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The purpose of this study is to examine a high poverty elementary school's improvement model for increasing student reading performance. The model at Martin Elementary School was designed to use interactive balanced literacy, the building of positive relationships, and class size reduction to improve the reading performance of upper elementary students from families living in poverty. The questions that will be answered are:

1. What effect does the incorporation of balance literacy supplemented with other effective teaching strategies have on the reading performance of students who are living in high poverty? The strategies include interactive teaching and the building of positive relationships.
2. How does reduced classroom size affect the incorporation of balanced literacy when it is augmented by interactive strategies and the creation of positive relationships?
3. What effects does the incorporation of balanced literacy involving interactive strategies, the building of positive relationships and class size reduction have on classroom teacher practice?

The school where this case study took place was Martin Elementary. It is a high poverty, urban, elementary school located in the Piedmont area of North Carolina.

A qualitative approach was used to examine the effects of the improvement model on the reading performance of students of poverty. Data collection for the study took place through one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, observations, and North Carolina End-of-Grade reading test proficiency scores. Six upper elementary classroom teachers were interviewed, observed and surveyed and thirteen fifth grade students were organized into a focus group.

IMPROVING READING PERFORMANCE IN A  
HIGH POVERTY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:  
A CASE STUDY

by

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Thomas “David” Kemp Jr., and my two sons Zachary Ryan Kemp and Matthew David Kemp who provided me encouragement, love, and time.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION/RATIONALE**

School systems in America are under escalating pressure to close the achievement gaps that exist in today's schools (Spellings, 2007). These gaps can be present between students from different ethnic groups, of different socioeconomic status, children with disabilities and students who speak English as a second language (Department of Education, 2007; Haycock, 2001; McCall, Hauser, Gronin, Kinsburg, & Houser, 2006). Poverty often compounds the low performance of children in the above subgroups. The majority of the students living in poverty have a multitude of academic needs (Payne, 2001; Peng & Lee, 1993). In order to meet these needs and close the achievement gap, educators must look at students as being capable and supply them with skills and strategies that will ensure their success. Reform strategies are implemented yearly to assist children of poverty achieve at the same level of students not in poverty.

This research is a case study of a high poverty, urban, elementary school located in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. This study defines a high poverty school as one that has at least 90% of the students qualifying for free or reduced priced lunch. Stake (2000) suggests that there are different types of case studies, and an intrinsic case study is undertaken when a researcher wants a better understanding of an actual case. Creswell et al. (2005) believe that an intrinsic

case is unusual and has merit in and of itself. The staff at Martin Elementary school devised an improvement model to increase the reading performance of their upper elementary students. The history of how this school was established, the population of the school, the commitment of the staff and the improvement model created are the reasons this case study is relevant and has merit.

Martin Elementary was a challenge because of the basic belief that since 94% of the students came from families that have incomes below the poverty line and 98% were African American, the school could not succeed in the current era of accountability. McCall et al. (2006) reported that European-American students perform better than African-American and Hispanic students and students from wealthier schools outperformed students from poorer schools. Nevertheless, the staff at Martin Elementary believed they could beat the odds. Their plan of attack was to incorporate a specialized reading process, known as Balanced Literacy, with interactive strategies along with the establishment of positive relationships in a reduced class size setting. In the remaining sections of this chapter the history of the school, the students, the staff, classroom settings, class sizes, balanced literacy and an accountability model will be described.

### **The School—History and Context**

In August 2003, Martin Elementary School opened its doors as a renovated school. The building had not been utilized as a school for ten years, only for office and storage space for the district. It is located in an urban area of a large school system in North Carolina. When Martin opened, it was established

as a neighborhood school. The neighborhood is located on the east side of town and is on a street that was once the main thoroughfare into the city. It has since become neglected. The neighborhood consists of government subsidized housing, boarding rooms, abandoned houses, and landlords who rent to low income families. The majorities of the families living in the neighborhood have income below the poverty line and are African American.

Planning for the opening of Martin Elementary proved to be an interesting challenge. As part of a bond referendum passed in 2001, Martin, which had been closed for over 10 years, would be renovated and opened as a neighborhood elementary school. The students located within the neighborhood were previously districted to three different elementary schools across town. The division of the neighborhood was originally done to assist the school system with desegregation. The African American children residing in the neighborhood were sent to three predominately Caucasian schools to help create diverse populations in the schools.

There were several meetings and a great deal of dialogue with the administration and the community regarding the “make-up” of Martin. The struggle was whether Martin should be a neighborhood school or a magnet school with a smaller attendance zone. The community fought for a neighborhood school and won. When Martin Elementary opened, attendance lines were redrawn and children from the neighborhood were all sent to Martin, creating a predominately African American school.

The main contention of the administration was that research shows that students are more successful if they are in a more diverse socio-economic setting (Kozol, 1991; McCall et al., 2006). If Martin was a neighborhood school, it would be almost entirely African American and the majority of the families would have income below the poverty line. Race was an issue that clouded the discussion although the administration tried to make it an issue of socio-economics.

### **Students**

When Martin Elementary opened, attendance lines were redrawn and children from the one neighborhood were sent to Martin, unless their parents could provide transportation and the students would be “grand-fathered” in and allowed to stay at their previous schools. Martin Elementary served approximately 280 students from August of 2003 to June of 2006. 97% of the population was African American and 94% of the families had incomes below the poverty level throughout that time period.

The majority of the students that arrived at Martin when it opened were not on grade level in reading or math and most of them had difficulty socially or behaviorally. During the first year, 2003-2004 there were fifty fifth graders. Of those fifty students sixteen students or, almost one third, had been retained at least once; three of the sixteen had been retained twice and one student had been retained three times. School had not been a positive, successful place for many of the Martin students. Approximately twenty percent of the students at

Martin were identified as students with disabilities. The students in general were in need of social, emotional and academic assistance.

The students who attended Martin were very knowledgeable regarding “street smarts.” They would inform staff if a parent or other visitor was into drugs or entertained men regularly; they knew how to get across town using the public transportation; and they were well informed about where to buy the “in” clothes at the cheapest price and who the older students were that were well connected but safe. The majority of the older students who had younger siblings were “in charge” of them. They were very protective and would make sure they had book bags and got to their classes and informed their teachers if the child had any issue for the day. For example, one day a third grade girl tried to get off school bus as it was pulling away from campus. The bus driver had to stop the bus and call the principal to it to remove the child. When the principal spoke with the child, she discovered that her Kindergarten brother was not on the bus and she did not want to leave without him. This illustrates how the children had to take care and keep up with one another due to their parents/guardians being away from home for various reasons.

The majority of the students went home after school instead of to daycare centers. They were typically left in the care of a neighbor, aunt or grandmother, and usually more than one household was being supervised by one adult. The parents were usually in their early twenties and had at least two to three children. Very few of the students had positive male role models. The Department of

Social Services (DSS) visited the school frequently to check-up on students in their custody or to visit with students on whom they had received reports.

Approximately five to six percent of the students were being raised by grandparents.

### **Personnel**

When Martin Elementary opened the staff was comprised of certified teachers who transferred from schools within the district, within the state, and from other states. The staff at Martin was more diverse than the student population; there was a 50%-50% split between Caucasian and African American teachers. All certified staff members had at least three years of experience; the most veteran staff member had twenty-five years experience; and the average level of experience was ten years. There were a total of twenty-one certified staff members; four were nationally board certified; eight teachers had advanced degree; and four were working towards advanced degrees.

To be employed at Martin, every teacher was interviewed one-on-one by the principal, and the make-up of the student population was explained to each interviewee. It was imperative that each teacher was told honestly about the challenges of the students at Martin. To ensure that all staff members understood the hard work that would be required of them, the challenges of Martin were not “sugar coated”. Many interviewees physically and mentally “shut-down” once they understood the demographics of the school and became disinterested in the positions available. They stopped asking questions and supplied brief

explanations to questions asked of them. There were many phone calls not returned to the principal after an interview. Candidates who had called about a specific position would all of a sudden have a change of heart—they were not interested in the grade level, decided it was too far to drive, or decided not to change schools. These explanations seemed to come about fairly quickly, and the majority of them did not feel truthful.

Persistence paid off; the teaching staff was hired; and no certified staff members were administratively placed at Martin. Administratively placed means that the human resource department did not assign surplus staff or early hires to the school. A surplus teacher would be someone in the system needing to move schools due to the school losing positions based on student enrollment and early hires are prospective candidates given early contracts without a specific school assignment at the signing of the contract. The fact that the teachers hired came to Martin willingly was an important factor in ensuring there was a commitment in place to improve student performance.

During the first three years at Martin, there was a low teacher turn-over rate. In 2004-2005, two additional teachers were hired to assist with class size reduction settings in third and fourth grades. Both teachers hired were veteran teachers each with a minimum of twenty-one years experience and transferred from within the district. At the completion of the second year, a first grade teacher left; he entered the North Carolina Principal Fellow's program to prepare for a career as an administrator by earning a Master of School Administration (MSA)

degree at one of nine University of North Carolina schools. A kindergarten teacher also left who had been added in December 2004 to maintain the class size reduction in Kindergarten because she had not met all certification requirements to stay. In 2005-2006, two teachers were hired to replace the two teachers who left. One of the new teachers hired was a first year teacher who attended school in Michigan, and one was a teacher with over seven years experience.

There were six classroom teachers from Martin who were interviewed for this case study. These six teachers spent the first three years at Martin in either third, fourth or fifth grade. They were active in developing and implementing the reading improvement model with regular class sizes and reduced class size settings. Their thoughts, feelings and experiences were the focus for the interviews. These staff members will be discussed in more detail in Chapter III.

### **Classroom Settings**

The school opened as a Title I school with 284 students, Pre K through Fifth grades, with 97% African American students and 94% qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch. A high poverty school is defined for this study as a school with at least 90% of its students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches. A Title I school must have (a) a percentage of low-income students that is at least as high as the districts overall percentage, and (b) have at least thirty-five percentage low-income student (whichever is the lower of the two figures).

Schools with 75% or more of the students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches must be served (NC Department of Education, 2007).

Martin Elementary was identified as a Title I School and considered “highly impacted” by the school system. Martin’s school system identified all its schools with eighty percent or higher of its students qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunch as “highly impacted.” This designation allowed for class size reduction in kindergarten, first, and second during the 2003-2004 school year. The Board of Education adopted a policy that all “highly-impacted” elementary schools would maintain a 15 to 1 teacher to student ratio for kindergarten through second grade. Class size reduction meant that these classrooms would have a maximum of 17 students in a classroom. Kindergarten through second grade class size reduction was funded locally. During the 2004-2005 school year the School Board extended the local funding to include third grade in the class size reduction initiative.

At Martin during the 2004-2005 school year, the school’s federal Title I funds were utilized to hire certified teachers for fourth grade to ensure that classroom settings for reading instruction had no more than 17 students. During the 2005-2006 school year, Title I funds were utilized again to hire certified teachers for fourth and fifth grades to ensure that classroom settings for reading were no more than 17 students.

Partnerships were formed in 2003 with two universities, a bank, a manufacturing company, community non-profit group, and an African Art Gallery.

Martin was a professional development school (PDS) with one university, which meant that the School of Education sent junior interns and senior student teachers to work closely with the classroom teachers and in turn the college professors were available to work and train teachers. The other university sent fieldwork students and interns who worked with the exceptional education teachers and the music education teacher. The PDS partnership assisted the staff in creating small group instructional settings for reading. The interns and students teachers were trained by university professors and the Martin staff in reading instruction so that they could work effectively one-on-one with students or in small group settings in reading.

The bank and the manufacturing company adopted the school and assisted with teacher wish lists and student supplies to ensure that all needs were meant. The community group volunteered its time to mentor students and work with families in need while being an advocate for the school and community. The African art gallery provided after school art enrichment instruction to third through fifth grade students who were interested.

### **Class Sizes**

During the 2003-2004 school year, there were two classes on each grade level 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> for reading instruction. The third grade had 28 students in both classes; the fourth and fifth grades had 26 students on average in each class. During the 2004-2005 school year, there were three classes in third and fourth grade and two in fifth grade for reading. The third and fourth grades had no

more than 17 students for reading instruction. Fifth grade averaged 25 students for reading instruction. In 2005-2006 there were three classes on each grade level 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>. All three grade levels had no more than 17 students in each reading class every day.

Table 1 lists the average class size setting for balanced literacy at Martin Elementary. The average size varied greatly as stated above, in third and fourth grade reading classes from 03-04 to 04-05. In fifth grade the class size setting only varied from 04-05 to 05-06.

**Table 1**

***Average Classroom Size for Balanced Literacy at Martin Elementary***

<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>2003-2004</b>	<b>2004-2005</b>	<b>2005-2006</b>
Third Grade	28	17 max	17 max
Fourth Grade	26	17 max	17 max
Fifth Grade	26	25	17 max

The decision to reduce the class size setting during reading instruction was made by the school leadership team. The team looked at the reading data from the 2003-2004 End-Of-Grade scores, the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) scores and informal assessments and realized that the needs of the students were not being met. Balanced literacy, interactive strategies and the building of relationships were being implemented but they felt there needed to be another piece to their plan. Their solution was to reduce class size settings

during reading instruction. The classroom teachers felt they were dealing more with classroom management issues instead of teaching reading skills needed by the students. The team felt that balanced literacy was a best practice but that they needed to promote positive relationships and reduce the student to teacher ratio in order to deal more with engaging the students in instruction instead of classroom management.

### **Balanced Literacy**

Martin Elementary used a process called “Balanced Literacy.” It entails teaching reading and writing using a variety of strategies that involve students in reading at their level and on grade level appropriate activities. Balanced literacy contains several components that are taught daily—teacher directed reading, guided reading, word study, silent sustained reading and writing. Balanced Literacy is based on the work of Pat Cunningham and Marie Clay. This was one piece of the reading strategies Martin implemented as part of its improvement plan. In addition, Martin implemented three other approaches—interactive strategies, creation of positive relationships and class size reductions for literacy instruction. These instructional approaches will be explained in detail when the literature is reviewed in Chapter II.

### **Accountability**

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measures the yearly progress toward achieving grade level performance for each student group in reading. Schools must test at least 95% of students in each group and each group must meet the

targeted proficiency goal in reading and mathematics in order to make AYP. Student groups are: (a) the School as a Whole; (b) White; (c) Black; (d) Hispanic; (e) Native American; (f) Asian; (g) Multiracial; (h) Economically Disadvantaged Students; (i) Limited English Proficient Students; and (j) Students With Disabilities. To qualify for a group of students there has to be a minimum of 40 students in that group in the grades tested. Martin Elementary only had the following AYP student groups: (a) the School as a Whole; (b) Black; and (c) Economically Disadvantaged Students. If just one subgroup in one subject at a school does not meet the targeted proficiency goal with a confidence interval applied to account for sampling error or safe harbor, then the school does not make AYP for that year (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2006).

The Adequate Yearly Progress Target Goals for 2003-2004 was set at 68.9% in reading. Martin Elementary did not meet the Adequate Yearly Progress goal for 2003-2004. One of the three subgroups in reading did not meet the proficiency goal. In 2004-2005 the target score for Adequate Yearly Progress in reading rose to 76.7% and remained there for 2005-2006. In 2004-2005, Martin did not meet AYP again. Two of three reading subgroups did not meet the proficiency rating nor did they meet the confidence interval or safe harbor. In 2005-2006, Martin met AYP in reading in all three reading subgroups with the help of safe harbor.

Safe Harbor (SH) is a condition that allows a school to meet adequate yearly progress without meeting the target proficiency level. If a school meets

“safe harbor” for a student group that does not make “regular” AYP, the school still makes AYP. “Safe harbor” is a safety net for schools to use when a student group or groups fail to meet target goals. Because tests and statistical calculations are imperfect measures, “safe harbor” is one of the safeguards in place to help ensure that schools are not unfairly labeled (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2006). If a student group meets the 95% participation rate, but does not meet a target goal for a subject area, the group can meet it with “safe harbor” if the group has reduced the percent of students not proficient by 10% from the preceding year for the subject area.

Confidence Interval (CI) is another situation that allows a school to meet adequate yearly progress without meeting the target proficiency level. A confidence interval helps factor in the idea that test data reveals “fairly certain” results as opposed to “absolutely certain” results (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2006). The more students taking the test in a particular group, the more confident that the true results lie fairly close to the results obtained (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2006). Students’ test results are only an estimate of a student group or school’s true proficiency. For each student group, a 95% confidence interval is used around the percentages of students scoring proficient in reading and/or mathematics to determine whether target goals for AYP are met.

Table 2 shows Martin Elementary’s reading information in regards to Adequate Yearly Progress and North Carolina’s ABC status. The table covers the

three years of the case study 2003 through 2006. The subgroups for each year are listed along with the number of students that were proficient, the subgroup's proficiency percent, if AYP was met and how it was met.

**Table 2**

***Martin Elementary's Accountability Reading Information***

Subgroups	Number of Proficient Students	Percentage Proficient	AYP Status	ABC Information
All (2003-2004)	119	63%	Met w/ CI*	No Recognition
African American (2003-2004)	113	62.8%	Met w/ CI*	
Free/Reduced (2003-2004)	105	61%	Not Met	
All (2004-2005)	126	65.9%	Not Met	No Recognition
African American (2004-2005)	118	65.3%	Not Met	
Free/Reduced (2004-2005)	108	65.7%	Met w/ SH**	
All (2005-2006)	130	72.7%	Met w/ SH**	No Recognition
African American (2005-2006)	119	74.3%	Met w/ SH**	
Free/Reduced (2005-2006)	112	70.1%	Met w/ SH**	

Source: North Carolina School Report Card

\* CI = Confidence Interval

\*\*SH = Safe Harbor

North Carolina's ABCs Accountability plan was developed by the North Carolina State Board of Education. The ABCs is a comprehensive plan to improve public schools in North Carolina. The plan began in 1996-1997 school year as the state's school improvement program; it was one of the first in the nation to focus on academic growth (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2006). The elementary school accountability model is based on the End-of-Grade tests in reading and mathematics, NC EXTEND 2, and NCCLAS (NC Checklist of Academic Standards) in grades third through fifth and the fourth grade writing assessment. The End-of-Grade test in reading and math are given within the last three weeks of school for elementary in grades third, fourth and fifth. An End-of-Grade pretest is also given within the first three weeks of third grade. The NC EXTEND 2, NCCLAS and 4<sup>th</sup> grade Writing assessment are only included in the performance composite not the growth standard. The ABCs model contains a formula for calculating growth based on growth rates in reading and math, (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2006).

Based on the ABC's Accountability Model schools receive a label, as shown in Table 3. In 2003-2004, Martin Elementary did not meet the federal government's adequate yearly progress (AYP) standard in reading or North Carolina's ABC expected growth in reading. In 2004-2005, Martin again did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) or the North Carolina's ABC expected growth. In 2005-2006, Martin met adequate yearly progress (AYP) for reading but did not meet North Carolina's ABC expected growth in reading. North Carolina

Schools are rated as effective or ineffective by adequate yearly progress (AYP) and ABC status. Table 3 summarizes Martin Elementary’s yearly accountability standards.

**Table 3**

***North Carolina’s ABCs Accountability Model***

<b>Performance Level</b>	<b>Academic Growth</b>	<b>Academic Growth</b>
<i>Based on Percentage of Students at or above Level III</i>	<i>Schools Making Expected Growth or High Growth</i>	<i>Schools Making Less than Expected Growth</i>
90% to 100%	Met AYP      Honor School of Excellence	No Recognition
90% to 100%	AYP Not Met      School of Excellence	No Recognition
80% to 89%	School of Distinction	No Recognition
60% to 79%	School of Progress	No Recognition
50% to 59%	Priority School	Priority School
Less than 50%	Priority School	Low Performing

Source: Division of Accountability Services: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

**Purpose of Case Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine a high poverty elementary school’s improvement model for increasing reading performance. The questions that will be answered are:

1. What effect does the incorporation of balanced literacy supplemented with other effective teaching strategies have on the reading performance of students who are living in high poverty? The strategies include interactive teaching and the building of positive relationships.
2. How does reduced classroom size affect the incorporation of balanced literacy when it is augmented by interactive strategies and the creation of positive relationships?
3. What effects does the incorporation of balanced literacy involving interactive strategies, the building of positive relationships and class size reduction have on classroom teacher practice?

There is not one approach needed to improve reading performance, a variety of strategies is needed (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). The synthesis of a balanced literacy program, positive relationships, interactive strategies, and class size reduction was implemented at Martin Elementary School, and it is this combination that is being researched. The next chapter will review the literature so that each strategy utilized at Martin is clearly identified.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The difference between the academic performance of poor students and wealthier students is commonly known as the achievement gap. This gap exists between children in low poverty schools and high poverty schools (Department of Education, 2007; Haycock, 2001; McCall et al., 2006). In order to meet the needs of the students living in households where the income is below the poverty line and close the achievement gap; educators must look at students as being capable and supply them with skills and strategies that will ensure their success. Reform strategies are implemented yearly to assist children living in poverty.

This case study is designed to investigate:

1. What effect does the incorporation of balanced literacy supplemented with other effective teaching strategies have on the reading performance of students who are living in high poverty? The strategies include interactive teaching and the building of positive relationships.
2. How does reduced classroom size affect the incorporation of balanced literacy when it is augmented by interactive strategies and the creation of positive relationships?

3. What effects does the incorporation of balanced literacy involving interactive strategies, the building of positive relationships and class size reduction have on classroom teacher practice?

There are many theories on how a child's success in school is affected by poverty. This case study explores a reading improvement model, of an elementary school with 94% of its students living in households below the poverty line. Martin Elementary utilized balanced literacy, interactive teaching strategies and promoted positive relationships while maintaining a small class sizes during reading instruction in third, fourth and fifth grade.

### **Balanced Literacy**

Balanced literacy is teaching reading and writing using a variety of strategies that immerse students in reading literature on grade level and on their level. These techniques offer components that lend themselves to being interactive which engage learners in the curriculum. Balanced literacy contains several components that are taught daily; teacher directed reading, guided reading, word study, self selected reading and writing. Balanced Literacy is not a program. It is not formal nor a prescribed format or sequence (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Clay, 1985; Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, & Moore, 1995; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

The philosophy behind balanced literacy is to teach the whole child and to meet the individual needs of all students. Children learn how to read and write in different ways. Teachers need to utilize a mixture of teaching methods, so all

children have success. Learning to read and write with fluency and confidence are long-term, multifaceted goals. Effective classrooms do not have one approach to reading and writing. Rather, they use numerous approaches to provide a wide variety of reading and writing experiences throughout the day and across the curriculum (Cunningham et al., 1995; Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Students not only need a balanced approach to literacy due to different learning styles they also need a balanced approach due to the different experiences they have had prior to entering school. Some children require more formal activities that provide for individual participation whereas other children require less formal activities that allow for peer interactions. A balanced classroom provides opportunities for both formal and informal activities (Cunningham et al., 1995).

Teacher directed reading is a component of balanced literacy and is usually presented as a whole class lesson dealing with grade level appropriate material of either fiction or nonfiction literature. The purpose of this component is to expose children to a wide range of literature and teach comprehension strategies. Literature expands and deepens children's knowledge of the world. It allows them to learn about people, events and locations that are beyond their experiences. The teacher directed reading block alternates between literature-based teaching and theme-based teaching. Literature-based teaching is

students' exposure with "real books" and different genres. Theme-based teaching involves materials that relate to units of content (Cunningham et al., 1995).

Guided reading is small group instruction at the child's instructional reading level. The focus can be teaching a child how to decode words and/or comprehend. A variety of strategies are utilized based on the group's reading level (Clay, 1985; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Iaquinta, 2006; Saunders-Smith, 2003). During the guided reading block teachers guide students to think in certain ways in order to solve problems or revisit their problem solving. Saunders-Smith (2003) describes guided reading as an opportunity to guide the students' thinking. This type of instruction at a child's instructional reading level shows children how to use and develop strategies while providing support. According to Fountas and Pinnell (1996), guided reading leads to the independent reading; it is the heart of a balanced literacy program.

Word Study is another integral block of a balanced literacy program. This is a time when students assemble, analyze, explore, discuss, and appreciate words. Word study takes on many different forms based on the needs of the students. It can be vocabulary building activities, understanding spelling patterns, increasing phonemic awareness, learning high frequency words and/or teaching phonics (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2004; Pinnell & Fountas, 1998). Cunningham et al. (1995) state in order to read and write fluently, readers and writers must be able to immediately recognize and spell the vast majority of

the words. They must also have some strategies for identifying and spelling the occasional word that is not automatic for them.

Word study can take the form of small group activities, centers or whole class lessons. Students examine words to discover the patterns, spellings and/or meaning of words. They learn how to look at words so they can construct an understanding of how written words work (Bear et al., 2004; Pinnell & Fountas, 1998).

Self selected reading is a block of time designated for independent reading. The students have choices of what to read and the text provided is at their independent level. A wide variety of materials are needed in order to meet the interest of students, yet be at their independent level of reading. An important feature of this block is students are met with weekly for individual conferences with the teacher. These one-on-one conferences provide for informal assessments, instruction and accountability for the student. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) define independent reading as a systematic way of supporting and guiding students as they read on their own. The more students read the better readers they become (Allington, 1977; Cunningham et al., 1995).

Writing goes hand-in-hand with reading. To focus on one without the other is not teaching literacy (Calkins, 1994; Cunningham, 1984). There are many arguments about how to teach writing, which could develop into another research study. In regards to what writing means for this study, it will be defined as Writers Workshop. Writers Workshop is teaching writing as a process with the inclusion

of mini lessons focusing on language skills. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) define writing workshop as an interrelated combination of writing experiences that occur during the writing block of a literacy framework. Students write every day so they become confident and skillful.

Incorporating writing into a daily block of time ensures students become competent and confident with putting their thoughts on paper. Children need to write for a sustained block of time every day in writing workshops to gain the experience they need in writing across a school year. Writing is not a skill a child can acquire with infrequent instruction and practice (Calkins, 1994; Ray & Laminack, 2001).

Cunningham, Hall, and Defee (1991) report the four block literacy framework was developed in 1989; it consists of self-selected reading, writing, working with words and guided reading. This reading instructional framework is slightly different than balanced literacy. Cunningham, Hall, and Sigmom (1999) describe the purpose of guided reading as “a block of time to expose children to a wide range of literature, teach comprehension strategies and teach children how to read material that becomes increasingly harder” (p. 43). This description is similar to the balanced literacy component entitled teacher directed. The four block framework has all the components of balanced literacy except the component described as small group lessons at a students’ instructional level.

Cunningham et al. (1998) report on a long-term development, implementation and assessment of the Four Block approach. This approach

provides a framework for reading instruction and contains four of the five components mentioned above in balanced literacy. The original implementation was done in a large suburban school with a diverse student population with approximately 25% percent of the children qualify for free or reduced priced lunches. During the eight years of four-block instruction standardized test data on these children were collected in third, fourth and fifth grades. The data indicated 90% of the children were in the top two quartiles. This shows the strength of the four block framework but with only 25% of the population on free or reduced priced lunches the question for Martin Elementary's staff was whether it would meet their needs due to their population having over 90% on free or reduced priced lunches.

Cunningham et al. (1999) reported on a suburban southeastern school district in South Carolina with 25% of the students qualifying for free or reduced price lunches implemented the four block framework with approximately half of the first grade teachers. The students were tested using a word recognition test from the Basic Reading Inventory, Metropolitan Achievement Test and the Cognitive Skills Assessment Battery (CSAB). The Basic Reading Inventory showed the first graders in a four block framework classroom were on average eight months ahead of their peers not utilizing four blocks. The Metropolitan Test analysis revealed the total reading mean score for the four block first graders was significantly better than their peers not utilizing four blocks. The district used the CSAB to analyze data by dividing both groups of students into thirds. This

analysis demonstrated children of all ability levels showed growth from the four block method. There was a 15-point difference in total reading scores for the lower third, a 23-point difference for the middle third and a 28-point difference for the upper third. This study was significant due to there being significant growth in reading but again there was a question regarding its ability to assist with the students in the lowest third of the population.

These studies help show the four block framework was a successful at meeting the needs of most students. The question was whether it was beneficial to students living below the poverty level or would the balanced literacy model be more effective. Balanced Literacy contained a fifth component; small group instruction at the child's instructional reading level, entitled guided reading.

The history of guided reading began with the theories and work of Marie Clay. Clay (1985) reports reading is a strategic process and students must be actively engaged with the text in order to help them solve problems. Clay's work resulted in Reading Recovery, a successful intervention program (Shanahan & Barr, 1995; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). This program served children who were at risk, but educators saw the benefits of the instructional approach and began implementing the principles of Reading Recovery in classrooms through small group instruction. The theoretical background behind guided reading appeared to meet the needs of Martin's students.

The National Reading Panel (2000) contend balanced approaches are preferred when teaching children to read, based on their review of research-

based reading instructional practices used in classrooms across the country. Martin Elementary's classroom teachers followed the balanced approach of teaching reading in order to meet the needs of their students. Balanced literacy allows for both heterogeneous grouping as well as opportunities for homogenous grouping in order to meet specific needs. The majority of students living in poverty have a multitude of academic needs. There must be a variety of strategies in place in order for them to be successful (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Knapp, 1995; Payne, 2001). Limited access to books and a lack of exposure to vocabulary limits students of poverty in the ability to understand story experiences (Farkas, 2003; Hart & Risley, 1995, Allington & Cunningham, 1996). Martin Elementary's staff felt these types of deficits could not be met with just one approach. The incorporation of the components of balanced literacy along with two other effective teaching strategies; interactive strategies and building of positive relationships for the students may help increase their reading performance.

### **Interactive Strategies**

One of the primary reasons for public education is to provide an equal opportunity for everyone. However, curricula may not be designed with all students in mind. Public education is supposed to level the "playing field" for disadvantaged children (Connell, 1994). Unfortunately, the established curriculum doesn't always take into account students' prior knowledge or prior experiences which create an unlevelled playing field for some children. Connell

(1994) says “To teach well in disadvantaged schools requires a shift in pedagogy and in the way content is determined. A shift towards more negotiated curriculum and more participatory classroom practices . . .” (p. 134). A participatory classroom is a classroom where students are engaged in the curriculum and this occurs when teachers utilize interactive strategies.

The restructuring of strategies and curriculum does not mean lowering expectations. High expectations are vital if children of poverty are going to break the cycle (Haycock & Jerald, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Jorgenson & Smith, 2002). Restructuring means educators need to find effective teaching strategies to assist students and teach the curriculum in a manner that is understandable through engaging strategies.

According to bell hooks (2003), classrooms can become a place where student individuality is promoted and authoritarian practices are eliminated. Progress towards more democratic classrooms is a necessity in many classroom settings. bell hooks uses the term democratic classroom which could be used to describe an actively engaged classroom. While there is a place for lecture, students learn best when they collaborate, plan, complete projects, brainstorm, engage with manipulatives, connect through seminars and utilize materials of high interest (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1990; Wolfe, 2001).

Cooperative learning is one way to actively engage students in the curriculum. Cooperative learning involves a small group of learners who work together as a team to solve a problem, complete a task or accomplish a common

goal (Artzt & Newman, 1997; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993). Cooperative learning has generated positive results at all grade levels, in all subjects and for students across all levels (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Qin, Zhining, Johnson, & Johnson, 1995; Slavin, 1990). When students work in groups of two to four, each group member can participate, individual problems are more likely to become clear and to be remedied, and learning can accelerate (Hertz-Lazarowitz & Miller, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Gibbs (1995) reports in a traditional classroom each student has about five to ten minutes of individual time to engage in classroom academic conversations. In group work, the amount of time increases considerably. She learned students experienced a greater level of understanding of concepts and ideas when they talk, clarify, and argue about them with their group.

Sitting for long periods of time is not uncommon in most traditional classrooms. Allowing for movement and making it a part of daily lessons can engage students in the learning process. Permitting movement enhances memory and provides extrasensory input to the brain (Markowitz & Jensen, 1999; Wolfe, 2001). Physical movement during writing and reading is crucial for brain alertness and performance in boys. Some boys will develop as writers once they are allowed to write as they move around. Movement can help the brain become stimulated to read and write (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Educators should be attempting to actively engage students as much as they ask them to sit and listen to a teacher lead discussion.

The use of playing games in the classroom is another avenue for interactively engaging students. Caine and Caine (1994) report game playing is one of the most basic levels of active processing. Students not only can have fun in school but they can practice skills, review concepts, and expand vocabulary. The effectiveness of a game is enhanced when the students help to design or construct it (Wolfe, 2001).

Interactive strategies as shown above can range from an organized cooperative learning activity, to playing a game or just physically moving. Engaging activities help to develop dendritic growth; the neural connections are made possible by experiences and stimulation (Diamond & Hopson, 1998; Healy, 1992). Research states these types of activities have proven to help students academically. To be more specific with literacy development, Allington and Cunningham (1996) state time needs to be available every day in every classroom to engage in reading and writing activities. This information was helpful to the Martin staff in developing their reading improvement model and was why interactive strategies were incorporated into the plan.

### **Positive Relationships**

Students living in poverty are seen as having a lack of 'quality' interactions with adults. Teachers need to develop positive relationship with students. Children learn more willingly from people they trust and respect and in places where they are trusted and respected (Bernard, 2004; McCombs, 2004). Mutual respect is a two-way street. Nelson, Lott, and Glenn (2000) state,

Children are always making subconscious decisions based on their perceptions, or separate realities, of their life experiences. . . . When children feel safe-when they feel that they belong and are significant-they thrive. They learn, they develop into capable people, and they develop social interest. (p. 83)

The Martin staff felt since the school and staff was new to the neighborhood and the students had to move from their previous schools, trust and respect needed to be established.

Carl Rogers an American psychologist and theorist believed individuals have the ability to grow and achieve to their fullest potential. This potential can be channeled given the right conditions. Those conditions are known as core conditions according to Rogers; empathy, congruence and genuineness. These enable a person to make decisions, using their own resources (Cornelius-White, 2007; Rogers, 1969). Rogers (1969) held "certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationships between the facilitator and the learner" yield significant learning (p. 106). Facilitation of this requires a trust, followed by the creation of an acceptant and empathic climate. The Martin staff believed the core conditions could be developed through relationships. These relationships would then help the students at Martin become more confident and resourceful learners, according to Rogers theory.

Ostrosky, Gaffney, and Thomas (2006) report the key to supporting a young child's budding literacy skills is the building of relationships and creating rapport with adults and peers through exchanges around literacy activities. The creation of lasting relationships with adults who take responsibility for engaging a

child in genuine conversations increase the chance for the child to build productive literacy connections. Ostrosky et al. (2006) state,

Robust relationships with caring adults are especially important in meeting the social and emotional needs of young children who may be unable to benefit from traditional, curriculum-driven, academics instruction. Many children have shown difficulty developing early literacy skills when taught using traditional techniques. (p.175)

If an atmosphere of respect and trust was established and the students felt they were cared for and respected would they be empowered? Empowerment could help students take ownership in their learning.

A key to helping students achieve success is creating relationships with them. When students who have lived with poverty and become successful adults are asked how they completed their journey, the answer nine out of ten times has to do with a relationship with a teacher, counselor, coach or someone who took an interest in them as individuals (Payne, 2001). Building positive relationships help all children feel a sense of belongingness and hence create environments of trust and respect. These environments are essential for learning to take place. Children require this type of environment in order to be successful in schools. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure these relationships are formed to assist them in academic proficiency.

### **Class Size Reduction**

Class size reduction has been utilized as an intervention to improve the academic performance of students in a variety of grades and subjects. The

effectiveness of a reduce class size has been debated as far back as 1900 (Achilles & Finn, 2002; Harder, 1990; Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulos, 2004; Pong & Pallas, 2001; Tomlinson, 1990). Several research studies will be discussed to provide background knowledge regarding this case study and the question how reduced classroom size affects the incorporation of balanced literacy when it is augmented by interactive strategies and the creation of positive relationships.

Project STAR (Student Teacher Achievement Ratio: The Tennessee class-size experiment) was a statewide controlled experiment. It manipulated only class size (small and regular) and one pupil-teacher ratio variable (regular and regular with an aide). Students were randomly assigned to a reduced class size classroom or a regular class size room. The research showed small classes in the primary grades have a positive impact on academic achievement in all subject area in kindergarten through third grade (Finn & Achilles, 1990; Word et al, 1990;). This research was the basis for district funds to be utilized at Martin Elementary's to fund class size reduction in kindergarten through third grade. Could similar results be reported in the upper elementary grades if class size reduction was utilized in those grades at Martin Elementary?

Nye et al. (2004) used the information provided by Project STAR to create a follow-up study and focused on the long term effects of such reductions. The research was designed as a qualitative study. The researchers utilized the California Tests of Basic Skills for math and reading in grades fourth through

eighth to study of the effects of small class size in grades kindergarten through third. The study was set up to measure the small class advantage by race, small class advantage by gender and small class advantage by gender within race.

Each of the small-class effects was presented as the difference between the mean achievement in small classes in Grades K to 3 and that in all remaining combinations of the classes divided by the overall standard deviation of test scores at the grade in that subject matter. Thus, each of the small-class effects was an effect size expressed in standard deviation units. (Nye et al., 2004, p. 98)

Their results showed small class size was an advantage by providing minority students lasting benefits in reading. This study was relevant to Martin Elementary's leadership team due to the large minority student population at the school.

Nye et al. (2004) also focused on the long term effects of class size reduction in the primary grades (kindergarten through third). They found there were long term benefits in academic achievement during the 5 years after the experiment ended, when the students were in Grades 4 to 8. Whether these students in fourth through eighth grade were on grade level or below grade level compared to the majority of their peers was not addressed. Students may have continued to make progress but it was unclear on whether they were considered proficient.

Finn, Gerber, Achilles, and Boyd-Zaharia (2001) also reviewed the Tennessee's Project STAR's data and came up with three other conclusions. First, students in small class sizes achieve better than do students in regular

class sizes or those in regular class size with a teacher assistant; Second, the year in which a student first goes in a small class and the number of years s/he partakes in a small class are important to the benefits gained; Third, they found few if any academic benefits linked to a full-time teacher's aide in grades first through third. Their first conclusion showed class size reduction made a significant difference and those students who attended small classes performed better on all achievement measures in all grades than the students in regular class size with or without teacher assistants. If class size reduction made a difference in achievement in kindergarten through third grade would the same be true for the upper elementary grades?

Tomlinson (1990) explored two significant studies regarding class size reduction, Tennessee's Project STAR (Kindergarten through third grade class-size reduction initiative) and Indiana's Project PRIME TIME (Kindergarten through third grade class-size reduction initiative). He looked at the benefits of these programs on achievement and the policy implications of class size reduction. He stated there is data reinforcing the achievement gains of disadvantaged students in small class sizes, yet he doesn't believe it is the cure. He concluded the data shows academic improvement in disadvantaged children but not in affluent children. He asks the question on whether it is economically justified to use class size reduction with only disadvantaged children. The problem being if class size reduction is only beneficial for disadvantaged then do you create homogeneous classes to financially support it and if so homogenous

groupings have proven not to be an effective strategy for students of poverty. An issue of concern regarding this case study is if homogenous classrooms are created due to the demographics of a neighborhood, like Martin Elementary would class size reduction be an academically and financially beneficial strategy?

Harder (1990) also explored Tennessee's Project STAR and Indiana's Project PRIME TIME. She focused on the learning activities within those classrooms. Harder came to the conclusion it was not the size of the classroom that made the difference but the activities that occurred during the day that was related to the achievement gains. She feels the focus should be on quality instruction not the number of students in a room. The Martin staff wondered if effective teaching strategies like balanced literacy, interactive strategies and relationship building were in place would class size reduction classroom help with reading performance.

The literature reviewed for class size reduction has focused on different aspects of class size reduction but one question that continues to arise is whether class size reduction is feasible financially as compared to the amount of achievement achieved in a selected group (Harder, 1990; Krueger, 2003; Nye et al., 2004; Tomlinson, 1990). A question that could be examined is if a high percentage of students living in poverty are located at one school is it beneficial to reduce class sizes in order to increase achievement.

## Reading Performance

North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction end-of-grade reading test evaluates a student's ability to read, understand, and critically analyze printed information in the elementary schools in grades third, fourth and fifth. The test is administered within the last three weeks of the school year. In third grade a pretest is given during the first three weeks of school so there is a base line to compare to the end of the third grade year test. The reading passages reflect reading for various purposes such as recipes, poetry and table of contents. Knowledge of vocabulary is assessed indirectly through the understanding of terms within the passages and questions. Four types of items are categorized on the reading tests ([www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/)).

The categories include cognition, interpretation, critical stance and connections. Cognition requires the reader to apply strategies, such as using context clues to determine meaning, summarizing to include main points, and identifying the purpose of text features. Interpretation requires the reader to make inferences and generalizations. It may ask students to clarify, to explain the significance of, to extend and/or to adapt ideas/concepts. Critical stance requires the reader to apply processes such as comparing/contrasting and understanding the impact of literary elements. Connections require the reader to connect knowledge from the selection with other information and experiences beyond/outside the selection. ([www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/NORTHGeneralpolicies.pdf](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/NORTHGeneralpolicies.pdf))

Student performance in reading is reported on developmental scale score.

The number of questions the students answer correctly is called a raw score. The raw score is converted to a developmental scale score and depicts growth in reading achievement from year to year. Teachers and parents can compare the

developmental scale scores on the end-of-grade test given during their child's previous year or in third grade on the pretest, to determine growth in reading ([www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/NORTHCgeneralpolicies.pdf](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/NORTHCgeneralpolicies.pdf)). Refer to Chapter I for the description on how the end-of-grade test scores are utilized for school accountability.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework, visually displayed in Figure I, is based on an exploration of several different approaches to help increase reading performance in the upper grades of a high poverty elementary school.

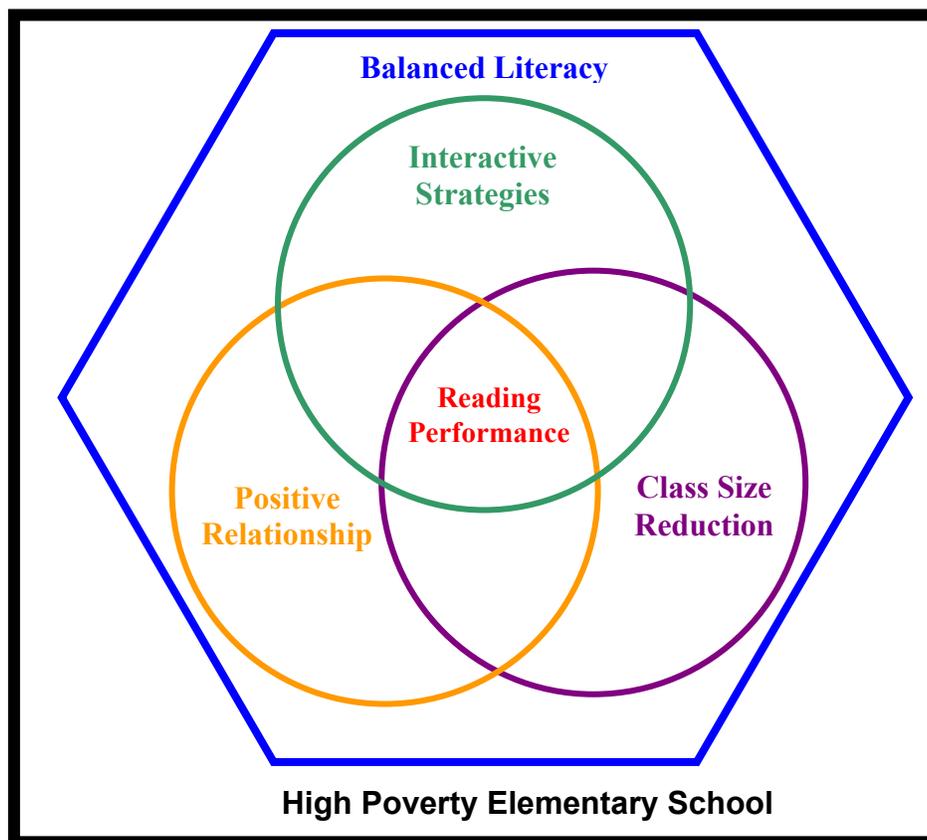


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework*

The framework illustrates that within this setting each approach is needed to make a significant difference in reading performance. As Allington and Cunningham (1996) state,

For too long the quest has been focused on discovering the one best way to teach reading and writing. We believe that there can be no such approach. Learning to read and write is a complex activity.

Four approaches: balanced literacy, interactive teaching strategies, creation of positive relationships, and class size reduction are a part of the reading improvement plan that was utilized and studied at Martin Elementary to improve reading performance.

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the literature on balanced literacy and the components were explained in detail. The literacy approach was explained as a process that meets the needs of students through whole class, small group and one-on-one instruction. Interactive strategies were presented which affirmed engaging students in literacy will assist them in processing the information and applying it. The literature reiterated the need for positive relationships in the lives of children and how teachers should build rapport and trust. Class size reduction research was reviewed to show there is lack of data available with regards to its effects with upper elementary grades class size reduction, but success has been proven with class size reduction in the lower elementary grades. This success in

the lower grades has carried over and been sustained for some students in the upper elementary grades. The questions that will be answered are:

1. What effect does the incorporation of balanced literacy supplemented with other effective teaching strategies have on the reading performance of students who are living in high poverty? The strategies include interactive teaching and the building of positive relationships.
2. How does reduced classroom size affect the incorporation of balanced literacy when it is augmented by interactive strategies and the creation of positive relationships?
3. What effects does the incorporation of balanced literacy involving interactive strategies, the building of positive relationships and class size reduction have on classroom teacher practice?

In the next chapter the research design will be discussed, describing the setting, participants, and data collection.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN/METHODOLOGY**

In this study, I explored the reading performance of students attending a school with 94% poverty rate. The school utilized a reading improvement model that incorporated balanced literacy with interactive teaching strategies, the building of positive relationships, and the creation of small class sizes in third, fourth, and fifth grade. The purpose of this study is to report the effects that this combination had on the efforts to improve reading achievement of upper-elementary grade students in a high poverty school.

A case study is more about a choice of what is being studied than a methodological choice (Stake, 2000; Yin, 1994). This case study utilizes a qualitative approach to examine the implementation of these approaches. Qualitative research involves the use and collection of a variety of empirical materials. A qualitative researcher deploys a wide range of interpretive practices in hopes of getting a better understanding of the subject matter at hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Yin, 1994).

Martin Elementary was chosen for this case study for several reasons. First, the primary researcher was the principal of the school. Second, the students' performance in reading at Martin had been of concern since the opening of the school in 2003. Third, the school leadership team developed an

improvement model to increase the reading performance of the students. The improvement needed to be evaluated to determine the benefits and challenges of the model.

### **Research Setting and Participants**

#### ***Martin Elementary School***

Martin Elementary School opened in August of 2003 as a neighborhood school in an urban area of a large school system in North Carolina.

Approximately 280 students were enrolled in the school Pre-K through fifth grade, with 97% African American and 94% receiving free and reduced-price lunches. Martin Elementary was a Title I school and considered “highly impacted” by the school system due to the high number of students from families below that poverty level, which is determined by the students’ eligibility for free and reduced-price lunches. A complete description of Martin Elementary, the history of its opening, and its social and economic context was provided in Chapter I.

The collection of data was in third, fourth and fifth grade classrooms at Martin Elementary. The reason for only utilizing the upper elementary grades was twofold: first, the district already had an initiative in place to reduce class size in Kindergarten, first and second grades; and second, North Carolina’s Department of Public Education gives state reading tests to students in third, fourth and fifth grade and holds schools accountable for student performance in these elementary grade levels. A full description of the state’s accountability classifications and Martin’s status was discussed in detail in Chapter I.

### ***Teacher Participants***

The Martin staff was trained in balanced literacy as it was described in Chapter II during their first year at Martin and continually attended staff development in reading yearly. Interactive teaching strategies were modeled and taught in staff development sessions at Martin yearly. Time was spent with University personnel and student teachers to practice and refine strategies due to the Professional Development School Partnership as described in Chapter I. Training at Martin on effective teaching strategies always took place in stages; first the information, data, and rationale behind the strategy were presented, second time was given to collaborate with peers, curriculum facilitator and administration, then a time period was designated for practicing and observing others demonstrate the imitative, and finally feedback would be given to allow for refinement or change.

Six classroom teachers who taught third, fourth and fifth grades at Martin Elementary beginning in August 2003 were interviewed, surveyed, and observed. There were two teachers interviewed in each grade level third through fifth grade for this study. These teachers were chosen because of their participation in the reading improvement model. These teachers had remained in their grade levels from August 2003 through May 2006 and had taught at Martin under arrangements with class size reduction settings and traditional class size settings for literacy instruction. Their experiences allowed them to provide valuable insight to the positive and negative affects the improvement had on the students and

their reading performance. Table 4 lists the six classroom teachers and shows where they transferred from, the grade level they taught at Martin, their years of experience, and their level of education.

**Table 4**

***Participants' Teaching Qualifications and Experience***

<b>Teacher Name</b>	<b>Transferred to Martin from</b>	<b>Grade Level Taught</b>	<b>Years of Experience Prior to 2003-2004</b>	<b>Degree</b>
<b>Elizabeth</b>	In-County	Third Grade	6 years	Bachelors
<b>Conner</b>	In-County	Third Grade	5 years	Masters
<b>Trudy</b>	VA Transfer	Fourth Grade	23 years	Bachelors
<b>Teal</b>	In-County	Fourth Grade	8 years	Bachelors
<b>Evers</b>	In-County	Fifth Grade	11 years	Masters
<b>Cooley</b>	CN Transfer	Fifth Grade	30 years	Masters

***Elizabeth***

Elizabeth had six years of experience working in the in Title I schools in North Carolina. She grew up in New York and attended college in North Carolina, where she completed her student teaching. She has taught third and second grades and was a full-time literacy teacher for a year. During her experiences as a second grade and third grade teacher, she was responsible for a self-contained class and taught the entire curriculum for the grade. As a literacy teacher, she worked solely with third grade and utilized a “push-in” system with three other

third grade teachers. "Push-in" refers to when a support teacher meets with a small group of students and teaches the same subject/objective that the regular teacher is working on. The support teacher differentiates instruction at the groups level. The three teachers arranged their schedule so that reading was taught at three different times during the day. This allowed Elizabeth the opportunity to push-in to every class and be the second teacher within the room to lower the teacher to student ratio. During the push-in time, she worked with small groups of students to meet their instructional needs. The extra time during the instructional day was to work with a group of students in writing and one-on-one with students as needed.

### ***Connor***

Connor had five years of experience working in Title I schools in North Carolina when she was hired at Martin. She grew up in North Carolina and attended college in North Carolina, where she completed her student teaching. She taught third and second grades and was a full time literacy teacher. She was responsible for self-contained classes and taught the entire curriculum for second and third grades. Connor looped up with her second grade class one year to third grade. This opportunity gave her a better understanding of the academic development and growth of students by teaching them for two years in a row. As a full time literacy teacher she worked with fourth and fifth grade students during guided reading, teacher directed, writing, one-on-one reading and assisted with reading assessments. She had training with Thinking Maps (graphic organizers),

phonics, math manipulative training with Marcy Cook, and Four Block Reading with Connie Prevatte.

### ***Teal***

Teal had nine years of experience when she was hired at Martin Elementary. Her first five years were spent in Atlanta, Georgia three, of which were spent in a Title I school. She then took eighteen years off from teaching to raise a family. When she returned, she spent four years teaching in a Title I school located in the same system as Martin. Teal has taught fourth and fifth grades and sixth grade language arts. One year, she looped up with her fourth grade class to fifth grade. This opportunity gave her a better understanding of the academic development and growth of students by teaching them for two consecutive years. Teal has attended training in cooperative learning. These sessions were designed to demonstrate how effective interactive learning can be in the classroom when implemented and facilitated correctly. The focus of these sessions included setting up the classroom to facilitate shared learning, grouping students to meet individual as well as group needs, and evaluating the performance of the groups. The outcomes for Teal were an increase in interactive learning and less teacher driven instruction.

### ***Evers***

Evers had eleven years of experience when she was hired at Martin. All but her first year of teaching has been in Title I schools. She grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, and attended college in Mobile, Alabama. Evers completed

all requirements and received her National Board Certification the year before coming to Martin. During her three years at Martin she completed her Master's degree in Educational Leadership at a local University. She has taught fourth and fifth grade and looped up with her fourth grade class one year to fifth grade. This opportunity gave her a better understanding of the academic development and growth of students by teaching them for two years in a row.

Evers had extensive training in cooperative learning and differentiated instruction. Three years before coming to Martin she attended a weeklong training by Susan Kovalik on Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI). This intensive training was based upon current brain research to integrate instruction through body-brain compatibility and character education using a conceptual curriculum.

### ***Trudy***

Trudy had twenty-three years of experience when she was hired at Martin. She had taught in North Carolina and Virginia. Her experiences ranged from private school to public school and from rural settings to urban settings. Trudy grew up in Virginia and attended a university in Virginia, where she received a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Trudy has taught at every grade level, Kindergarten through Fifth in elementary.

### ***Cooley***

Cooley had thirty years of experience when she was hired at Martin. She taught in North Carolina, Virginia, and Connecticut. Her experiences have ranged from a small rural school in North Carolina to a larger high poverty urban school

in Connecticut. Cooley grew up in North Carolina and attended a university in North Carolina. She received a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in educational leadership and reading. Cooley has taught both primary grades and the intermediate grades in elementary.

### ***Teacher Interviews***

Interviews for these six teachers were structured and followed a protocol to reveal information about each teacher's beliefs and practices. It was important to hear and use their language regarding their pedagogy (Carlson & Apple, 1998). All interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. Interviews are active interactions between two people leading to a negotiated understanding. Interviewing is a popular way to gather qualitative research data because talking is natural (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Griffiee, 2005). Seidman (1991) suggests that at the beginning the interview focus on formality rather than familiarity. An interviewee needs to feel comfortable and supported but if they are too familiar they may withhold information unintentionally or focus on one particular piece because they think the interviewer would approve. During interviewing, Seidman (1991) believes that the interviewer needs to listen at three levels; first is what the person is saying, second is listening to the "inner voice, and third is listening while remaining aware of the process of the interview. These three levels were easily achieved through listening to the tape recordings of the interviews and transcribing them.

The face-to-face interviews were beneficial in understanding the teachers' attitude, their ability to use instructional strategies, their utilization of the components of balanced literacy, and their creation of positive relationships. The interviews allowed for the participants to discuss how they used strategies Just as well as the frequency of their use of these strategies. Their discussion also provided insights into whether they truly believed and utilized the strategies.

As the principal of the school where the research participants work and as the person evaluating them, I had to make sure to reinforce with the participants that the data collected would not be used for any other reasons except for the case study. The participants' truthfulness was important and they needed to understand that data collected was for the sole purpose of addressing the purpose of the research. The six teachers who were interviewed were spoken to individually about the case study and the purpose of the research. Prior to the research process I had many informal conversations with the classroom teachers who were participants. The conversations were about their comfort level with my collection of the data about their teaching practices, their thoughts, and their feelings related to my being their supervisor. I allowed them the opportunity to ask questions and make comments. Each staff member was given a consent form to read and sign. The prompts used to focus the interviews were:

1. Tell me about your teaching experiences.
2. What are your teaching experiences with children of poverty?
3. Describe how you teach reading—literacy.

4. Describe how you develop relationships with your students.
5. Tell me about your experiences with class size reduction settings.
6. Tell me about your experiences with regular class size.
7. Tell me your thought and feelings about class size reduction versus regular class size.
8. Is there anything else you want to share?

Surveys were also given to the six classroom teacher participants. They were administered one-on-one during the month of May 2006. I explained the double sided survey to the participants and reminded them of the need to be honest with their answers. The purpose of the survey was to have another method of verifying the teaching practices of the staff participants. As the researcher, I felt the teachers not only needed the opportunity to discuss their teaching practices but to tell about the frequency of those practices independently from the interview. The survey asked the teachers about their teaching experiences and to rate the frequency of their teaching practices with regular class sizes and small class sizes. The teaching practices they were questioned about were the components of balanced literacy and interactive strategies.

Formal and informal observations assisted with the triangulation of data collected about teaching practices. Triangulation is a method of verifying findings. Stake (2000) and Griffiee (2005) state that triangulation has been generally

considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning. As the principal of Martin Elementary School, I visited every classroom daily.

Observations were done informally and formally on all six teachers participating in the case study. Informal observations were daily pop-ins where I continuously looked for three main things: (a) what was the objective of the lesson, (b) what was the teaching doing to help the students understand the objective, and (c) what were the students doing to comprehend the objective. Formal observations were organized around observing different parts of balanced literacy in order to help the teachers by providing feedback regarding their reading instruction. The observations were conducted over a three year period allowing me the opportunity to provide insight into the teacher's instructional practices. They were documented in a written narrative form. Stake (1995) reports that observations work the researcher toward greater understanding of the case. All these strategies were utilized as sources of information to help in the collection of data so that a complete picture of the teachers' practices could be created.

### ***Student Participants***

Focus groups were held with two different groups of fifth grade students at Martin Elementary. Students were selected for the focus group from the 23 fifth graders who had attended Martin since the opening of the school in 2003. These 23 students were from a total of 41 fifth graders enrolled in fifth grade in 2005-2006. All 23 students and parents were sent information about the case study

and asked if they would participate. Thirteen students returned the parent permission slip form. The students needed for the focus group had to have experiences with class size reduction settings and traditional class size settings in the upper elementary grades at Martin Elementary. The focus group consisted of seven African American girls and six African American boys. Their academic abilities varied from a student with a learning disability to a student receiving services for being identified as gifted.

Focus group discussions allow for the opportunity to express points of view in a group setting (Villard, 2003). These sessions gave the students a chance to talk about their experiences over the past three years in third, fourth and fifth grades at Martin Elementary. Their perceptions of their learning, their relationships, and their success in regular class settings and reduced class size settings was valuable information that needed to be collected. Their perspectives were different from the teachers and mine as the observer. This study was about their learning; so their viewpoint was an important piece of data.

Two focus groups were conducted; one with seven students and one with six students. I did not want all thirteen students present at one time, fearing that not everyone would have an opportunity to share their thoughts. Students were placed in two groups to divide boys and girls and to spread out the personalities, thus ensuring everyone was comfortable speaking their mind.

A focus group is a type of qualitative research that allows participants to state their points of view in a group setting (Villard, 2003). The meetings with the

students were face-to-face and held as a group so that the students felt comfortable, did not feel singled out, and were able to “feed” off each other and spark ideas. I informed the students that there were no right and wrong answers. As the principal of the school attended by the research participants, I felt it important to reinforce with students that the data collected would not be used for any other reasons except my research.

Focus groups were semi-structured and followed a protocol to elicit information about the students’ experiences within small class size settings and larger class size settings. The focus groups were held in an empty classroom during school when it was convenient for the teacher to release them without a disruption and at a time they wouldn’t be upset about missing what other students were doing (i.e. recess, lunch). Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and was taped and transcribed for analysis. The prompts that were used to focus the discussion were:

1. Tell me what you remember about third grade.
2. Tell me what you remember about fourth grade.
3. Tell me about fifth grade.
4. Tell me what was different about third grade compared to fourth and fifth grade. What do you remember about how you were taught in third grade compared to fourth and fifth grade?

Due to the fact that I was dialoguing with a group of 10- and 11-year-olds, I needed to bring them back to the questions several times during the interview

and had to ask clarifying questions to ensure they understood the questions and that I understood their answers. The students were very willing to meet with me and appeared to be very comfortable talking to me. The group dynamics led to a very open discussion.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Interviews***

Interviews were recorded and transcribed into a word processing document. The interviews were printed out as six different documents. The transcriptions were then coded into categories (Kleinman & Copp, 1993) using colored highlighters. I read each transcription through and then used a single colored highlighter to discover patterns and mark categories, i.e. relationships, reading instruction, and classroom management on each document. Each transcription was checked through again and again to assist with marking different categories.

When the coding was complete, the categories were identified and given a title. A word processor was used to create a table for each category and the statements that fell under the title were listed in the table in the same row as the teacher's name. These tables enabled me to collectively see each category with individual statement listed altogether, which teacher stated the comment, how many comments were listed, which teacher didn't have a comment under a given category. It also allowed for identification of duplications and gave me the opportunity to look across the interviews for contrasts and patterns.

### ***Focus Groups***

Focus groups were conducted with a total of thirteen fifth grade students who attended Martin Elementary School since third grade. I used a tape recorder and took notes to ensure I captured all of their comments. The recordings were transcribed into two word documents and both documents were printed. The transcriptions were then coded into categories (Kleinman & Copp, 1993) using colored highlighters. I read each transcription through and used a single colored highlighter to discover patterns and mark categories. A different colored highlighter was then utilized and each transcription was read through again marking a different category.

When the coding was concluded the categories were identified, and each category was given a title. A word processor was used to create tables for each category and the statements that fell under the title were listed in the table. These tables enabled me to collectively see each statement listed altogether, which group stated the comment, how many comments were listed, and to detect any duplication and look across the interviews for contrasts and patterns.

### ***Surveys***

The six classroom teachers were met with one-on-one and given a survey to complete regarding their literacy instruction. The survey was a two sided sheet of paper with information regarding their teaching practice with regular class sizes and with class size reductions. The classroom teachers were asked to rate their frequency of practice; daily, four times weekly, three times weekly, twice

weekly, or once a week. When all the surveys had been completed they were tallied on a blank survey form. The tallies were then transcribed into a table so that the information was clearly written and that patterns could be seen.

### ***Observations***

Observation notes were read and reviewed and then coded into categories (Kleinman & Copp, 1993) using colored highlighters. I read each document through several times and used colored highlighter to discover patterns and mark categories, i.e. reading instruction, interactive strategies, and classroom management on each document. Different colored highlighters were utilized and each document was checked through again and again to assist with marking different categories.

The different components of balanced literacy along with a category for partner work during reading instruction were the focus when reviewing the observational documents. A word processor was used to create a table for each category. The frequencies the different components of balanced literacy were utilized by the teacher were charted along with partner work. These tables created a visual for the number of times the strategies that were a part of the plan of action to increase reading performance were experienced by the students.

### ***End-of-Grade Reading Scores***

North Carolina's End-Of-Grade reading tests proficiency scores for third, fourth and fifth grades were collected and analyzed for three years consecutively

beginning from 2003-2004. Martin Elementary School is a public elementary school located in North Carolina. This means that the students enrolled in third, fourth and fifth grades have to take the North Carolina Pretest and End-of-Grade Test.

The Pretest and the End-of Grade tests students' ability regarding reading comprehension and mathematics. It is given to every third grade student within the first three weeks of school as the pretest. The pretest measures knowledge and skills specified for grade 2 in reading and mathematics as outlined in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. The End-of-Grade test is then administered to every third, fourth and fifth grade student within the last three weeks of school. A comparison of the results from the third grade pretest and the results from the grade 3 end-of-grade tests allows schools to measure growth in achievement in reading comprehension and mathematics. Growth can also be measured in fourth and fifth grades by comparing the students' previous years'. This case study will be reporting and analyzing the proficiency rate that each grade received overall in reading for three years consecutively from 2003 to 2006.

This End-of-Grade reading scores were retrieved off the North Carolina Report Card that can be accessed on-line at [www.ncschoolreportcard.org](http://www.ncschoolreportcard.org). The NC School Report Cards offer a snapshot of some of the important information about individual schools. The School and District Report Cards are developed around the State Board of Education's Strategic Priorities. The main areas are:

School/District Profile; High Student Performance; Safe, Orderly & Caring Schools; and Quality Teachers/Administrators. In most cases, data in the School Report Cards are reported at the school, district and state levels. School data are based on information from all grades within the school.

### **My Role as Principal and Researcher**

This research project presented minimal risk. Participants were invited to be interviewed. All participants had the opportunity to ask questions before, during and after data collection. Participants could have chosen to discontinue participation; in which case, the data collected from interviews would have been destroyed. Participants' identities are anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. The study does not identify participants by name or any other identifiable data, descriptions or characterizations.

Research was conducted in a high poverty elementary school where I was the principal from July of 2003 through June of 2006. The certified staff members who were asked to participate were under my direct supervision. Prior to the research process beginning I had several informal conversations with the classroom teachers that would be interviewed and surveyed for the study. The conversations were about their comfort level with me collecting the data about their practices, thoughts and feelings while also being their supervisor. We discussed the need for their honesty and that the data would never be used as part of any evaluation. I allowed them the opportunity to ask questions and make

comments. The staff participating was supportive and agreed that they felt comfortable with the case study.

As an administrator I encourage my staff to question policies, procedures and practices at the school level. I believe that their opinions and concerns are valid and important because they work directly with the students. I as the administrator need to hear their thoughts and either make adjustments or explain decisions so that they understand the reasoning behind them. As a supervisor I feel that open dialogue and honesty is the only way to create a culture for learning. This climate I feel enhances the classroom teachers' ability to be truthful. The surveys and interviews were conducted in May and June of the 2006 school year. This also ensured that all end of year evaluations were complete prior to their participation, to reinforce the fact the information collected would not be used for evaluation purposes.

The fifth grade students who were eligible to be interviewed due to attending the school for three years were sent home a parent consent form. I spoke with the students prior to it being sent home to tell them that I wanted to interview some of them, and I needed their parents' permission. I also informed them that I would be asking them about their experiences at Martin and that I needed them to be honest so that I could help students. The students that brought back parent permission slips were a part of the focus group where I explained the research again, asked if they wanted to still participate, and read their assent forms to them before they signed. Their interviews were conducted

after they had completed End-of-Grade testing and knew they had passed and would be going on to middle school.

As the principal of Martin Elementary and the primary researcher for this case study, another issue regarding subjectivity needs to be addressed. The leadership team implemented a reading improvement model, but I was the instructional leader of Martin. I brought the plan to the leadership team and not only did I believe in the plan but supported the plan through the allocation of funds for staff, provided resources, trained staff, and ensured scheduling was not a barrier. I believed in the plan but as the principal I also wanted to ensure that what was implemented at Martin was helping students. My primary reason for this research was to discover if the plan was worth repeating and/or continuing. I would love to know that the plan created under my leadership made a difference. If it did not make a difference in the lives of the children, there is absolutely no need to replicate the plan. We as educators cannot afford to waste time or resources on initiatives that do not academically benefit the children.

### **Summary**

A qualitative design was used as the framework for this case study. In Chapter I the school's history, students, staff, classroom settings, class sizes, balanced literacy, and accountability models were described. In Chapter II a review of the literature was presented on balanced literacy, interactive strategies, positive relationships, class size reduction, and reading performance. The study provided data from a number of sources: interviews, focus groups, observations,

surveys and End-of-Grade test scores. All of these different sources were utilized in order to address the research questions in Chapter IV; the data collected from the sources described in Chapter III will be presented.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The achievement gap between children in high poverty areas and other children is still one of our educational systems biggest concerns. Research has been completed on the effects of reduced classroom size in the lower primary grades. This case study was designed to determine if Martin Elementary's reading improvement model was an effective approach to improving reading achievement of upper elementary grade students in a high poverty school.

As described in Chapter III, this case study utilizes a qualitative approach. In this chapter, results are presented in five sections. The first section presents reading proficiency percentages from North Carolina's End-of-Grade test scores. The second section contains data from individual interviews. The third section includes interview data from the focus group discussions. The fourth section contains survey data from classroom teachers. The fifth and final section is observational data.

#### **End-of-Grade Tests**

North Carolina's school accountability model is based on the End-of-Grade tests. The End-of-Grade test in reading and math are given within the last three weeks of school for elementary in grades third, fourth and fifth. An End-of-Grade pretest is also given within the first three weeks of third grade. Every

school in North Carolina receives a proficiency score in reading and in math based on the number of students in grade third, fourth and fifth that receive a passing score of a level 3 or level 4. North Carolina's accountability model was described in detail in Chapter I.

Table 5 records the End-of-Grade reading proficiency scores for the third, fourth, fifth grade and the overall percentage for third through fifth grade at Martin Elementary from the 2003-2004 school year until the 2005 -2006 school year. The overall proficiency percentage increased from 61% for the 2003-2004 school year to 72% for the 2005-2006 school year. The third grade reading proficiency percentages increased every year from 49% to 62%. Fourth grade reading proficiency percentages fluctuated. The fifth grade reading proficiency percentage in 2003-2004 was 68% and in 2005-2006 it was 84%.

**Table 5**

***Martin Elementary's End-of-Grade Reading Proficiency Percentages***

	<b>Third Grade</b>	<b>Fourth Grade</b>	<b>Fifth Grade</b>	<b>Overall</b>
<b>2005-2006</b>	62%	67%	84%	72%
<b>2004-2005</b>	56%	56%	86%	67%
<b>2003-2004</b>	49%	69%	68%	61%

Source: North Carolina Report Card

Another way to view these test data is to look at the cohort groups as they move from third grade, to fourth grade and then finally fifth grade. The cohort group that began in third grade at Martin in 2003-2004 was 49% proficient in reading, in fourth grade in 2004-2005 they increased to 56% proficient and in fifth grade in 2005-2006 they increased to 84% proficient in reading. The cohort group that began in fourth grade in 2003-2004 was 69% proficient in reading and in fifth grade in 2004-2005 they increased to 86% proficient in reading. The cohort group that began in third grade in 2004-2005 was 56% proficient in reading and in fourth grade in 2005-2006 they increased to 67% proficient in reading. All cohort groups increased their reading proficiency scores.

### **Teacher Interview Data**

One-on-one interviews were held with six classroom teachers at Martin Elementary. These interviews gave the teachers a chance to speak about their teaching practices and experiences in both a regular class size and in a reduced class size setting over the past three years at Martin Elementary. Interviews were analyzed utilizing qualitative methods. The transcriptions of the audiotapes of each interview provided me the opportunity to relive the experience and reflect on participants' answers while paying attention to inflections and intonations.

The transcriptions were coded, which assisted in analyzing the data and creating the categories (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). These categories were created out of patterns formed; pattern coding (Miles & Huberman 1994; Yin, 1994) was used to discover patterns among the teacher interviews. The categories created

were: (a) balanced literacy, (b) relationships, (c) meeting student needs, (d) student engagement, (e) student self-esteem, (f) classroom management, (g) parent involvement, and (h) teacher management.

### ***Balanced Literacy***

There were six classroom teachers from Martin who were interviewed for this case study. These six teachers expressed their thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding the implementation of the reading improvement model. The classroom teachers were asked to describe their reading instruction, how they implement balanced literacy and if class size reduction affected the execution of the balanced literacy approach. Connor explained her reading instruction,

Several different ways: in a whole-group setting, that would be a teacher directed lesson, where everyone has the same book, in a small group, for guided reading, broken into ability levels and one-on-one conferencing during self selected reading. We work on word block engaging type things and the writing process. Strategy, comprehension, word-call, that type of thing are reinforced in all areas.

Connor described how balanced literacy teaches children in a whole class, small group and one-on-one setting to meet their needs. She also mentions all the components of balanced literacy and need to ensure there is a teaching objective focused on skill attainment.

Trudy described how she teaches reading and stated,

Oh gosh, that's hard to really just pinpoint. I tell the students: you're reading all day long, it's not just reading in a basal, or a book. We read as

a whole class with fourth grade material, in small groups at their reading level and one-on-one. And just try to get them to apply the—the reading skills. I have a strong phonics background, and that's how I learned to read, so I—I do like to have phonics and word study. I have such a joy of reading, myself, and always have, that I try to make reading fun, and help them to see, again, even in math, reading word problems. We kind of do, a lot of the same vocabulary, when we're talking about conclusions in a story, I'll use the same vocabulary in—in math, when we're reading word problems: after you have this information, what's your conclusion, which is basically going to be what operation would you use? And I've found that that really helps them a lot: crossing the vocabulary between the two subject areas. What's the main idea of the word problem, that kind of thing?

Teal's description illustrated how the different parts of balanced literacy are interconnected and that it can be integrated into other subjects. As stated previously balanced literacy is not a program but a process and Teal's explanation confirms that.

Elizabeth commented in detail about her approach to teach reading.

Well, we have guided reading, which is small group; I really prefer five students and under. And that's on their grade level. And, I focus on a few words that I think will give them difficulty in the text in the beginning, and then I let one student read with me per day, and the others are reading the same text while we read. And then I work with their individual issues that they have; that's usually fluency. And then we do a comprehension activity after that, where I speak with all the students, and they're talking about what they've read. And they take a book home with them every day. Then there's SSR, where they are reading on their own: any kind of text that they're interested in. And they meet with me hopefully once a week; if it's smaller class size, then I get to meet with them twice to three times a week, which is even better. And we discuss what they're reading; it depends if they're working with fiction or non-fiction text, what kinds of questions I'm asking. But it's focusing on are you paying attention while you read, and making connections? That's—and then there's teacher-directed reading, which hits the genres and how to work with a text, specifically. And that's really more about comprehension on their grade level. And there would be some word work, and well, this year too there

was phonics involved as well. We did start doing daily, a ten minute drill of the things that they—each group—seemed to be struggling on.

Elizabeth's explanation of how she teaches reading described the strategies utilized within each different component of the balanced literacy program. This illustrates that balanced literacy is not just implementing the different parts but utilizes best practices within the blocks.

Cooley explained her reading instruction,

Well, I always try to build some kind of connection. Don't get right into the book, or whatever, you know. Talk about a time this happened, or a time that happened, or have you ever been, or would you like—build some kind of background, let them share. I do this in teacher directed, guided reading and one-on-one with students. Then, after I've done that I'll decide—after I've decided what the focus is or the skills I'm going to be teaching, then I will let them know what I am going for. And I'll get into the lesson, if it requires extra vocabulary, then I'll introduce it. If not, just go through the lesson and try to have them figure out if a word, they don't know what it means, you know, using their skill context clues, and so forth, picture clues, to try to figure it out, I want them to be as independent as possible, so I don't give them something, unless I really think it's something they require in order to understand something. I always have a closure, and if it's something that I'm doing over three or four days, which I usually will, if it's a skill, let them know what they're going to expect, and also how they can use this skill in another area outside of reading. Even without a book.

Cooley focused her explanation on teacher directed reading and how she helps students make connections when teaching reading. She reinforces that within each component of balanced literacy there has to be a well planned lessoned that provides for a link to prior knowledge, skill development and closure.

Teal described what reading looks like in her room:

Ok, if I'm teaching to the whole class and doing generally teacher-directed reading, we usually introduce what we're going to read, talk about what kind of reading it is. Um, I do a lot of oral reading to them, because they like to listen to me read. And I find that if I let them read a lot on their own, they're not really reading it. So I do, we do a lot of discussion, a lot of open-ended questions, as opposed to, you know, what is. I try to encourage them to come up with opinions and make conclusions of their own about what they're reading. Also, we work a lot on how to read different types of text, what you're looking for. So I tend, I try to take it to a little bit higher level than just the literal stuff, um, and find things that interest them. So sometimes its stuff from the basal book, and sometimes its whole class novels, sometimes it's reading a book to them that I know they will like, and discussing it. But I think if we get their interests, then they're gonna want to read. I also do guided reading groups. And that, we tried to . . . and this year we really did meet with them every single day. Every group had guided reading every day. That was the perfect situation. Try to meet with the lower, the low grade-level kids every day, and give them about thirty minutes. And then the children working at grade level, they can read a little bit more independently, with some jobs to do, so try to set up literacy centers for them. But they also need to be met with, so I'll give them about twenty minutes, while the others are doing something independently. But we do have guided reading; it is every day, it is always small groups, and never more than five in a group.

Teal has described how she utilizes the teacher directed reading block to increase comprehension and the utilization of guided reading. Her explanation of guided reading illustrates how balanced literacy promotes differentiation and meeting the individual needs of students.

Evers explained her reading instruction:

Whole groups and small groups are done on the students' instructional level. And whole group is done on grade level. Normally whole group is social studies or science and I integrate the reading skill into the lesson. And we try to do social studies and science for guided reading also. And we read. We read, read, read, read, and read. The students do self-

selected reading. Or they're doing independent reading. We also do word activities like making words and usually vocabulary work.

Evers focused on the need to integrate science and social studies into the reading block in order to spend more time on integrating nonfiction and reading skills. Her explanation demonstrates how the balanced literacy process is not a program and can be integrated with any subject.

Balanced literacy is the process utilized in all classrooms to teach reading but as the descriptions illustrate every teacher has his/her own style and every grade level and class has its own identity. The process allows for flexibility for integration and meeting the needs of all students. The teachers made comments specifically related to class size reduction and literacy instruction during the interviews. Elizabeth stated, "Like guided reading wise if you have to have a group of seven instead of four, it just isn't as effective." Trudy commented that with a regular class size that there's no time to conference, do individual conferencing, with twenty eight children, it's very difficult to even pinpoint what specific skills so-and-so needs. She also mentioned that with a reduced class size, "I can look through their papers and see, so-and-so needs help with this skill, so let me set up a group in that area." "We really can zero in on individual needs," explained Teal. Evers summed up nicely by stating, "They (the students) have more attention; they can be assessed for their individual needs continuously." A reduced class size setting allows for guided reading groups to

be met with daily and one-on-one conferencing to occur more frequently which is a better model for meeting the individual needs of students.

### ***Relationships***

Every teacher was asked about relationships within their classes to discover how they were established to assist reading performance. Elizabeth commented on relationship building skills.

I think that my students probably don't see me as like this is my friend relationship. I think it's a—this is my, you know, this is an adult, and this is a child, relationship. I think that they probably see that I'm consistent, which makes them feel safe, and that that's what builds the relationship; that it doesn't change for different people, it doesn't—it doesn't change year to year. I'm still the same way that I was when they saw me in third grade, so they see me that way when they're in fifth. And that's usually how it kind of develops, and then through that I think that they find security. And, and in the, in the end they think, well, that person might have been hard on me, but they did it 'cause they cared. And I think that they understand by the end, maybe not in the beginning, that it's, it's the way that I . . . I feel like, you know, that I had faith in them, and that I showed it that way, because I wanted them to do well. Not touchy-feely.

Elizabeth's approach to building relationships with her students was focused on consistency and fairness. Her students knew the expectations and knew the results will be the same for everyone.

Cooley goes into detail about building relationships,

Well, I think it's very important—I have this hard name—so I think it's very important that I get the names right on the first day. That is one of my goals for the first day. I want to know their name, I want to know something about them, and I also share some of my life with them. Depending on, you know what I see on the first day, I pretty much have to play it by ear. But I like to have them make friends, so we do a lot of bonding type things—games, and I participate in them when I can. And

definitely want to have them aware that we're all different, but we all have something to offer. So I want them to talk about themselves. And if it's something that they don't know, I say, well, what do, you know, well what are your dreams? Any time I hear something that a child is interested in, I jot—I jot it down, and try to make that thing available in class. For those who want to, you know, draw or whatever, I just try to bring in extra things, and with all this stuff I've been collecting for years, I usually have it. You know, or if I don't, I go and get it. Sometimes it's just a matter of sitting down and talking to them, while you're doing this outside of class, you know. Really it's just being personal and taking time with the child, every single day. If it's possible, usually it is. Even just a quick moment, just to say, you know, I like the way you wear your hair today, or that's a real nice outfit; is it new? But, you know, they have to feel that they are important. And they, they do become very important; that's why I still tear up at the end of the year. And, if a child feels that you care, you have their best interest in mind, even when they don't have good days, they still come back, because they know, that you are there for them. And that it's not a strike against them if they are not doing the right thing. You don't like that thing, you know, but you still like them.

Cooley concentrated on connecting personally with her students in order to build relationships and getting to know them as individuals. Her method of finding one-on-one time with each child allows her to get to know her students at a level that cannot be achieved within a large group.

Connor explains how she develops relationships,

I like to get to know them in ways, on the playground, and I like to know what's going on in their life. I like to first dig up some information to see what their family life is like. For example, students that don't have a mother in the home tend to need different things than kids who don't have fathers in the home. And I think it's very important to know what the family make-up is, to give them what they need for that. But just talking to them, journal write, we journal write, and I learn things about them that way. And I tend, you know, if there's a sensitive area, leave it alone, and, you know, don't push hard on those—those topics, kind of thing.

Connor discussed ways she gets her students to open up to her and their need for different types of connections from her. The connections she creates may be different for each child but every child is different and differentiation needs to occur at all levels to meet the needs of the “whole” child.

Trudy put into words how she creates relationships:

I guess I really kind of think of them almost as my own children, and maybe it's because my own children are grown. They kind of take their place maybe a little bit. I think really to be an effective elementary teacher, you really have to like children, you just have to have a genuine joy of working with children, and I think that the children can tell that. And they, they can tell that you enjoy being around them, and you get a kick out of 'em, as well, and you can just kind of sit and talk with them, but you also can be serious, and get across to them, that you think education is very important, to them.

Trudy's mothering approach allowed her to talk to her students and know what was on their minds in order to benefit them and meet their needs.

Evers states how relationships are formed in her room:

Um, usually just getting to know them in the beginning of the year. Tell them about me, they tell me about them. We do a lot of team building activities, like different game type thing. To build community, we have class meetings. And the kids get to bring up the topics for class meetings most of the time. But in the beginning of the year, I usually do kind of getting-to-know-you things. Dealing with parents, talking with the parents. I usually have the parents do a survey about their students. Tell me what they think their strengths and weaknesses are, and, and about their personality.

Building a community and team spirit was the goal of Evers in order to create and sustain relationships within the classroom.

Teal comments on her relationship building:

I try to get to know them (students), find out their home situations without prying. And I really try to see who needs the most attention. There are some kids that operate really well, deal with. They have better homes . . . more solid home life, and they don't need as much from me. And the ones, I try to zero-in on; the ones that really do. And I do try to involve a social worker in cases that I feel like I just don't know how to handle. But I do try to get personal with them outside on the playground, or in the cafeteria, or just walking down the hall, and I'm bad about talking to them when I probably shouldn't be. But that's when they like, when they're moving is when they want to talk to you. So, that's usually the time when they'll casually mention something that clues you in to what's going on. So I do try to develop personal relationships with them, and I think they're pretty comfortable talking to me. They know that I can be really strict with them, but on the other hand, I think they feel comfortable telling me things. I try to call the parents as much as possible, to find out if anything is going on at home. I know I need to call the parents more for positive things, as opposed to wanting to find out why something is happening in the class. And I also try really hard to get the parents involved, you know, please take them to the library, you know, please come here for meetings, you know, tell them, you know, things that their kids could be doing to do better. So, I feel like the kids trust me. And they do respect me.

The teachers made comments specifically related to class size reduction and relationship throughout the interviews when discussing other aspects of their teaching and classroom environments. Elizabeth commented, "The children tend to bond better with each other and with the teacher. I think your whole community is enhanced by a small class size." Trudy, referring to large class size, reiterated, "It's just very difficult to be able to appreciate and treat each child as a unique individual." Teal says about small class size, "They seem more like a family." Connor states, "You get to build those relationships a little bit faster. You can have more one-on-one time with students or small group time." While Evers

articulates about large class size, “It’s harder to get to know your students as well.” Cooley comments,

I’m a person who wants to greet the children and make them feel comfortable, I want to know something about them and share some of my life with them. I like to have them make friends, so we do a lot of bonding type things this is more effective with smaller class sizes.

That building relationships are simplified in a smaller class was confirmed by all six of the teachers interviewed. Relationship building can be made easier with class size reductions due to time and the number of opportunities for student to teacher interactions. Creating positive relationships is demonstrated through the comments of every teacher. There were similarities with several teachers about getting to know their students outside the classroom and drawing in the parents. Their means of creating the relationships vary from classroom to classroom but the results were the same—a positive classroom climate.

### ***Meeting Student Needs***

The six classroom teachers reported that small class size settings allowed them to better meet students’ needs. Elizabeth puts it this way: “It’s easier to meet their individual needs; easier to learn the students and what works with them and what doesn’t.” Teal agreed:

We really can zero in on individual needs. It helped to find exactly what they need, know who needs to be tutored, who needs after-school tutoring, and how often they need guided reading. As hard as you try, you cannot get every one of them, and find out exactly where they are, and how well they understand something (in large classes).

Having smaller classes allowed these teachers to do more with students in the classroom and to arrange for support activities outside the classroom.

Understanding their students' needs came from having more time to spend with them, because there were fewer students competing for the teacher's time.

Meeting student needs entails differentiating instruction and giving students more attention. As Evers said,

It's a little more difficult to differentiate in a large class because there's such a wide gap. They (the students) get more attention so they can be assessed for their individual needs continuously. I've been able to differentiate instruction more.

Trudy added that she was able to meet with students individually more and to better analyze their written work. All teachers interviewed were in agreement that it is easier to zero in and identify individual needs within a smaller classroom size setting. This ability benefits the students and allows for more differentiation.

### ***Student Engagement***

On the topic of student engagement, the teachers made direct comments regarding the positive implications of smaller classes. Evers, who spoke of teaching science stated,

Hands-on is much easier in a smaller class. When there are more students doing hands on, it's hard to get around to them . . . getting that thinking part in. We can do more stimulating type things. It's hard to keep them engaged with a larger class, especially when you're working with small groups.

Cooley reiterates that small class sizes assists with engaging the students, “I could do more with cooperative groupings, because I was able to get around and to facilitate what was going on.” The teachers felt being able to get around to every group and assist with dialogue and processing of information was important to learning and easier with a smaller class.

Elizabeth and Teal discussed the benefits of small class sizes in regards to students being actively engaged in reading, which is critical to balanced literacy. The teachers were able to create small groups with the small class size. “Like guided reading wise if you have to have a group of seven instead of four, it just isn’t as effective,” declared Elizabeth. “Guided reading’s more difficult and less effective, because we have so many different groups,” stated Teal about large class size.

The benefit of small class sizes with guided reading comes into effect two ways as reiterated by these two teachers. The larger class sizes mean either there needs to be more students in a group or there are more groups for a teacher to manage. These two scenarios offer the same results--less engagement of students manipulating the curriculum and less time with the teacher. Connor summed it up by stating, “I tend to shy away of, too much cooperative learning when there are more students in the class.” The teachers state that it is harder to keep students engaged in small group activities when there is a larger class size and more students to manage.

### ***Student Self-Esteem***

The teachers also mentioned students' self esteem when class size is reduced. Trudy puts it this way,

I'm able to get around the room and give a lot of verbal encouragement and praise. (With a smaller class) it's hard to reach every child or know why they are so quiet and maybe they have some turmoil that I need to be aware of, but there's no time. The really very quiet ones, just completely fall through the cracks.

Teal declares, "(The students) are more encouraging to one another." Elizabeth expressed, "I think they feel safer because there's not a crowd." Based on the comments there seems to be more opportunities in a smaller class for encouraging students. These opportunities help students' self images.

### ***Classroom Management***

Classroom management can be an issue for most teachers. During the interviews several teachers declared that reduced class size settings assisted with classroom management. Connor remarked, "You (the teacher) don't have so many behaviors in the class building on one another, where there's conflict between the students." "There's more discipline issues with a larger class. I think they feel safer because there's not a crowd." stated Elizabeth about a smaller class. Evers commented, "Not as many (children) to monitor that aren't directly working with you in a group." These teachers bring up the problem of having many bodies in a room and the management of those bodies. The previous

discussions have been on the management of the students' brainpower; these comments also bring out the physicality of having more students in one space.

### ***Parent Involvement***

The teachers often discussed parent involvement during the interviews. Trudy stated, "With fifteen students it is much easier to sit down in the afternoon and make a couple of quick phone calls to parents." "It's easier to keep up with the parents, because there are not as many parents, so it's easy to contact the parents more often for each individual child," commented Evers. Connor feels that not only is it physically easier but that the perception of a smaller class also helps. "I think you're more susceptible to want to meet with them and contact more parents if you don't have to contact but fifteen; for positive things." It is not as demanding to keep in touch with parents when number of students in a class is fewer. The smaller class size allows the teacher time for frequent contact with parents regarding positive and day to day issues instead of just academic and behavior concerns.

### ***Teacher Management***

The teachers have made statements about their students and parents but teacher work is also affected by class size setting reductions. Evers remarked, "I can do more planning. Just simply grading papers takes half the amount of time." "The small size really made the difference, being physically ready, emotionally ready, to come in and serve those children," declared Cooley. In contrast, Trudy stated about larger classes, "There's not time to sit there and write individual

comments, when I grade their paper.” The teachers expressed that reduced class sizes helps them better prepare to meet the needs of their students by having less “paperwork.” Evers brings out another point in regards to engaging the students daily; she stated that there were fewer materials to prepare for activities. This issue shows that the teacher management can affect whether students are engaged but class size reduction helps to alleviate that obstacle.

### **Teacher Survey Data**

The six classroom teachers were given a survey to complete regarding their literacy instruction. The surveys were tallied after the interviews were transcribed and coded. The results of these surveys were used to further analyze and provide for more validity in regards to statements made in the interviews, what was stated in the focus groups, and what was observed both formally and informally.

Table 6 shows the combined scores of all six classroom teachers regarding the time they devoted to the components of balanced literacy and partner work when they had regular class sizes. The five different elements of balanced literacy were explained in detail in Chapter II. Partner work listed in Table 8 was described to the classroom teachers as the times they would engage the students in the reading curriculum utilizing partner work.

The front side of the survey asked the teachers to record the frequency of several teaching strategies with a regular class size. According to the surveys guided reading was taught four times a week by five of the teachers and three

times a week by one of the teachers. Writing was taught daily by two teachers, four times a week by two of the teachers, three times a week by one teacher and twice a week by one teacher. Self-selected reading with individual conferencing occurred in one class daily, three classes four times a week, one class three times a week and one class twice a week. Word block was only utilized three times a week in four classrooms, twice a week in one room and once a week in one of the classrooms. Teacher directed whole class instruction was taught daily in four of the classrooms and one classroom four times a week. Partner work was utilized by one teacher daily, one teacher four times a week, one teacher three times a week and three of the teachers utilized partner work twice a week.

**Table 6**

***Teaching with Regular Class Size: Survey Results***

	Daily	4 times Weekly	3 times Weekly	Twice Weekly	Once a Week
Guided Reading		5	1		
Writing	2	2	1	1	
Self-Selected Reading w/ conferences	1	3	1	1	
Word Block			4	1	1
Teacher Directed	5	1			
Partners	1	1	1	3	

Table 7 shows the combined scores of the six classroom teachers regarding the time they devoted to the components of balanced literacy and

partner work when they had reduced class sizes. Four of the classroom teachers had two years of experience with class size reduction and the other two had one year of class size reduction to base their answers on for the survey.

**Table 7**

***Teaching with Reduced Class Size Setting: Survey Results***

	<b>Daily</b>	<b>4 times Weekly</b>	<b>3 times Weekly</b>	<b>Twice Weekly</b>	<b>Once a Week</b>
<b>Guided Reading</b>	6				
<b>Writing</b>	5	1			
<b>Self-Selected Reading w/ conferences</b>	5	1			
<b>Word Block</b>	4	2			
<b>Teacher Directed Small setting</b>	6				
<b>Partners</b>	5	1			

The back side of the survey asked the teachers to record the frequency of several teaching strategies with a reduced class size. According to the surveys, guided reading groups met daily by all six of the teachers. Writing was taught daily by five of the teachers and four times a week by one teacher. Self-selected reading with individual conferencing occurred in five classes daily and one class four times a week. Word block activities occurred daily in four classrooms and four times a week in two of the classrooms. Teacher directed reading was taught

daily in all six of the classrooms. Partner work was utilized by five teachers daily and one of the teachers utilized partner work four times a week.

These surveys provided insight into the frequency of the teaching strategy on a weekly basis. The survey provided the teachers the opportunity to think about how many times a week they utilized the strategy compared to a regular class size and reduced class size setting during literacy instruction. The tables show that there was an increase to the weekly frequency of strategies that encompassed small group work and one-on-one work with class size reduction classrooms. Guided reading increased from the majority of teachers utilizing four times a week to every teacher utilizing it daily. Self-selected reading with one-on-one conferencing occurred across the spectrum with regular class sizes from daily to twice a week and when compare with class size reduction it narrowed to five teachers utilizing it daily and one teacher four times a week. Word block jumped from teachers utilizes on average three times a week or less to the majority utilizes it daily or at least four times a week. Partner work was utilized on average three times a week by teachers with regular class sizes and when compared with classroom with reduced class sizes the majority of the teachers utilized it daily.

### **Student Focus Group Data**

Two focus groups were conducted with a total of thirteen fifth-grade students who had attended Martin Elementary School since third grade. Their views and opinions regarding instruction and classroom climate is valuable data

for this research. There were only 23 out of 43 students in fifth grade in 2005-2006 that had attended Martin Elementary since the school opened in August of 2003. Letters were sent home with all 23 students to ask permission for them to participate in the focus group. Thirteen students returned their permission forms; seven of them were girls and six were boys.

The transcriptions were then coded which assisted me in studying the data and to create categories (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). The categories created were: (a) student engagement, (b) classroom management, (c) teacher management, (d) classroom space, and (e) class size.

### ***Student Engagement***

The students were asked to talk about how they were taught in third grade compared to fourth and fifth grade. Both focus groups discussed their opportunities to work with partners and with projects. One student referred to his/her fourth and fifth grade experiences by stating, "We did a lot of working with partners in 5<sup>th</sup> grade." "We got to switch groups. We switched for math and reading." " We have groups almost every day. We have smaller groups." The student was referring to the fifth grade teachers utilizing small group work more frequently during literacy. Another child stated, "I think in 5<sup>th</sup> grade we got to do more." Another student continued discussing their fourth and fifth grade classes and explained, "It was easier, we would do some games." "We have more activities. We have a lot of activities."

The activities discussed by the fifth graders were projects that were designed to cover the curriculum and engage the students. One example was an economics unit that was designed so that small groups of students created and designed a holiday item, projected cost, produced it, and sold it to make a profit. One student described their fourth and fifth grade classes, "There were more activities." The students seemed to collectively agree that their experiences in fourth and fifth grades were better due to the opportunities they had with small group work and activities, which refers to the students being actively engaged with the curriculum and not working independently with worksheets.

### ***Classroom Management***

The students in both groups also discussed classroom management issues. The students in group one made many comments regarding their third grade experiences, "Like, the behavior, it was worsen then, than it is now." "There would be fights going on, because there were so many kids." "They would talk over the teacher." Students also commented on their fourth and fifth grade classes, "Because it was easier to handle us with 12 in the classroom, people weren't getting in to trouble as much." The students' perceptions were that because there were less of them it helped them get along and helped the teachers manage them.

The second group supplied just as many comments regarding management issues, "It was hard to learn. There were too many people and they would aggravate you." "They were just talkative. It was hard to hear. You would

just get in the conversations.” “The noise, aggravation. More kids mean more aggravation.” “If there are only a little people in the class there is less bothering each other.” The students were asked specifically by me, “Did you do activities in third?” One student responded, “No!” I asked, “Why?” He stated, “Behavior.” The students stated that a high number of students in class that had to interact with each other caused for more discipline issues, which in turn meant more independent work versus group work. They perceived that the more students in their class caused for fewer opportunities for projects or group work.

### ***Teacher Management***

The children in the focus groups also explained the impact of larger class sizes versus small classes on their teachers. Comments from two students in group regarding third grade were, “Hard for them to teach because there were so many kids.” “It was easier for the teachers to teach because there weren’t as many students in the class (referring to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>). Students from group two also reiterated the same beliefs about their fourth and fifth grade classes, “It was more easier for the teachers. There is less to handle and pressure.” The students brought up the pressure or the inability of their teachers to handle twenty-eight students versus fifteen by themselves.. They perceived a real difference among their teachers’ ability to manage a large class size versus a reduced class size.

### ***Classroom Space***

Two students were impacted by the physical space issue attributed to a regular class size versus a small class size. A student in group one explained, “It

is a lot easier to spread out the people.” A student in group two stated, “So many desks around your feet would get tangled around.” The students’ surroundings were affected by classroom size. Teachers and parents typically realize the difference between twenty-eight desks versus fifteen desks in a classroom, but it appears that the students realize the difference, in a very concrete way, with their personal space.

### ***Class Size***

The actual number of students in their classrooms was brought up by the students in both focus groups. A student in group one compared third grade to fifth grade by declaring, “It was worse than it is now.” “It was bigger classes and hard to learn. There were twenty-six to thirty kids.” affirmed a student from group two. Comments made by other students in group one were: “We had two classrooms with a lot of students, like 24. “ “We had less people in the class because we got divided up into three classrooms (fourth compared to fifth).” “Fourth and fifth had small classes and third had large classes.”

The students’ actual account of how they had two classes in third and then three in fourth grade demonstrates the impact of class sizes. The student referred to it as the students dividing up not just the adding of a new teacher to the grade level. Students from group two stated, “There were three teachers and 16 students in each class. It was more easier for the teachers. In third grade there were at least 26 students in each class.” The students recalled the actual number of students they had in their third grade classes versus their current fifth

grade classrooms. They felt differences in the grade levels because of the number of students.

### **Observations**

I routinely observed the teachers involved in the reading instruction and tracked their approach to literacy instruction. These ratings are based on my daily observations of reading instruction of these six teachers with the final rating listed in Tables 10-15. All observation data is based on the 2005-2006 school year when all six of the classroom teachers had reduced classroom size.

Table 8 shows that all six of the teachers met with guided reading groups daily to instruct children at their actual reading level. The teachers even rearranged their schedules if there was a special program to ensure that guided reading instruction was done every day and would bypass another component.

**Table 8**

***Teacher Use of Guided Reading with Class Size Reduction: Observational Data***

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>4 Times Weekly</b>	<b>3 Times Weekly</b>	<b>2 Times Weekly</b>	<b>Once a Week</b>
<b>Elizabeth</b>	X				
<b>Connor</b>	X				
<b>Teal</b>	X				
<b>Trudy</b>	X				
<b>Evers</b>	X				
<b>Cooley</b>	X				

Table 9 reveals that all six teachers utilized whole group instruction for grade level appropriate material with teacher directed reading. This component of balanced literacy was taught daily by every teacher as the schedule permitted, to cover grade level appropriate text. The teachers utilized a mixture of genres and integrated science and social studies content into this section.

**Table 9**

***Teacher Use of Teacher Directed Reading with Class Size Reduction:***

***Observational Data***

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>4 Times Weekly</b>	<b>3 Times Weekly</b>	<b>2 Times Weekly</b>	<b>Once a Week</b>
<b>Elizabeth</b>	X				
<b>Connor</b>	X				
<b>Teal</b>	X				
<b>Trudy</b>	X				
<b>Evers</b>	X				
<b>Cooley</b>	X				

Table 10 illustrates that three teachers used self-selected reading with one-on-one conferencing daily and the other three teachers utilized it four times a week. Self-selected reading usually occurred every day in classrooms but the one-on-one conferencing is the most important part of this component and would occasionally be left out. During observations the teachers had to meeting with

students one-on-one, the students had to be reading and no class work could be worked on in order for this to be tallied as a successful completion.

**Table 10**

***Teacher Use of Self Selected Reading with Class Size Reduction:***

***Observational Data***

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>4 Times Weekly</b>	<b>3 Times Weekly</b>	<b>2 Times Weekly</b>	<b>Once a Week</b>
<b>Elizabeth</b>	X				
<b>Connor</b>	X				
<b>Teal</b>		X			
<b>Trudy</b>		X			
<b>Evers</b>	X				
<b>Cooley</b>		X			

Table 10 points out that writing was taught daily in four classrooms and four times a week in two of the classrooms. In order for this component to be checked off as utilized by the teacher, writing instruction had to include a mini-lesson and independent time for the students to write. Writing was not easy to observe because the teachers would move this block of time around in order to integrate it with other subjects. As the researcher, it was important to for me not count off for the time change but ensure all the pieces were being included into

the block of time. Writing was an excellent tool to help integrate literacy and other content areas (see Table 11).

**Table 11**

***Teacher Use of Writing with Class Size Reduction: Observational Data***

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>4 Times Weekly</b>	<b>3 Times Weekly</b>	<b>2 Times Weekly</b>	<b>Once a Week</b>
<b>Elizabeth</b>	X				
<b>Connor</b>	X				
<b>Teal</b>	X				
<b>Trudy</b>	X				
<b>Evers</b>		X			
<b>Cooley</b>		X			

Table 12 refers to word block activities and three teachers organized those daily, two organized them four times a week and one of the teachers organized word activities three times a week. Word block activities that were observed varied greatly. The main ingredient I would look for as the researcher was whether the students were engaged with curriculum and students were learning how words work. The activities that were observed as part of the word block time were phonics activities, spelling pattern games, vocabulary building activities, and making words.

**Table 12*****Teacher Use of Word Block with Class Size Reduction: Observational Data***

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>4 Times Weekly</b>	<b>3 Times Weekly</b>	<b>2 Times Weekly</b>	<b>Once a Week</b>
<b>Elizabeth</b>	X				
<b>Connor</b>		X			
<b>Teal</b>	X				
<b>Trudy</b>	X				
<b>Evers</b>		X			
<b>Cooley</b>			X		

Table 13 shows that partner work was utilized on average by four of the classrooms daily and in the other two classrooms four times a week. Partner work was tallied when at least two students were engaged with literacy curriculum; the completion of a worksheet with a partner was not tallied as partner work. Partner work may have been taking place in math or other content areas but the observations were focused on literacy instruction.

### **Summary**

The staff at Martin Elementary school devised a reading improvement model to increase the reading performance of their upper elementary students. Their improvement plan was to combine an interactive balanced literacy program with the establishment of positive relationships. Class sizes were also reduced to

facilitate the delivery of literacy instruction. This chapter described the participant's experiences with the improvement model at Martin Elementary.

**Table 13**

***Teacher Use of Partners with Class Size Reduction: Observational Data***

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>4 Times Weekly</b>	<b>3 Times Weekly</b>	<b>2 Times Weekly</b>	<b>Once a Week</b>
<b>Elizabeth</b>	X				
<b>Connor</b>	X				
<b>Teal</b>		X			
<b>Trudy</b>	X				
<b>Evers</b>	X				
<b>Cooley</b>		X			

The data analysis provided insight to the participants' experiences as classroom teachers and as students as well as information gathered from surveys, observations, and the North Carolina's End-of-Grade reading scores. The final chapter will concentrate on insights constructed from the literature review, as well as contributions of the study, and possible future research needs based on the findings of the study or information not found within the study.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **INTERPRETATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this final chapter is to provide a review of the case study, to discuss the results as they relate to themes in the data, and to inform the work of future administrators. The chapter closes with recommendations for future researchers and possible next steps for advancement of other studies of schools with high concentrations of students from families with income below the poverty line.

This research is a case study of a high poverty, urban, elementary school located in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. The staff at Martin Elementary School devised an improvement model to increase the reading performance of their upper elementary students. Martin Elementary was a challenge because of the basic belief that since 94% of the students came from homes below the poverty line and 98% were African American, the school could not succeed in the current era of accountability. European-American students perform better than African-American and Hispanic students and students from wealthier schools outperformed students from poorer schools (Haycock, 2001; McCall et al., 2006; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). Nevertheless, the staff at Martin Elementary truly believed their students would be successful. Their plan of attack was the incorporation of interactive balanced literacy, the building of positive

relationships, and class size reduction to improve reading achievement of upper-elementary grade students.

The purpose of this study is to examine a high poverty elementary school's improvement model for increasing reading performance. The questions that will be answered are:

1. What effect does the incorporation of balanced literacy supplemented with other effective teaching strategies have on the reading performance of students who are living in high poverty? The strategies include interactive teaching and the building of positive relationships.
2. How does reduced classroom size affect the incorporation of balanced literacy when it is augmented by interactive strategies and the creation of positive relationships?
3. What effects does the incorporation of balanced literacy involving interactive strategies, the building of positive relationships and class size reduction have on classroom teacher practice?

This study investigated how the approaches were used concurrently and the results that were achieved in reading performance. There is not one answer to improving reading performance of students. A variety of strategies is needed (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). The synthesis of a balanced literacy program, positive relationships, interactive strategies, and class size reduction was implemented at Martin Elementary School, and it is this combination that is being researched.

Data collection for the study took place through one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, observations, and North Carolina End-of-Grade reading test proficiency scores. Six upper elementary classroom teachers were interviewed, observed and surveyed, and 13 fifth-grade students were organized into a focus group.

### **Validity**

I attempted to be true to the opinions, feelings and perceptions of all participants. During the classroom teacher interviews, notes were taken and the sessions were taped so that their responses were clear in the transcriptions. The focus groups sessions were taped, notes were taken, and clarifying questions were asked to ensure the fifth graders' answers were understood.

Triangulation of data was completed to confirm the validity of the results. Creswell and Miller (2000) describe triangulation as a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study. Triangulation can occur in different forms. Denzin (1978) identified four different ways to triangulate; by data source, by method, by researcher and by theory. During this case study triangulation occurred by using different methods of data collection. Interviews, focus groups sessions, surveys, and observations were used to confirm the findings.

Triangulation of data from the interviews, surveys and observations of the classroom teachers confirmed that balanced literacy utilizing interactive

strategies was implemented at Martin for literacy instruction. Triangulation also confirmed through interviews, surveys and observations that the class size reduction increased use of the balanced literacy components with interactive strategies. There was also corroborating data among the interviews, focus group discussions, surveys and observations that there was an increase use of partner work and cooperative learning activities with the students to engage them in the curriculum.

Member checking and peer reviewing were utilized during this research to ensure credibility. Creswell and Miller (2000) state that member checking consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information. This occurred with the classroom teachers. They were asked to review information and provide feedback regarding its credibility. Member checking was utilized to verify each teacher-participant's background information, interview transcriptions, data from observations, and survey data to confirm or revise the information. The participants' review of their information about their practices for teaching reading and creating relationships assisted in ensuring their teaching practices were described accurately.

Creswell and Miller (2000) describe peer reviewing as the review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research. The peer reviewing for this case study was completed by a doctoral student who was on staff at Martin Elementary but was not a participant in the research study.

The peer reviewer read through the case study and was instrumental in assisting in verifying and filling in the gaps regarding the history of Martin Elementary, the description of Martin's staff, and the description of the students. The peer reviewer's perspective as a staff member was vital in assisting in painting a vivid picture. The peer reviewer's knowledge of the school also helped ensure that important information was not left out and that the picture painted in the case study was truthful.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Effects on Literacy Performance***

The first research question asked what effect the incorporation of balanced literacy supplemented with other effective teaching strategies has on the reading performance of students who are living below the poverty line. Based on the interviews, surveys and observations, the third, fourth and fifth grade teachers implemented balanced literacy utilizing interactive strategies and created positive relationships with the students. The components of balanced literacy as described in Chapter II were utilized by all the teachers.

As confirmed by interviews, surveys and observations teacher directed reading and guided reading were utilized daily by all the teachers and the other components of balanced literacy were implemented at least four times a week. Children learn how to read and write in different ways. Martin's upper elementary grade teachers utilized a mixture of teaching method, to meet the individual needs of their students. Learning to read and write with fluency and confidence

are long-term, multifaceted goals. Effective classrooms do not have one approach to reading and writing. Rather, they use numerous approaches to provide a wide variety of reading and writing experiences throughout the day and across the curriculum (Cunningham et al., 1995; Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

The six classroom teachers explained how they taught reading. Their comments varied, but all of them followed the balanced literacy model. Balanced literacy at Martin contained several components that were taught daily; teacher directed reading, guided reading, word study, silent sustained reading and writing. Balanced literacy was not a program: it was not formal nor a prescribed format or sequence. The philosophy behind balanced literacy is to teach the whole child and to meet the individual needs of all students. Balanced literacy is teaching reading and writing using a variety of strategies that engage students in reading at their level and on grade level appropriate activities. These techniques offer components that lend themselves to being interactive and engage learners in the curriculum.

The reading performance based on the overall proficiency of the students at Martin Elementary in third, fourth and fifth grade showed the following:

1. The third graders that entered Martin in 2003-2004 had an average of 28 students in their literacy classrooms and were 49% proficient in reading. The following year when the same cohort was in fourth grade with an average of 15 students in the classroom they were 56%

proficient in reading. Their last year at Martin in fifth grade with an average of 15 students they were 84% proficient. This cohort grew by 35% in three years.

2. The second group of third graders entered Martin in 2004-2005; they had an average of 15 students in their literacy classroom and were 56% proficient in reading. The following year in fourth grade with an average of 15 students they were 67% proficient in reading. This cohort grew by 11% in two years and ended their third grade year 7% higher than the previous third grade cohort.
3. Third grade's proficiency in reading increased over the three years. The first year there was an average of 28 students and 49% of their students were proficient. The second year with an average of 15 students they had 56% proficient in reading. The last year with full implementation of balanced literacy with interactive strategies and the creation of positive relationships the third graders were 62% proficient in reading.

Reading proficiency increased over time in the grades where interactive balanced literacy was implemented with the creation of positive relationships with class size reduction in high poverty upper elementary grade classrooms.

### ***Classroom Size Reduction***

The second question of the improvement model is whether a reduced class size affects the implementation of balanced literacy that involved interactive

strategies and the creation of positive relationships. The interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys all showed an increase in the implementation of balanced literacy with interactive strategies and more opportunities for creating relationships in a reduced class size setting of an average of fifteen students versus a regular class size of twenty-five to twenty-eight students. The classroom teachers voiced their perceptions and thoughts about the ability to implement balanced literacy interactively more effectively and more consistently with reduced class sizes versus a regular class size in a high poverty school. Their perceptions and thoughts were confirmed by the perception and thoughts of their students, who also felt that they had more opportunities to interact during the two years they were in a reduced class size versus the year they were in a regular class size. The surveys validated the discussions with the teachers and the students by showing that the balanced literacy components were more engaging and done more consistently daily in a reduced class size setting than in a regular class size.

During the interviews the teachers spoke about the effects of class size reduction. Elizabeth discussed the benefits of small class sizes in regards to students being actively engaged in reading, "Like guided reading wise if you have to have a group of seven instead of four, it just isn't as effective. It's easier to meet their individual needs; easier to learn the students and what works with them and what doesn't." Teal agreed, "We really can zero in on individual needs. It helped to find exactly what they need, know who needs to be tutored, who

needs after-school tutoring, and how often they need guided reading. Guided reading (in a regular class size) is more difficult and less effective, because we have so many different groups.”

During the focus groups a student referred to their fourth and fifth grade experiences by stating, “We did a lot of working with partners in 5<sup>th</sup> grade.” “We got to switch groups. We switched for math and reading.” “ We have groups almost every day. We have smaller groups.” Another student described their fourth and fifth grade classes, “There were more activities.” The students’ verbalize that they were more engaged in instruction when they had smaller class size settings.

The surveys verified that there was an increase to the weekly frequency of strategies that encompassed small group work and one-on-one work with class size reduction. Guided reading increased from the majority of teachers utilizing four times a week to every teacher utilizing it daily. Self-selected reading with one-on-one conferencing occurred across the spectrum with regular class sizes from daily to twice a week and when compare with class size reduction it narrowed to five teachers utilizing it daily and one teacher four times a week. Word block jumped from teachers utilizes on average three times a week or less to the majority utilizes it daily or at least four times a week. Partner work was utilized on average three times a week by teachers with regular class sizes and when compared with classroom with reduced class sizes the majority of the teachers utilized it daily. The triangulation of the data compiled from the

interviews, focus groups discussion and the surveys confirm that classroom size settings positively affects the implementation of balanced literacy interactively and the creation of positive relationships within a high poverty upper elementary grade classroom.

### ***Effects on Teacher Practice***

The third research question asked about the effects of incorporating interactive balanced literacy, the building of positive relationships and class size reduction on classroom teacher practice. During the interviews the teachers described how they taught reading utilizing balanced literacy. Connor explained her reading instruction, "Several different ways: in a whole-group setting, that would be a teacher directed lesson, where everyone has the same book, in a small group, for guided reading, broken into ability levels and one-on-one conferencing during self selected reading. We work on word block engaging type things and the writing process." Trudy described how she taught reading and stated, "I tell the students: you're reading all day long, it's not just reading in a basal, or a book. We read as a whole class with fourth grade material, in small groups at their reading level and one-on-one." Elizabeth commented about guided reading. "Well, we have guided reading, which is small group; I really prefer five students and under." I also do guided reading groups. Teal describes what reading looks like in her room, "We tried to...and this year we really did meet with them every single day.

The classroom teachers also spoke about interactive strategies through student engagement utilizing cooperative learning and partner work during their interviews. Cooley reiterated that small class sizes assists with engaging the students, "I could do more with cooperative groupings, because I was able to get around and to facilitate what was going on." Connor stated, "I tend to shy away of, too much cooperative learning when there are more students in the class."

The surveys the teachers completed also illustrated that partner work was used as a teaching strategy on a weekly basis. Partner work was utilized on average three times a week by teachers with regular class sizes and when compared with classrooms of reduced class sizes the majority of the teachers utilized it daily.

Observations on the teachers showed that all six of the teachers met with guided reading groups daily with reduced class sizes to instruct children at their actual reading level and utilized teacher directed instruction daily to teach grade level appropriate materials. Observations also documented that three teachers used self-selected reading with one-on-one conferencing daily and the other three teachers utilized it four times a week. Word block activities were observed with three teachers daily, two of them four times a week and one of the teachers organized word activities three times a week. Observations were documented regarding partner work, which was utilized on average by four of the classrooms daily and in the other two classrooms four times a week. Balanced literacy was implemented interactively with the students, and partner work was shown to be

an integral part of the third, fourth and fifth grade classroom instructional approaches.

Each teacher interviewed described how relationships were established in classrooms. Every teacher created positive relationships based on their style, beliefs and skills making use of a variety of techniques. These relationships helped build rapport and trust. An atmosphere of love, respect, and trust was created in each teacher's classroom at Martin. Students felt that they were cared for and respected. bell hooks (2003) states that educators have to come out of traditional roles and have faith in the power of relationships.

The Martin teachers felt that if they were to going to help their students achieve success, they had to create relationships with them. Payne (2001) reported that when students who have been in poverty and become successful adults are asked how they completed their journey, the answer nine out of ten times has to do with a relationship with a teacher, counselor, coach or someone who took an interest in them as individuals. Elizabeth commented on relationship building skills, "I think that they (the students) probably see that I'm consistent, which makes them feel safe, and that that's what builds the relationship; that it doesn't change for different people, it doesn't—it doesn't change year to year." Cooley talked about building relationships, "I think it's very important that I get the names right on the first day. That is one of my goals for the first day. I want to know their name, I want to know something about them, and I also share some of my life with them. It's just being personal and taking time with the child, every

single day.” Connor explained how she develops relationships, “I like to get to know them in ways, on the playground, and I like to know what’s going on in their life.” Evers stated how relationships are formed in her room, “Um, usually just getting to know them in the beginning of the year. Tell them about me, they tell me about them. We do a lot of team building activities, like different game type thing. To build community, we have class meetings.” Relationships were created with the students as documented by the interviews as part of their improvement plan.

The improvement plan at Martin Elementary was initiated in order to improve the reading performance of the students. This plan included training of effective teaching strategies, support of the administration and provided the teachers a common goal. This allowed a foundation to be created and the staff was able to be reflective about their teaching practices. The teachers had to utilize the strategies in order for the plan to be implemented. The strategies were based on research and best practices for children. Their dialogue along with the dialogue from the administration gave them the opportunity to reflect on their practices in order to better meet the needs of their students.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The data presented show that there is evidence that students in the upper elementary grades at a high poverty elementary school were able to improve the reading performance through the implementation of a balanced literacy approach that involved interactive strategies and the creation of positive relationships in

classes with reduced numbers of students. On the basis of this research, class size reduction in a high poverty elementary school in the upper elementary grades facilitates the implementation of balanced literacy, interactive strategies, and positive relationships.

Martin Elementary was created as a homogenous neighborhood school with 98% of the students being African American and 94% of the students living in poverty. Students living in poverty are defined as those who meet free and reduced-priced lunch criteria. The school system where Martin was located had confidence in the Project STARS and Indiana's Project PRIME TIME research and funded the class size reduction in Kindergarten through second grade and then added third grade. Martin Elementary's leadership team went a step forward by funding reduced class size settings in literacy for fourth and fifth, wanting to ensure consistency and continuity for Martin's students. This case study shows that resources need to be utilized in Kindergarten through Fifth grade in high poverty elementary schools to improve their students' reading performance.

The research also shows that only implementing class size reduction is not the answer to increasing performance. Harder (1990) also explored Tennessee's Project STAR and Indiana's Project PRIME TIME. She focused on the learning activities within those classrooms. Harder came to the conclusion that it was not the size of the classroom that made the difference but the activities that occurred during the day that was related to the achievement gains. Martin's Leadership Team agreed with this research and ensured that the

activities within the classroom were beneficial. A school that is willing to utilize the resources to fund class size reduction also has to put in the time and commitment to ensure there is quality instruction. This study shows that Martin's staff was able to engage students in an interactive balanced reading program that creates positive relationships can improve the reading performance of students in the upper elementary grades of a high poverty school.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The findings of this study need to be considered in light of some limitations. First, there are many other variables that potentially contributed to the increase in reading proficiency at Martin. As the principal of Martin Elementary, I believe I affect the lives of many. The children are the bottom line, and if they are not included in every decision, then an injustice is being committed. As the administrator, my vision was to create an environment where no child was left behind academically, socially or emotionally. To achieve this vision, I created a culture that continually questioned what was right and best for students. Having the school with this type of culture requires not only communication but high expectations and acceptance for risk taking and questioning. This belief and leadership style could be a variable that contributed to the increase in reading proficiency.

Second, this research was conducted at only one high poverty elementary school. As the researcher and principal of Martin, it was imperative to discover whether the purposeful act of creating and using resources to support the

reading improvement plan was beneficial. The replication of this study at several other schools with similar demographics would provide more data and insight into this model.

Third, there were only six classroom teachers interviewed and thirteen students that were a part of the focus group. The sample size could not be increased due to the nature of a case study and the mobility of the students in attendance. Again, developing a similar study in other high poverty elementary schools would increase the number of teachers and students who could be a part of a study.

Fourth, the teacher survey and observations could have provided more data if they were administered at least twice. It would have been very beneficial for the first administration to be completed before the improvement model was implemented. Due to the staff and administration not planning ahead and putting an improvement plan into place as quickly as possible, the gathering of data at the beginning was not completed. The teachers completed their surveys on their practices in a regular class size based on memory and dialogue with the other teachers. The observational data was only completed and recorded when there were class size reduction sizes.

Fifth, as the researcher and principal of Martin there had to be an understanding with the participants. They had to know and believe that their honest opinions, feelings, and perceptions were wanted and that they would not be penalized as employees for that honesty. Trust had to be developed and data

collected after end of year evaluations to prove that the data was driving the research. If this research was duplicated, an outside researcher may be able to provide additional insight. Nevertheless, this study provides important information regarding the effects of class size reduction in correlation with interactive balanced literacy and the creation of relationships with the reading performance of upper elementary students attending a high poverty school.

### **Summary**

As leader in a high poverty elementary schools, it is imperative that principals and teachers work to assure that the students are reading on grade level, and if not, that they create a plan to increase reading performance. At Martin Elementary, an improvement plan was put into place to address their reading program in the upper elementary grades. Their plan included the implementation of a balanced literacy program that interactively engaged the students in the curriculum and emphasized positive relationships between the teachers and the students. Class size reduction enabled teachers to implement the interactive balanced literacy with the creation of positive relationships more effectively.

The staff was concerned about students and wanted to ensure their decisions were research based and that data were used to inform their decisions. Data from formal and informal assessments were used to drive discussions and the staff revised and adapted to make certain reading growth was achieved by the students.

Schools in America are under escalating pressure to close the achievement gaps that exist (Spellings, 2007). Poverty often compounds the low performance of children. In order to meet these needs and close the achievement gap, educators must look at students as being capable and supply them with skills and strategies that will ensure their success. This study heightens the awareness of integrating best practices to improve the learning environment of Martin Elementary. Class size reduction, balanced literacy, engaging students through interactive strategies, and teachers developing and maintaining positive relationships with students made a significant difference by providing an environment for students to achieve growth and experience academic success.

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