This construct of care as applied to this study focused on four critical parts: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Educators widely recognized that for any characteristic of a classroom to be desired by students, then, it must be modeled by leaders. Within the classroom, the leader that was suggested was the teacher. Nodding's described this first aspect of modeling by describing a situation where students were not told what it meant to care, but shown the value of it by observing the demonstration of care provided by the teacher.

The second component of Nodding's construct of care was dialogue. From this conceptualization, caring should not only be demonstrated, but also talked about. The act of caring was varied, meaning that it showed itself to be different when compared to a group of individuals across a population. For students to be engaged in a caring environment they discussed how each person within the educational community showed he or she cared. This type of dialogue opened up the windows for the exploration of difference among students and teachers. The third component of Nodding's construct of care was practice. Within this aspect, she argued that every decision that was made within the educational setting at a macro-level or within a classroom at the micro-level created a pattern of experiences which made up practice. Every school or classroom's pattern of practice led to a specific mentality. This mentality either pointed to a focus on caring or not. So, when the researcher looked at Horizon Middle School, an examination of the types of decisions that were made each day at the macro and micro level pointed to experiences for students and teachers that were immersed in the process of caring or not.

The final aspect of Nodding's construct of care was confirmation which was where she claimed that there was a distinction between this construct and moral education. Confirmation was the act of affirming and encouraging the best in other individuals within the context of the educational community. To do this, trust was built and continuity forged. Trust was seminal because for care to be characterized by trust it must be credible. For trust to be built, individuals explored and were capable of the process of uncovering what that might mean for both parties. Continuity was critical as it pointed to the central nature of individuals known to one another. So, as trust was built and continuity nurtured, the learning community engaged in the process of affirmation and encouragement of the best in others (Noddings, 2003). It is in this construct of care that educated the researcher during an analysis of the affective domain of teaching the writing skill through a collaborative model at Horizon Middle School. This part of the conceptual framework was applied to the classroom observations and field-notes from the faculty meeting taken by the researcher. Noddings informed the researcher as to what was viewed in both classrooms and faculty meetings.

The second part of the conceptual framework which informed the researcher on the topic of a collaborative model of teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill was the assumptions related to Personal Theorizing by Cornett. According to Cornett (1992), personal theorizing was the systematic process of reflection by teachers. The purpose for this process was to recognize and understand personal understanding as part of instructional improvement. This theory was supported by the notion that teachers used personal guiding theory to determine classroom decision-making. Cornett's theory was a result of teacher's personal and professional experiences. An uncovering and understanding of the personal theories that the researcher held was worthwhile in examining Horizon Middle School. Furthermore, uncovering and



understanding the personal theories that made up the research team at Horizon Middle School informed the researcher on where classroom decision-making was determined. It was in the process of reflection upon Personal Theorizing that the researcher found another aspect that informed the overarching collaborative writing model at Horizon Middle School (Ross, Cornett, & McCutcheon, 1992).

The third part of the conceptual framework which informed the researcher on the topic of a collaborative model of teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill was the essential principles of Mindful Learning presented by Strahan. This model related specific elements in relation to intellectual development: students made connections between their own ideas and new ideas, students were more engaged when they discussed how they learned and had opportunities for the examination of their own choices, students learned best when they were actively involved in the process, and students thrived when they were given mental procedures which were used to engage in new concepts and skills to be learned. Each of the four principles provided beliefs and assumptions about how cognitive development occurred within the middle grades. The first principle focused educators on the consideration of student connection or what can be easily deduced to be real-life situations for learning. Students were naturally inclined to focus attention, energy, and emotion on endeavors that they found to be interesting and related to their existence. From a simple survey of their opinion to a full-scale research paper on a topic of their choosing, students greatly benefitted from seeing the relevance of what they were learning. The second principle focused educators on conversation and reflection. When students felt that the learning community was one in which they had a valuable voice and reflection was a worthwhile use of their time, then, tremendous cognitive outcomes were found. It is in this idea of having a voice and making decisions that empowered and motivated students for current and future learning (Strahan, 1997).

Strahan's third principle focused educators to consider the notion of multiple-intelligences and hands-on learning experiences. When creating a learning environment that encouraged multiple-intelligences and hands-on interactions, students were empowered to show that they were motivated and capable due to the realization that there were multiple ways to show that one understood and exhibited specific skills. Beyond finding value in this type of learning, students had a variety within their day that ensured that all students found a place of worth in academic achievement. When a child and educator engaged in hands-on learning experiences, there was a sense of anticipation and authenticity. This type of learning engagement planted seeds for future growth within students and within the learning community abroad.

The fourth and final principle representative of Strahan's Mindful Learning was the idea of guidance. More specifically, students provided with mental procedures and models that were enduring were dynamic for student learning. When students were actively engaged in the process of being introduced, mastered and reviewed specific mental procedures there was a sense of security. With security came confidence and skill development. Students at the middle level were constantly being faced with new concepts and skills. Therefore, when they were equipped with these types of platforms for engaging new content they were more than adequately prepared to be successful (Van Hoose, Strahan, & L'Esperance, 2001). Recognizing each of these principles of cognitive development urged the researcher to examine the context of Horizon Middle School with inquiries such as: Did students see learning as relevant? How did the teachers prepare to ensure that the learning was engaging? What kind of choices were students given when considering their own learning? How did teachers implement procedures which nurtured student reflection? It was in answering these types of questions prompted by Strahan that the researcher

found clarity and understanding of the phenomenon found in the classroom through observation at Horizon Middle School.

### **Data Collection**

For the purpose of this research study, the following data was collected. Data was collected in three ways to inform the researcher in gaining an understanding of the phenomenon that was Horizon Middle School. The first way data was collected through observations and field-notes of faculty meetings. More specifically, the faculty meeting that established the current operating principles for the school was dynamic and informative. This data informed the researcher in relation to school culture. The second way data will be collected was through classroom observations of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing team. While making classroom observations, the researcher took field-notes which pointed to the ways in which writing instruction occurred in the middle grades. This data informed the researcher in relation to the writing instruction at Horizon Middle School. The third way data was collected was through interviews. The questions were posed to the members of the research team, and each inquiry further informed the researcher of the personal theories that were reflective of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing team. It was an understanding of these personal theories that aided in making connections as to the models of instruction that were chosen or preferred by the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing team at Horizon Middle School. This data informed the researcher in relation to the personal and professional theories that drove the school.

### **Research Site**

HMS was located in the heart of Kissimmee, Florida in Osceola County. The school was located in a rural area that faces challenging demographics in relation to student learning and achievement. The school was founded in 1996. The mission statement of the school was:

Horizon Middle School strives to develop self-confident and creative students willing to take risks within a challenging and innovative environment. Since the founding of the school, there were three principals that have led which enhanced the stability of the institution. Osceola County mission statement was: Education which inspires all to their highest potential. The school's leadership consisted of: principal, assistant principal, reading coach, and grade-level deans. This leadership provided the constant assertion of school culture. This culture was focused on: attendance, achievement and behavior. Each area was upheld as valuable for student growth and development. The faculty and staff were friendly, firm and consistent in all interactions with members within and outside of the learning community.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to explore the cognitive, social, and affective factors that contributed to the development of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill at an urban, rural middle school. The study included data from classroom observations, individual interviews, and field-notes from faculty meetings. The central research question for this study was:

- How does a collaborative model of teaching writing prepare students for high achievement on Florida Writes?
- The following supporting questions were examined:
- How does school culture impact teacher collaboration and student engagement in teaching writing?
- What was the relationship between engaging in a collaborative model of teaching writing and improvement of writing skill in middle level students?

These questions focused on understanding the collaborative writing model at HMS. The researcher interviewed participants, observed participant's classrooms, and participated in faculty meetings with participants.

The researcher interviewed participants over a period of six months. Each interview was conducted one-on-one in the environment most convenient to the participant. All of the participants chose to be interviewed on the campus of HMS, except for one participant who was interviewed at the UCF downtown campus CREATE. Each participant was asked over the phone for consent to be interviewed. They were also asked if audio-tape was permissible. All participants agreed to be interviewed and audio-taped. Classroom observations also occurred over a six month period. Multiple classroom observations of each participant were conducted by

the researcher. Faculty meetings occurred over a six-month period and allowed the researcher to participate in the process of analysis of school-wide operating principles. The compilation of this data was analyzed through the central research question and the two supporting questions.

### **Responses to Research Questions**

Research Question 1: How does a collaborative model of teaching writing prepare students for high achievement on Florida Writes?

#### ***Individual Responses***

To answer this first research question, there were four codes used that related to the construct of personal theorizing:

1. Identification of the middle school student at HMS (CL)
2. Type of writing instruction (WI)
3. Teacher collaboration (TC)
4. View of standardization through the Florida Writes. (ST)

It was a combination of these four codes that communicated the construct of personal theorizing of the participants which determined how the collaborative model of teaching writing prepared students for high achievement on the Florida Writes.

#### ***Anne***

Anne is a first-year teacher at HMS. She is originally from Vermont and spent most of her teaching career there at a school which represented the same challenging demographics as HMS. She relocated to Florida to be close to family during a difficult period in her personal life, placing her in the circumstance of finding a new teaching job. She described the interviewing

process for new teachers at HMS as thorough and intentional. After each additional question in the interview, she was affirmed that this school was a fit for her. Her assurance was not only in her abilities, but more importantly in the organization that she was joining. Anne felt that the high expectations she always had for these populations was shared by the leadership at Horizon. She described her arrival at Horizon as dynamic and empowering. From the first observation of her classroom, her strength of character and depth of experience were evident. She sees teaching as a mission and every interaction in her classroom points to her focus on this challenging endeavor. Teaching similar populations in the past gave her a unique perspective for viewing HMS.

Her conception of the middle level student at Horizon is one that achieves. She noted in the interview that all of her students achieved, they just simply had differing ways of arriving there. Therefore, she saw her role as one that provided many paths leading to the same destination. To ensure achievement, she pointed to high expectations for all learners in the classroom environment. Respect for all learners was part of the culture within the classroom. Students in Anne's classroom are comfortable with collaborating with peers, but for middle level students this is not a simple task for classrooms. In one part of the lesson observation, she paired the students up by twos to work on a learning task. A student raised his hand to ask, "Can we choose partners?" It did not take two seconds for Anne to respond knowing that this student was looking down on his partner. Her response was as follows, "I suggest you sit up, respect your partner, and think about the fact that he may not want to work with you either."

Instead of quickly moving on with the lesson, this suggestion to the student demonstrated that she took the time and firm commitment to develop the student's character. Anne believes that students at Horizon are successful because they are relational and the school is committed to

helping them learn how to treat one another in the context of a community. This example provided support for this belief in her students at HMS.

Anne's writing classroom was organized, clean, and thoughtful. Structure was valued and student engagement was a non-negotiable. At the beginning of a lesson, she said, "I'm losing some of you." This was a signal for refocusing and reorientation to the concept or skill that was being taught within the writing lesson, an earnest prompt for every individual in the learning environment. She stood in the front of the room with a firm voice and half-smile that communicated to the students that she wanted them to be successful and that she was not going to move on until they are ready. At the end of the lesson, she posed this question, "So, how does this vocabulary activity help you in your writing?" Students immediately began raising hands and provided answers to the inquiry. It was evident they could see and make the connection between the learning activity and their writing progress.

Coming to a new school with challenging demographics can be overwhelming (Braun, 2004). However, this was not the case for Anne. In the role of a new teacher, Anne described the process as inspiring because of the support and encouragement of other writing teachers at HMS. It was simple for her to set high expectations for her writing curriculum because this was done by every other teacher in her department. This also provided a sense of validation and belonging from the start. In creating curriculum, she had teachers work alongside to provide feedback with the intention of partnering with her as a professional and with the desire for the students in her classroom to be successful. The idea of standardization was new compared to Anne's former teaching situation. For writing instruction to be meaningful in Anne's classroom, she fostered an understanding of going deeper and not wider in relation to creating curriculum. Her view was that teachers must prepare for the Florida Writes, but this was only one limited aspect of teaching



writing at the middle level. Anne’s personal theory focused on the empowering nature of teacher collaboration, the belief in high expectations for all students, the critical role student engagement played in the classroom and how meaningful learning encouraged learners to make connections.

### *Cathy*

Cathy is a fourth-year teacher at HMS. She grew up in Florida, a few hours south of Horizon. After she finished college, she knew she wanted to be a teacher. So, she began the process of applications and interviewing. When she stepped foot on the campus of HMS, she said she just knew. Her experiences of growing up in schools with similar demographics planted seeds for her future career. Cathy has a kind spirit and leads in her classroom with a steady, visionary hand. Throughout the school day, she teaches writing to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students through varied courses from Regular to Honors.

Cathy described the students at Horizon as vulnerable and desirous of structure. She viewed the students as capable and deserving of high expectations. Her focus in writing instruction was one that encouraged learners to do their best with an underlying belief that each student can achieve. She showed this through a classroom observation of an FCAT diagnostic writing prompt. Each year, 8<sup>th</sup> grade students are required by the state of Florida to take a certain number of practice prompts timed. So, after she passed out the writing prompt, Cathy said, “Relax, take your time and do your best!”

Her classroom was comprised of Level 1, 2, 3 and 4 writers. Students that scored 3 or 4 were functioning at or above grade level. Students that scored 1 or 2 were functioning below grade level in writing and required additional support for future academic development. This showed that the variability in skill level and confidence was extremely varied. Students began

writing and she walked around which showed that she was intentional about the idea of providing physical support for students while writing. After making two to three passes of each group of students, she noted to me in a compassionate tone,

Normally, I do not help or explain, but with my level one and two students, they will simply shut down. They just need to know that I see what they are doing and they have my support.

Cathy understood the importance of following the state standards and assessment thereof, but focused primarily on developing the craft of the writing which she believed led to achievement on any standardized assessment.

During classroom observations, as I looked around the classroom, I noticed a poster called SOAR on the wall. It looked familiar to me as I had seen this poster in another classroom. Cathy explained to me that this poster was the school-wide behavioral system. She expressed the strength she feels knowing that there was collaboration on the policy and implementation school-wide. Just as she felt that strong collaboration existed within the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing team, the behavior that was required to teach those skills and concepts were demanded from classroom to classroom. This provided continuity for her as the students entered her classroom. Cathy's personal theory focused on her role of support for student learning, the thoughtful planning required for teaching writing, the encouragement of teacher collaboration, and the depth of understanding of the student in the classroom.

### *Janet*

Janet is an eighth-year teacher at Horizon. She started teaching in her home state of New York as a first grade teacher. She recalled her early teaching experience as a confirmation that she loved to teach language arts and loved to relate with students. After teaching first grade, she

spent time as a reading facilitator at Columbia University. She loved what she was doing, but wanted to move away from her home state. So, she came to Florida and after walking through what she described as a 100 question interview with the principal at HMS, she was here to stay. She has taught 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in all areas of Language Arts at Horizon. Her care for the students and expertise in teaching writing is apparent.

Janet also believes that Horizon students need relationships and a personal connection to engage in the process of learning to write.

Our students need so much love and so much support from just human to human contact. Just having a responsible adult and a good role model and once that's established than they'll work for you and the achievement comes with it.

Beyond the understanding of human contact, Janet views HMS students as a group of learners that need love and attention.

They're silly, they're fun, they, they definitely want to learn, they definitely need structure because they have different rules at home, but once you make that personal connection with them and you have established the rules and developed that mutual respect, they're like my own children, and I've had great relationships with them. As writers, they vary based on their personal experiences.

Writing instruction in Janet's classroom focused on the purpose for writing. From her vantage point, if students and teachers did not align the purpose for the writing it would be difficult to foster achievement within these student populations. Not only did she focus on this alignment, but she also focused on what each student needed within the learning environment.

Um, we do a lot of whole to part to whole, looking at model texts, just a lot of writing in front of the students, showing them exemplar texts, breaking it down into pieces. It basically depends on what the students need. Some are more needy in organization structure, some more on content and support, so it does depend. We, uh, we use mini-lesson models with examples, whole group, small group, and individual practice.

She pointed to teacher collaboration as a hallmark of HMS. Teachers collaborated on lesson planning, but also participated in collaboration through co-teaching.

I have a special education teacher who is a certified teacher in the subject areas and special education, and the model that we use is that we are both the teachers in the classroom. This is not an assistant who's helping, this is not someone who just someone who focuses on students with IEPs and who have accommodations, but that's another teacher who is there working with all of the students to maybe teach them in a way that I'm not. So, between the two of us, were able to reach more kids and differentiate more.

Janet views the standardized writing assessment students have to take as one aspect of teaching writing. The value that she placed on this component was limited.

The standardized writing assessment that students at HMS take each year in the spring Florida writes is there. I try to teach above that because it's such a, a structured, general question, and it only allows students to pull from personal experiences. It doesn't allow for the varied styles of writing. I use, I keep that in the back of my head, and I do teach the process, and I do use the rubric that the state uses as my scoring guide, and the students are well aware of it and have the ability to score themselves, and we do go through that process, but we focus more on the connections with different texts. So, for me, the Florida Writes is not, the be all end all, but I do have to address it because it is mandatory.

Janet's theory focused on her love and compassion for students, the power of collaboration, and how personal relationships and personal connection played a vital role in the development of writing skill.

### ***Brad***

Brad is a seventh-year teacher at HMS. He received a teaching scholarship right out of high school, but at the end of college decided to go into retail. As the years passed in this profession, he found it to be unfulfilling with the exception of the aspects of training and teaching of employees. So, this enjoyment prompted him to give teaching a chance as a profession. Brad is a passionate professional who takes every opportunity to relate to his students. When the researcher entered his classroom, there was a sense of excitement and anticipation for the learning process that was unfolding. Brad has taught primarily reading classes at Horizon with the exception of a few sections of writing. He teaches every lesson with a

sense of urgency for himself as a professional and for his students as individuals preparing for the future.

Brad described the students at Horizon as struggling readers which led them to be struggling writers in his reading classroom. He found that the range of students in terms of background and abilities was varied. Brad reflected on his learners as individuals that needed someone to believe in them.

Um, many of my students were on free and reduced lunch, um so you know they are in that sort of high poverty um sector but um what I found about my kids is that they had somehow stopped believing in themselves, and it was very interesting for me to find a way to empower them to let go of, “I can’t read.” “I’m a bad reader” ‘ I’m not good at this,’ to I’m going to work at this , I’m going to try to do better, and I think that shaking their own beliefs in who they were as readers was my most challenging aspect.

It is in that space of re-instilling hope and opportunity that Brad finds fulfillment and sees his students thrive.

Brad believes in teaching writing by focusing on the whole and not divorcing the art of writing into too many parts. As he teaches reading to his students, he starts with a “Do Now” at the beginning of the period to engage the students. Then, he often uses audio enhancement as a tool. He explained this tool in the classroom.

I would press the audio play they would follow along in their books I would monitor that they were actually reading. That was a big push in my classroom. Don’t get lazy because we have someone else reading. That person on the audio reading is so that we can spend more time gaining fluency and it wasn’t to give us, you know no purpose. We had to look at that as an advantage not as a replacement, and I would sort of stop it along the way and discuss certain things with the students answer their questions, and at the end we would have a follow up lesson, you know, related to that days reading.

Brad is empowered by teacher collaboration especially in the context of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing team at Horizon. His belief that continuity comes from teacher collaboration is a dynamic factor that supports the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing teachers.

There are things that I don't always agree with that we teach but for the sake of continuity between the classes between the grades and I'm very much a person that even if I don't feel that it's the number one best process I get on board

Brad is passionate about providing opportunity for students. Therefore, when he considered the idea of achievement through the standardized assessment of the Florida Writes his intentions were clear.

Umm, I think my kids, the reason I have such success with my struggling readers is that they know one hundred percent that my heart and soul is invested in their ability to grow, and they know from day one that I don't care about their FCAT test results in the fact that I judge them or look at them differently based upon the way they perform, but I do care about their FCAT results based upon the opportunities that it will afford them in high school. In middle school, having a double block of reading with me eliminates them from an elective, if they go to high school where they get so many more opportunities of an elective, sculpture, the humanities, psychology, sociology, ceramics, photography, digital computer, all of those things that might be the things that my kids, my students, are talented at and could find a passion for that would sort of help them find a reason for becoming a more educated person, and if those things are stripped away from them, we may lose them completely, and so my kids would tell you that I am very serious about them having every opportunity in their lives.

Brad's personal theory focused on the rekindling of belief for students in possibility, the role of writing for the student, and the impact of teacher collaboration.

## **Synthesis**

The responses to the first research question were varied, but when analyzing responses together there were significant consistencies. These consistencies directed the researcher to the personal theorizing of the participants responding to the given question. According to Cornett (1991), personal theorizing is the systematic process of reflection by teachers. The purpose for this process was to recognize and understand the theories that guided the decisions made through the collaborative model of teaching writing.

All four of the participants pointed to the student at HMS as individuals that needed tremendous support and as individuals that needed a belief in their ability to achieve. The students were described as thriving in environments that were empowering and valued their personal experiences for learning. It was these understandings about the student that were the starting point in preparing students for high achievement. Next, in relation to writing instruction, each participant modeled classroom procedures and instructional strategies that were consistent and thoughtful. Writing instruction involved the development of meaning and purpose for building the skill for the student's future. This type of writing instruction was consistent with the needs expressed by the description of the students.

Beyond a recognition of the student and a specific type of writing instruction, there was a structure necessary to prepare students for achievement—teacher collaboration. All four participants discussed the empowerment experienced by knowing and being a part of professional collaboration. The collaboration was ongoing and focused on meeting the needs of the students. Finally, a view of the Florida Writes confirmed the extent to which students were prepared. The participants viewed the Florida Writes as necessary, but not definitive. A focus on this assessment as one part of student preparation for the future aided in the development of student writing skills beyond this basic level of evaluation. In the final analysis, the personal theories that represented: the recognition of the Horizon middle level student, effective writing instruction, ongoing teacher collaboration, and perspective on the Florida Writes combined to answer the first research question for the study.

Research Question 2: How does school culture impact teacher collaboration and student engagement in teaching writing?

### ***Individual Responses***

To answer this second research question, there were five codes used that related to the construct of care:

1. Belief in student potential for academic achievement (CL)
2. Teacher collaboration (TC)
3. School leadership (SL)
4. School-wide responsibility of student achievement on Florida Writes (SC)
5. Role of student engagement (SE)

It was a combination of these five codes that communicated the construct of care which determined how school culture impacted teacher collaboration and student engagement.

### ***Dana***

Dana is a first-year dean at HMS, but not a new-comer to HMS. She has been at Horizon for the last 12 years. She has taught and co-taught reading and writing with all ranges of students. She discussed her initial interview as a foundational piece of her journey.

I went back to Florida, and little did I know the principal was going to ask me 700 questions and it was the hardest interview I would ever have to do but something just felt right. I just knew that that was what I was supposed to do.

Originally, she was from Canada and expressed no interest in moving back home.

I knew that this was home, and, you know, I've been here ever since.

At Horizon, Dana found that she was not the only person that believed students were capable of high achievement.

That's what we're doing here, and it's not me, it's not one person, It's everybody. Everybody thinks that and everybody, um, believes that the kids can do that, and what we do here that I think is different is that we take the kids where they are at and get them



where they need to be. We don't just say you're in eighth grade, you should be here, let's do this. You have to start where they are.

Dana discussed how she functioned as a teacher and co-teacher before she was a dean. It was these experiences in teacher collaboration that supported her understanding of student achievement.

We were always trying to figure out what would work. Sometimes we would split them up, and I would take a group and we would leave the class, and she would lead the class or vice versa, or I would be working on one thing and she would be working on something else, or we would just be flip-flopping and doing whatever was needed, We were both very good at looking, ok this isn't working what can we do, lets switch it, and that, that made a big difference.

Her role as a dean held a specific expectation for all students. This expectation included a commitment for teachers to uphold classrooms where student engagement was a reality for all learners.

I never tell them that they can't. I don't ever tell them that, I don't ever say, 'well you have a learning disability so you shouldn't be able to do this.' Not at all, absolutely not, that is completely unheard of. Every single kid can do it, and I know that, and they know that, and some of them will start to say they can't but we get there.

Finally, Dana had a strong conviction that excellent writing instruction started with organizing your thoughts.

I think laying that foundation starting out, especially with the kids that I work with, a lot of them don't have any experience or can't just pick up things easily, so laying down that foundation of how to organize your thoughts in a frame or a web or whatever works for that kid. Once they have that, they can start developing stories and anecdotes, and details, but they have to have that foundation before you can go any further.

Dana's construct of care focused on student engagement, belief in student potential, and the power of teacher collaboration.

## ***Brenda***

Brenda is the reading coach at HMS. Originally, she is from Indiana. She taught for one year in her home state before leaving the profession for a couple years to do professional development in the corporate world. She described her departure after one year from a parochial school as part of her disgust with the low expectations the school had for student learning. After a brief stint in the corporate world, she found she missed teaching. So, she moved to Florida and begun her search for a teaching position. She recalled in her initial interview when they asked her to, "Tell me about your expectations for students." It was at this point that she knew HMS was a fit for her professionally.

At Horizon, the school culture focused on professional ownership of all students; meaning that every staff member had a role to play in empowering students to achieve on the Florida Writes. History told of the circumstances which laid the foundation for this school-wide belief.

In 2000, we didn't have the school-wide, lets everyone look at the student's writing. But what happened then, after, the year after that, we lost two of our three language arts teachers, and one was the department chair, who was kind of our writing guru, and this was in December and the writing test was in February. We lost two of the three teachers in Language arts, and the only person left was a new teacher, and so, you know, the staff came together and said, what can we do to help? And that's when, that's when the principal at the time said, well, now were going to train you to grade these essays. So, what happened was, there was a professional development, a couple of professional development meetings held to train our P.E teachers and our science teachers, our math teachers, everyone, how to grade essays and then provide feedback to the students, and that became a tradition from that point on, and that is part of our culture, and part of our writing process.

To undergird this ownership of student achievement, teacher collaboration played a significant role in the schedule.

We had some consistency in terms of planning among the language arts teachers. There were three of us, and we did plan consistently, and we didn't do a formal lesson study,

but we did do a lesson study model where we would sit down and look at, ok, what are your kids having trouble with? Where are your kids doing well? And talk about our instructional practices, and um make adjustments from there.

Brenda's experiences at Horizon taught her that students were the center of the learning process. Therefore, student engagement translated into the student's role as active participants.

So, you're going to see their belief that their students can rise to the occasion, and you're going to see their belief that the students need to be active participants in their learning, you're going to see a lot of, um, a lot of the classrooms, like in science they do interactive notebooks, and in a lot of the classrooms, you would go in ask the students, 'what are you working on today?' they could tell you and they could tell you why. The students are keeping track of their own data, and they can speak to that.

As a reading coach that understood the process of supporting teachers in the high-stakes environment, she pointed to the type of writing instruction that made the difference for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.

I think that making the adjustments, the big part of the key to that is just being knowledgeable as a teacher to know when you need to make those adjustments. Regardless of what a map or a calendar might say, um understanding your students well enough and knowing where they are in their skills to be able to say, hey we need to change something, we need to make an adjustment, and our teachers are very good about that.

Brenda's construct of care focused on school-wide ownership of student achievement, high expectations for all learners and the power of effective instruction.

### ***John***

John is the principal at HMS. He spent the last 13 years in education and has spent the last few years as the leader at Horizon. John's career as an educator started as a teacher. He strived to keep this at the forefront when leading.

Well, uh, my primary take on leadership and philosophy of leadership is being actively involved. I am a hands-on um principal Um in terms of, I get involved, and I provide the support, because as a classroom teacher I can remember not having the support when you had challenges.

When focused on developing school culture, John saw the students as the center-piece.

I try to make kids feel a part. I think when they feel that they have a part of something, or they are part of the process, they take ownership, but when they just feel like, um, whatever, they don't take ownership. It's like whatever, who cares. It's like, if you go to the cafeteria now, you'll see kids taking, they're part of the cleaning of the cafeteria. They take ownership for their tables. Of course, we teach them the procedures, but if we didn't do that, of course, they would leave the trash on the tables and all over the floor, and keep on moving for the other kids are going to have to come and do something about that, but just little things like that, it speaks volumes when we make kids a part of things.

John discussed a high level of trust between staff and school leadership. He viewed the difference-maker with the teachers was the high level of teacher collaboration.

I think we have a phenomenal staff. The teachers, we have a, a large percentage of the staff that really cares. They work, and I think that what helps us is, they work hard in terms of—they collaborate together. We have fostered a culture of collaboration, um and we try to foster a culture of consistency, and building our overall culture and climate so that everybody is speaking the same language.

John analyzed the teacher collaboration and quickly directed attention to the role of the student in the learning process at HMS.

You will see students who are complying with rules and are functioning in a structured environment. Um, in addition you will see students expressing excitement about what they're doing.

He further detailed the role of school culture by pointing to the type of writing instruction that was valued at Horizon.

You know, we're trying to teach very good instructional strategies, and one of the things we use here, is um, we did a book study last year on *The Art and Science of Teaching* with Dr. Robert Marzano, looking at effective high yield teaching strategies. You're looking at different strategies that you can use in that lesson, so that the students really benefit. Having essential questions, what is the most important thing that day that you want kids to walk out that day knowing, and building on it, and the more we do that, the more we ask those higher-order questions, and ask kids why? Why is that the right answer? Versus saying, well, the answer's A, well why do you think it's A? Making them go back to the text to provide support for the answers which is all common core type stuff. We're really preparing them for the test without taking the test.

John's construct of care focused on the creation of a student-centered learning environment, the role of school leadership and the value of teacher collaboration.

## **Synthesis**

School culture is driven by school leadership (Graham & Perin, 2007). Therefore, an analysis of the responses of the principal, dean, and reading coach provided a platform for examination and understanding of how school culture impacted teacher collaboration and student engagement in teaching writing. The school culture discussed by the leadership included a focus on: belief in student potential for academic achievement, school-wide responsibility of student achievement on the Florida Writes, and ownership of academic achievement. Each of these components played a critical role in the school's culture and thereby had a strong effect on the level of teacher collaboration and student engagement.

According to the construct of care provided by Noddings (2003), the interaction of care was carried out through modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. Both the notion of teacher collaboration and student engagement involved a steady stream of dialogue, actions and confirmation which made this a living aspect of the culture. School leadership described teacher collaboration as an indispensable aspect of HMS. They discussed this through the implementation of all staff being involved in the process of preparing students for the Florida Writes. The participants pointed to the fact that the history of the school designated the future of the school. The principal used the phrase, "fostering consistency" when discussing teacher collaboration. The dean carried this forward by pointing to her own experience as a co-teacher in a writing classroom and the involvement of connecting with students through connecting with professionals.

Next and equally distributed in response from participants was the idea of student engagement. Because the school leadership encouraged this through culture development, the following ideas were founded in relation to student engagement. All three leaders directed attention to the excitement that students expressed in the learning process at HMS. Next, the teachers were focused on using instructional strategies that drew the student into deeper meaning based on his or her own personal experiences. Finally, the dean expressed it clearly by saying, "...some of them will start to say they can't, but we get there." This sentiment of "we" synthesized the leadership which launched the school culture creating a natural out-flowing of teacher collaboration and student engagement.

Research Question 3: What was the relationship between engaging in a collaborative model of teaching writing and improvement of writing skill in middle level students?

### ***Individual Responses***

To answer this third research question, there were four codes used that related to the construct of mindful learning:

1. How the learner was viewed by teachers (CL)
2. Teaching of writing (WI)
3. Curriculum development (TC)
4. How writing was defined by teachers (DW)

It was a combination of these four codes that communicated the construct of mindful learning which determined the relationship between a collaborative model of teaching writing and the improvement of the writing skill.

*Janet*

As a veteran teacher at HMS, Janet discussed her definition for writing to help explain the relationship she felt between a collaborative model and student development of the writing skill. It was this foundation that began the discussion of this interaction.

I want students to be able to, to use the skills for life. That's my number one is, I want them to see the reading and writing connection and actually be able to use it.

To show how this definition came alive in the classroom and the strategies that were chosen to teach 8<sup>th</sup> grade writers, Janet pointed to how she developed her day-to-day lessons.

It's not about me. With that said, we bring the calendar home to our school, and it doesn't always work. It's there as a guide, not the be all, end all for us. WE still always do what's best for kids. WE still have the flexibility in our department uh for both reading and writing teachers that we can bring in the text that we want the texts that we feel the students need. If we feel that we need extra time to work on a certain skill we have that flexibility. We also work in our grade level with reading and writing teachers so that we can match up what we're teaching so were hitting certain skills were matching up certain academic vocabulary with the students.

Finally, she deliberated upon the notion of student improvement of the writing skill by articulating how exactly she judged writing and the value thereof. This brought attention to her philosophy, and the prevailing philosophy of the school in relation to student achievement.

We don't water it down. We still expect them to bring it up. Will they get there as fast? No. Will they always achieve that high, high, high score? No. But we had, the learning gains in my classroom throughout the year from my monthly assessment that we tracked on our charts, our class charts, the gains were tremendous. Going from like an average of 1.2 up to 4.5 by the end of the year out of 6, so I would say that one of the big things of the curriculum is not watering it down but giving them the extra support to bring them up.

Janet's construct of mindful learning focused on the creation of curriculum that nurtures high expectations, writing instruction that has life-long value for students and a definition of writing instruction.

## ***Brad***

Brad was definitive in his view of writing and how that process was executed within the context of the middle level.

Writing is the art the communication of letters it's the art of expressing one selves and having it down in black and white it's the art of maybe the sort of Virginia Wolfe stream of conscious writing where you are not quite sure yourself where this is headed but you may find yourself in a completely new light if you just continue the process. I want students to see that the writing for writing sake isn't the be all end all but it's sort of the step in and this sounds lofty and silly especially when we look at it in such a prescriptive, or scripted form, but writing is sort of that step in being able to analyze one's own thoughts and beliefs.

Beyond a provision of a definition of writing, he was insistent on an understanding of his role in delivering the curriculum. It was a preparation and delivery of lessons that provided a context for improvement of the writing skill.

I think that for my students who were struggling readers, I found that they were also struggling writers, and it was really difficult for me to sometimes place less emphasis on the writing and more emphasis on getting the oral answer for them to respond without recording it on paper. As the year progressed, I found that they were more capable of getting a short response down and then speaking about it and so that became more of my routine. In order to get a little bit more writing from them because as we moved along I saw that their writing skills weren't really improving and I thought well, duh. They're not going to improve if I don't force them to do what is more difficult for them.

Brad's construct of mindful learning focused on delivering curriculum that challenges students, making writing a skill for wrestling student thoughts and beliefs, and the role of improvement of the writing skill.

## **Synthesis**

Middle level students thrive when engaged in a model of learning that represents engagement and meaning. Strahan's mindful learning (1997) focused attention on the intentional nature of this model when examining a teacher's thoughts and actions. Within this model,



students made connections between their own ideas and new ideas, students were more engaged when they discussed how they learned and had opportunities for the examination of their choices, and students learned best when they were actively involved in the process. To understand the relationship between a collaborative model and student improvement of writing skill, it was critical to examine how the 8<sup>th</sup> grade lead teachers defined writing. For both educators, writing was the process of organizing thoughts, a way to approach life and the challenges that abound. It was the skill that could be applied to life in a meaningful way to engage. Both teachers also referred to the use of writing for a purpose in understanding and articulating beliefs. According to these teachers, this was a process that was organic and life-changing.

Building on this definition of writing, both teachers pointed to the idea of students as the center-piece for curriculum building to show the relationship between a collaborative model and student improvement. The approach represented by these teachers was one that focused on determining where students were and delivering content to meet their needs. Within this construct, they discussed how there was a separation between the intended curriculum and the day-to-day delivered curriculum. Finally, both professionals directed attention to the constant challenging of students to improve their academic skills and how this was at the heart of judging student development of the writing skill. This was accomplished through an immense understanding of the population followed by a succinct definition of writing and carried out with strategies that provided choice and meaning for all 8<sup>th</sup> grade writers.

### ***Faculty Meetings***

Schools are constantly changing. The legacy of a school is either defined or destroyed by its ability to assess, plan and manage the culture. School culture is the value system that creates meaning for every interaction within a community. In order to examine research question two through Noddings (2003) construct of care, an examination of the following questions was needed:

- What is seen? (modeled)
- What is heard? (dialogue)
- What is done? (practice)
- What is fostered? (community)

By answering these inquiries, the researcher was given an assessment of the care nurtured by the community.

### ***Historical Perspective***

Beyond interviews and classroom observations, data was documented and analyzed from a series of faculty meetings over a six-month period. To understand the gravity of these faculty meetings and the happenings thereof, it was critical to provide context to the data through a brief retelling of history to the researcher by the faculty liaison. Horizon is a member of the School and Community Partnership in the College of Education at the University of Central Florida. Because of this relationship, the faculty liaison engages with the school and provides continued professional development. Through this relationship, Horizon was provided support in the process of developing its operating principles.

## **Operating Principles**

In 1999, the principal made a statement that changed the trajectory of the school, “Something is not working.” What she meant by saying this was that there was a foundational piece missing at the school. The academic setting was filled with teachers that were passionate about their subject matter and cared deeply about their students. Not only did they care for their content areas and their students, but they also were intentionally involved in caring for the process of meaningful learning. What the principal was searching for was the red thread that held everything together. It was the thread that would be so intricately woven that it may not even be apparent to an outsider. This statement and the motivation behind it fueled the creation of the school’s operating principles (Appendix C). These were the expectations by which all members of the community governed themselves.

So, the principal organized a time for every member of the learning community from lunch servers to janitors to teachers to principals to provide input on a list of expectations for the school’s operating principles. After the collaboration was completed, the operating principles were documented, printed, and dispersed to the learning community. After a year, the principal realized that there was a disconnection between what was listed and what was observed in everyday practice within the context of the school. Therefore, the principal took the community of professionals to an all-school retreat. At this retreat, the participants took the expectations and added meaning statements. So, after each expectation was how this translated into reality if the statement was honored. As a result of professional collaboration and school leadership, the learning community had a document that served as an unshakeable part of its foundation.

By 2012 the school leadership determined that it was time to reexamine the operating principles at Horizon. As is the case with schools and their attrition over time, leadership and

staff had changed since the inception of this cornerstone. Due to this change and a sense of continuing solidification of this foundational piece, the time was now. This included a series of faculty meetings to examine the current operating principles and create the 2012 operating principles.

The school community started with an examination of the original operating principles. After this was complete, the school community spent time collaborating to create an updated version that would be consistent with the needs of the existing learning community at Horizon. . What resulted was a new list of expectations.

When the school community reached this point, the school leadership and Dr. Hopp realized that in essence the new operating principles were the same as the old operating principles, but how could they show this to the staff in a meaningful way? So, the assistant principal and the reading coach met with the liaison to discuss how to approach the staff with relating the old to the new. She started the meeting by saying, “The process of operating principles can’t be tainted.” At this point, the school leadership pointed to those teachers that might try to destroy this meeting of unifying the old and the new. The liaison reminded them of a saying that originated from her father, “Ointment is bigger than a fly.” She went on to explain that for the staff to make this connection there must be a high level of respect and this was only accomplished through the whole community. She went on to remind the school leaders that, “School culture does not take much, but everybody has to do it—it is the power of the collective.” After this teachable moment, the assistant principal went back to the type of school leadership that was required at Horizon, “Firm, Fair and Friendly...if you can’t do these things, Farewell!” With that, a meeting time was selected and the school leadership discussed the varying roles that needed to be fulfilled to ensure success.

At the meeting focused on old and new operating principals, teachers were sitting in groups. Each group was given a strip of paper with a different principle from the list of both 200 and 2012. One-by-one teachers stood up to read their principle. What the teachers did not know was that what they were reading was a combination of the old and new operating principles. After all the statements were read, the liaison asked the group how these statements compared with the original operating principles. It was obvious that every professional in the media center that day saw the old was the new.

After this eye-opening experience occurred, the staff was then encouraged to write meaning statements that reflected the expectation. The groups went to work and begun writing down the meaning derived from the principle. As the researcher walked around the room, it was inspiring to see that each group chose a different way to communicate the meaning. Some groups created a list of words while other groups wrote a narrative. After each group was given time to communicate and document meaning of the expectation, each group selected a member to stand up and read aloud to the rest of the school community. One teacher said quietly to me as another professional read her group's meaning statement, "This is why I work here—this is what we talk about at staff meetings." After all of the meaning statements were read, they were collected and the staff was dismissed. There was a palpable sense of anticipation and continued hope felt as the researcher left the media center.

So, to answer the inquiry of what this series of faculty meetings leading to 2012 operating principles meant to the researcher, it was helpful to examine Noddings (2003) construct of care and how this framework informed the school culture at HMS. This construct pointed to four distinct aspects of understanding care: model, dialogue, practice and confirmation. Each aspect was viewed by the researcher within this process of developing 2012 operating principles.

First and foremost, Noddings (2003) pointed to modeling. She asserted that if care was to be understood it must be first seen by individuals. This was confirmed for the researcher by observing the preparation meeting with the school leadership. The meeting begun with a simple inquiry from the assistant principal, “How are we going to help them see the new is the old?” What the assistant principal was saying was that it is our responsibility and duty to make sure that the teachers were set up for success. This exemplified what modeling was defined by.

Next and equally critical to defining the red thread was dialogue. Noddings (2003) suggested that if care was modeled it must be discussed. The process from start to finish in developing operating principles was a discussion. It was a conversation that was accepting of other’s ideas and the value of varying perspectives. While the teachers discussed the meaning behind each expectation, one professional noted with compassion to a colleague, “I don’t agree with you, but I can see where you are coming from.”

Next, the construct of care applied to school culture was practice. This was the pattern of decisions that created a mentality for all members of the community. The actual process of teacher collaboration experienced in creating, defining and distributing the operating principles which included expectations and meaning statements showed that these were the decisions that would be made by professionals as the school forged onward. Finally, the construct of care applied to culture was an examination of confirmation. This was the place where care existed so deeply that community and trust were built. The evidence of this part of the construct of care was realized through the relationships forged within the school community. Brad proved this by saying, “Even if no one else notices my work or passion, Horizon Middle School will uphold me.”

## **Synthesis**

The participants within the process of were varied, but when synthesized the following assertions were made. First and foremost what was viewed through participant modeling was collaboration, ownership and engagement—a desire for a culture that took responsibility for student learning. Next, what was heard was dialogue that focused on the needs of the community; it was a deliberation of trust and dependence. What was done through this practice was a pattern of shared experiences which created a distinct school culture. Finally, what was fostered through this process was a lasting foundation that provided support for the current day and the future happenings of the learning community.

## **Summary**

The conceptual framework for the study provided a lens for the evidence found in the interviews and observations. The process of data analysis started with the deliberation of the central research question, to what extent does a collaborative model of teaching writing prepare students for high achievement on Florida Writes, through the construct of personal theorizing defined by Cornett (1992). The data focused on identification of the middle school student at HMS, type of writing instruction, teacher collaboration, and the view of standardization through the Florida Writes. These focus points were dissected from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing team.

Next, the data analysis moved to the second research question, how does school culture impact teacher collaboration and student engagement in teaching writing, through the construct of care defined by Noddings (2003). The data focused on belief in student potential for academic achievement, school-wide responsibility of student achievement on the Florida Writes, and

ownership of academic achievement. These focus points were dissected from the school leadership through the lens of the principal, dean and reading coach.

Finally, the data analysis was completed by addressing the final research question, what was the relationship between engaging in a collaborative model of teaching writing and improvement of writing skill in middle level students, through the construct of mindful learning defined by Strahan (1997). The data focused on how writing was defined by the teachers and the resulting instructional strategies chosen. It was in unpacking each research question through the conceptual framework that informed the evidence presented through the interviews and observations.



## CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this study was to explore the cognitive, social, and affective factors that contributed to the development of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing skill at an urban, rural middle school. The study included data from classroom observations, individual interviews, and field-notes from faculty meetings. After data collection and analysis, the researcher used the research questions to draw conclusions from the research study.

### Conclusions

#### *Research Question 1: How Does a Collaborative Model of Teaching Writing Prepare Students for High Achievement on the Florida Writes?*

To consider the relationship between a collaborative model of teaching writing and high achievement, the data analysis pointed to the following topics for conclusions: conception of the learner, teacher collaboration, meaningful writing instruction, and lens on standardization. What conclusions were drawn for each area? The first conclusion from the data analysis was that for students to be successful on the Florida Writes, the teachers that led them must believe they could do it. Within the context of interviews and faculty meetings, the researcher was inspired by the lens by which the school community viewed the student at Horizon—one that was successful and had high expectations for learning.

Beyond teacher belief in the student's ability to achieve, the second conclusion drawn from this data analysis was that students benefited greatly on the Florida Writes due to the perspective that the teacher had on the examination. From the principal to the classroom teacher, it was communicated that the Florida Writes was just a part of the curriculum. There was a steady belief that if the writing curriculum taught critical thinking skills and how to write for any

purpose, then the results on the standardized assessment would take care of themselves. This proved true in this context; teachers did not teach to the test and students thrived on the test.

***Research Question 2: How Does School Culture Impact Teacher Collaboration and Student Engagement in Teaching Writing?***

To consider how school culture impacted teacher collaboration and student engagement, the data analysis pointed to the following conclusions: standardization, conception of the learner, teacher collaboration and student engagement. As a professional and researcher, there were two areas in which evidence and analysis supported conclusions. The first conclusion was the in-depth manner in which the school community collaborated within the faculty meetings. It was impactful to witness the focus and inspiration generated within each group and within the sharing of ideas. The same high level of expectations for student learning was applied to professionals school-wide.

The second conclusion was the parallel that was drawn between theory and practice when comparing the interviews/classroom observations and the series of faculty meetings. Building on this initial conclusion was the most dynamic part in observation of the operating principles process unfold was the parallel that could be drawn within the classroom and within the one-on-one interviews. The school community at Horizon was unrelenting in holding high expectations for students and the process of learning that was occurring—the same value was upheld in their interactions with one another through this series of faculty meetings. If the researcher was to understand why HMS was a phenomenon, a success story that needed to be told, this set of snapshots was the undeniable evidence of the “red thread” that held it all together. So, the final conclusion was that if school culture was interwoven deep in the fabric of the school-life then

there was a true connection between theory and practice—teacher’s knowledge and thinking were complimentary of their actions.

***Research Question 3: What Was the Relationship between Engaging in a Collaborative Model of Teaching Writing and Improvement of Writing Skill in Middle Level Students?***

To draw conclusions on the relationship between engaging in a collaborative model and the improvement of writing skill, the data analysis pointed to the following conclusions: conception of the learner, power of collaborative curriculum development, effective writing instruction and a definition of writing. The first conclusion reached by the researcher was that teachers who participated in a collaborative model of teaching writing saw student’s writing improve. Not only did it improve in relation to their interest in the content area, but also in relation to their standardized test scores. The researcher came to this conclusion by pairing the high achievement levels found on the Florida Writes and the student engagement viewed within the context of the classroom. Students scored high on standardized tests and enjoyed the process of learning.

The second conclusion based on this inquiry was that for teachers to effectively function within the collaborative model there was a shared understanding of the population. There was a shared definition as to how and why certain strategies were most beneficial to the population. At Horizon, when teachers and school leadership described teaching writing to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, it was clear what was meant. They shared ideas such as high expectations and standards for all learners; personal voice and meaning were important.

The final conclusion based on the research question was that within a collaborative model of teaching writing that improved the writing skill of the middle level student, teachers collaborated to design writing instruction that met the needs of the learner. So, for student’s

writing to improve through a collaborative writing model, the model was marked by teacher collaboration, student engagement, and a belief that all students were capable.

### **Implications for Practice**

This research study was an exploration of the collaborative model of teaching writing at HMS and provided two critical implications for practice:

1. The dynamic nature of a partnership between higher education and a local school
2. The relationship between theory and practice at the school level

Horizon is a member of the School and Community Partnership in the College of Education at the University of Central Florida. Because of this relationship, a faculty liaison engages with the school and provides continued professional development. Through this relationship, Horizon was provided support in the process of developing its operating principles and other projects that supported the mission of the school. Since the founding of the school, Horizon has placed a high value in this partnership and the inherent value of the relationship. This was one pivotal reason why the school culture representative at Horizon stood as a success story for others to review—a true phenomenon. HMS faced the same challenging set of demographics as many urban schools, but they were able to move past standardization, poverty, and a myriad of other realities to a transformational place of growth and development for all learners and professionals.

Therefore, as HMS grew and developed their unique school culture, they had a far-reaching support system. This was a support system that represented the best in theory and philosophy within higher education. Consequently, when the school leadership and community members analyzed their day-to-day practice patterns, this high-level of expertise was embedded.

An outside consultant was not called to address Horizon's challenges and support continued professional growth; better yet, the faculty liaison was deeply relied upon. The liaison was a professional that understood the history and context of Horizon. This professional was equipped with the insight to provide leadership; it was the dynamic nature of leadership created by journeying with a group of professionals. This traveling created a strong sense of trust and ownership between the two parties involved in the partnership. This was trust and ownership which naturally evolved as the professionals collaborated in a meaningful way over a period of time. This was a situation that provided tremendous benefits to both parties involved.

There is a challenge to connect theory and practice (Duffy, 2003). In the context of this study, the two populations were the local school and higher education. For higher education, the challenge was to stay connected to the local school and the practice thereof in the midst of high demands for teaching, research, and writing. For the local school, the challenge was to stay connected to sound theory as it related to their practice in the midst of the immense pressure of standardization and challenging demographics.

Therefore, what the partnership between the University of Central Florida and HMS showed was that these challenges faced by both populations could be addressed in a meaningful and effective way. This partnership proved to be a model for other education departments at the higher level and a model for local schools that must be equipped to lead students towards achievement, especially in the context of the current demographics faced by schools. As Graham and Perin (2007) pointed out through the review of literature, what the field needs is more educational studies that represent success stories of these populations. The researchers were referring to populations that represented academic achievement, similar to the kind found at Horizon.

The second implication of this study for practice was an analysis of how the researcher reviewed the theory asserted by the professionals at Horizon. This was accomplished through an investigation of the day-to-day happenings within the educational setting. While the personal theory asserted through interviews was powerful and the faculty meeting was inspirational, it was critical that the researcher investigated the idea of practice. This was what Noddings (2003) noted as the pattern of experiences which made up the practice. It was this set of experiences that represented a transformational mentality for the community. Within this mentality, it was either the fostering or neglect of trust for all individuals. It was at this deepest level of the construct of care that the researcher was now focused.

To show this implication for practice and why Horizon stood as an exemplar, a narrative excerpted from field notes taken from observations within the last week of school proved the best vehicle for clarity to the reader. The narrative started from entry into the building and finished by listening to a teacher's discussion. Tightly woven through each observation was an integration of the values that represented the school culture of HMS: school leadership, student engagement, teacher collaboration, founded conception of the learner, definition of writing, mindful approach to learning, and a limited lens on standardization.

### **Last Days of School**

It is a rainy morning in early June and the school year has almost come to a close. As I walk in the front office, I wait my turn to enter the school as the lobby is filled with students and parents waiting to be checked in or out. Once I have arrived at the front of the line, I greet Mrs. Johnson and let her know that I am heading to the media center. Her response is, as usual, "Sign in and we will get your visitor's pass ready!" I walk over to the sign-in notebook, and return to

gain my badge for entrance. After placing my badge on my wet dress, I proceed to the media center. But, not without Mrs. Johnson saying, “Have a good day!” Order, respect and professionalism are a marked sign of being present at Horizon Middle School. So, I should not be surprised, but what a remarkable way to start my damp morning. Thus, my day begins.

Knowing that it is the second to the last day of school, I am expecting high emotion and some lack of focus and procedures—understandably so. I will see how the day goes...

As I enter the Media Center, Brenda immediately gets out of her chair to say, “How are you today?” I respond and we sit down to begin conversing about how she is doing and the current happenings at Horizon as the school year comes to a close. We start with a discussion of the FCAT scores and the ridiculous nature of the prompt for both 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. This part of our conversation ends with a witty smile from her and, “Well, 84% of our students passed...it is a little down from last year, but we will keep working.” It is this type of comment that continues to ring in my ear as I reflect upon my day. The idea that 84% of the student body passed coupled with this idea that we can still do better. This is the kind of focus and determination that seems to close discussions and drive leadership and teachers at this school.

We continue our conversation in the Media Center by Brenda answering a simple inquiry, “So, tell me about the last days of school at Horizon?” Immediately she looks at me as though she either does not understand this simple inquiry or that she is insulted that I had to ask, but as always she is gracious and professional. Her response starts with, “No slacking off; we remain academically-focused.” After making this comment, she looks at me as though she is thinking, isn’t this what all schools do? In my mind, it is understandable, her role and leadership make it difficult for her to even ponder anything other than Horizon. Then, she begins to describe how this is accomplished. As she is keenly aware that my focus is the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, she tells me

about the adjustments that are strategically made for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade's last week of school to ensure that as many students as possible are successful. This is another aspect of Brenda that is exceptional; it is the notion that it is her responsibility to do everything in her power to place students in an environment that they are successful.

First, knowing that students are going to be excited about school ending and wanting to take pictures and bring inappropriate items from home; the school does not allow students to bring backpacks the last week of school. They are simply required to bring a folder that has loose leaf paper and pencils in it. She describes how this idea originated as teacher input which was later implemented. All teachers are required to adjust their curriculum to fit this arrangement in terms of student learning which teachers gladly embrace. Second, she mentions that instead of having all of the students departure at the same time on the last day of school, the schedule is staggered to encourage appropriate behavior upon leaving the campus. After describing why this is important, she moves on to the last day of school.

The last days of school for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students is known as "End-of-the-year Activities" which breaks into two parts: last day of school Activities/Dance and the Central Florida Theme Park Trip. Brenda then gets out of her chair and says, "I know what you need, our student handbook." So, she walks over to her desk and pulls out the current 2011/2012 handbook and she remarks, "Well, you can have this one, but it does have notes all over it from our annual review." As the culture continues to persuade, there is a constant analysis of what is being done. Everything is up for discussion and change. This comment instantaneously reminds me of my visit before FCAT testing when Janet said, "Basically, my job is to change and adjust to what students need and if that means change--that is what I do." Once again, this idea that even if we are successful at an endeavor, we should probably review it because it could be improved



prevails. She continues to detail the annual review of the student handbook noting that there were concerns about the eligibility process. So, I probed her to tell me more about this process of eligibility. She began by turning to page 11 in the student handbook which details eligibility requirements for all students. At this point, she prompts me to take a moment to read through the guidelines so that we could continue our discussion more specifically. As I begin reading through this section, I am struck by the first sentence which reads, “There are many *privileges* that *qualifying* 8<sup>th</sup> grade students enjoy at HMS at the *end of the school year*.” Privileges, qualifying, and end of the school year all strike me as significant. First, the word privilege is significant, meaning that this is something special and prized. Next, the word qualifying, meaning that there will be a cost. Finally, end of the year, meaning that you as a student will be involved in this process of achievement all year long.

After the opening paragraph in this section of the student handbook, there are two sets of criteria outlined for students. The first set of criteria is focused on the Central Florida Theme Park. The second set of criteria is focused on Last Day of School Activities and Dance. The criteria are focused on three primary areas: Attendance, Academic Achievement and Character. After reading this page in the student handbook, Brenda goes on to provide me with an explanation of why these three areas are so critical. She closes with, “These are what matter to us at Horizon.” So, when the teachers met with leadership to review the student handbook, some of the teachers felt as though the criteria needed to be adjusted. Their concern was that the criteria was not student friendly enough in relation to giving students a second chance if he or she had been suspended early in the school year. I also noted that 30% of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade was not eligible for these two special set of events. After telling me about these two special sets of events, she describes what the students probably enjoy the most, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade video. This is the video that is

shown just prior to school closing the last day of school. Once again, students must be eligible to participate. Then, as I thought my day would be moved into the classroom for observation, Brenda asks if I would like to see the 8<sup>th</sup> grade video. So, we left her office and headed to the technology room. Nothing could have prepared me for what happened next.

As soon as we walked in the door, the media specialist says, “You have got to see this! It is done!” Her voice and demeanor were embodied by excitement and ownership. So, Brenda and I sat down and the ten minute video began. As the video was playing, the media specialist began detailing how the video was made. She noted first that students chose all of the music to be used. So, the students would view the pictures and the theme for the year and music would be chosen and voted upon by the 7<sup>th</sup> grade yearbook staff. The process of putting together a message from the principal, assistant principal, and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers was crafted with creativity and a desire to connect with the current 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. As I am listening to her describe this collaborative process, I notice that Brenda is sobbing. In her simple, humble way she wiped the tears from her eyes and began to reminisce about different students in the class. Her heart was on her shoulder and I was touched. It is this kind of moment that will never be forgotten by me both personally and professionally.

But as Horizon goes, there is more to see and do...

As we leave the media center, we head to Janet’s 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts Class. Brenda walks me to the classroom and once I am settled, she heads back to her office. The classroom is dark and all of the students are mesmerized by the screen. I open my field journal and look up to note that it is the black-and-white version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. As I scan the classroom to view the students, I am struck initially by their interest. Next I am struck by the individual nature in which they are all watching. Three girls are sitting closely with eyes glued to the

screen, one boy in the back is tossing a ball up and down rarely taking his eyes off the film (no one else but me seems to notice that he is actually doing this) and another has his head resting on his table focused solely on not missing the next part. Then, all of a sudden one of the students screams, “Come on Peter, kiss her!” This comment is fueled by others affirming that this is their anticipation for what occurs next in the film. Within 90 seconds, Peter has kissed his love and the class cheers. At this point, Janet leans over and says, “We did just read this and they do love that part; I am so excited they are enjoying this.” The students continue watching the movie while Janet quietly tells me about their final week of school. As the period comes to a close, one of the students jumps up at the first bell to leave the classroom. Janet calmly says, “Remember, no one is leaving quite yet.” After she gives her closing remarks, she dismisses all of the students. Procedures and consistency matter—even if it is the second to last day of school. The lights are turned on, movie off and she sits down for a moment.

As soon as she sits down, she begins to tell me all about how many different things are going on. She describes how crazy and overwhelming this part of the year is, pointing out that she has just got to let go of something next year. In mid-sentence, Brad pops in from his classroom which is situated right next to Janet’s room. Instead of going into the hallway and entering through her classroom door, he simply moves the retractable wall and there he is in the heart of her classroom. He excitedly comes over and gives me a hug while crying. He begins telling us about how hard it will be to let these students go and that he just had to say goodbye to a student that would not be in school tomorrow. He describes the farewell from the student by retelling what the student said, “Thanks for making me work so hard in your class.” Brad is deeply moved by this student and the school year coming to a close, but still in the midst of his many responsibilities. He echoes the same sentiment that Janet does which is an overwhelming

set of responsibilities. They both begin to tell me about the different aspects of the school that they hold leadership positions within and how difficult it is to let go of some duties. I chime in by trying to understand why this is so difficult. With a pause in the conversation, Brad says, *“Well, if we don’t teach and show them the culture of Horizon, who will?”*

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

After an address of the three research questions, it was appropriate to consider what the research offered in relation to future studies and examination of the field. There were two dominate recommendations made by the researcher for further studies:

1. Need for further research of case studies representative of success of similar populations
2. Need for further examination of the power of the partnership of higher education and the local school in the case of the challenging demographics found within the case study

First and foremost, this research study pointed to a success story representing the power of achievement through school culture. But, the challenge for the field remained due to the limits of the case study. Simply, it was one school. Therefore, more schools that represent similar achievement and distinct school culture need to be recognized. As more educational institutions were added to the list of success stories, then, wider range patterns and assumptions were made for transferability of populations. Future studies pursued would build on this case study. Research focused on these same challenging demographics that showed academic achievement would serve as helpful to practitioners and researchers.

Finally, there was a need for further examination of the power of the partnership presented by Horizon and the faculty liaison. This kind of research was needed for two reasons. First, this type of further study lessened the tension between theory and practice. Instead of facing the challenge and often reality of disconnect, a partnership would provide tangible evidence to the contrary. The second critical reason why further research was needed focused attention on the notion of understanding how this partnership was built and sustained. An in-depth understanding of this model and the intricacies involved were helpful when considering the possibility of transfer to other local schools and higher education. The partnership considered for further research were those that focus on the same challenging demographics mentioned within this case study. It was in these local contexts that a partnership was most beneficial.

## **APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**  
**FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Erin J. Mander**

Date: **July 30, 2012**

Dear Researcher:

On 7/30/2012, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: Successful Urban Adolescent Writers: A Study of a Collaborative Model of Teaching Writing  
Investigator: Erin J. Mander  
IRB Number: SBE-12-08418  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Patria Davis on 07/30/2012 09:49:29 AM EDT

IRB Coordinator

**APPENDIX B: HMS HISTORICAL TREND OF FLORIDA WRITES SCORES**



### HMS Florida Writes Historical Trend

<b>Spring FCAT Year</b>	<b>Mean Score HMS</b>	<b>% Scoring 4.0 or above</b>
2012	3.5	47%
2011	4.6	91%
2010	4.3	86%
2009	4.3	81%
2008	4.1	77%

**APPENDIX C: OPERATING PRINCIPLES 1999 AND 2000**



### *Operating Principles*

Developed and approved by the Horizon Middle School faculty in 1999.

1. We support and recognize each other with dignity and respect.
2. We affirm our strengths while working on our weaknesses.
3. We maintain high expectations.
4. We all grow from our mistakes and are willing to accept change.
5. We use humor and laugh with each other.
6. We embrace active learning because we are active learners.
7. We always keep sight of the *Big Picture*.
8. We acknowledge the presence of others, if simply with a smile.
9. We maintain a safe and caring environment.
10. Our decisions are based on what is best for student growth.



### *Operating Principles*

Developed and approved by the Horizon Middle School faculty in 2000.

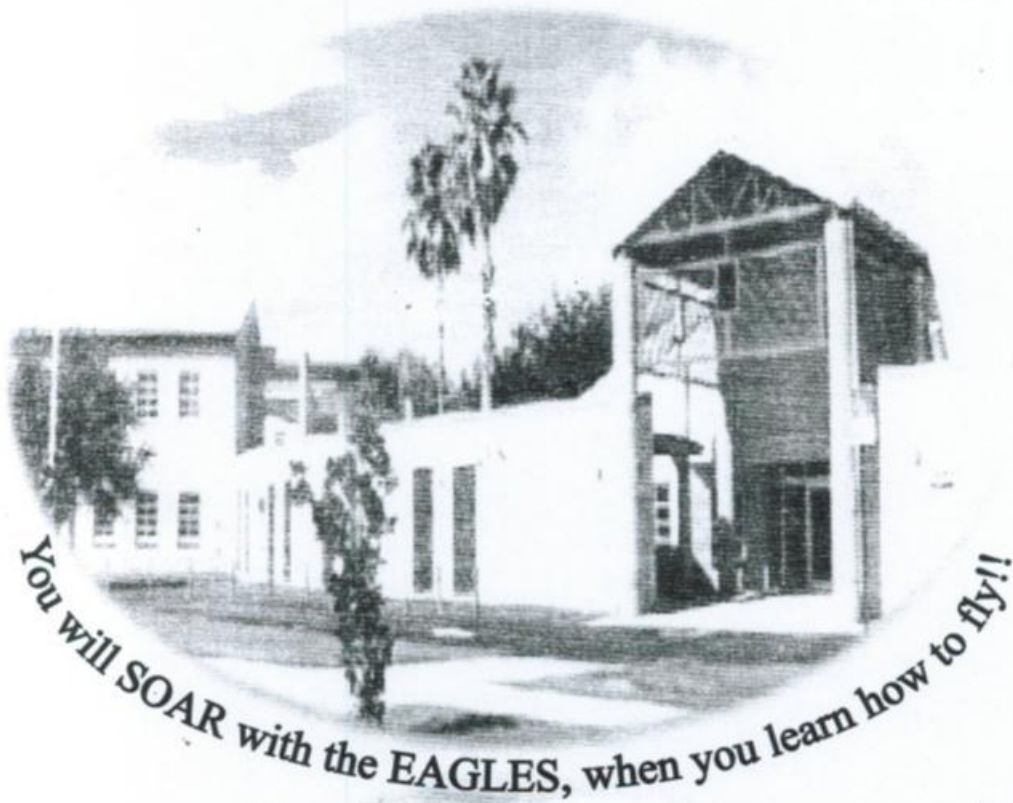
1. We support and recognize each other with dignity and respect.  
**Professionalism is the cornerstone of our practice.**
2. We affirm our strengths while working on our weaknesses.  
**Constructive criticism, balanced with genuine concern and affirmation.**
3. We maintain high expectations.  
**To maintain high expectations through encouragement, modeling and ethical behavior.**
4. We all grow from our mistakes and are willing to accept change.  
**We accept that personal growth is a learning process that involves mistakes, failures consequences and change.**
5. We use humor and laugh with each other.  
**We will laugh with each other, yet never use it as a weapon.**
6. We embrace active learning because we are active learners.  
**We strive to be active learners through individual responsibility toward our own learning activities and fostering them in students.**
7. We always keep sight of the *Big Picture*.  
**Accept that we don't always know the Big Picture, because it is a growing 3-D puzzle that is never ending.**
8. We acknowledge the presence of others, if simply with a smile.  
**We recognize that each person is an integral, vital, valuable part of Horizon Middle School and treat them accordingly.**
9. We maintain a safe and caring environment.  
**We establish fair limits and boundaries that allow everyone to feel safe.**
10. Our decisions are based on what is best for student growth.  
**The bottom line is - our students are top priority.**

## **APPENDIX D: HMS HANDBOOK**

# HORIZON MIDDLE SCHOOL

## PARENT/STUDENT HANDBOOK

### 2012-2013



**Principal**

Dywayne B. Hinds

**Assistant Principal**

Michelle L. Henninger

**Dean of Students**

Gary E. Dunn III

Russell Gould

Deanna L. Hebbler

Lucile Schneider

### Unacceptable Attire, Accessories, or Appearances

- Clothing associated with gangs and/or secret societies as prohibited by Florida Statutes shall not be permitted.
- Clothing which encourages the use of tobacco, drugs, alcohol, and/or violence.
- Clothing associated with discrimination on the basis of age, color, handicap, national origin, sexual orientation, marital status, race, religion, or sex.
- Clothing exposing the torso or upper thighs such as see-through garments, mini-skirts or mini-dresses, halters, backless dresses, tube tops or tank tops without over shirts, spaghetti strap garments without over shirts, bare midriff outfits, or shirts tied at the midriff.
- Clothing or outer garments traditionally designed as undergarments such as boxer shorts, bloomers, tights, hosiery, and/or sleepwear.
- Clothing or footwear that is construed by the Principal or designee as hazardous or dangerous to the health of the student or others.
- Hats, headgear, bandanas, scarfs, or any head covering, except when approved by the Principal.
- Athletic shorts including spandex-style "bicycle" shorts, cut-off jeans, frayed jeans or pants, cut-off sweatpants, short-shorts, running shorts, and see-through boxer-type shorts are not permitted.
- Gym uniforms/shorts are not considered part of the dress code and shall be worn during PE classes only.
- Clothing which is not properly fastened or clothing that has holes, **rips, and/or tears**.
- Hair colors such as neon colors, i.e., **orange, purple, green, red, blue or other unnatural** colors are not permitted.
- Patterns such as plaid or strips, extreme spiked hair and similarly unusual and distracting hairstyles are not permitted.
- Make up that is not within the acceptable standards of the school or community is not permitted.
- Body piercing, except for earrings on the ears, is not permitted and **MUST BE REMOVED, NOT CONCEALED**.
- Writing on clothing, backpacks, self or other students is prohibited at Horizon Middle School.

### Considerations

- No student shall be denied attendance at school or be otherwise penalized for failing to wear clothing that complies with the uniform dress code if such failure is due to financial hardship. Each school's principal and SAC shall develop procedures in order to assist students who are having difficulty complying with the school's uniform dress code due to such financial hardships.
- Students entering the Osceola County Public School system for the first time during the school year shall be granted a grace period up to thirty (30) days to comply with the dress code requirements.

Each school may provide for more specific dress code requirements within the scope of this district-wide dress code and shall provide each student with a copy of their school's dress code. **School Principals and/or designee shall have final authority to decide if clothing complies with District rules.**

When it is determined that a student's clothing does not comply with the dress code, a parent/guardian may be asked to bring an appropriate change of clothes to school. The student may, with parental permission, be sent home in order to change clothes. In addition, the student may also receive a disciplinary consequence for violating the school's dress code policy.

Violations of this policy shall be treated as disruptive behavior in violation of the Student Code of Conduct. This policy shall apply to students at all times when they attend school or any school sponsored event. The principal may exercise discretion and permit exceptions to this policy for extracurricular activities.

At Horizon Middle School writing on clothing, backpacks and self or other students is prohibited.

*Note: It is beyond the scope of this handbook to identify all potentially relevant dress code issues. Therefore, this publication of the Horizon Middle School Parent/Student Handbook is not an exhaustive representation of every possible example of acceptable or unacceptable attire, accessories, or appearances. However, it does represent a good faith effort to address the district-wide and Horizon Middle School's dress code policies, procedures and/or violations. The principal and/or designee has final authority to decide if clothing or footwear is in compliance with the dress code policy.*

#### **EARLY DISMISSAL**

Students leaving prior to dismissal must be picked up in the front office by 3:15 p.m. and 2:15 on early release days. Unless a child has permission from the office, no child is permitted to leave the school grounds prior to the regular dismissal, even with his/her parents. We do not know everyone, so please do not feel offended if we ask for identification. **STUDENTS ARE TO BE SIGNED OUT BY THE INDIVIDUAL PICKING THEM UP AND NO STUDENT WILL BE ALLOWED TO LEAVE WITH ANYONE WHO IS NOT LISTED ON THE STUDENT INFORMATION FORM FILED IN THE FRONT OFFICE.** A student who needs to be dismissed at anytime other than the regular student dismissal should bring a written note from home on the day the student intends to leave early. For the safety of everyone, children will not be removed from the bus once they have been loaded. Drivers have been told that once the buses move, NO student can be taken off the bus.

#### **END OF YEAR ACTIVITIES**

There is various activities for eligible students to enjoy at HMS at the end of the school year. Also, there are activities that are open for 8<sup>th</sup> grade students only. In order to qualify and participate, students must meet all of the eligibility requirements:

##### **Field Trips – All grade levels**

- Student's must have accumulated a minimum of 210 points in each academic area by the end of the third (3<sup>rd</sup>) nine weeks.
- All books, including library books must be returned, or payment received prior to the field trip.
- Appropriate behaviors are expected from students in the classroom and in all activities during the school year. An accumulation of four (4) or more days of out-of-school suspension at **ANYTIME** during the school year will automatically eliminate a student from attending the activities. In addition, a student receiving any out-of-school suspension during the last nine weeks will be eliminated.
- Five (5) or more **UNEXCUSED absences** or five (5) or more **UNEXCUSED tardies** will be grounds for elimination. All notes must be received during the current 9 week marking period in which absence/tardy occurs.
- A parent/guardian may be required to accompany any student with special needs or medical conditions as deemed by the Principal.



## **APPENDIX E: TABLE OF INTERVIEW CODING**

## Interview Coding

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>
1	Conception of Learner	CL
2	Writing Instruction	WI
3	Teacher Collaboration	TC
4	Standardization	ST
5	School Leadership	SL
6	School Culture	SC
7	Student Engagement	SE
8	Definition of Writing	DW

## **APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**Teacher Interview Questions:**

1. Tell me about your teaching experiences and how you arrived at Horizon Middle School.
2. Tell me about your experiences in teaching writing.
3. Do you have a specific method for teaching writing?
4. What are your most important beliefs in terms of teaching writing?
5. What do you teach throughout the day?
6. How would you describe your students?
7. In the context of FL Writes, what kind of decisions do you make about how you teach writing?
8. How do you make decisions about the curriculum?
9. Do you make adjustments within the curriculum?
10. Have you received your FL Writes results?
11. If I were to come in your classroom, what would I see or hear about what you believe about teaching and learning?

**School Leadership Interview Questions:**

1. Tell me about your experiences and how you arrived at Horizon.
2. Describe your philosophy of leadership and how that translates to day-to-day practice.
3. Tell me about the students at Horizon.
4. Tell me about the teachers and staff at Horizon.
5. In the context of Florida Writes, how does the FCAT fit into the curriculum?
6. If I were to come in your school, what would I see or hear about what you and your teachers believe about teaching and learning?

## **APPENDIX G: TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEWS**

## **Interviewer Transcription**

**Date: October 5, 2012**

**Interviewer: Erin Mander**

**Participant Name: Brenda**

The interview with Brenda was held in the Media Center at Horizon Middle School on October 5, 2012. Erin Mander, Researcher, conducted the interview. Cynthia Blackburn, Graduate Assistant, transcribed the interview.

Interview Codes: EM =Erin Mander

BD= Brenda

EM: Brenda, question number one. Tell me about your teaching experiences and how you arrived at Horizon Middle School.

BD: Okay, um, I'm originally from Indiana so my first, initial teaching experience was in southern Indiana in a very small school. Actually it was a parochial school which was a very new environment for me.

EM: Mhm

BD: the school I was in was a 6 through 12 um junior and senior high school. Um that school along with the elementary school composed the entire dieses for the entire country.

EM: Wow

BD: and my principal was the superintendent for the entire county. That was, I know you probably don't want a lot of details there, but what happened there sort of influenced my teaching career greatly. It was a very uh different experience. I had teachers there who told me, don't worry about uh you know the grading and so forth. What I do there is I determine uh what kid is an A student, or b student at the beginning of the year and I make sure they get that grade. I'd go in and fill in my grade book to support it in case anyone ever questions me.

EM: Wow

BD: Uh, that was a turn off to me, and I had the principal tell me that my expectations were too high, and that I had to accept mediocrity. Um, several things like that that were a big turn off to me. Especially, to me personally, in my own beliefs as a teacher, and as a brand new teacher, A my first teaching experience. So, um I was there. I actually went to leave half way through the year, but in the state of Indiana, in order for your license to be validated, you actually have to have the principal sign, you have to complete one year of teaching, and have the principal sign it.

EM: ok

BD: Then your license is considered valid, active, etc. So, I stuck out the year so I could have my license signed and then I left teaching for about six years and went into corporate America and did professional development training for a large company.

EM: Sure

BD: I missed, I enjoyed professional development. I missed the teaching. I picked up an adjunct position at a community college in Indiana, and realized that I really wanted to get back into the teaching full time which I decided to do, at the time there were no jobs in the Midwest, and I decided to look for work elsewhere and uh, had some connections down here. Came down here for a job fair, had a very interesting interview with the principal at that time, and was offered a job at the job fair, and that's how I came down here. The principal at the time, I'm sure you've heard many people refer to her, Mrs. Noyer. The reason that I wanted to include the previous experience is that Mrs. Noyer's expectations were very high and the expectations for the teachers and of the teachers and students at Horizon are very high, so that was very refreshing coming from that environment where someone told me my expectations were too high, where expectations are high and that's the norm.

EM: Now, when you came to Horizon, were you a teacher. How was the transition to your current position of being a reading coach?

BD: When I came to Horizon, I came on board as a teacher, a reading teacher uh, so I taught reading for um a few years. I had one year of 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts. Uh, so I did have some experience with the writing process as a classroom teacher. Then, I was an intensive reading teacher, and then I transitioned into the reading coach which I've done for the past eight or nine years.

EM: Uh, Ok, um question um number two. Tell me about your experiences um in teaching writing.

BD: Ok, Now, like I said I did have one year as an eighth grade language arts teacher in the class teaching writing, and that was back in 2000-2001, so it's been a while, but even back at that time we had some, we had some consistency in terms of planning among the language arts teachers . Um, there were three of us, and we did plan consistently, and we didn't do a formal lesson study, but we did do a lesson study model where we would sit down and look at, ok, what are your kids having trouble with? Where are your kids doing well? And talk about our instructional practices, and um make adjustments from there. Um, we did not have our, um, our writing process that we are kind of known for. That was not in place at that time.

EM: Ok, question number three, do you have a specific method for teaching writing?

BD: We actually, and I guess now I speak to the school as a whole, um we, we do have a particular method in terms of, we are following, we are using the same common language in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade um we are using the same type of a planning tool. We obviously use the same rubric that's used by the state, the holistic rubric, um and one of the things that we do, we sort of uh differentiate a little bit, in that we do, sort of, focus more on the solid paragraph structure in

6<sup>th</sup> grade, and then 7<sup>th</sup> grade would be more of putting everything together, and eighth grade is the sort of polishing it up.

EM: Ok, that makes sense. Question number four, what are the most important beliefs in teaching writing?

BD: First of all, I think the most important thing is to realize that there is no one formulaic way to write, I think there has, there have been a lot of messages sent out in the past couple of years that, especially when it comes to the FCAT Writes, that you need to write this, that there needs to be a formula boom, boom, boom um, and so much that that has even been in the newspaper a couple of years ago.

EM: Right, right, right

BD: Um, but I think the important thing in terms of your beliefs is to understand that writing, you're writing for a purpose and you need to know what that purpose is for that particular writing, and then go from there. You still need to have your main ideas, and have your support etc. but there is no one formulaic, five paragraph way to write. If you are still stuck in that belief, that mindset, that that's the way to write, then that's not good, but I think we've pretty much communicated that school wide that writing has purpose and that the purpose of the writing dictate what the response will look like.

EM: Ok, uh, question number five was omitted which is, what you teach throughout the day. Question six, How would you describe your students?

BD: If you're looking demographically, we have a wide variety in our student population. We have 60% of our student population on free or reduced lunch. We need 70% to be a Title I school, so for all intents and purposes a Title I school. Um, our students, probably the best way to describe our students is successful, they are successful at Horizon. Whether they are in an honors class, they are in an ESOL class, they are in an ASD class, they are in a regular class, our student are successful, and that all goes back to the teachers and the administration, but I guess, I don't know exactly what you're looking for in describing the students, but that would be the way I would describe them. They are successful. They have high expectations of themselves. They understand that we as teachers and as administrators, and as a school have high expectations. They enjoy, for the most part, they enjoy coming to school. For many of them, it's the only structured environment or caring environment they have.

EM: Sure

BD: in their life, but I would describe our students as successful and having high expectations for themselves.

EM: Okay, question number seven, in the context of Florida Writes, what kinds of decisions do you make about how you teach writing?



BD: Well, obviously, we first have to figure how much time that's going to take out of the curriculum, well not out of the curriculum, but how much time is devoted to it in the curriculum. We also are, this year we are piloting a program called Springboard in our Language Arts classes, and one of the decisions and of the deciding factors in choosing Springboard is that it did have an emphasis on writing. It especially, it, it comes from college and career readiness and so it does have that gear towards common core, and it is geared towards, um, the college readiness track, but that was big consideration when we chose that program, because we wanted to make sure that we are challenging our students, and that we are continuing to support the FCAT Writes even though in a few years things are going to be changing in terms of assessment.

EM: Right, right, ok, um question number eight. How do you make decisions about the curriculum? Collaboratively? Individually?

BD: Collaboratively. Absolutely, that is one of the things that is one of our strengths. It's one of the cornerstones of coaching here at Horizon, and again, these things have to come from the top down, and we made a decision. We've always worked together collaboratively. It's before, before we started going to conferences, PLC conferences, we were collaborating together. Like I told you, back in 2000 when we were teaching Language Arts, we were collaborating. Um, but, Obviously, in the light of PLCs and some of these things that are hot topics right now, we're putting a little more focus on structuring that and having a little more structure to it, but we actually, we have, we made a decision not this past summer, but the summer before that we were going to make sure that we honored that time. That planning period time, and we made that sacred. So, first of all we made our schedule around, designed our school wide schedule so that teachers would have common planning periods. So, all of sixth grade reading and language arts have a common planning period. All of the sixth grade science teachers have a common planning period, um, our assistant principal says, 'the way you design your schedules shows your priorities' So, our priority is in collaborating, and we think there is great strength in that. Um. But we made the decisions like we said, for the last school year to even honor that more in that there are no meetings to be scheduled during that time. Administration does not schedule meetings during that time. There are no meetings, there are no trainings, no parent conferences, no ESC meetings, no meetings scheduled on that time, so Tuesday of every week, is that day where they plan, so we don't plan any meetings on Tuesdays during that planning time so that we show them how we feel about that time, and we feel that it's important that they have that time. Um this year, last year it worked well, this year I think it's working even better in that we've kind of gone back from what we learned through PLCs, we've kind of honed it a little bit better and given them, I don't want to say guidelines, but given them a purpose. Instead of saying, we want you to plan together, well not this year, the PLC I work with, I work with all of the reading PLCS, I actually gave them goals this year, and that seems to keep them even more focused, and they're being even more productive this year. So, collaboration is the key. Our writing process, I know you're looking at our writing process, and that was a unique collaborative situation in and of itself. Like I said, in 2000, we didn't have the school-wide, lets everyone look at the student's writing. But what happened then, after, the year after that, we lost two of our three language arts teachers, and one was the department chair, who was kind of our writing guru, and this was in December and the writing test was in February. We lost two of the three teachers in Language arts, and the only person left was a new teacher, and so, you know,

the staff came together and said, what can we do to help? And that's when, that's when the principal at the time Mrs. Noyer said, well, now were going to train you to grade these essays. So, what happened was, there was a professional development, a couple of professional development meetings held to train our P.E teachers and our science teachers, our math teachers, everyone, how to grade essays and then provide feedback to the students, and that became a tradition from that point on, and that is part of our culture, and part of our writing process.

EM: Um, question number nine. Do you make adjustments within the curriculum? If so, how is that accomplished?

BD: Uh, We do make adjustments, uh one example that pops into my head is um, we actually, the past couple years have had an outside consultant come in and work with the language arts teachers on writing, and we had our curriculum pretty much set.

EM: Sure

BD: You know, obviously, your curriculum is not set in stone, but we had it mapped out, and um, he said, you know what, these last four weeks before the writing test, don't work on the whole essay, because that's what we had planned out. Uh, he said don't work on the whole essay. Take it piece at a time, this week you're going to work on, focus on the introduction. This week you're going to focus on um, you know, anecdotal support, this week you're going to focus on that, and so that's one way we made adjustment even at the last minute before the test, and the teachers found great results with that, and I think that making the adjustments, the big part of the key to that is just being knowledgeable as a teacher to know when you need to make those adjustments. Regardless of what a map or a calendar might say, um understanding your students well enough and knowing where they are in their skills to be able to

Say, hey we need to change something, we need to make an adjustment, and our teachers are very good about that.

EM: Ok, question number 10. Have you received the Florida Writes results that would be from 2011-2012, if so, what are your thoughts?

BD: We, of course, there was a big hullabaloo about the scores before they came out, and about how 44% of the fourth grade passed and so forth and so on, so we were very nervous. Um, because traditionally we've done very well on the writing, on the FCAT writes. So, when we, I guess we braced ourselves for the worst.

EM: Right

BD: Um, we were not disappointed. Obviously, we always think that there are things that we can improve upon, but all things considered, the fact that we didn't really get a new rubric, uh to go by, we didn't have exemplars to look at or to guide us, and there was not communication to the schools as to how much the grammar was going to weigh. All things considered, I think we did very well, and I think we can attribute it to our in house writing process and the fact that we've kind of honed that.

EM: Right, right, okay, question number 11. If I were to come in your classroom, what would I see or hear about what you believe about teaching and learning?

BD: If you went into any of our classrooms, I think first of all you are going to see that our teachers have high expectations of the students um, you know, and that means that if you're a level one or a level five, that you're, that they're not looking at that, that they've, they've, they are convinced that all of the students have potential, and we believe, and I think you'll see this in the classrooms that you have to stretch kids in order for them to grow. This spoon feeding and this, "Oh, my kids are level one" excuses and things like that don't fly here, and our teachers don't succumb to that. They have very high expectations. You could go, you could go into a level one classroom, or maybe a split classroom, and then go next door to an honors class, and I think you're going to have a hard time knowing the difference in terms of the teachers' instruction, because the teachers have the high expectations of their students. So, you're going to see their belief that their students can rise to the occasion, and you're going to see their belief that the students need to be active participants in their learning, you're going to see a lot of, um, a lot of the classrooms, like in science they do interactive notebooks, and in a lot of the classrooms, you would go in ask the students, 'what are you working on today?' they could tell you and they could tell you why. The students are keeping track of their own data, and they can speak to that. Um, so you're going to see a high level of expectations and the belief in the teachers and the students that they can be successful.

EM: Very good

## **Interviewer Transcription**

**Date: July 9, 2012**

**Interviewer: Erin Mander**

**Participant Name: Brad**

The interview with Brad was held at CREATE, University of Central Florida downtown Orlando campus on July 9, 2012. Erin Mander, Researcher, conducted the interview. Cynthia Blackburn, Graduate Assistant, transcribed the interview.

Interview Codes: EM =Erin Mander

BC= Brad

EM: Ok Brad, We're on. Question number one. Tell me about teaching experiences and how you arrived at Horizon M.S

BC: Ok, Um I am a career changer, so I had a stint in retail

EM: mmhmm

BC: before I came to teaching.

EM: mmhmm

BC: Uh, in a roundabout way, I had gone to school originally uh, on a Chapman James Most Promising Teachers Scholarship right out of high school,

EM: Ooooh mhmm

BC: and at the end of my first year of school I fell in love with the creative writing department, and changed my major to creative writing. So, I finished up with that degree and went into the highly lucrative field of uh retail.

EM: Hmmm

BC: Was unfulfilled felt that the aspects of my jobs in retail that I enjoyed was the training and teaching, and I decided to go back and give it a shot. So, I got a temporary cert. which gave me three years, and uhh was hired a week after I left my job, and I came to Horizon. It was my first teaching assignment. I wanted to teach high school, honors, English, I got offered a middle school position I said well, since I quit my job this is my in and fell in love with it. I just finished my 7<sup>th</sup> year and uh I've taught 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade

EM: Ok, second question. Tell me about your experiences in teaching writing

My writing experience formally in school has been limited, I've only taught two language arts classes per say, the rest of my classes have been reading, so I've gone through all the training that the other Language Arts teachers have been through. Um, I've taught the writing process; it feels, of course as a creative writing major, it's a bit formulaic for my taste.

EM: Mhmm

BC: There are things that I don't always agree with that we teach but for the sake of continuity between the classes between the grades and I'm very much a person that even if I don't feel that it's the number one best process I get on board

EM: Right

BC: when everyone else is doing it. I just happen to also slip in, you know, my own beliefs, you know, as a creative writing person. I give those tips and tricks to my kinds kind of as a side bar.

EM: Ok, Question number three. What would be your specific method for teaching writing?

BC: Oh, I guess for me it would be to take the pressure off producing the sort of standardized five paragraph essay or your thesis statement within your example and your, your specific one time, one evidence. I feel that that really sort of sucks the soul out of what writing is about and although I recognize the importance of teaching a basic format for kids.

EM: Sure

BC: I really want, I guess if I were to be in charge of a writing program, I would want there to be uh multiple forms of writing. I would want to see uh firstly creative writing to play a much more prominent role I think that it does plays in schools today because I think that's what really gives the kids the license and the want to actually write, and then, I would work on the specifics of essay writing and give them the opportunity to sort of explore writing in different avenues. There definitely has to be a template for them to follow in a formal writing situation, but I think kids will only become stronger writers if you give them the sort of the license to get creative without the risk of being sort of graded on their creativity.

EM: Sure

BC: I think they have to write for writing's sake, and we've sort, we've sort of have done away with that.

EM: Question four which is closely tied to the last question: What are the most important beliefs to you in terms of teaching writing?

BC: I feel that Again, I feel like I'm harping on the one note, you know, sort of cause here but it's, it's to... I'm sorry repeat that last part of the question

EM: What are your most important beliefs, what are your most important beliefs the drive the teaching of writing?

BC: I guess there has to be an organic purpose for writing. You have to have a reason for writing, and that I guess students need to be able to understand that there are multiple benefits to writing. It's not just about writing a sort of laundry list of things to do, It's not about writing an essay on a topic that will sort of gain approval from the audience that reads it,

EM: Sure

BC: but that writing is the art the communication of letters it's the art of expressing one selves and having it down in black and white it's the art of maybe the sort of Virginia Wolfe stream of conscious writing where you are not quite sure yourself where this is headed but you may find yourself in a completely new light if you just continue the process. I want students to see that the writing for writing sake isn't the be all end all but it's sort of the step in and this sounds lofty and silly especially when we look at it in such a prescriptive, or scripted form, but writing is sort of that step in being able to analyze one's own thoughts and beliefs.

EM: Question number five: What do you teach throughout the day? Give a description of your schedule instruction

BC: Ok, Well, just this past year I taught remedial reading, which means that I taught the entire level one scoring on FCAT students for 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Umm, it was a double period class, so I had the students for 90 minutes a day and I had three classes. So, I worked with Dr. Janet Allen's Plugged into Reading Program which I loved, because it marries my belief of sort of teaching the whole rather than just the part ummm in sort of lit circles and novel studies, and really for the first time in my teaching career, I was able to get on board with a program that really sort of mimicked and mirrored by own beliefs about reading where you read the novel and stopped along the way and then sort of taught what naturally was going on within the novel. You know the average day was to come in. Umm, the plugged in program had audio support, so my kids would come into the room. Uh, part of their "do now" their bell ringer work or whatever you want to call it was to grab if we were doing a class novel, was to, uh, grab the novel. Come back to their seat. I would have them head their paper for the activity that we would be doing after the reading, or before the reading, or during the reading, and um then I would set up a sort of series of questions that I would want them to maybe look at while we did the reading, and I would press the audio play they would follow along in their books I would monitor that they were actually reading. That was a big push in my classroom. Don't get lazy because we have someone else reading. That person on the audio reading is so that we can spend more time gaining fluency and it wasn't to give us, you know no purpose. We had to look at that as an advantage not as a replacement, and I would sort of stop it along the way and discuss certain things with the students answer their questions, and at the end we would have a follow up lesson, you know, related to that days reading.

EM: Okay, Question 5- Where does writing fit in to all of that that you just described?

BC: I think that for my students who were struggling readers, I found that they were also struggling writers, and it was really difficult for me to sometimes place less emphasis on the writing and more emphasis on getting the oral answer

EM: Right

BC: for them to respond without recording it on paper. As the year progressed, I found that they were more capable of getting a short response down and then speaking about it and so that became more of my routine. In order to get a little bit more writing from them because as we moved along I saw that their writing skills weren't really improving and I thought well, duh. They're not going to improve if I don't force them to do what is more difficult for them. So I tried to, before they could speak, out loud in the group, before they could talk to their partner, they had to write it down, and then, they could speak about what they wanted to speak about so that sort of forced them

EM: Okay, question number 6, How would you describe your students?

BC: My students are struggling readers. You know, they're everybody from the kid that's there every day that puts the effort in that maybe has some exceptional, some exceptionalities that they are working through that, you know, have 504 plans or they're in ESC. I would say I had a pretty high percentage of kids who were in the ESC program this year, to students that are at school sporadically there two days gone three days back a day gone two days, and students who, you know, have, you know, moved from other countries that haven't been English speaking students until they got here three or four years ago. So, I had a wide gamut of students. Um, many of my students were on free and reduced lunch, um so you know they are in that sort of high poverty um sector but um what I found about my kids is that they had somehow stopped believing in themselves, and it was very interesting for me to find a way to empower them to let go of, "I can't read." "I'm a bad reader" "I'm not good at this," to "I'm going to work at this, I'm going to try to do better, and I think that shaking their own beliefs in who they were as readers was my most challenging aspect.

EM: Question number 7: In the context of Florida Writes, what decisions to you make about how you teach writing?

BC: Well, Again, I'm kind of on board with the language arts department and I mimic what they are doing within my reading class. I try to keep the same terminology that the language arts teachers are teaching when they're teaching writing. I don't change it up. I try to stick with the same things. When we do short responses I ask them, "Oh, you know how you do this when you're doing it in language arts when you're doing an essay and writing for the FCAT writes why don't you try to answer in that format for me. "And we do some practices throughout the year that, just trying to support the language arts dept.

EM: Ok um, how do you make decisions about curriculum? Is that a collaborative process? Is that an individual process?

BC: Well, right now one of my colleagues is at a curriculum writing conference. She and I went last year, and she went back this year their revamping it starting from scratch. WE definitely at this point, in Osceola County, we have Common Core Standards in mind. It's coming down the line. We want to get on board; we want to be ahead of the curve and so that what we're working on now. Um, the curriculum really sort of comes from county office, and we take it into the

school and implement it as best and as closely as we feel is beneficial to students. WE have always been really heavily supported by administration in the vein of, do what's best for your students and so fortunately last year and then again this year we've been on the committee, so we've sort have built a curriculum that we believed in, and that was very easy it was like this is what we painfully wrote out and even though it might feel a little bit awkward right now, were going to transition into this thematic unit, we are going to work in this particular area because we had discourse about it. Again, as an individual, any time I'm teaching if I feel that the curriculum is ahead of where my kids are, or I feel that uh they're not quite ready for that particular piece, I will change it to suit what my students need at that moment, because in the end it's not about following a calendar and it's not about following the prescribed material that we deemed were so important. It's about seeing what that particular set of student's needs right now, and what they are going to respond to right now, and what they need maybe to latter up to the curriculum right now. So curriculum changes based upon what my kids did yesterday when I think they need next.

EM: Mhmm, So, question nine was do you make adjustments in the curriculum which you've addressed, and how they are accomplished, so question 10, have you received your Florida Writes results, and if so, what were your thoughts on those?

WE did receive our Florida Writes results, of course there was the whole uh lovely fiasco of the grade changes that happened state wide, um our grades after the adjustments came back and they were a little bit lower than normal um after the adjustments, and of course that was um disheartening, but you know, looking at the way the kids progressed throughout the year, you can see the growth progressed from their practice essays in August through you know February, so I don't know what they did on the actual test, cause I haven't seen those, you know those didn't come back with the scores, but I feel that you know, the standards do need to increase from time to time, but I think for them to increase so dramatically over one year's time is detrimental to the kids, umm but again, writing is about communication and if the kid are communicating effectively, I think we can see those things as a teacher. I don't necessarily believe that we have to pay a company, you know, however many millions of dollars to test the kids on what we can see from day to day. As a professional, I know which kid can write and which kid can't write, um and I feel confident that I could be honest and say so and so is really struggling behind the rest of his peers in writing or isn't meeting the 8<sup>th</sup> grade benchmark standards for writing. I guess I'm curious as to why we need to invest so much money in the testing of writing when there are perfectly qualified individuals, the teachers that are capable of making those decisions.

EM: Sure, question 11: If I were to come in your classroom, what would I see or hear about what you believe about teaching and learning??

BC: My students would say that their educations isn't a joke to me, uh they know I'm serious hard core about their opportunities in the classroom. They would also tell you that um I like to have a good time in the classroom that I think education should be fun and at times funny. That it should be sort of a community project, but not lose sight that we have to each pull our independent weight before we have something valid and worthy to contribute to the class community. Umm, I think my kids, the reason I have such success with my struggling readers is that they know one hundred percent that my heart and soul is invested in their ability to grow,



and they know from day one that I don't care about their FCAT test results in the fact that I judge them or look at them differently based upon the way they perform, but I do care about their FCAT results based upon the opportunities that it will afford them in high school. In middle school, having a double block of reading with me eliminates them from an elective, if they go to high school where they get so many more opportunities of an elective, sculpture, the humanities, psychology, sociology, ceramics, photography, digital computer, all of those things that might be the things that my kids, my students, are talented at and could find a passion for that would sort of help them find a reason for becoming a more educated person, and if those things are stripped away from them, we may lose them completely, and so my kids would tell you that I am very serious about them having every opportunity in their lives. I guess that's what you would see, and a lot of joking.

## **Interviewer Transcription**

**Date: September 6, 2012**

**Interviewer: Erin Mander**

**Participant Name: Dana**

The interview with Dana was held in the Dean's office at office at Horizon Middle School on September 6, 2012. Erin Mander, Researcher, conducted the interview. Cynthia Blackburn, Graduate Assistant, transcribed the interview.

Interview Codes: EM =Erin Mander

DH=Dana

EM: We are up and running. Question number one: Tell me about your experiences and how you arrived at Horizon Middle.

DH: Well, I have only worked at Horizon M.S. I graduated from college 12 years ago and I actually got a job here. I was planning on going back to Canada. I had no intention of moving anywhere in the states. I went to school in the states, but I planned on going home, and um I went to a job fair. It was a special Ed. It was a Conference and there was a job fair there, and we were just walking around, and I kind of got attacked, for a lack of a better word, by the recruiter who jumped into the aisle and was like, 'Hey, how would you like to move to Florida'

EM: Oh my goodness

DH: and we thought, I thought well, he's kind of crazy. Whatever, I ended up starting to talk to Mrs. Noyer, who was the principal here when I started, and we were just talking, and I kind of got a good vibe that I was like yeah, I'm not going to move to Florida.

EM: Good

DH: So, then, I was walking around a bit more and I went to Denver, Colorado interview, and they were like, hey I'm going to interview you tomorrow. I had no intention of interviewing, but I thought, okay let me practice, well, I thought lets go back and interview with Florida as well, because I can, I can practice. Well, I ended up getting both jobs, but the Colorado interview was 4 questions long, and they were like, "Ok, here you go, here's your job," and I was like, "What are you talking about?" and so I went back to Florida, and little did I know that Mrs. Noyer was going to ask ne 700 questions and it was the hardest interview I would ever have to do but something just felt right. I just knew that that was what I was supposed to do.

EM: Right

DH: So I went to, I went home and talked to my family about it, because that's a long way from Canada to Florida. So, we came down and checked out the school, and just being here I knew

that this was where I was supposed to be, and so I packed my car with what fit. I, My best friend drove down with me, and I basically knew the recruited who scared me in the aisle and the principal, and that was who I knew, umm and that was 12 years ago, and I haven't, and I never looked back. The way that my visa worked was that I had a one year extension on my student visa, so technically, my first year teaching I was still considered a student by the government, um and so I had to decide by October whether or not I was going to apply for my temporary visa to extend my ability to work,

EM: Sure

DH: and the county just happened to have a contract that year with a company, I can't even remember the name of the company, but they were trying to recruit teachers from England, and so, you know they were working with teachers to get paperwork and stuff done, and it just happened to fall that one year I was here they were working on that, and everything just kind of fell into place, and I knew that this was home, and, you know, I've been here ever since. My one point I wanted to move home because my nieces were getting big, and I was missing them all growing up and my mom was like why would you want to move? Why would you want to move back here and have to start all over again? You're happy; why not stay there, so you know. ?

EM: Right, that's very interesting. Question number two: What are your experiences in teaching writing at Horizon?

DH: I started out in a self-contained classroom it was called functional skills at the time but it would be an IND classroom now. Um, So I started out there. My kids were fairly low functioning. We worked on daily skills, but they still had to take the writing test just like everybody else, um, and so I taught them writing, and that's when Florida Writes was just started. That's when it initially came in, and I believe a passing score was a 3, and that's where we were at, and then I moved into what I called, it was a VE setting where I taught to classes of language arts two classes of writing, and these were kids most of them had learning disabilities, but it was a purely ESC class, and then I taught that for a couple years, and then I moved into co-teaching language arts, eighth grade language arts and taught writing there

EM: Ok, question number three: Do you have a specific method for teaching writing?

DH: I do, I'm very, and I'm not your typical language arts teacher. I don't know how to say this, and I hope it's not offensive, but I'm not one of those "foo foo" writers who goes off on tangents and is all creative and stuff. I'm very much a mathematical person, and everything is a formula, and everything is this is what you do, and if you do it again you're going to get the same results, and that's just how my mind works, and so yes, I broke it down into a formula, and even when I was in functional skills or the V.E study, that is what we did. We learned the formula. WE learned what goes here, what goes here, what goes here, and of course the context of that changed, but it was a way of organizing the kids' thoughts. Especially the kids with the learning disabilities, um it's hard for them to organize it,

EM: Sure

DH: it's hard for them to wrap their brains around what is this 5 paragraph essay or 4 paragraph essays. That's a lot that's just unheard of.

EM: Sure

DH: My other method is practice, practice, practice, and practice some more. My kids wrote like they have never written before, and that's... you know WE looked at their writing; they looked at each other's writing, um, to see what they were doing. The other thing I do is I never tell them that they can't. I don't ever tell them that, I don't ever say, 'well you have a learning disability so you shouldn't be able to do this.' Not at all, absolutely not, that is completely unheard of. Every single kid can do it, and I know that, and they know that, and some of them will start to say they can't but we get there.

EM: Okay, question number four: What are your most important beliefs in terms of teaching writing?

DH: I think laying that foundation starting out, especially with the kids that I work with, a lot of them don't have any experience or can't just pick up things easily, so laying down that foundation of how to organize your thoughts in a frame or a web or whatever works for that kid. Once they have that, they can start developing stories and anecdotes, and details, but they have to have that foundation before you can go any further.

EM: Okay, question number five. What do you teach throughout the day?

DH: Currently, I don't teach anything during the day. I'm a dean, I student assist, but in the past, last year, I co-taught three eighth grade language arts and three eighth grade math classes. They year before that, I only had one eighth grade language arts class because we had a smaller ESC population, and they only needed one class for that, but then I had, um, I believe it was three math and two science classes, and I co-taught those. Prior to that, I was teaching, um, just V.E reading I believe and V.E Language Arts.

EM: Um, question number six: How would you describe your students?

DH: They're great, they're unique, they are hardworking, um, they want to do well, but on the same token they want to be cool and tough. They don't want to show that they want to be successful at school. Not all of them, but especially the ones in my classes. Um, they've struggled a lot. When I was teaching ESC whether they were labeled ESC or whether they were not. They all had something that was a struggle to them whether it was at home or they all had something going on, but they all wanted to overcome it, and they all wanted to do well, and I think that that's in every child. I think that they want to be successful, even though it's not cool to like school. It's not, for a lot of kids it's, 'I don't want to do this, I want to save face' but I don't think that that's what's truly inside of them, and they are very creative and they're funny you know. They are just good people.

EM: Question number seven: In the context of Florida Writes, what kind of decisions do you make about teaching writing?

DH: In the context of FL Writes, um, one I did, was I would look at what they were asking and then I would figure out how to get my students to achieve that. Um, when I was in functional skills, I had kids passing with a 3, because they knew what was expected. They knew how to take it out of the prompt and how to organize it, and how to put, um, put in what they needed. When it moved to 3.5, I'll have to be honest, my first thought was, 'I just got these kids to a three, how am I going to get them to a 3.5?' and we worked, and worked, and worked and we did, we got them to the 3.5. That's when I was teaching V.E that it went to 3.5, and it I kind of went off track to the question because I forgot the question.

EM: That's ok; um do you make a lot of decisions about the curriculum. That's at least question number eight. What kind of decisions do you make about the curriculum when you're teaching?

DH: It depends on my kids. I can't... it honestly depends on what they need, because some kids are needing to work on the anecdote or body paragraph because that's what they need most, that's the meat of their essay, but other kids know how to do that and are now ready to start writing better introductions and stuff, so when I was in the VE setting, I had the calendar, um the county calendar and I used it as a guide

EM: Sure

DH: but I pulled a lot of my own things, because it didn't fit necessarily with what my kids needed. So we got to it where we needed, we were able to do what they needed, but we had to, I had to change it around and figure out what that was.

EM: Question nine. Um did you make changes in the curriculum, which you answered is yes. How is that done? Individually? Collaboratively? How do you see that happen here?

DH: When I had my own classroom, it depended on the kids. We did it individually or in small groups they would have stations, or we would work together. When we co-taught, I co-taught with Ms. Braco, we had a very unique relationship because we are coworkers, but we are friends as well, we were able to talk about things all the time. We were always trying to figure out what would work. Sometimes we would split them up, and I would take a group and we would leave the class, and she would lead the class or vice versa, or I would be working on one thing and she would be working on something else, or we would just be flip-flopping and doing whatever was needed, We were both very good at looking, ok this isn't working what can we do, lets switch it, and that, that made a big difference. Like you and I were talking about before we started taping, the kids, the ESC students knew that I was the ESC teacher, and often they would ask Ms. Braco for help, because they didn't want to be seen talking to the ESC teacher, but the other kids didn't know they thought they had two teachers, and so it didn't matter that so-and-so was an ESC student, but I Would help them that didn't matter at all. They were both of our kids, and we both did what we needed to do to make those kids be successful.

EM: Okay, question number ten: Have you received your 2012 Florida Writes scores, and then, sort of, what are your thoughts on that topic?

DH: Um, yes we did get them, and I'll be honest, a lot of our kids were disheartened and I was disheartened, and it was very hard to look at them because of all of the hard work that we had put into them, um and with all the changes and everything that happened, with how were going to pass them or what the passing score is going to be, it was very frustrating, and it kind of made our hard work seem like it wasn't important because they are just going to change the criteria anyways. So, hopefully, those kinks are ironed out with whatever else is going on with the changes, because we all know that that's coming, but I think what we did, was when we presented to the kids we took, um, kind of a different approach. We said, if this was the same as when we were grading them before they made all of these changes this is what your score would have been, and we told them one score above so they would have a relation to what we were doing, because our scores, many of what they were getting on the practice scores were a lot less, I mean the practice scores were a lot higher, so the kids were crushed, because they were getting fours and they had to work and work to get those fours, and now I got a three, and that crushed them, it was just devastating, and so we said yes, they graded it a little bit differently, and had we been grading it you would have gotten a four, or whatever it was, and we added a point to try to soften the blow, and say that their hard work did pay off, because they did do what they were supposed to do, they worked so hard.

EM: If I were to come into your classroom or office, what would I see or hear about what you believe about teaching and learning?

DH: It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter what your abilities are, you can do it. Now, does that mean that everyone has to do the same thing at the same time? No, absolutely not. Um, for certain kids, they are going to have different goals, not every child is going to have the same eighth grade goals. Perhaps, someone who is autistic, or IMD, their goals might be how to make dinner or how to, you know, get dressed themselves, but no matter what it is, you have to find those goals and help those kids to reach them, because they absolutely can do it with a lot of work and a lot practice, and they have to know that you believe that, and the kids have to know so that they believe it, because a lot of them, especially by the time they get to middle school have been defeated, for a lack of a better word. They've just, you know, they've struggled and struggled and struggled. I can't tell you how many times I've sat in meetings with parents, and they've said, you know, 'this is the first time that anyone has cared about my child.' 'This is the first time that I have seen my child do this.' Or I'll call, and they'll say, 'you're talking about my kid' because they haven't heard that, and it just breaks my heart when I hear that, but to know that that's what we're doing here, and it's not me, it's not one person, Its everybody. Everybody thinks that and everybody, um, believes that the kids can do that, and what we do here that I think is different is that we take the kids where they are at and get them where they need to be. We don't just say you're in eighth grade, you should be here, let's do this. You have to start where they are, and I think that's one thing we do well here, and it's kind of off track but...

EM: Perfect

## **Interviewer Transcription**

**Date: October 5, 2012**

**Interviewer: Erin Mander**

**Participant Name: John**

The interview with John was held in the Principal's Office at office at Horizon Middle School on October 5, 2012. Erin Mander, Researcher, conducted the interview. Cynthia Blackburn, Graduate Assistant, transcribed the interview.

Interview Codes: EM =Erin Mander

JH=John

EM: Question number one. Can you tell me about you experiences and how you arrived at Horizon.

JH: Um, Well, I've been in education for about thirteen years. I started out as a teacher teaching students with severe emotional disabilities, um and from there I was an ESC department chair person, uh and then kinda became a lead teacher, and then became an assistant principal uh all in Hillsboro County, and um the former superintended, Dr. Grecko was in Hillsboro County, and the time and when he came over he asked me to consider coming over to, um, to run this school, so through that connection I found Horizon, (laughs) um so but my background is primarily in ESC working with students who have disabilities so.

EM: Question number two. Describe your philosophy of leadership and how that translates to day to day functioning here at Horizon.

JH: Well, uh, my primary take on leadership and philosophy of leadership is being actively involved. I am a hands-on um principal Um in terms of, I get involved, and I provide the support, because as a classroom teacher I can remember not having the support when you had challenges. Um, from upper level administration, so I didn't lose sight of what it felt like not having the support when I was a teacher, so as a principal that's very critical to me that teachers know that you're present, kids know you're presence, present. In addition to that, you'll help with every situation. So, it's not like, I'm here on this level, but I can't do this job because I'm on another level. Um so, I think, having a system where teachers and students feel like they are in an environment where they feel supported, and that they, they can get their resources, and they have someone that will listen and will always try to always look for better ways to do things, so my philosophy involves those types, takes, and that we do everything for kids. You know, I would do anything to help a kid be successful, um and so, I show them who I am. Um, If there's a story that connects with their situation that I've gone through, I don't hold that back, you know, I share it. They need to know, I'm human. I've probably felt that way before, you know, uh, and try to coach them through those processes.

EM: Okay, so questions number three. Tell me about the students at Horizon. How would you describe them?

JH: Our students are very unique. Um, they come from all walks of life. Um, when looking at ethnicities as well as just experiences in life. Um, being in different parts of the world... um, their home environments are very different um and it's unique in many ways. Um, We've had kids, and I've seen kids who have been at other schools, of course we read the paperwork, and they have not been successful and not found ways to be successful, and they come here and all of the sudden it's different, and I think it goes back to relating to my philosophy. As a principal, new kids coming, I may not remember their names, but I will meet them and say, "Hi, I'm the principal" If you're a new kid, what school are you coming from? And do the little thing. Are you having any troubles, and I try to follow up with them, um, you know, and it's a lot of kids to manage, but I do try to do that as often as I can because it makes a difference. Um, but I've said our kids are unique in many ways because, to me, they come here despite all the challenges they face outside, and they really try to give us their best. Yes we have that 20% that are always kind of causing problems, but we work with them, and we try to find the one positive thing the kid is doing, and we over-dwell on it.

Uh, in hopes that that will be the thing that somebody took the time to notice that I got a haircut or noticed that I made an A in this class, and I never did that before, you know but, so that's very important. And so, we do that, I do that with my administrative staff every Monday we talk about kids. We talk about what challenges were having, and how can we help turn it around for that kid? Um, so, I think that's, that's very critical, so.

EM: Ok, tell me about your teachers. This is question number four. Tell me about your teachers and your staff here at Horizon.

JH: I think we have a phenomenal staff, uh, the teachers, we have a, a large percentage of the staff that really cares. They work, and I think that what helps us is, they work hard in terms of, they collaborate together. We have fostered a culture of collaboration, um and we try to foster a culture of consistency, and building our overall culture and climate so that everybody is speaking the same language. Um, I'm trying to make sure that the teachers are working together and knowledgeable. As a principal, um it's my responsibility to make sure they are informed and again make sure they know the proper protocol and procedures. So, we go through that with them, but I would say that they care, and they're in it for the right reasons. Teachers that are not in it for the right reasons don't typically last long here. They don't last long, uh and what happens, not necessarily because of me all the time, but sometimes you'll get teachers who come and say, "Oh man, Something is wrong with this, and she's not a part of the group and team, and trying to help with the efforts," so they start making comments, and we like, okay so there's a problem here. So, but for the most part, they try to work as a family, they try to look out for each other, and I think that's important so.

EM: Definitely, Um ok, question number five. In the context of the FCAT and the notion of high stakes testing in Florida, how does that fit into your curriculum and the learning that's going on?

JH: Well, what we do, what I emphasize to the teachers is, we don't teach to the test, but we teach effective, we use effective teaching strategies daily, and that will take care of the test, so



trying to teach teachers that whatever lesson you're planning, you're planning it in an effective way. Um, that you're looking at different strategies that you can use in that lesson, so that the students really benefit. Having an essential questions. What is the most important thing that day that you want kids to walk out that day knowing, and building on it, and the more we do that, the more we ask those higher-order questions, and ask kids why? Why is that the right answer? Versus saying, well, the answer's A, well why do you think it's A? Making them go back to the text to provide support for the answers which is all common core type stuff. We're really preparing them for the test without taking the test and saying, ok, number one looks like this, so remember this. You know, we're trying to teach very good instructional strategies, and one of the things we use here, is um, we did a book study last year on The Art and Science of Teaching with Dr. Robert Marzano, looking at effective high yield teaching strategies. Um, in fact we're going to be using that Coaching Classroom Instruction book um I have right there on the counter. We're going to be using that with a group of teachers all talking about effective strategies that you can use in your classroom, and, and, ultimately, it will cause an increase in student achievement, and making sure everybody's doing it. It's not just the reading teachers who are responsible for teaching skills that help with the reading FCAT. Everybody is involved in that process, and so we work from that standpoint.

EM: Ok, Um, last question. If I were to come into your school, what would I see or hear about what you believe and what your teachers believe to be true about teaching and learning?

JH: I think you'll see excitement um with the teachers um, you'll see well-prepared teachers in the classroom. Um, you will see students who are complying with rules and are functioning in a structured environment. Um, in addition you will see students expressing excitement about what they're doing. Again, we're not perfect by a long shot, but I like to believe that anyone that comes to my school will feel the sense of culture, and feel that this is a strong environment, and that the school is ran properly, and that we care about kids, um and that they will see that, you know, so, um that's pretty much what I think would be key, and you know, we've had situations where people have come to our school, um, and um, done presentations, and before they would leave, they would say, man there is something about this school that is so different than other schools than they had been to. We had, uh, uh, I can't remember his name, uh, oh god, what's his name? He's a father, and he's going around right now doing presentations, and unfortunately his son committed suicide. Oh! I'll find his name after all this is over.

EM: It's all right

JH: but he came to the school, and they were talking with the organization that he was representing, and you know, all of them kept saying "man", you know, it was an assembly with the kids, and all of them kept saying, "there's something about this school. Something about the kids here, you know, that I've never felt at any other school." So, those are testimonies in terms of what we build here at our school, and we, I try to make kids feel a part. I think when they feel that they have a part of something, or they are part of the process, they take ownership, but when they just feel like, um, whatever, they don't take ownership. It's like whatever, who cares. It's like, if you go to the cafeteria now, you'll see kids taking, they're part of the cleaning of the cafeteria. They take ownership for their tables. Of course, we teach them the procedures, but if we didn't do that, of course, they would leave the trash on the tables and all over the floor, and

keep on moving for the other kids are going to have to come and do something about that, but just little things like that, it speaks volumes when we make kids a part of things, so.

EM: Now, I'm going to add one more question. If I were to interview you five years from now, five years out, not just based on academic achievement but where would you like to see the school grow. In terms of whatever level or whatever aspects you feel are most important for where the school is. What would you like to talk about five years from now?

JH: Five years from now, I probably won't be here. I'll probably be doing something slightly different, because I do have goals to do. Higher education type stuff, and one of my goals is, I would like to be a high school principal preparing me for the next level in a district position, so but, I would like to see. One of the things that a struggle, it's a challenge for us now is, how do we consistently reach the 20% that we constantly have issues with, because they are often times the ones that are the low performers on the FCAT. The ones that need the most attention, so some of the things we are looking at is creating a, um, mentoring program. Doing a gentleman's club for boys, um, who have no male role models in their life, and were having those discussions. Making sure that we can have enrichment programs during the school day that doesn't take away from academic time, um that we can truly build skills, um because what happens is when we have the after school programs or the enrichment programs, the kids that come, are really the kids that don't need to come. They're the ones that already have it, but the one's that need to come they're not here because of transportation. They're not here because parents may not see any value, or they may not have the resources to get them here. So it goes back to some of Ruby Payne philosophies in terms of when you look at kids in poverty and who they think. So, holistically, and overall, just trying to find a way to champion that cause because it's been a struggle for education period, and across the board, and what happens is as things change, the requirements change for teachers and different things, and people start throwing their hands up. So, I want to see an environment that really sticks with the fight come up with ways that we can really champion that cause, and be the model or be the example um that we set out to be.

EM: Do you think that there's any one educational community locally, or even abroad, or nationwide that does an excellent job any models that are helpful in terms of that 20%?

JH: There's a guy, Dr. Steve Perry out of, I want to say, he's out of I wanna say, is it Wisconsin, or somewhere, and he's, he's known nationally. I mean, He's pretty much taken it and created his own private schools and championed the cause of trying to save young men, to save lost kids, you know, and he's been very effective at doing that. So, I mean, we've looked at some of the things of the things he's doing, and some of the models he's using, and right now it's trying to building the steam to get it going, and how do we sustain it, because again, the resources needs, the resources needed are not available right now in terms of district funding for things like that, but it is something that is very important, and I give you, like I said earlier, when I see a kid who walks in my door, um who's been at multiple schools within a year, and who's ran, who's cursed staff out, who's made threats to staff and that kid comes here and we make a connection with the kid, and now we have zero incidents for as long as the kid's been in school, for eight nine or nine weeks, however long we've been in school, and A's and B's. That says something to me,. We trying, our, our staff has found a way to connect with this kid, and yes it takes time, yes we go,

and I may say this student, I want everybody to get to know this student and its simple. Hi, how're you doing? Wow, someone spoke to me? And then the next day, Hi! So, and so, and so. Call him by name. They know my name, and I'm not in trouble. Recognizing the small good they're doing, or even like I was telling a teacher the other day, she was frustrated about a kid saying, she doesn't do this, this and this, and I said, Well, what is she doing that's right. Well, she does stand in line when I ask her to. She's not in the right spot, but she is quiet. Well, next time say, "Hey, I appreciate you standing quietly waiting for us to get situated to go into the classroom but, is it possible for you to just slide over a little bit?" Now it's like, oh wow, he said something positive it's received from the student versus, "You're not in line!" "I am in line!" So, it' just changing that whole, how we say what we say, and getting it accomplished a whole 'nother way. You know, so

EM: Perfect

JH: I can ramble. I love what I do. I really love what I do. I truly, truly love what I do. I'm very tough, but I have no regrets about what I do when it comes to kids. I treat them like they are my own personal kids, and I really care about 'em. So

## **Interviewer Transcription**

**Date: July 9, 2012**

**Interviewer: Erin Mander**

**Participant Name: Janet**

The interview with Janet was held at CREATE, University of Central Florida downtown Orlando campus on July, 9 2012. Erin Mander, Researcher, conducted the interview. Cynthia Blackburn, Graduate Assistant, transcribed the interview.

Interview Codes: EM =Erin Mander

JB: Janet

EM: Ok, were on. Question number one: Tell me about your teaching experiences and how you arrived at Horizon Middle School.

JB: Uh, I started ten years ago in New York City teaching first grade. Originally, I was thinking of taking a different path, and I was offered a job at an elementary school, um and I fell in love with it. I went for an internship over the summer, and I loved working with the little ones, uh and I would up, after my first internship, teaching the reading program. I was a reading facilitator with Columbia University, and I would go and train with the teachers college reading and writing program

EM: Okay

JB: and immediately they put me into lesson study. So, I got my feet wet very quickly. I loved it, but I wanted to get out of New York. When I came down here, since I had an English degree, I stumbled upon Horizon, while I was looking for, and I went for an interview down at county, and I interviewed with another school, and they said, 'We have the perfect school for you, here's Horizon.' I got a hundred question interview, and I've been here ever since. So, I've been here for eight years. This will be my ninth year at Horizon, and I've taught 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade here

EM: 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, okay. Question number two: Have you always taught writing at Horizon?

JB: No, I've also taught reading. Intensive reading honors. Same thing for language arts.

EM: Okay

JB: I also work with co-teaching for language arts.

EM: Do you have a specific method for teaching writing?

JB: We use, do you mean like the model? The way I approach it? Um, we do a lot of whole to part to whole, looking at model texts, just a lot of writing in front of the students, showing them exemplar texts, breaking it down into pieces. It basically depends on what the students need. Some are more needy in organization structure, some more on content and support, so it does depend. We, uh, we use mini-lesson models with examples, whole group, small group, and individual practice.

EM: Okay, question number four: Um, what are the most important beliefs to you in terms of teaching writing?

JB: Teaching it, I want students to be able to, to use the skills for life. That's my number one is, I want them to see the reading and writing connection and actually be able to use it. That's number one for me.

EM: Okay, question number five: What do you teach throughout the day?

JB: For my classes. Um, well, like I said, it's been extremely varied. When I first started here, I taught advanced language arts, uh, which included levels 2, 3, and 4 students based on their reading FCAT since they don't have current writing scores.

EM: Mhmm

JB: I have flip-flopped back and forth between reading and writing. I haven't decided because they both go together. There were a few years where they were able to accommodate me, were I had a period of reading, and the same students for a period of writing, and so it was a 90 minute block, which it was just a literacy block, and that was my favorite way to teach.

EM: Oh, sure

JB: And I did that with level one and two students, and those were co-teach classes as well. I've taught honors classes this year, I believe, well, I'm definitely teaching eighth grade language arts and it should be a few classes of level ones and two, again co-teach it's the inclusion, and the rest I believe are honors classes.

EM: Okay, now when you say 'co teach' what do you mean by that?

JB: I have a special education teacher who is a certified teacher um in the subject areas and special education, and the model that we use is that we are both the teachers in the classroom. This is not an assistant who's helping, this is not someone who just someone who focuses on students with IEPs and who have accommodations, but that's another teacher who is there working with all of the students to maybe teach them in a way that I'm not. So, between the two of us, were able to reach more kids and differentiate more.

EM: Right

JB: And it's a fabulous model

EM: Right, okay. Question number six: How would you describe your students here at Horizon?

JB: Uh, they need a lot of love and attention. They're silly, they're fun, they, they definitely want to learn, they definitely need structure because they have different rules at home, but once you make that personal connection with them and you have established the rules and developed that mutual respect, they're like my own children, and I've had great relationships with them. As writers, they vary based on their personal experiences

EM: Sure

JB: and how much writing instruction they've had before they came to me.

EM: Oh, Okay. Um, question number seven: In the context of the Florida Writes what kind of decisions do you make about how you teach writing?

JB: Florida writes is there. I try to teach above that because it's such a, a structured, general question, and it only allows students to pull from personal experiences. It doesn't allow for the varied styles of writing. I use, I keep that in the back of my head, and I do teach the process, and I do use the rubric that the state uses as my scoring guide, and the students are well aware of it and have the ability to score themselves, and we do go through that process, but we focus more on the connections with different texts. So, for me, the Florida Writes is not the be all, end all, but I do have to address it because it is mandatory. It is part of their assessment, and we use the PDA program, which it has been very successful, but the students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade are lacking so much in conventions that I think it has to go back to

(Knock on door) Unknown male: Let me interrupt for just a second. I'm sorry were taking that

EM: No worries. It's fine. Now describe that, did you say it was PDA?

JB: PDA is a program that, uh, it's a very, it's... a program that allows you to teach the different writing components for focus, organization, the conventions, the structure with different graphic organizers and teaching it piece by piece at putting it back together.

EM: Ok

JB: It's a good guide. It helps students write four paragraph essays organize with a thesis, two main ideas with support, and a conclusion.

EM: Sure

JB: Um, it really draws on students' personal experiences which goes back to the type of students that I have, it can be a challenge sometimes, but once they get into the program they love it. It is not a structured text book. It's just a way to present the mini lessons to the students and it's more like tips and tools. Here's how you can use it for a variety of writing prompts. I usually, what I do is I take it and incorporate it into reading as well and have students write written responses to our reading texts. Since I've had that opportunity to work with a lot of them for reading and language arts I can do that.

EM: Question number 8: How do you make decisions about the curriculum?

JB: Well, I have had, um the opportunity to make all the decisions for the curriculum, because I was on a team with about four teachers and two reading coaches this summer and we... Last summer we wrote the curriculum, and this summer we fine-tuned it to start matching it up with the common core standards, start moving in that direction. At the same time working on, mini assessments and sim lessons to go along with the sunshine state benchmarks that they will be tested on for FCAT.

EM: Ok, Ok

JB: We had to kind of mesh the two and marry them in a way so that we can start progressing further and getting deeper in with our text and start developing really high level lessons and still marinating the same benchmarks that will be tested on FCAT. So, with that said, as for me making decisions for my curriculum, I had a lot on input from the calendars that were created, so I very much liked the calendars that were created, because I worked with a lot of teachers who, from across the county, so we listened to a lot of input. I think that I'm good at keeping my own personal opinion in line with everyone else for the good of the kids. It's not about me. With that said, we bring the calendar home to our school, and it doesn't always work. It's there as a guide, not the be all, end all for us. WE still always do what's best for kids. WE still have the flexibility in our department uh for both reading and writing teachers that we can bring in the text that we want the texts that we feel the students need. If we feel that we need extra time to work on a certain skill we have that flexibility. We also work in our grade level with reading and writing teachers so that we can match up what we're teaching so were hitting certain skills were matching up certain academic vocabulary with the students. So going back to that calendar as our guide and checking in to see, 'how are you doing, where are you at? How are these students performing on your class on these skills? Maybe they need more in the reading end, maybe they need more on the language arts end, and so we have a lot of flexibility and so curriculum has been, hasn't really been an issue since we've had our hands in it. Now, we have Spring Board, so it's going to change up a little bit because it is scripted, um but the fortunate thing about the program is that the majority of the texts that are in that program are the ones that we had previously picked for the curriculum without even looking at the Springboard text, so we were very happy about that.

EM: What are your... IF you have any concerns about that new curriculum for Horizon what would those be in terms of implementation and making the change this year?

JB: Uh, I guess my big concern is that teachers aren't communicating and helping each other. I want to make sure that they are reaching out to each other and not afraid to say...'How do I do this?' How are you doing it? I think sometimes you get so stressed about new information, new program, new students, but that's my biggest wish I would say for teachers is to make sure that they're meeting throughout the week and talking out the concerns so they can work through the problems together and then during our, our department meetings we can actually help each other out and work out those problems sooner rather than later. AS to the content of the program, I hope people are flexible and understand that sometimes you have to give up getting some new.

EM: Sure, okay. Right, right. Um: Question number nine is do you make adjustments in the curriculum, and if so how is that accomplished? You pretty much addressed that. Do you want to add anything to that?

JB: I guess with the adjustments to the curriculum one of the big things is, with the lower level students the level ones and twos, or those who have a disability in writing, we don't water it down. We still expect them to bring it up. Will they get there as fast? No. Will they always achieve that high, high, high score? No. But we had, the learning gains in my classroom throughout the year from my monthly assessment that we tracked on our charts, our class charts, the gains were tremendous. Going from like an average of 1.2 up to 4.5 by the end of the year out of 6, so I would say that one of the big things of the curriculum is not watering it down but giving them the extra support to bring them up.

EM: Right, right, ok Question number ten: Have you received your Florida Writes results? If so, what are your thoughts for this past year and then, you know, sort of moving forward into this year?

JB: Uh, the way. We got the results, and they were a lot lower than last year. Last year the results were the highest the school ever had. That was my first year in eighth grade. That group of students that I had last year for the 2011 Writes, I followed those students for 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>, and it was the highest scores ever. I definitely think consistency played a huge role in that. Um, the students I had last year the scores were a lot lower, but they were also consistent with the other schools that have similar demographics. They were consistent with our performance in terms of its comparison to the district and state. Um, across the board, based on the rubric from the year below, they were all about one point lower, but you could see, the trends were the same. So, even though the scoring had changed, or the rubric was used in a deeper way for the conventions, I still think the students made so much progress that I'm happy with what they did. I was very happy with what they did.

EM: Okay, question number eleven: If I were to come into your classroom, what would I see or hear about what you believe about teaching and learning?

JB: I... I my big things are high expectations always. IF you can't do it, I'll show you how. One of my biggest things with my kids is, I'm not going to do it for you, but I'll give you the tools and the skills you need to be successful. Um, and keep working through that. I think I'm very nurturing and supportive. So, I think you're going to see a relaxed environment, but there is an underlying structure to the foundation that we lay early on in the year.

EM: Now how do you lay that foundation with students early in the year?

JB: Procedures. We spend a lot of time on procedures. We have school wide teach-to's and we have grade level uh, teach- to's. We use the Time to Teach program, where, it's not very critical on the students. It's more of a cool off, and joins us when you're ready to learn because you want to be in here, and they know we want them in here. Once they, they're children they make mistakes and we understand that, and once they know that we want them to be there to learn, they're more likely to perform and try.



EM: Now, how long do you think it takes to get those procedures in place after students come back, you know as the year moves forward. How long does it take to get through that process?

JB: At the beginning of school? The first few weeks. The entire first week of school we spend on procedures, and any time we have a new procedure, there's a lesson or a half a period. Socratic seminars take a long time, because you have to keep stopping, and explaining, and demonstrating and referring to the positives to show students what it looks like. If it's moving into small groups, it might only take thirty seconds for the procedure. Writing procedures, I start with the basics with their pre-write frames. They start with their graphic organizers at the beginning of the year and they cry about it because I won't give them a hand out, but after a couple weeks, they're asking me. Is that what you want? Yes, Go. It all depends on the procedure, but it's the consistency, simplicity, and repetition, and we try to do that across the grade so the students are getting that same information and that same repetition and it becomes second nature, and they stop fighting it, and they do it.

EM: Ok, one final thought, the school on its website talks about achievement, attendance. Can you sort of talk about those things together: Achievement and attendance and sort of that notion of the behavior and everything that goes along with that. The culture here.

JB: Yes. It's amazing to see when schools are not attending how it affects their classroom achievement and how those missing pieces and those missing days of being a part of that classroom culture sets them off to the side, and it's such a multifaceted piece when they're missing school. So, I think those are the kids we try to bond with and say, 'hey how are you doing?' "I hope I see you tomorrow." 'Come on in during lunch,' and really try to get them on board just as, uh, a way to communicate and make them feel comfortable before they've even started with the academics, and I think that's one of the things with our students is that they need so much love and so much support from just human to human contact. Just having a responsible adult and a good role model that once that's established than they'll work for you and the achievement comes with it.

EM: Very good

## **APPENDIX H: DATA CODING**

BC: but that writing is the art the communication of letters it's the art of expressing one selves and having it down in black and white it's the art of maybe the sort of Virginia Wolfe stream of conscious writing where you are not quite sure yourself where this is headed but you may find yourself in a completely new light if you just continue the process. **DW** I want students to see that the writing for writing sake isn't the be all end all but it's sort of the step in and this sounds lofty and silly especially when we look at it in such a prescriptive, or scripted form, but writing is sort of that step in being able to analyze one's own thoughts and beliefs. **DW**

how teacher views writing

definition

*Int: Question number five: What do you teach throughout the day? Give a description of your schedule instruction*

BC: Ok, Well, just this past year I taught remedial reading, which means that I taught the entire level one scoring on FCAT students for 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Umm, it was a double period class, so I had the students for 90 minutes a day and I had three classes. So, I worked with Dr. Janet Allen's Plugged into Reading Program which I loved, because it marries my belief of sort of teaching the whole rather than just the part **WI** ummm in sort of lit circles and novel studies, and really for the first time in my teaching career, I was able to get on board with a program that really sort of mimicked and mirrored by own beliefs about reading where you read the novel and stopped along the way and then sort of taught what naturally was going on within the novel. You know the average day was to come in. Umm, the plugged in program had audio support, so my kids would come into the room. Uh, part of their "do now" **WI** their bell ringer work or whatever you want to call it was to grab if we were doing a class novel, was to, uh, grab the novel. Come back to their seat. I would have them head their paper for the activity that we would be doing after the reading, or before the reading, or during the reading, and um then I would set up a sort of series of questions that I would want them to maybe look at while we did the reading, and I would press the audio play they would follow along in their books I would monitor that they were actually reading. That was a big push in my classroom. Don't get lazy because we have someone else reading. That person on the audio reading is so that we can spend more time gaining fluency and it wasn't to give us, you know no purpose. We had to look at that as an advantage not as a replacement, **WI** and I would sort of stop it along the way and discuss certain things with the students answer their questions, and at the end we would have a follow up lesson, you know, related to that days reading. **WI**

writing process/structure/strategy

class format/writing process

classroom direction of skill

classroom instruction

*Int: Okay. Question 5- Where does writing fit in to all of that that you just described?*

BC: I think that for my students who were struggling readers, I found that they were also struggling writers, and it was really difficult for me to sometimes place less emphasis on the writing **CL** and more emphasis on getting the oral answer

who the student is at HMS

*Int: Right*

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