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# Enriching the state of Louisiana secondary English language arts comprehensive curriculum

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ENRICHING THE  
STATE OF LOUISIANA  
SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS  
COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
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by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The primary purpose of this research was to dissect the state of Louisiana's comprehensive curriculum and make suggestions for enhancement to a document that is intended to set basic standards for education in all public schools throughout the state. While the Louisiana State Department of Education acknowledged a real need for such a document, the one it originally produced fell short of many educators' expectations. In taking into consideration the diversity of the state's students and their heritages, the researcher makes suggestions for enriching the English language arts (ELA) curriculum for secondary students by incorporating a wider variety of multicultural, multiethnic, and women's literature and writing along with folkloristic teachings.

The researcher began her process by consulting several educational authors and texts, namely selected articles by Ogbu and *Understanding by Design* by McTighe and Wiggins, before embarking on personal interviews during which she conversed with a curriculum writer as well as experienced and respected educators in the Baton Rouge community. Dividing the findings into three categories, the researcher analyzed Louisiana State University's Laboratory School's curriculum to serve as a model for advancement of the state's public schools' curriculum and then delved into the state's curriculum to explore what material is being covered in the document. This research is followed by a chapter analyzing the construction of the current comprehensive curriculum and the disconnect that exists between the state's intended implementation and what is really happening in many schools.

Finally, the researcher presents suggestions for diversifying the material and literature being taught by including cultural teachings from a variety of sources designed to envelope students from all ethnicities in the hopes of producing well-rounded and educated world citizens. Suggestions include utilizing the Louisiana Folklife Program

and its website to implement a folklore unit within the ELA curriculum allowing students to use a kinesthetic approach to exploring their own and other cultures and working through various resources to discover literature of often times curriculum-neglected cultures, such as Cuban, Cajun and Acadian, Zimbabwean, and Nigerian, as well as women's writings.

## Introduction

In April of 2005, Louisiana State Department of Education Superintendent Cecil J. Picard implemented a comprehensive curriculum to be taught by all public schools within the state. The department of education's website<sup>1</sup> states the following about the curriculum:

“The Louisiana Department of Education is providing this Comprehensive Curriculum to every district in the state. The curriculum is aligned with state content standards, as defined by grade-level expectations (GLEs), and organized into coherent, time-bound units with sample activities and classroom assessments to guide teaching and learning.” (*LA Dept of Education*)

While this program was certainly designed to raise Louisiana's educational ranking, it has a long way to go before it is anywhere near perfect. Some would even agree that the curriculum does more to hinder the state's education progression while others, who have an accurate understanding of the curriculum and its intended use, agree that it is step one in a positive direction for Louisiana's future generations.

In my thesis, I used Louisiana State University's Laboratory School's English language arts (ELA) curriculum as taught by two veteran teachers as a model for analysis and comparison to the state's curriculum, which was explained to me by a curriculum writer. This allowed me to better understand the construction and implementation of the comprehensive curriculum in the public school system. After gathering my information, I devised strategies and suggestions for enriching the state's curriculum to incorporate a wider and more diverse body of materials, literature, writings, reading, elements and activities with a main goal of creating room for folkloristic elements, women's literature and writing, and multicultural and multiethnic pieces.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/index.html>

My first chapter will deal with analyzing the LSU Lab School curriculum alongside that of the state's comprehensive curriculum. Here, I discuss programs and features which the Lab School offers and from which the state and its public schools' students could and would greatly benefit. Two instructors at the Lab School gave me a firsthand look into how beneficial it is to teach in such a learning-conducive environment and showed me how they make the most efficient use possible of their many resources. Also, I took a deeper look into the world literature program the Lab School offers to its seniors and discussed literature selection with both educators.

Chapter two details the construction of the comprehensive curriculum as explained to me by an English language arts curriculum writer. After I got all the facts straight, I began asking questions about why the state chose to devise the document in such a manner, and I explored problems with miscommunication that lead to improper and overly-strict implementation of the document, which is intended as a guide only. Briefly, I made suggestions for repairing this breakdown in communication to increase the effectiveness of the comprehensive curriculum by ensuring its proper use.

The final chapter of my thesis provides suggestions both from myself and my interviewees for enhancing the comprehensive curriculum to become not only a teacher-friendly but also student-friendly document in the sense that students will achieve maximum academic success as a direct result of following this prescribed plan. Also, I explained the revisions which are to become a part of the 2008-2009 revised curriculum and gave my opinion, supported by research, as to why these changes are working towards not only improving the state's standardized test scores but also encouraging and easing the transition between secondary and post-secondary education for the state's student population.

The conclusion of my thesis looks at the bigger picture, putting the details previously discussed aside, and comments on the nature of the state's comprehensive curriculum as a whole as well as praises the changes which are to go into effect for the 2008-2009 school year. It briefly reviews the issues taken with the comprehensive curriculum and reminds readers of the potential benefits of the changes and additions I suggested throughout my thesis. Among the major benefits discussed are the value of including multicultural and multiethnic literature selections and women's writings as well as folklore studies and fieldwork.

### **Need for the Development of the Comprehensive Curriculum**

Based on the 2006-2007 school year, Louisiana is ranked forty-four on the list of the "smartest states," one number higher than the state ranked the previous school year and two ranks higher than in 2004-2005 (*Morgan Qunito Press*). While these are arguably minute victories, it is still necessary to recognize such accomplishment and investigate the factors that lead toward this positive change and continue to bring Louisiana closer to national standards in the education sector. One obvious change to which credit is awarded is the comprehensive curriculum implemented in 2005 after years of department of education officials, staff, and contracted educators and companies working diligently to develop a standardized curriculum that not only raises Louisiana from the bottom of the nation's educational rankings but also keeps all public schools in the state on the same core curriculum and level. The Louisiana State Department of Education's website discusses about the founding of the curriculum reporting,

"Louisiana's education reform is built on the concept of rigorous and challenging content standards. In the early 1990s, Louisiana began a process of raising these academic standards. Content standards were adopted for English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, foreign languages, and the arts. In 2005 Louisiana developed a Comprehensive Curriculum based on the Grade-Level Expectations (GLEs), which are statements of what all students should know or be able to do by the end of each grade, PreK-12, in English language arts,

mathematics, science, and social studies.” (*LA Dept of Education*)

Upcoming educators are taught that the main idea behind the comprehensive curriculum is basically two fold. As with any state, Louisiana finds itself with a diverse population of teachers, with the span ranging from first-year teachers to veterans of more than thirty years and every age and education level in between. Ideally, this diversity should enrich the education program and expose students to a wide variety of teaching tactics, methods, materials, and strategies. However, there is a need to level the playing field for all teachers to utilize each other’s approaches to enhance the education of each student, regardless of their teacher, to achieve a well-rounded student population ready for the road to post-secondary education.

Veteran teachers<sup>2</sup> often times (but certainly not always) tend to use traditional approaches in the classroom. Some of them structure their learning environments with students in rigid rows of desks, seated at all times, and focusing on a textbook and/or notebook for the duration of the class. This type of teacher typically avoids using kinesthetic lesson plans which involve student movement and interaction with one another to put some of the responsibility for students’ education into their own hands allowing them to teach themselves and one another as supplements to the teacher’s instruction. They believe in sticking to the canon, traditional literature, and feel that when students are exposed to these culturally iconic authors, they develop a stronger background for reading and analyzing complex literature that can carry them through any genre and higher level of education. Also, without continuing education programs requiring them to do so, many of these veteran teachers are not familiar with the latest technological advances that the younger teachers are educated in utilizing and operating.

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to veteran teachers as those who have dedicated twenty to thirty or more years to teaching in the school system.

Because of this gap in teacher education, students are not equally exposed to equipment and features they will likely be expected to use in higher-education settings, and classroom activities and lesson plans are limited by the avoidance of the newest technology, which most students in today's classrooms respond well to as part of a technologically-advanced (as well as dependent) world.

### **Teacher Certification Requirements**

The requirements to receive a renewable teaching certificate in the state of Louisiana have risen, requiring more from teachers and teacher-education programs alike. Some universities within the state, such as Louisiana State University (LSU), require that students graduating from their college of education not only pass course requirements (per the university and college) but also complete the additional requirements (per the state department of education) necessary for state teaching certification before being awarded an undergraduate diploma from the university.<sup>3</sup>

Candidates studying to be secondary educators are required to complete fifteen hours of curriculum and instruction courses in addition to the forty-nine hours of content-area courses they must pass, all with an average grade of a 'C' or higher. Of those fifteen hours, six are based solely upon the content matter (ie. high school subject) of the education student's choosing and incorporate a variety of topics and strategies the new teacher will have to address and ideally should implement in a secondary classroom. This segment of coursework begins with a course reviewing the founders of modern educational practices and teaches students how to utilize the efforts of education greats, such as Horace Mann, John Dewey and Maria Montessori. Students enrolled in this course study the writings and teachings of these educational reformists and use their

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<sup>3</sup> When discussing the requirements for teacher certification, I intend to speak solely on the basis of secondary education, English (6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade public school system certification) as that is my certification and the sole area of my interest and this thesis.

findings to develop lesson plans which incorporate a variety of tactics developed by multiple individuals studied throughout the course to address the needs and learning styles of each individual student.

The second course based solely on the prospective educator's subject area is lesson- and unit-plan intensive and requires the education student to create, submit for evaluation by a professor, and teach multiple lesson and thematic unit plans to a class of peers and fellow educators. The major focus of this course beyond lesson plan structuring is to teach the basics of developing thematic units and lesson plans that correspond to and unite within a central theme. While working through the complexities of planning and executing their lessons, education students in this course face classroom disciplinary issues which are likely to arise while they are teaching such lessons and units, and they are taught how to deal with these situations effectively but also in a manner least disruptive to the class as a whole.

The remainder of the fifteen hours of curriculum and instruction courses is composed of the following: a classroom management course in which potential educators develop the necessary skills to create a classroom environment conducive to learning, open and inviting for student collaboration, and well maintained to avoid disruptive disciplinary issues that can bring an entire class off track from the task at hand; a course in the history of the nation's public school education system which tracks the progression of education as well as important legislation enacted to enhance the country's education programs and also studies key individuals who made significant contributions to and reforms in modern education; and a course entitled "Reading in the Content Area," which may very well be one of the most beneficial courses required for completion of one's secondary education degree.

“Reading in the Content Area” focuses on reading, as its title insinuates, but goes beyond the surface in explaining that reading is an integral part of every content area, not just history and English to which many would immediately relate reading. It teaches strategies for incorporating reading into all subjects, including mathematics (which is traditionally only associated with numbers and calculations), and uncovers the necessity for strong reading comprehension to achieve success in any field. Instructors of this course tend to group education students within the class into like content areas so they may work together in designing activities and plans but still benefit by sharing their work with the rest of their classmates in different content areas.

After completing the necessary coursework to attain one’s undergraduate degree, secondary education degree candidates are required to complete a semester of fieldwork, commonly referred to as student teaching. Within this semester, students are required to complete two hundred seventy classroom (internship) hours in addition to at least ten hours of observations outside of the school in which the student is placed to teach. Some of these ten hours need to be observed in areas outside of the student’s content concentration (area of teaching certification) as well as grade level range (eg. middle school versus high school settings.) Dissecting the two-hundred-seventy-hour requirement, student teachers are required to have one hundred eighty hours of teaching time.<sup>4</sup> The remaining ninety hours are to be logged as participation<sup>5</sup> or observation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “‘Teaching’ is defined as assuming the responsibility for instruction. Although the student teacher’s ultimate goal is to assume full responsibility for classroom instruction (planning, instructing, disciplining, and testing), teaching should not be restricted to a full class setting” (LSU Student Teaching Handbook 14).

<sup>5</sup> “‘Participation’ is defined as performing any phase of a teacher’s responsibilities EXCEPT direct teaching. Participation should be related to the improvement of the educational environment. Examples of participation include routine housekeeping (attendance, etc.); planning instruction; sharing duty with the classroom mentor teacher; and attendance at meetings” (LSU Student Teaching Handbook 14).

<sup>6</sup> “‘Observation’ is defined as watching a teaching-learning situation. Areas for observation include not only the assigned placements, but also other classes and related areas/activities in the assigned PDS *and* in other schools” (LSU Student Teaching Handbook 11).

Either before student teaching or during the process, LSU students working toward education curriculum and instruction degrees must pass a series of standardized tests known as *The Praxis Series*<sup>TM</sup>. As mentioned earlier, universities statewide have different requirements for completion of teacher education programs, and LSU is one of the few which requires successful completion of not only *Praxis I*<sup>®</sup> but also *Praxis II*<sup>®</sup> as a requirement to graduate. Per Educational Testing Services' (ETS) website<sup>7</sup>, "*The Praxis Series*<sup>TM</sup> Assessments provide tests and other services that states use as part of their teaching licensing certification process. The *Praxis I*<sup>®</sup> tests measure basic academic skills; The *Praxis II*<sup>®</sup> tests measure general and subject-specific knowledge and teaching skills; and the *Praxis III*<sup>®</sup> tests assess classroom performance" (ETS). LSU requires that secondary education curriculum and instruction students pass *Praxis I*<sup>®</sup> before they are allowed to enroll in 3000- or 4000-level education courses. *Praxis II*<sup>®</sup> must be passed before graduation, and therefore, it is acceptable to take this three-part series<sup>8</sup> within one's student teaching semester.

Because *The Praxis Series*<sup>TM</sup> is a fairly new development in teacher-certification preparation, many teachers who had been in the field for ten years or more were required to continue their professional development in terms of passing *Praxis II*<sup>®</sup> (with *Praxis I*<sup>®</sup> being a prerequisite) along with aspiring young teachers. These long-term educators were generally upset by this new requirement feeling that they have earned their spot in the classroom based on service and do not need to pass standardized tests. However, this was certainly a necessary move to bridge the gap between the differing generations of educators. When considering the rigorous training program up-and-coming educators

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<sup>7</sup> "*The Praxis Series*." ETS. 2007. 7 May 2007

<<http://www.ets.org/portal/site/ets/menuitem.fab2360b1645a1de9b3a0779f1751509/?vgnextoid=48c05ee3d74f4010VgnVCM10000022f95190RCRD>>.

<sup>8</sup> *Praxis II*<sup>®</sup> is composed of three tests: content knowledge (in the area of the student's intended certification), pedagogy, and principles of learning and teaching.

face and must successfully complete in order to earn their position in the classroom, it is only fair and sensible to expect veteran teachers to meet the same requirements. A counter argument to that assertion would be that the experience that veteran teachers have acquired over the years in actual classroom interaction usurps the knowledge that any standardized test could analyze.

However, requiring veteran teachers to meet the same standards as new teachers is necessary, and refusing to have any educator lag behind another is one of the reasons the comprehensive curriculum was put into action in the first place. *The Praxis Series*<sup>TM</sup> tests more than knowledge of one's content area; it tests teachers in the methods and strategies they would use to relay this knowledge to a classroom of students with varying abilities and does so with a test mainly composed of writing as opposed to standardized, multiple-choice questions. The problem with veteran teachers not being required to pass *The Praxis Series*<sup>TM</sup> does not lie in the thought that they are not familiar enough with the subject matter they teach; the new requirement stems from a general unwillingness to venture out into new approaches and styles of teaching the material using a variety of resources and technological components. These tests are specifically designed to evaluate how an educator would address classroom issues as well as teach subject matter to a wide variety of students. However, it must be noted that it is not completely uncommon for veteran teachers to have difficulty in passing *The Praxis Series*<sup>TM</sup> tests, perhaps because they have been on the opposite side of the desk for too long whereas new teachers are freshly out of the classes in which these strategies are being taught and practiced.

### **Need for Equivalence among Schools**

After considering the first half of the two-fold reason Louisiana enacted the comprehensive curriculum, the second half is presented with a focus on the most

important aspect of education, the secondary students who are being taught in public schools throughout the state. Before the comprehensive curriculum was developed, there was a relatively vague system intact to measure and compare what schools were teaching students. It consisted of measuring core curriculum components<sup>9</sup> needed for a high school diploma. While this system is still necessary and very much used to gauge student progress amounting towards high school graduation, the comprehensive curriculum is designed to delve much deeper into the actual content being taught across the state and focuses the majority of its attention on the grade-level equivalents (GLEs), skills which should be mastered by students before successful completion of a unit and course.

Simply measuring core curriculum components has one major flaw. It does not account for what students are being taught on a daily basis, and this is a problem for several reasons. First, an inconsistency in what students are being taught provides for inconsistency in standardized testing results throughout the state, meaning while the testing scores could possibly level out, some schools are going to be in danger of falling below national standards while other schools are excelling. While the idea here is certainly not to lower the standards of the excelling schools, it is indeed to raise those of the failing ones instead of letting them hide behind the merits of the better-performing institutions.

Secondly, the state department of education's idealized vision would provide for smoother transitions between schools for students. Currently, if a student transfers from one school to another, they should not miss more than a few days of coursework because the comprehensive curriculum not only delegates content but also a timeline by which this material should be taught. Previously without such structure, students transferring

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<sup>9</sup> For example, four units of math and English or half a unit of basic computer applications are core curriculum components.

from one school to another within the state could possibly be completely lost at the new school in the sense that they may have not covered any of the material the new school has been teaching or may have missed an imperative transition element between their old and new institutions.

In theory, this is a great idea; in practice, however, many problems persist. Regardless, students transitioning from one school to another are going to face an adjustment period, the length of which depends on the flexibility of the student and his or her personality and resilience, learning style, and educational ability. Also, requiring all students within the state to cover the same exact material on the same exact time frame will inevitably hinder advanced students' progress and leave behind the students who need more time than others to grasp certain concepts. If the responsibility to assess student understanding is not left up to the classroom teacher who works with the students on a daily basis, students are not likely to effectively comprehend the material being taught to them. Educators must be the ones to establish a time frame for teaching material to their classes and adjust that time frame as needed to account for student response. Also, not all schools implement the comprehensive curriculum in the same manner. Some districts and even individual schools require a stricter adherence to the document than others, and because of that, it is not sound to expect all schools to function in exactly the same manner. Instead of raising the standardized testing scores, which are ideally intended to report the progress of the state's students, it will surely hinder them in several areas.

### **Issues with the Current Comprehensive Curriculum**

Taking all of these factors into consideration, it is obvious that the state needed some type of detailed structure by which to teach its students, and as previously mentioned, Louisiana is seeing slow but steady improvements in the state's educational

ranking. However, the curriculum does have many flaws that have yet to be worked out in its earliest stages. One of the chief complaints teachers have with the curriculum concerns the seemingly unnecessary restrictions it places upon teachers' creativity. After reviewing the extensive program from which teacher-hopefuls graduate<sup>10</sup>, it is discouraging to know that when they walk into their own classroom for the first time, they will be handed a binder that tells them what to teach, when to teach it, and how that teaching should be done.

Such impositions draw criticism to the curriculum for a variety of reasons beyond the suppression of creativity. One of the main reasons the curriculum was enacted was for all teachers to work towards new and progressive ways of teaching students. It was said that this new curriculum would prevent veteran teachers from sticking to the same lesson plans from year to year and not accounting for technological and methodological innovations, creations, and developments. However, implementing a curriculum that is as precise as the state of Louisiana's ensures that the same exact problem will arise again in just a few years. Unless a new curriculum with all new activities and literature selections are developed each year, this new plan and structure will soon become old and outdated, much like the overly-traditional practices of the veteran teachers modern educators were trying to avoid.

Other grievances concern the unreasonable timeframe the curriculum imposes upon certain units, not allowing educators enough time to complete important lessons, and this issue also extends to include the problem that the curriculum does not allow room for error. It is not capable of accounting for student comprehension. Some lessons take longer than others to teach students, and teachers report that many times, the calendar the curriculum imposes upon teachers does not allow them the extra time

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<sup>10</sup>Louisiana State University (LSU) Student Teaching Handbook, spring 2006.

necessary to re-teach information on which students do not have a strong grasp. On the flip side of the argument, some students are going to grasp material faster than others, and because of differences in school structures and student-ability diversity, many students will be held back to allow for other students to reach their level.

Yet another area of concern with the comprehensive curriculum is the fact that it does not push the material at any more of a progressive rate than many schools (not in a high standing in comparison with schools in other states) did before this implementation. This is not only a problem because it does not challenge the students in secondary schools enough to better prepare them for post-secondary education, but it is also a problem because it prevents a wide variety of literature and studies from being included in the secondary English curriculum. Instead of looking at how this harms students, it may be more beneficial to study a school which pushes its students at a faster rate than traditional Louisiana public schools and the commendations that school has yielded as a result of such actions.

### **Model for Possible Enhancements**

Louisiana State University's Laboratory School, affectionately known in Baton Rouge as University High or U-High, gives a prime example of what a progressive school can accomplish<sup>11</sup>. Put briefly, this school accelerates English classes in combining what the public school system considers English I and II, both courses in general literature, fiction, and short stories. English II for the Lab School is comprised of American literature (traditionally taught as English III in other public schools), and English III is British literature (whereas this course is typically taught as English IV elsewhere in the state). Advancing their curriculum in this way allows the Lab School's

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<sup>11</sup> Information about the school and its educational success can be found on the school's website <http://www.uhigh.lsu.edu/>

English IV course to be free of restraint, so to speak, and they choose to use this senior-year opening to teach world literature. This is a phenomenal idea for innumerable reasons, mainly because it incorporates any and all suitable literature that did not fit into their first three courses of English better preparing these students for the diverse English courses they will encounter at a university during their post-secondary education. Later in my thesis, I will discuss some world literature selections currently taught at the Lab School as well as explore several of the benefits students could reap from such exposure. Because of this invaluable benefit, the state should look upon the Lab School as an example of what educational strides could be taken to bring all schools, all students up to such standards of educational excellence.

### **Possibilities for Enriching the Curriculum**

With the diverse student population in Louisiana public schools, a curriculum rich with studies of various cultures would be dually beneficial. First, the students would be learning about their own heritage and the heritages of those around them. They would learn that they are not only Louisianans, but their heritages also stem from countries around the world, therefore making them all world citizens. This would not only break the monotony of reading the traditional canon selections these students have studied throughout their entire schooling career but also ignite a spark of interest within the students who enjoy readings about people most like themselves partaking in experiences with which they have also been faced<sup>12</sup>. Folkloristic studies provide an excellent means for learning about other cultures with the hands-on approach that fieldwork requires; I will return to this idea in chapter three. Secondly, exposure to a variety of readings from

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<sup>12</sup> John Ogbu's "Adaptation to Minority Status and Impact on School Success" confronts this issue and is a valuable resource to which to turn for further reading on the topic of student relation to currently taught material. I will also visit this issue later briefly in my introduction and in greater depth in chapter three of my thesis.

and about currently untaught ethnicities would better prepare students for post-secondary education by alleviating the culture shock many students experience when exposed to such studies for the first time at the university level. Many times the dialect and references used in multicultural literature are intimidating, especially to students who may already have a difficult time with reading rate and/or comprehension. Coverage of such readings during their secondary education would allow students the opportunity to explore this diversity with more close guidance and individual assistance than is typically provided at the university level.

Louisiana history is usually taught during the middle school years in the state's schools; however, very little if any reading from the state's authors is taught in English language and literature courses. In the same token, students are once again shortchanged by the comprehensive curriculum's lack of folklore elements and studies. By bringing the state's folklore into the classroom and even teaching and allowing students to do their own fieldwork, they will benefit greatly from the new form of research (because it is one they have never experienced before as the majority of their research for school projects is done online or with the use of published materials) which would allow them to experience a hands-on approach to their own education. The benefits of such tasks are priceless and again push students into new experiences where they can grow and develop as learners.

To incorporate our state's folklore into the secondary English courses, curriculum authors could allow for a project which allows students to choose an element of Louisiana folklore which piques their interest<sup>13</sup>, interview someone (or people) who can teach them about the tradition (using proper interviewing techniques which could be

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<sup>13</sup> A plethora of resources are available through the Louisiana Folklife Program's website <<http://www.louisianovoices.org>> which I dissect, explore, and explain in detail in the "Inclusion of Folkloristic Elements" section of chapter three of my thesis.

taught as part of the regional folklore unit), write a field research paper on their exploration and findings, and informally present their research to the class. I participated in a project of sorts myself as a graduate student, and for the first time, I not only experienced what it is like to conduct fieldwork but also discovered the immeasurable benefits of this type of research.

As a possible example, my project centered on the state's Mardi Gras tradition. Many residents, lifelong and new alike, and including myself, participate in Mardi Gras parades, traditions, and celebrations every year without truly understanding carnival's origin and symbolic meanings. I thought a good interviewee for my project would be my hometown of New Roads' parade's carnival coordinator, Brian Costello, who is involved in the tradition as a historian who not only educated me about the current practices but also past traditions and how they came to be. When my graduate class gathered at the end of our research period to present our findings to one another, we enjoyed learning about often times overlooked traditions and cultures in this most unique way. Through peer education, it seems obvious how beneficial such fieldwork will prove to be in aiding students in understanding the culture in which they partake and thrive.

While learning about our state and its traditions and being exposed to literature and writings from and about Louisiana and its people is decidedly imperative, it is also necessary for curriculum developers to look beyond the state's immediate culture and return to a sense of heritage. Louisiana is a state blessed with a melting pot of ethnicities, and the public school system showcases this diversity. However, the traditional canon makes room mainly for American and British literature (written by mostly male authors) with some allowances for African-American studies and perhaps a few other extremely limited ventures. Students from Acadian and Cajun descent and those from other cultures

are excluded in this mainstream view even though the children are very much present in the school system.

Even one unit dedicated to exploring Chicana, Cuban, Haitian, Zimbabwean, Nigerian, American Indian, and other cultures, literature, and writing would allow for students of such descent to at least have exposure to their own ethnicity's work, and it allows other students the opportunity to learn about people different from what they have read their entire lives. When entering a university of nearly any capacity, these students will be required to take courses beyond the traditional American and British literature canon, and having exposure to currently unfamiliar cultures will help students in their transition from high school to college courses. These new experiences may also encourage students who previously had no desire to opt for post-secondary education to reconsider their options as they will realize the world of opportunity at their disposal with an ever-expanding selection of educational avenues to explore.

Another issue that needs to be investigated is the deliberate inclusion of women's writings and literature. Often times ELA teachers are quoted discussing the traditionally taught canon as "a bunch of dead, old, white men." So regardless of their culture or ethnicity, women are often times excluded from the measure. Most classrooms are divided fairly equally between male and female students, and just as students of other cultures need to be able to relate to taught material, female students need to be able to relate to their own gender's writing. Curriculum authors need to combine the two literary searches and not only find Caucasian women's writing to include in the prescribed reading but also writing from and about women of various world cultures and locations.

### **Deciding on a Research Process**

While Louisiana's educational leaders had the state's students' best interest at heart when developing the comprehensive curriculum, their plan falls short of many

expectations and is going to require much revision in order to reach maximum effectiveness. The notion of keeping teachers up to date with current educational resources and practices serves as a benefit to all and should continue, never allowing the curriculum to become outdated and teachers to become too comfortable with traditional teaching methods and unwilling to try new things. Conversely, aligning the curriculum should not mean restricting creative educators who have trained for years in preparation to put their knowledge and skills to use in the classroom. The constant revisions that a comprehensive curriculum requires to be effective should also take into consideration advancing the state's secondary English program to allow for diversity in literature, studies, and therefore thought, better preparing Louisiana's students for post-secondary education and a thriving, successful future.

As a newly certified teacher, I found myself excited at the innumerable prospects my future holds for educating Louisiana's youth, but at the same time, I was concerned about approaching this (what I believed to be) "beast" of a curriculum. Because I completed my experience with teaching in a classroom of high school students at LSU's Lab School where I did not have to teach with the comprehensive curriculum, all of my knowledge concerning the document was secondhand from educator friends and colleagues. However, I quickly decided that I was fortunate to not have to deal with such trials and tribulations on a daily basis once I heard the incessant complaints of teachers who were forced to work with the curriculum in their classroom and school. I also developed a fear of the prospect of one day working in a school which would force me to deal with this document, especially since my training did not incorporate it. These reasons along with my curiosity as an educator caused me to go out in search of answers to my questions about Louisiana's secondary English comprehensive curriculum.

Traditional avenues for research in libraries and archives would not lead to suitable answers to the questions I had developed about this new document<sup>14</sup>; I knew to get the answers I wanted, I would have to speak with those who work with it every day or, better yet, had a hand in writing (or at least deciding what would be written in) the comprehensive curriculum. I decided to begin my quest at my inspiration as an educator, the LSU Lab School. This environment seems so ideal to me for a plethora of reasons, and although I know every school has room for improvement in some area, this school and faculty and administration certainly appear to have its main focus, students' education, working as a fine-tuned machine.

### **Reflection to Student Teaching at LSU Lab School**

I reflected on my student teaching experiences when I would collaborate with my mentor teacher, Connie McDonald, to develop lesson and thematic unit plans and was delighted to hear her approve every idea I threw her way. She was excited about my enthusiasm, and although she would certainly guide me in the right direction based on her previous over twenty years experience, she never discouraged the unique approaches I wanted to try with the students. Our materials were abundant in and out of the classroom, and it seemed like if I could think it up, she could help me to make it happen in the classroom. I wanted to know if it is at all possible for all students to be able to benefit from such variety and exposure.

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<sup>14</sup> While I have referenced educational authors, researchers, and materials in both my thesis and works cited pages, these readings did not contain the specific information I was most interested in studying. Because the comprehensive curriculum was first published in 2005, I could find no published research on its success or even simply analyzing the document. Therefore, my work needed to be done in the field so I could publish the research that previously did not exist. The educational authors that I studied while writing my thesis, namely John Ogbu (and his articles "Adaptation to Minority Status and Impact on School Success," "Minority Education in Comparative Perspective," and "Understanding Cultural Diversity and Learning"), helped me to understand the necessity to reach students of all backgrounds, especially minorities, but as beneficial as his research was to me, it still was not specific to the state of Louisiana and its comprehensive curriculum. Therefore, the main referenced sources in my thesis will be my personal interviews, which will be supported by my academic research.

One of the most beneficial experiences for my students was their interaction with one another in varying degrees and forms. Regardless of our subject matter for the class period, be it poetry, a short story, a novel, or a play, Mrs. McDonald and I would use brainteaser openers to the class to get the students thinking about a particular theme, experience, or scenario. Throughout the class period, we would alternate between individual student work, pair work, group work, and whole-class involvement. One of my favorite means of sharing was called “whip arounds” in which each student would share one thing he or she wrote or drew about the assigned subject; this activity encouraged participation without singling out any individual student and allowed students to decide what they would or wouldn’t share with the class as a whole while still partaking in the activity.

Another daily activity in which our classes participated was the sustained silent reading (SSR) program; during each class period, students would read for five to twenty minutes in a book of their own choice. It was so exciting and encouraging to me to hear the students beg me for just a few more minutes of SSR on days we didn’t have time for a full twenty minutes. They were truly excited about reading, and it was an excitement that came from within rather than being one I had to create for them. As a teacher, I know how imperative it is for students to have ownership in their own education. There is only so much want one can create within someone else; the majority has to be internal.

This program allowed students to choose books that they prefer reading about people they can relate to doing things they enjoy doing or learning about. It also allows students to select literature on a level which they are comfortable reading. When students are given material to read that they have to constantly struggle with because of a vocabulary or reading comprehension deficit, they often times become discouraged, and if they continue to read the literature at all, they dread doing so. It becomes a task in

which they have to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible and certainly not one in which they enjoy. That is no way to develop a reader and foster a young mind.

My students also interacted with myself and one another in sharing exercises about their books even though each of them were reading something different, and I, as an adult, had not read most of the books they were bringing to class. I remember that on my first day of teaching after the SSR period, I asked the students to write me a short letter (one hundred fifty words or so) telling me about the book they were currently reading or asking for suggestions for future reading based on their interests. Initially, I asked my students for this letter as a writing sample; I wanted to know how each of them wrote and see if their thoughts would be based more in analysis or plot summary. My students' responses were overwhelming; I learned much more than I intended. Students explained themes and recurring images and elements in their reading, what they thought the author's intention might have been in writing the work or including a certain passage or scene, and certainly acted as critics detailing what they did and did not like about the text, often times even making suggestions to the author for what would produce a more satisfactory piece of writing. I quickly discovered that these students love reading, and I have to attribute this feat in large part to the Lab School's SSR program. In addition to telling me how much they liked the book they were currently reading or predicting what they think will happen next, many of the students asked for me to suggest something else for them to read once they finished their current selection.

I did book talks in which I brought in mostly young adult literature that I had read as a youth or for young adult literature classes I took at the university with a few appropriate adult novels sprinkled into my selections for the students I knew had an advanced reading level. I tried to make sure I incorporated multicultural literature selections as well as women's writing to appeal to the diversity of my classes, and I also

paid attention to the composition of the texts I selected. For example, I spoke about Elie Wiesel's *Night*<sup>15</sup> because when I was my students' age, I had never before read a memoir, and I thought experiencing that style could have a profound effect on the students' response to literature. I also chose Ernest Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men*<sup>16</sup> because the book discussed the touchy topic of race relations, used regional dialect (which can sometimes be challenging for students), and had alternating narrators at the beginning of each chapter. I spoke about *Chasing Redbird*<sup>17</sup>, a Sharon Creech coming-of-age story in which the female protagonist deals with many heavy issues facing some unfortunate youth in our society. In the subsequent class periods, I invited the students to do book talks about their current selections in a whip around format. I also altered the letter-writing assignment asking students to write to one another telling about their books, making reading suggestions, or predicting what they think will happen next in their current selection and why. Having the students so engaged with their reading only fueled their passion more, and at that point, I was certain that my future classroom would definitely have SSR time and a bountiful library as Mrs. McDonald's did for the students to pick from without even having to leave the room.

### **Interviewees**

Besides creating a great sense of nostalgia for my student teaching days, this reflection also helped me to choose the direction in which I would go to begin my research. I knew Mrs. McDonald, a veteran teacher, would be a wonderful resource for me to utilize, and I wanted to know how she felt about her experiences teaching at the Lab School as opposed to the other schools in which she has previously taught. I wanted her to tell me more about the research behind the SSR program and where the Lab School

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<sup>15</sup> Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Bantam, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Gaines, Ernest. *A Gathering of Old Men*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.

<sup>17</sup> Creech, Sharon. *Chasing Redbird*. New York: Joanna Cotler Books, 1997.

got the idea to enact it, and I was curious about how she composed her own library with a plethora of reading selections for nearly all reading levels and interests. She was my first interviewee.

I also spoke to Carol Young, world literature and International Baccalaureate (IB) instructor as well as head of the English department at the Lab School. While I was not assigned to work with Ms. Young during my student teaching semester, I did help her with the IB testing and found the program to be very interesting and beneficial to the students participating in it. During that time and our following interview, I discovered that IB is a two-year program in which students earn high school credit as well as credit for college courses accepted at universities worldwide (Young 105<sup>18</sup>). Ms. Young is a huge supporter of IB over traditional advanced placement (AP) curriculums because as she explains,

“AP is a one-shot wonder. You sit for the exam, and whatever you get on the exam...that’s it. And they have these hideous multiple choice questions, and the premise is that if you try to teach a kid to think and then you give him a multiple-choice test...well, am I really trying to teach him to think or am I trying to teach him how to think like me? And, I have argued with kids prepping them for AP because they’ll have a perfectly logical explanation and answer, and it’s not the right answer.” (Young 105)

However, IB’s procedures are much different. As Ms. Young clarifies,

“IB offers multiple chances. Part one they do an external essay, and it’s mailed somewhere in the world for somebody else to grade. Part two they do a formal take...They will do an oral commentary on an excerpt or poem, and IB will chose seven or eight tapes, my really high, middle, and low, and they get mailed somewhere in the world. They do another paper that gets mailed somewhere in the world. They do an informal presentation that just I assess, and then they sit for an exam... IB...allows the student more room for expression and multiple opportunities.” (Young 105)

This amazing program allows students the opportunity to do creative writings with opportunities to “[add] a chapter, [write] a parody, [or even have] two authors have a

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<sup>18</sup> Any time I quote Connie McDonald, Carol Young, or Laree Taylor, the page number that follows their quotation corresponds to a page number in this thesis as the quotes come from my interview transcriptions.

discussion” with one another about their works or internal themes (Young 105). As Ms. Young promoted the IB program, she sold it with one simple statement: “IB encourages creativity and thinking as well as analysis, and I don’t think AP does” (Young 105).

The way the Lab School allows for world literature for all students in their senior year of high school is ingenious and sincerely advantageous to the students’ development as readers as well as their post-secondary education. I wanted to know more about which literature selections Ms. Young uses in her classes and how she chooses them as well as how the IB curriculum differs from that of her mainstream students. Ms. Young was my second interview, so she could fill in the gaps from my conversation with Mrs. McDonald and continue by answering my specific questions for her about her positions with the school.

Through friendship and constant correspondence with Mrs. McDonald, she suggested that I speak to Laree Taylor, a woman Mrs. McDonald told me had a hand in actually writing the curriculum. Because of her integral role in composing the document, I was most interested in speaking with Ms. Taylor. She was able to answer many of my questions about the structure of the curriculum, the materials to be taught per its instruction, and the timeline by which all of the lessons and units are to be completed. I was also inquisitive about how individuals were chosen to work on the comprehensive curriculum’s composition and who those individuals were exactly. Curiosity struck me as I wondered if teachers throughout the state had problems with the same elements about which I had heard so much negative feedback, and that in turn caused me to question if and when there would be a rewrite to fix the issues that have arisen since the original comprehensive curriculum’s implementation.

## Literature Review

While my interviews proved to be the most valuable information concerning my specific interest, I referenced a variety of educational resources to support the claims my interviewees made as well as the suggestions I proposed. In this section of my thesis, I picked out the main points within the major educational sources I consulted and presented them in tune with the arguments made and issues discussed throughout my thesis. While I introduce the works here, I will also reference them in later chapters as the problems at hand arise in my thesis.

McTighe and Wiggins' *Understanding by Design*<sup>19</sup> was an obvious starting point for this research since all three of my interviewees referenced the work multiple times throughout the course of our interviews. These authors work a great deal with curriculum development, and in this most popular text of theirs, they discuss planning techniques proven to yield favorable student comprehension results. One such technique is backward design or backward planning. This concept basically calls for keeping the end in mind; lesson, unit, and even curriculum plans are developed beginning with the question of what we want the students to know, achieve, and/or complete. A backward design approach would greatly benefit the State of Louisiana's Department of Education's ELA curriculum writers as the state already has a defined goal, an end result to achieve: higher student test scores proving greater comprehension and retention. We, as a solid body of educators, want to see our students' comprehension and reading rates rise to meet national standards so that our students will accomplish greater successes. Therefore, it is necessary to use a backward planning method when developing and

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<sup>19</sup> McTighe, Jay and Grant P. Wiggins. *Understanding By Design*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD): Alexandria, VA, 2005.

revising the ELA curriculum to ensure we keep these goals not only in mind but easily identifiable with every lesson included in the document.

Kenneth T. Henson's *Curriculum Development for Education Reform*<sup>20</sup> speaks a great deal about the hesitancy of some veteran teachers (about which I've previously written) and even veteran administrators who are stuck in the same pattern of teaching and materials. He makes the obvious point that with the same efforts, schools will yield the same results, and while it is definitely a risk to try something new, there is no possibility for advancement without considering new tactics and resources. Henson comments, "When teachers try to introduce something different at their schools, often the first resistance they hear is the voice of tradition. Often, tradition is a stumbling block to progress. New ideas are not given a chance because of fear of failure or a fear of the unknown" (31-32)<sup>21</sup>. The state's ELA curriculum writers must compromise when developing a standardized plan for all public schools to follow. While benefit is definitely seen in traditional literature and classics that have been taught for decades, it is necessary to allow room for growth and development in the means of teaching methods as well as literature. If minimal or no increases are being seen in student comprehension and reading rates with the current canon of material being taught, then it is worth the risk of incorporating multicultural and multiethnic selections to try to spark the interest of the students and relate to their and each others' heritages. Henson also writes about textbook usage, and I will revisit his commentary in chapter one of my thesis when discussing textbook usage with two of my interviewees.

In the final chapter of my thesis where I propose suggestions for enhancements to the curriculum, I discuss the gap between the resources readily available to the LSU Lab

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<sup>20</sup> Henson, Kenneth T. *Curriculum Development for Education Reform*. New York: HaperCollins, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> I will revisit Henson's comments about the tradition barrier in chapter one of my thesis.

School versus those existing to typical public schools in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Fenwick W. English and Betty E. Steffy's *Deep Curriculum Alignment*<sup>22</sup> discusses this issue in the context of standardized testing results. They write,

“The basic construct for curriculum alignment is to ensure that what is tested is what is taught. The idea that the advantages enjoyed by children from high-wealth circumstances on high-stakes tests of accountability should not unduly privilege them in the process. More importantly, children of poverty and of color are not to be punished for being who they are and from the socioeconomic conditions in which they are enmeshed, in a society in which the gap between the *haves* and the *have nots* has been accelerating.” (English and Steffy 25)

I confront the issue with greater depth in chapter three of my thesis, but English and Steffy's writing affected my thought process while writing. They acknowledge the very real problem of socioeconomic status as do I, but they, also like me, do not have a viable and complete solution to this problem. As compensation, I turn to suggestions within the classroom to level the playing field between that of privileged and impoverished.

Developing stronger reading skills through programs such as the sustained, silent reading program at the Lab School are not terribly costly but allow students the opportunity to develop a passion for literature and literacy alike. Turning our attention to these cost-efficient methods may not solve all financial inequality, but it will prove to be a remarkable first stride in bridging the student-ability gap.

The final author and research I would like to make a special mention of here is John U. Ogbu who has written a variety of articles about the diverse student population in this country and minority success in our nation's school systems. His article “Understanding Cultural Diversity and Learning”<sup>23</sup> explores the basis of core curriculum education compared to multicultural education and criticizes the minute strides many

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<sup>22</sup> English, Fenwick W. and Betty E. Steffy. *Deep Curriculum Alignment: Creating a Level Playing Field for All Children on High-Stakes Tests of Educational Accountability*. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Ogbu, John U. “Understanding Cultural Diversity and Learning.” *Educational Researcher* 21.8 (Nov. 1992): 5-14+24. [JSTOR](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0013-189X%28199211%2921%3A8%3C5%3AUCDAL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R). 3 March 2008 <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0013-189X%28199211%2921%3A8%3C5%3AUCDAL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>>.

schools praise themselves for making. As someone who is self-admittedly not an educator but instead an anthropologist, he makes quite accurate assessments that are directly applicable to the state of Louisiana's ELA curriculum. Ogbu confronts the schools which pride themselves in teaching a Japanese haiku and feeling that completes their obligation to cover multiethnic and multicultural literature in the classroom. His ideas are concurrent with the argument I present throughout my thesis which criticizes the state and its ELA curriculum writers for not performing more adequate searches for appropriate multicultural literature selections to include as part of the document. In the second half of my first chapter, I analyze the state's ELA comprehensive curriculum as explained to me by one of the document's writers, and I refer to this research of Ogbu's in greater detail.

Another interesting and applicable article of Ogbu's is "Adaptation to Minority Status and Impact on School Success,"<sup>24</sup> which dissects the reasons why minority students are not excelling at the same rate as their Caucasian counterparts. One of the major issues about which he writes in this article is language barriers preventing these minority students from achieving higher standardized testing scores and comprehension rates. This hurdle could be easily crossed with the inclusion of texts and materials from non-traditional sources which appeal to students of all backgrounds and ethnicities. In chapter three of my thesis, I suggest incorporating a world literature program into all schools' curriculums, and in this chapter, I discuss the language barriers about which Ogbu speaks in terms of choosing literature which allows obvious student connection to promote comprehension and retention.

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<sup>24</sup> Ogbu, John U. "Adaptation to Minority Status and Impact on School Success." *Theory into Practice* 31.4 (1992): 287-295. JSTOR. 3 March 2008 <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0040-5841%28199223%2931%3A4%3C287%3AATMSAI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S>>.

In the next chapter, I will begin with an analysis of the LSU Lab School's curriculum and the resources which are so easily accessible to the school and its faculty and students and how that accessibility contributes to the school's academic excellence. Using commentary from my interviews with Connie McDonald and Carol Young, I explore the genius behind the unrestricted curriculum by which Lab School instructors teach. Also, I ask these veteran educators with a plethora of experiences to comment on the state's current comprehensive curriculum and tell me what they would like to see as a standard of education for students in the state of Louisiana. Afterward, I delve through Laree Taylor's detailed explanation of the current English language arts (ELA) comprehensive curriculum and the changes which are to take effect in the 2008-2009 school year.

## **Chapter 1: Analysis of Curriculum Options**

### **Analysis of the LSU Lab School's Operation, Curriculum and Resources**

As an aspiring secondary educator, I cannot deny how impressed I am with the way the LSU Lab School conducts its educational institution. Their tactics appear to be most effective in not only keeping their students on target with the state's grade-level expectations, but their students are actually ahead of the state's curriculum by one grade level, allowing the opportunity for world literature to be taught during senior year English IV. Standardized testing scores at the Lab School are also consistently among the highest in the state, and I know from personal experience that every year students from the school are chosen as top award winners for local, state, and national writing contests. It seems like the state could use the Lab School as a model, or rather goal, for what it would like all of the public schools within the state to function like within the next several years.

Connie McDonald and Carol Young are excellent resources of mine to discuss the Lab School curriculum, and with almost sixty years teaching experience between the two of them, I know they have insightful opinions about the comprehensive curriculum, its necessity, and the future of the state's educational status. When I began my interview with Mrs. McDonald, my first question surrounded how much the Lab School actually uses the comprehensive curriculum and how much the teachers there have worked with the document. Mrs. McDonald explained,

“At the lab school when the comprehensive curriculum first came out, which is only within the last few years, we weren't following it, and we felt pretty confident about what we were doing. We just didn't know much about it, even though some of us were involved in the state department with committee work with the GEE. We felt like we had a handle on the test, the kids did well, and we just really didn't pay attention to the comprehensive curriculum. But through a series of events that just kind of came together, a confluence of events, we started working with Lafayette Parish, and they showed us how they had done some revisions to the comprehensive curriculum.” (90)

She continued her explanation with a report of how the Lab School faculty attended a retreat on LSU's campus lead by Harriet Mayer who dissected the comprehensive curriculum not only to explain to teachers the state department's intended implementation of it but also, in the words of Mrs. McDonald, to "open our eyes to what a good job and thoughtful job the state committee and especially the Lafayette Parish teachers who revised it had actually done with it" (McDonald 90). She continued by explaining that the school already followed the state-mandated grade-level expectations (GLEs)<sup>25</sup>, but the faculty would recommend the way the comprehensive curriculum put them into practice as a guide for new teachers. Through this retreat, Mrs. McDonald along with other Lab School faculty was able to gain a greater deal of respect for the doctrine composed to save the state from educational crisis (90).

Hearing her rave about the Lafayette Parish curriculum and all of the innovative inclusions they made to their version of the document made me curious about the enormity of the differences between the state's curriculum and that of Lafayette Parish's. Mrs. McDonald began by explaining,

"From what I can see, they ordered the activities. They took the activities that were recommended, and they sort of translated them into more student-friendly, teacher-friendly activities using...the GLEs but incorporating best practice with it so there's a mixture of small group, partner work. In a class period, there might be direct instruction a little bit, and then there might be partner work, small group work, whole class work...a lot of different configurations of group work for the kids to get their hands on and apply some of the things they were learning." (90)

I found it interesting that Mrs. McDonald began with this point because I already knew from my experience teaching at the Lab School that all of this is common practice there.

The students are constantly engaged in different learning groups of various sizes and even ability levels, and because of that interaction, students generally are more willing to

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<sup>25</sup> "A grade-level expectation (GLE) is a statement that defines what all students should know and be able to do at the end of a given grade level. GLEs add further definition to the content standards and benchmarks" (LA State Dept of Education.)

discuss their work and be open to sharing it with the teacher as well as the rest of the class. Also, this ever-changing dynamic allows each student the comfort of never being singled out to share with the class as often times every student is sharing in some way, shape, or form. Each class period would ideally offer every student a chance to be in their own element regardless of their learning style, be it kinesthetic, visual, or verbal<sup>26</sup>.

Mitchell and Tchudi's text *Explorations in the Teaching of English*<sup>27</sup> support this methodology of student interaction within the classroom. They explain,

“Meeting the class as a whole is the time-honored mode of teaching. It allows the teacher to convey common content efficiently and to involve students in whole class discussions. If handled well, this approach can create a sense of community...Both of us like to use groups, and we find them an effective middle ground between whole class instruction and a totally individualized program. Groups usually involve a high degree of interaction among students, yet control is still maintained.” (Mitchell and Tchudi 65)

Mitchell and Tchudi continue their assessment of affective classroom instruction processes by discussing the value of independent work also in a way already implemented in Lab School classrooms. They state,

“Involving individual students in their schooling in a meaningful way has long been a goal in education, one complicated by the economic necessity of clustering students in groups of thirty or more for efficiency. It's difficult to find ways to meet all students at their interest and need levels when English teachers have at least five classes and 150 students. However, if students have some choice about selections and also have a variety of appealing writing assignments, the teacher has made a good start toward individualizing. Time can be set aside in class for students to work on such tasks as composing, researching, and reading.” (Mitchell and Tchudi 65)

The sustained, silent reading program at the Lab School is a prime example of this highly beneficial individualized learning about which Mitchell and Tchudi write. The opportunity for Lab School students to write in the reading logs I previously discussed

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<sup>26</sup> LDPrize.net does an excellent job at explaining and illustrating the different learning styles on their website. A direct link can be found at <http://www.ldpride.net/learningstyles.MI.htm#Learning%20Styles%20Explained>.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell, Diana and Stephen Tchudi. *Exploration in the Teaching of English*. New York: Harper and Row, 1989.

exemplifies the variety of writing assignments while the student-selected texts allow the individual students to appeal to their own interests.

When I asked Mrs. McDonald about other major differences between the state and Lafayette Parish curriculum, she responded, "...it's just more thoughtful. I think that they had a little more time. I mean somebody did the groundwork, the state committee, and they were pretty pressured and rushed, and the Lafayette teachers were paid to go back into it. And, I think they spent a summer of pretty intensive everyday work going in and really thinking it through. You can tell a classroom teacher did it" (McDonald 90). Since I had heard so much about the restrictive nature of the timeline by which lessons and units were to be taught and activities completed, I asked Mrs. McDonald if the Lafayette Parish curriculum allowed a little more leeway for teachers to decide how fast they should progress with their class. She commented that she did not believe the state intended the document to be taken literally but rather as a guide complete with suggestions. Individual school districts and even individual schools are the ones that are taking this guide and enforcing it as law. She remarked, "EBR (East Baton Rouge) and several other parishes in the state take it almost literally and objectives on the board and monitored and the activities all have to be done and have to be done in this order, and that's different from the way Lafayette interpreted it as a school system" (McDonald 91).

Ms. Young did not have a terribly favorable opinion of the curriculum. She also told me about the workshop the Lab School instructors went to this past summer. What surprised me the most is the fact that Ms. Young admits that the comprehensive curriculum does reference and somewhat follow *Understanding by Design*<sup>28</sup>, and even

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<sup>28</sup> McTighe, Jay and Grant P. Wiggins. *Understanding By Design*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD): Alexandria, VA, 2005.

though she has great respect for that books' authors' research and conclusions, she still is disappointed with the upper level English language arts document. She states,

“...the comprehensive curriculum does work pretty well with *Understanding by Design*, and it's not so bad until you get to the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade...[which] is much more prescriptive...I think it's hideous. I don't think I could do first unit in the year a literary research paper and six weeks *Beowulf*. I would just gag. I would lose those kids before they ever drove up. That's just hideous.” (Young 107)

Ms. Young continued to explain that the document calls for the students to know higher-level literary element names, which is not at all important for typical high school students. While impressive, this feat does not further the understanding or comprehension of the students when it come to the literary works with which they deal. At one point during our conversation, Ms. Young even commented, “I think some of the...I don't think a senior in high school really needs to know synecdoche and metonymy...parallel episode and pathetic fallacy aren't really that important to a high school kid. Whoever wrote it, I think, was just showing off saying I know these big words” (Young 107). These harsh words come from a veteran educator with innumerable teaching credentials, and hearing such dissatisfaction for our state's educational plan perplexes me as to why teachers such as Ms. Young did not have the opportunity to voice these opinions before the curriculum was put into practice in the state's public schools.

Ms. Young did not have all bad things to say about the state's plan for academic progress, however. As any teacher I've spoken to, she did rave about the GLEs, acknowledging the importance of not only having but following such guidelines. The state's schools do need some order and guidance as to what to teach our students; however, devising the curriculum in such a way as to limit any of a teacher's creativity or potential for effectively conveying the material is not progress by any means. Ms. Young, a teacher with multiple degrees and a highly respected educator, remarks, “I think

the GLEs are fine. I think the comprehensive curriculum 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade is unrealistic. It is not engaging, not even for me much less a kid” (108).

The flexibility of the Lafayette Parish curriculum seemed to be a huge selling point for experienced teachers such as Mrs. McDonald. She, like me, acknowledges that no matter how advanced the Lab School student body as a whole may be, each student learns in a different way and at a different rate than his or her neighbor just like in any other school system. To account for the differences in students’ ability and learning styles, an effective curriculum must allow enough leeway for teachers to present lessons without the restrictions of a timeline or required strategies. Teachers at the Lab School are accommodated with innumerable resources by which to present information to their classes. One of the most obvious benefits to the English language arts department is the plethora of reading and teaching materials available not only through the state-of-the-art library but also individual teacher’s classrooms.

With so many literature selections surrounding the walls of her room, one thing that has always perplexed me about Mrs. McDonald’s English classroom is that I never noticed any textbooks, and I know when I was teaching with her, we would provide photocopied material to students rather than ever using a textbook they had to produce from their book bags or desks. I reflected to my experiences receiving a secondary education, and I made Mrs. McDonald laugh when I told her that I remember using the Glencoe<sup>29</sup> series the entire time I was in school. Each year I would get a different book with new literature, but it was in the same format from the same publisher and each increase in grade level would still bear a striking resemblance to the previous year’s text.

When discussing her use of textbooks, Mrs. McDonald did admit that she doesn’t have a classroom set of texts that she hands out to each student with the expectation that

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<sup>29</sup> Glencoe is a textbook series published by The McGraw-Hill Companies.

the student will bring it to every class. Instead, she individually utilizes textbooks in her lesson planning and extracts from them what she feels to be pertinent information. She either photocopies sections of the information to hand out to the class or devises a lesson and activity in which the information will be used in an alternate way. The students have resource manuals instead that they keep at home and can reference them when working on a homework assignment, writing a paper, or simply need individual reinforcement of something discussed in class either by themselves or with a parent or tutor (McDonald 94).

Ms. Young is not a typically textbook-bound teacher either. She has developed her own carefully-crafted lesson plans and updates them in some way, shape, or form every year. She remarks, "I'll change one or two things every year simply to keep me fresh because I find if I teach the same thing too many times, I begin to assume that they know something that they may not know, so I need fresh eyes" (Young 102). Regardless of whether she is working on a regular world literature curriculum or developing a plan for her IB students, McTighe and Wiggins's *Understanding by Design* serves as a model and springboard for her own ideas and good practices. She states,

"...after going through *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe...I went through that training, and it made a world of difference because some of the things that were stressed were: Why am I teaching this? ...Where am I going? What do I want the kids to get from it? Now, for years and years and years, intuitively I'm making connections between student life and book material. And, I've always told my students that if I can't connect it to your life, I'm not going to teach it because then it's just superfluous. But then with *Understanding by Design*, I had a better understanding of the how and why it should connect to their lives, and I also came to realize that less is more, and if the student is truly learning the skills, then they'll transfer it. If they can read this short story and do a good job with it, then they should be able to read independently other short stories. So, that was a kind of big influence." (Young 101)

Ms. Young makes an interesting point in discussing the meaning of what is taught to today's youth and the fact that it must be applicable to their lives. Using *Understanding*

by *Design*, Ms. Young is better able to draw the connections she seeks and can therefore branch out with different teaching materials. Her questioning the purpose of what she's teaching her students is a concept directly from *Understanding by Design* and references the backward planning about which I spoke in the "Literature Review" section of my introduction.

In her discussion about curriculum development and lesson planning, Ms. Young shared with me her philosophy of quality versus quantity. She commented that when she taught advanced placement (AP) courses in other public schools years ago, she noticed that the program pushed to cover as many pieces as possible in as little time as manageable. When she came to the lab school and began developing her own curriculum as well as working with the IB standards, she soon realized how much more beneficial it is to students' comprehension to cover a few pieces of literature thoroughly rather than several pieces casually (Young 101). When students are given the opportunity to delve deeper into literary pieces, they can better uncover elements, such as theme and symbolism, and can learn how to apply these elements to any number of works they may face in the future. Covering too many selections in a limited time span almost confines students and teachers alike to a more plot-based understanding and doesn't allow for higher thinking and critical analysis.

Ms. Young carefully explained to me how she devises her lesson plans each school year. She said,

"Since I teach seniors and I like the thematic approach, I've got my year divided up into five units. The first unit is nonfiction, and I'm trying to focus on...the idea that nonfiction is important, and if we're going to be lifelong consumers of information, we need to know how to read information. So, we talk about how nonfiction...why it's important, how it's important, and how we judge, and we look for bias...after that unit, I moved to kind of preparing the kids for accepting responsibility for their choices, their habits, and helping them understand that ignorance is not an excuse. They're leaving home, so we focus on things like what it means to be human, what do we have in common with other cultures, and

how the human condition, people, don't change. We all have the same needs and the same desires, so this makes it easy to bring in pieces from wherever...looking for those common human elements and things like trying to understand our world, make sense of our world and trying to find some speck of immortality. So, we read things like "Gilgamesh,"<sup>30</sup> *Perceval*<sup>31</sup>...we'll talk about the importance of communication...So all of these...pieces...feed into whatever...my theme is. So, that's basically how I choose: what do they have to know and be able to do, and then I fit the literature to my purposes instead of the other way around." (Young 101-102)

I immediately take interest in the way Ms. Young goes about devising her lesson plans to show obvious connections between the students and the themes she is teaching. She is working on the basis of the "Reading in the Content Area" course taught as part of the teacher-education program at LSU in exhibiting to her students how integral it is to be able to efficiently consume and compute information in any variety of mediums. Ms. Young is able to make use of her ability to break beyond the bounds of a singular textbook and search for literature and writings that clearly convey her intended themes and life lessons.

Ms. Young enjoys teaching controversial literature to her classes whenever possible and is truly grateful that the IB curriculum allows for such an outlet. While Ms. Young acknowledges that teaching such works entirely depends on individual classes and their maturity level, she explains,

"I teach *Huck Finn*<sup>32</sup>, which, of course, is highly controversial, but you lay the groundwork. And you talk about, for example in *Huck Finn*, how so many people misread it, and you talk about satire and what did Mark Twain really intend. And if you lay the ground work and you tell the kids that there's going to be some stuff in this book that today may seem inappropriate but if you put it into the context of when the book was written, who wrote the book, and the intent, then you can get away with it, and I've not had any problems with teaching *Huck Finn*. The rape scene in *The Kite Runner*<sup>33</sup>...I think if you lay the groundwork, I don't think it's an issue because the kids I teach watch R-rated movies, and they're very much aware of it." (Young 103)

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<sup>30</sup> Gardner, John. *Gilgamesh*. Trans. John Maier. New York: Vintage Books, 1985.

<sup>31</sup> Troyes, Chretien. *Perceval*. Trans. Ruth H. Cline. Athens: University of Georgia, 1985.

<sup>32</sup> Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1986.

<sup>33</sup> Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.

This mentality opens lots of traditionally closed doors to Ms. Young and her lesson planning. Throughout the course of our conversation, I agreed with Ms. Young in the point that controversial literature is healthy for secondary students because it allows the student to become a critic. All too often students are handed books, told what to read, and, most shamefully, told what to think about that prescribed literature. Exposing them to harsh world realities as opposed to highly sanitized writings gives them passion; it ignites a spark of curiosity which otherwise might be doused in the likes of traditional canon readings.

Since world literature and women's writing are major focuses of my research, I wanted to know more about how Ms. Young goes about selecting texts for her classes. For her regular world literature students, she basically has free reign to make appropriate selections at her discretion, and while IB provides a list from which she must choose, Ms. Young assures me that the possibilities are endless. It doesn't sound like she has ever come across a novel that she would like to teach that IB wouldn't recognize as acceptable for their students (Young 105). She mentioned a few titles to me in saying,

“I have tried different books from different countries and taught them like *Devil on the Cross*<sup>34</sup>. I think it's from Kenya... I have tried *Sand Child*<sup>35</sup> from India... I think next year I will change one of my readings for *Fires on the Plain*<sup>36</sup>, which is the story of a Japanese soldier. It's sort of a memoir in the sense that the guy really was a prisoner of war in World War II... I do Zora Neale Hurston... *Wide Sargasso Sea*<sup>37</sup>... *Like Water for Chocolate*<sup>38</sup>, again kind of giving voice for the voiceless... We'll read an excerpt from “A Walk to the Jetty”<sup>39</sup> by Jamaica Kincaid.” (Young 105)

After hearing Ms. Young speak so passionately about all of the multicultural literature selections she has tried and will try with her class, I feel optimistic knowing that there are

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<sup>34</sup> Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Devil on the Cross*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987.

<sup>35</sup> Jelloun, Tahar Ben. *Sand Child*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2000.

<sup>36</sup> Ooka, Shohei. *Fires on the Plain*. North Clarendon, VT: Turtle Publishing, 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982.

<sup>38</sup> Esquivel, Laura. *Like Water for Chocolate*. Wilmington: Anchor, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Kincaid, Jamaica. “A Walk to the Jetty.” *Annie John*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985.

teachers who enjoy the trial and error process of deciding what does and does not work with their students if for no reason other than the benefit the students gain from such exposure to cultures.

In a similar quest for unique teaching options, Mrs. McDonald references her filing cabinet overflowing with invaluable resources in handout form; in this sense, she is not limited to the confines of what one publisher chooses to include in a textbook but can instead teach from innumerable sources throughout the school year or even single class period. I questioned her about the benefits of not only having access to but freedom to teach such a wide scope of literature and information, and she mentioned Stephen Tchudi<sup>40</sup>, a highly published educational author, and stated,

“[Tchudi] and his teacher researchers pulled together a list of most effective ways to teach, and the least effective was chronological, textbook bound. And, I think a lot of school systems buy the textbooks, and the teachers follow it...and it’s all about the textbooks and the textbook money and the textbook companies, so they follow them...And the other thought I had on that was...about it being used...One of the things the state is pushing and each parish seems to really think is important, and I guess it is, is that if everybody is on the same page at the same time, then if somebody moves in, they can...so there’s that...But that is the least effective way.” (McDonald 94-95)

Mrs. McDonald makes an interesting point here about the typical use of textbooks in school systems and the reasons that teachers may feel the need to utilize them in such ways. I must add to her point in questioning the use of textbooks as a crutch. In many textbooks, units and chapters are clearly defined and may even contain end-of-chapter or end-of-unit reviews, quizzes, and tests which can be utilized as such or even as a study guide for the teacher’s own examination. Also, literary textbook series usually come complete with a teacher’s edition which makes helpful notes in the margins, provides answers to all quizzes and tests, and often time even produces writing and/or discussion

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<sup>40</sup> Tchudi, Stephen. *Planning and Assessing the Curriculum in English Language Arts*. Baltimore: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, 1991.

prompts which correspond with the reading in which students are partaking. Perhaps these textbooks make teachers' jobs easier, and that could be yet another reason why textbooks play such a strong role in many public school districts.

Henson's comments in his book *Curriculum Development for Education Reform*<sup>41</sup> about the reason textbooks are so widespread through American classrooms. He writes,

“Through the years the textbook has been the number one curriculum determiner...One explanation for this success and longevity is the textbook's availability. One has to teach abroad to realize that in the United States the textbook is so accessible that it is taken for granted...Most textbooks are organized so that the content in each chapter builds on the content in previous chapters. This makes organization of the class easy for teachers who use required textbooks...By mastering the stable content in the textbook and then lecturing, chapter by chapter, the teacher can demonstrate expertise in content and organization...The textbook also makes test construction easy and defensible. By requiring a text, and then using the text to construct the tests, a teacher can defend the questions on the tests. Even when the teacher fails to address some of the topics in class, the teacher is still protected. When questioned about the content validity of the test, the teacher can respond, ‘It was taken from the assigned reading in the text.’” (Henson 33)

Henson lists several reasons why textbooks make teachers' jobs easier. While some of the points he makes demonstrates a potential student benefit, such as a clearly-defined syllabus for students to be able to remain on track as well as look ahead, most of the advantages are enjoyed by the teacher clutching the textbook for security. Henson makes a valid point in saying that teachers who stick to the text are able to defend questions about material they have never taught, but what is the purpose of student assessment? The purpose of assessment is to gauge students' comprehension and track their progress, and it is neither fair nor completely accurate to consistently test students on material not covered in class or ever taught to them by their instructor. Henson also makes an interesting point about how textbooks allow teachers to become comfortable in thinking they are an expert in their content simply because they have mastered the limited material

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<sup>41</sup> Henson, Kenneth T. *Curriculum Development for Education Reform*. New York: HaperCollins, 1995.

covered by the text with which they teach. This comfortability often time leads to a slacking in the area of professional development and the mentality that there is nothing left to learn, which should never be mindset by the teacher or student.

Considering the second point Mrs. McDonald made about textbook usage, one which I have heard numerous times, about how students who are displaced from one school into another would be able to pick up exactly where they left off if all schools are quite literally one the same page, I cannot help but acknowledge the holes in such a textbook-bound curriculum argument. While it does seem plausible and even necessary for students to be covering roughly the same GLEs in the same greater time frame, any student who moves from one school district to another or even one school to another within the same district is going to face some sort of transition period, the extent of which determined by the individual student and his or her ability to cope with change. If schools are consistent in effectively teaching the GLEs required for each grade level in a somewhat prescribed order, students should be able to make a reasonable transition from one learning environment to another with some supplemental help and instruction until the change is complete.

As a counter argument, Mrs. McDonald and I discussed the benefits of an outlined curriculum which would ensure teachers spend the proper amounts of time on each GLE rather than focusing on the one or ones the teacher finds most interesting, has the most training working with, or has the most lesson plans and activities developed for. She commented,

“...we know there are teachers who are starting with the nouns and moving on through the parts of speech maybe even twelve weeks, and their schools scores are actually...even some of the schools that are gifted schools are taking a dive...Even though the scores are fairly high, they're not moving up. That's really some old, old stuff, and I think that's why let's say a parish like Lafayette Parish where that's happened where the teachers are determined that this is the first two six weeks, we are going to do grammar. I think that's one reason why they do

push the comprehensive curriculum in the public schools...really to make it more equitable. It's a matter of equity." (McDonald 95)

Just as Mrs. McDonald commented, there must be a basis by which teachers instruct students to ensure they are comprehending the necessary elements to successfully complete one grade level to move on to the next. But, she is also careful to use Lafayette Parish as a prime example for leadership in successfully implementing a plan that allows schools to maintain equality while not hindering student progress and confining and limiting student ability.

Another point that must be considered is how teachers are gauging and sometimes perhaps underestimating student potential. A comprehensive curriculum ensures that teachers are not the ones who are allowed to judge whether or not a student can comprehend a certain standard; GLEs are handed down from the state department with the expectation that each student, regardless of socioeconomic status, background, or educational ability (extensive special needs aside) will master the skill in order to progress with his or her education. Mrs. McDonald reinforced my point by saying,

“...by having a comprehensive curriculum you would encourage those people who are teaching from crumbly notes and teachers who really just didn't know what to do or couldn't do it or just being negligent...if they had to do it, then that's going to give some kids in some schools who weren't getting anything to get something...because the teachers have to. I've seen that to. I've seen almost a matter of equity, especially those at-risk schools where sometimes the teachers are not really doing anything because they say, 'My kids can't do this; this is too hard for my kids.' With the comprehensive curriculum, the whole theory behind it is that they can do this, and you've got to teach this because we're on this unit.” (McDonald 95-96)

This “No Child Left Behind”<sup>42</sup> mentality at least ensures that all students within the state are given the fair chance at an education equal to any counterpart. Henson<sup>43</sup> also

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<sup>42</sup> “The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) -- the main federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. Proposed by President Bush shortly after his inauguration, NCLB was signed into law on January 8th, 2002. NCLB is built on four principles: accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater local control and

reinforces this point about underestimating student potential in his writing about tradition, which I touched on in the introduction to my thesis. He lists out several of the common excuses which are heard in resistance to change, such as “‘But we’ve never done that at this school.’ ‘It will never work.’ ‘They won’t like it.’ (*They* is seldom defined). ‘The administration will never by it.’” (Henson 31). While he does support the counter argument that tradition does “[protect] the tried and proven” teaching methods and materials, he certainly acknowledges the crippling effects this limitation has on student progress and success. What worked for students in past generations may not necessarily appeal to current and future classrooms of students. Educators must adapt to the changing student population and recognize that while some traditions do need to be upheld, room must be made for new educational explorations by way of multicultural, multiethnic, and folkloristic teachings and literature.

Returning to Tchudi’s findings in search of the answer to what type of curriculum plan is the most effective for student learning<sup>44</sup>, Mrs. McDonald shared with me a few comments on the benefits of Lab School procedures and even her own methods of teaching, and she even mentioned how teachers who are bound within stricter confines of the comprehensive curriculum could still try to incorporate best practices in any way possible. She reported,

“The best [teaching method], of course, is [a] one on one [approach], but the second best is reading-writing workshop where the teacher is selecting things that are appropriate for the kids and they are reading and responding and thematic grouping. Thematic units are the recommendation there...a reading-writing workshop with a thematic unit. And that is kind of hard to do if you have to follow a textbook, but the teachers that I know who know that and are trying to work within the textbook chose something, say from that literary period, and they

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flexibility, and an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research” (U.S. Department of Education).

<sup>43</sup> Henson, Kenneth T. *Curriculum Development for Education Reform*. New York: HaperCollins, 1995.

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, Diana and Stephen Tchudi. *Exploration in the Teaching of English*. New York: Harper and Row, 1989 is also an excellent resource to consult for further reading on the development of effective ELA curriculums.

try to link it up with an article or a poem or a story and kind of achieve that thematic feel even though they are being required to go through the textbook.” (McDonald 95)

Listening to Mrs. McDonald make these statements brought me my first glimmer of hope with the comprehensive curriculum; without even realizing it, Mrs. McDonald encouraged me by reassuring me that good teachers will find a way to make something work with their classes. Even the teachers who aren't able to abandon the traditional textbooks as Mrs. McDonald has done are still able to incorporate some of the material that she uses in conjunction with what they are required to teach. I think this point brings me back to the basis of my argument, which resides in the fact that energetic, effective teachers will find a way to reach their students using whatever means necessary even when bound by restrictions of a prescribed curriculum.

With the Lab School so free to explore any educational avenue to cover the GLEs, I was curious about how far Mrs. McDonald has taken her classes during her more than thirty years of teaching experience. In my own experience, I have seen how valuable women's writings and literature, folklore elements, and literature from and about different countries and cultures can truly be. But while I was surprised to find out that Mrs. McDonald didn't really go to the extremes to incorporate such literature selections into her lesson plans, she did make a simple and interesting point about which I had never before thought. She stated,

“I don't know enough about folklore elements; I don't think I can tell you that I use that...I'm trying to think of the short stories that we use...some of them are not, some of them are dead and old and white. I think Eudora Welty. We do some Native American writing and poetry and prayers. We do *The Crucible*<sup>45</sup>, excerpts from *When I was Puerto Rican*<sup>46</sup>, Esmeralda Santiago, but I think they're limited by what the teacher knows.” (McDonald 96-97)

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<sup>45</sup> Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible*. New York: Penguin, 1976.

<sup>46</sup> Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I was Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

I'm continually adding to my list of questions to explore, and this remark is no exception. How do we as a state of educators expose teachers to the endless possibilities of teaching material? While I have too much research to review before even beginning to answer such a loaded question, I did want to question the distinguished educator Mrs. McDonald is about the benefits of exposing students to a variety of writings.

During our conversation, I told Mrs. McDonald about my work as a learning strategist at LSU's Academic Center for Student Athletes where I encounter a wide variety of students, ranging from juniors and seniors who are well established in their college pursuits to freshmen who are somewhat lacking in college survival skills. While students with stronger backgrounds are usually able to more readily cope with diverse experiences, both extremes of my students had a hard time working with unfamiliar literature. When they would enroll in class that taught multiethnic and multicultural literature, often times they were thrown off by the vernacular and colloquial dialogue between characters, unique names not common to Americans, and references to ideas, beliefs, or even objects associated with other countries and/or cultures. Mrs. McDonald elaborated on my point by saying that all students can certainly benefit from exposure to folklore and writings from other cultures. She commented, "I think it's always great if they (students) can broaden their horizons just a little because the kids we have [at the Lab School] are generally pretty well traveled, but they don't know anything about where they've been but "they had a crummy McDonald's" or "the McDonald's was built just like the castle." It's just limited..." (McDonald 97). Even her students with seemingly unlimited resources were unable to bridge the gap between the pop culture understanding they have of other parts of the world and literature which delves deep into the lives of the people of these cultures.

Resources do play a large role in the success of schools within each district, and as always, the Lab School is a great example of what benefits ample financial resources have on the progression of a school. One of the first things I noticed about the Lab School is how amazing its spacious and well-stocked library presented itself, occupying a great deal of the west wing of the building. During my many visits to that library, I admired the innumerable shelves stacked near ceiling to floor with books, comfortable reading chairs which allow students to preview materials before making a check-out selection, bulletin boards with recommended reading, and the librarian's long desk lined with various featured readings from diverse authors. Even attending a private school, I had never before been exposed to such a wonderful selection of literature, and thinking of how all of these resources are at the Lab School students' fingertips, encouraged me in realizing that it is possible to create a warm, inviting atmosphere within a school where individual thinking and interests not only could but should be pursued. Mrs. McDonald acknowledged the Lab School's good fortune in saying, "We're just so lucky here, and we do take advantage of it. And what the library can't afford...if we can dream it up, there is generally a way to get it..." (McDonald 98).

Ogbu writes about the opposite side of the fortune spectrum in his article "Minority Education in Comparative Perspective"<sup>47</sup>. He states,

"Minority children receiving inferior education cannot learn as much or test as well as children of the dominant group who have access to superior education. In America, inferior education for Blacks and other minorities has ensured that these groups would fail to qualify for desirable jobs or other positions in adult life that require good education." (Ogbu 51)

While Ogbu only writes about minorities here, the lower socioeconomic schools are typically the schools with the highest concentration of minorities. Therefore, there is an

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<sup>47</sup> Ogbu, John U. "Minority Education in Comparative Perspective." *The Journal of Negro Education* 59.1 (1990): 45-57. JSTOR. 3 March 2008 <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-2984%28199024%2959%3A1%3C45%3AMEICP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U>>.

obvious link between lack of funding and the oppression of minority students. Lack of funding leads to more problems than simply ensuring that students are housed in aesthetically pleasing schools, this cash flow issue also makes it harder for schools to branch out and explore diverse literature opportunities with students who need it just as much if not more than others. The minority population of students is the one which needs to see books by authors and writing about people from its own ethnicities and heritages. Developing a sustained, silent reading program and providing students with multiethnic and multicultural selections from which to choose could be a relatively inexpensive first step in a positive direction to diversifying ELA curriculums in all schools, regardless of socioeconomic status. I will continue to investigate the gap between the Lab School and typical East Baton Rouge Parish public schools along the lines of funding and opportunity in the third chapter of my thesis.

In addition to the state-of-the-art library available to the Lab School, Mrs. McDonald's students are privileged enough to have a library within their very own English classroom. Throughout her thirty-three years of teaching, Mrs. McDonald has slowly built an amazing personal library with book shelves lining some part of all four walls of her classroom with literature selections as diverse as any other library. Mrs. McDonald asks students to donate books to her collection, exchanges books given to her for age-appropriate material for her students, writes grants for any particular needs which can't be met by the library or usual Lab School resources, and spends a great deal of her own funds to keep her classroom library current and full of selections to appeal to any student, regardless of interest or reading level (McDonald 99).

To promote the multicultural material the Lab School's library carries, the librarian comes to individual classroom and does book talks on popular books and series as a way to give students suggestions for different reading and answer any questions

students might have about a particular reading interest of their own. Sometimes these book talks by the librarian, Mrs. McDonald, other students, (or even me when I was student teaching) encourage students to branch out and explore other literary avenues. Such exposure not only teaches students about other cultures in a most unique and interactive way by allowing them to develop their own visualization of the book's setting and events but also broadens their emotional connection to their reading, particularly strengthening their sense of empathy.

While the Lab School, like any other school, has its unavoidable flaws, it seems to have a good sense of direction towards an effective curriculum. The school follows the GLEs produced by the state in acknowledgement of the need for standards in education, but in its decision to not follow the comprehensive curriculum, the school consistently sees test scores among the highest in the state and produces students who excel in all fields. After speaking with Mrs. McDonald and Ms. Young, I cannot help but wonder why the state has not taken an example from such a prestigious institution.

### **Analysis of the State's Comprehensive Curriculum**

When she learned that I was researching the comprehensive curriculum, Mrs. McDonald put me in touch with an invaluable resource, Laree Taylor. Ms. Taylor was an educator for twenty years teaching in multiple schools in both Lafayette and East Baton Rouge Parishes before she took an administrative position at Glen Oaks Middle School in Baton Rouge during the 2006-2007 school year. She currently works as the Project/Literacy Coordinator for a Board of Regents Grant (Partnership for School Reform) to aid in the reconstitution of Glen Oaks Middle School. Ms. Taylor explained, "Ultimately, the grant seeks to create a model for successful collaboration between universities and struggling schools. The majority of my day is spent guiding job-

embedded staff development initiatives” (Taylor e-mail<sup>48</sup>). However, Ms. Taylor’s extensive experience as an in-the-classroom educator primed her for such a position as well as her duty as an English language arts comprehensive curriculum writer.

Apparently, the Louisiana State Department of Education acknowledges the need for changes to be made to the current curriculum, so Ms. Taylor acts as one educator who is working to improve the document to its full potential. After considering all of the constructive complaints I have heard about the comprehensive curriculum, I was interested in knowing what sort of amendments are currently being made to the ELA document to hopefully go into effect at the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year. When I began this line of questioning with Ms. Taylor, she explained to me that there was a time frame in which teachers who worked with the comprehensive curriculum could log into the state department’s website and provide feedback on the curriculum, its effectiveness and user friendliness, and suggest improvements for future updates to the document. Even at schools that did not truly follow the curriculum, such as the Lab School, the teachers were still provided the address to offer constructive criticism for the curriculum writers, state department, and outside consultants to review and take into consideration for rewrites. To the curriculum writers’ delight, many teachers, principals, teachers, etc used the website as an outlet and in turn established a useful basis for revision (Taylor 114). Ms. Taylor stated,

“The state department had things they wanted changed, and then there were comments from teachers throughout the state. So, we were asked to do many things in the revisions. Some were as simple as...in many of the activities, there were an enormous amount of GLEs for the activities. You might have an activity that is a little, short paragraph, and you might have eighteen GLEs. See if you could pare those down and underline the significant GLE. Bigger things were

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<sup>48</sup> Ms. Taylor and I corresponded through e-mail after our interview when I realized I had a few more questions about the content we discussed.

looking at the order of the units because...switching some units...would allow [teachers] to address...things before LEAP<sup>49</sup> testing.” (Taylor 114-115)

Ms. Taylor explained to me that the state department initially sifted through comments and feedback from the website in order to select the revisions it would like to see made to the comprehensive curriculum, so by the time the curriculum writers received the commentary, it contained specific measures that needed to be taken.

The activities of the original curriculum always find themselves in the line of direct criticism. Many teachers did not find them effective in helping to teach students a particular skill, and as Ms. Taylor described, some simple activities were expected to carry the weight of multiple GLEs, making them ineffective in truly assessing student comprehension of the standard. While many activities were amended to support less of a GLE burden, some of them were eliminated and replaced by new plans. The timing about which Ms. Taylor spoke also seemed to be a great issue with the ELA instructors not only to cover LEAP testing material in a timely manner before the test but also because of the nature of literary works covered in the classroom. Sometimes teachers were expected to begin literary units a week or so before a major holiday, such as the Christmas break, and not finish them until the student returned a couple of weeks later. Such a lapse in exposure to the material slowed and hindered student comprehension as well as caused teachers to have to re-teach material covered before the break in an effort to remind students where the lesson ended before the break. Restructuring the order of the units and activities could alleviate this problem by having teachers present shorter units that can be finished in advance of a school break allowing them to begin with new material upon returning to the classroom (Taylor 115).

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<sup>49</sup> Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP)

Two other major changes are underway with the ELA section of the comprehensive curriculum. Ms. Taylor explains, "...we were required to include a materials list in each activity so that teachers would have a complete list of what was necessary. A major change is the addition of black line masters, to where if I say, 'Use a rubric to score this comparison and contrast essay,' I had to create a comparison and contrast rubric and attach it as a link to the curriculum" (115). This addition of rubrics sparked my curiosity because even as an aspiring secondary educator, I have already learned the importance of assessing my students' work based on a mentality that includes knowledge of how the class typically operates. It seemed to me that the instructor who works with the class on a daily basis would be a little more capable of assessing student comprehension of material rather than the state department whose officials never set foot in the classroom. Ms. Taylor responded to my concerns, "Do I like the idea? Not really, to be truthful. And they wanted more of a document...for it to be more user friendly as well. So, what it does is that it gives a teacher an option. It's almost like doing some of the legwork for the teachers" (116).

Her last comment was one that I just couldn't shake. Is "doing some of the legwork for teachers" really a good thing (Taylor 116)? While I agree that it is necessary to have guidelines by which to teach, I don't necessarily agree that it is a good idea to remove the teaching responsibilities from the actual instructor. Just as students cannot and do not fit into one ideal mold, neither does assessment of student comprehension. Just as each student will have a different learning style, each class needs the benefit of assessment by the instructor teaching the material who can use different tactics to evaluate student learning.

Black line masters<sup>50</sup> (BLMs) are another example of the legwork the comprehensive curriculum is now going to do for teachers. Basically black line masters are going to be sample handouts for the students. If a lesson activity requires the student to fill in a chart or complete a worksheet, instead of having the teacher or even student construct the form, the comprehensive curriculum will provide each document in easily copied form. Ms. Taylor commented,

“A lot of times when we say that students need to create a chart of some sort...they require that we make a black line master of what that student handout would look like. Mostly black line masters that will be attached to the new curriculum are student handouts...So, there are probably anywhere from three to ten black line masters attached to each unit of the new curriculum...And providing them even with the worksheet, you know, or the handouts that they are going to use.” (Taylor 116).

The more I learned about the comprehensive curriculum, the more I became concerned that everything I heard about how it stifles teachers’ creativity and makes our degrees useless and unnecessary is true. I reflected again upon my student teaching experience and the hours I spent developing lesson plans and handouts for my classes. I thought about how I would sometimes poll the class on a particular topic to help me appeal to their interests when developing worksheets and even grammatical sentences to correct as a warm-up GEE<sup>51</sup> prep activity. There is no way the Louisiana State Department of Education could or would take such time with every individual class throughout the entire state to ensure that each one had such individualized attention. It also made me angry to think that all the creative ideas I had while student teaching would have gone to

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<sup>50</sup> A black line mater is basically a handout attached to the curriculum in a sort of appendix. For example, if an assignment calls for a teacher to evaluate a student writing sample based on a rubric, the curriculum writer develops the rubric and attaches the document to the curriculum as a black line master. In a similar manner, student handouts, such as vocabulary lists or study guides or worksheets, will be attached to the curriculum as black line masters as well.

<sup>51</sup> The Graduate Exit Exam (GEE) is a standardized test that “has 4 sections, English, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Students take the English and Math tests in Grade 10 and the Social Studies and Science in Grade 11” (Test Preparation).

waste if I would have had to teach by a comprehensive curriculum that had already done the legwork for me.

Another issue even Ms. Taylor, a curriculum writer, has with the newest version of the document is the fact that the state department required the use of titles. She explained,

“...we had a huge argument over, in the first writing, of whether to include titles or not...and I don't mind telling you that I was on the side saying no way because the minute we put a title in here, then principals across the state are going to require teachers to use those specific titles...I felt like it was taking creativity out of teaching and...not taking into account the diversity of the student population, so I fought vehemently against putting titles in. I've lost that battle because the outside examiners for this rewrite are now telling us that without titles you can't ensure rigor.” (Taylor 116)

In this instance I was finally starting to see the main problem with the comprehensive curriculum. It is not always the case that the document overly restricts educators, but sometimes the problem lies in the fact that individual school districts, principals, and even teachers are forcing the comprehensive curriculum to be something that it is not. Several times throughout our meeting Ms. Taylor emphasized, “The curriculum says sample activities. That's what it says before you ever read a single activity. It says sample activities. Does the state mean for teachers to take this as a lesson plan and follow it straight through? No. They never said that” (Taylor 116). I will revisit the problem with interpretation and implementation of the curriculum in greater depth in a later chapter.

Plagued by my concerns about teacher involvement in lesson and activity development, I expressed my worries that there would not be room for creativity when teaching by the comprehensive curriculum. She informed me, “I think there's room for creativity...Administrators fall back on a word-for-word interpretation with teachers who need extreme guidance...when you have teachers who are strong who understand the

GLEs and what is...important...to know, I see principles willing to provide some room for teachers to do what they need to do in order to deliver the GLEs” (Taylor 117-118). While this explanation did ease some of my concerns, I wondered about the schools in which the principals did not give this sort of leeway. What if perfectly capable teachers are in schools where they are not allowed to express their effective creativeness to instruct students? And maybe even more importantly, why are there teachers in classrooms who are not capable of devising their own plans and effective teaching methods? If there are standards for student learning, are there not standards for teacher qualification? Again, these are all issues I will address in later chapters.

Ms. Taylor was most excited to discuss the literacy strategies newly embedded in the comprehensive curriculum rewrite which should be published this year. She raved,

“Probably the biggest difference you will see, and it will be an enormous difference in curriculum, is that we are embedding literacy strategies in every single curriculum. We worked with Dr. William Brozo out of, I think it’s, James Madison University. Dr. Brozo has identified thirteen literacy strategies that are to be incorporated throughout not only ELA but all of the curriculums. The general rule of thumb is that one-third of all the activities in each unit must include literacy strategies. So, basically the way I looked at it is that for every three activities, I must have one literacy strategy.” (Taylor 118)<sup>52</sup>

Ms. Taylor gave me several examples of types of literacy strategies rooted within the comprehensive curriculum. She continued by explaining,

“Some of them would be... RAFT<sup>53</sup> writing [and] SPAWN<sup>54</sup> writing...Graphic organizers, brainstorming, [and] learning logs all fall under the category of literacy strategies and are also being used in math, science, and social studies. So,

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<sup>52</sup> After my own research, I believe Dr. William G. Brozo was a professor at George Mason University (not James Madison University) at the time of his noteworthy IRA publication *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader*. Currently, he appears to be a professor of language and literacy at the University of Tennessee (Allyn & Bacon/Merrill).

<sup>53</sup> RAFT is a writing technique acronym which stands for role, audience, format, and topic. Keeping these key elements in mind, students are able to more easily maintain focus on the assignment. They are to remember who they are writing as, who they are writing to, the form their writing will take on, and what they are writing about.

<sup>54</sup> SPAWN is a writing technique acronym which stands for special powers, problem solving, alternate viewpoints, what if?, and next. This is a creative writing prompt. For example, a student may choose the “next” portion of the assignment, and he/she would perhaps write a prologue to the work he/she just read explaining what happened to the characters or how a particular situation was resolved.

a lot that was already part of our English curriculum and was actually good practice within the English classes are now going to be across the curriculum, and we embed those strategies. And once we wrote those in, Dr. Brozo personally reviewed every single unit in every single curriculum to see that not only that we mentioned the strategy but that it was exemplified within the activity.” (Taylor 118)

If prescribed activities are going to be included in the comprehensive curriculum, I was excited to at least see that creative writing techniques like SPAWN are being included. In this unique approach writing prompt, students are asked to create any number of things, and it is inspiring to know that the curriculum writers are working harder to incorporate creative writing into the document rather than simply research papers or typical non-fiction writings. Even though I am solely interested in English language arts, I was also pleased to hear that a reading across the curriculum program is going to be instilled with these literacy strategies becoming part of all major subject areas in the secondary schooling program.

After hearing a bit about the literacy strategies and revisions to the current curriculum, which I will return to later in my thesis, I wanted to know more about Ms. Taylor’s recommendations for the ELA suggested reading lists. I was curious to know how she chose literature and how much attention she paid to ensuring she selected a wide variety of genres and styles of writing as well as representing a plethora of ethnicities and cultures. When I asked her how she went about making her selections, she responded,

“It comes from several different things. First of all, at our curriculum writers meetings, we sat around and discussed books that had been used at different levels and why teachers preferred to use them at whatever level they used them at. We, as a curriculum team, talked about it and made suggestions... We would say, ‘When I taught tenth grade, I had success teaching this novel.’ I taught at all four levels in high school, so I was able to offer all sorts of suggestions. And likewise, the teachers that I was working with were all experienced educators and were able to make suggestions. And then I went back to my high school and got suggestions from people in the department there, and I talked to people like Connie McDonald because I wanted people...I am traditionally in low-performing schools, and then we’ve got the lab school. So, what I did was make an effort to talk to teachers who run things and find out what books are working in

their classrooms, and that's what I did...but also paying attention to multicultural literature as best as I could." (Taylor 122)

While it does seem like Ms. Taylor and the curriculum writing team consulted one another and perhaps even outside teachers to develop their suggested reading lists, I must admit that I was surprised that she never mentioned consulting librarians, book store children's section managers, publishers, or any other outside-of-education sources to get leads on new books. As a teacher myself, I understand how imperative it is to not only teach a "good" book but also one to which the students will respond, so in that sense, I do agree with her philosophy of incorporating tried and true selections. However, since countless books are published each year, I was saddened to know that there isn't any research being done into new literature that could be added to the suggested reading lists.

I also wanted to know more about the last tag she threw into her explanation of literature selection concerning multicultural literature since that is an interest of mine. I wanted to know if Ms. Taylor worked to include books written by authors from around the world, about people and civilizations around the world, or perhaps both. She replied,

"No...It's books by authors. It was the authors I was concerned with because I have two Hispanic writers, British, and certainly American, but then we have African-American writers...Harper Lee, Walter Dean Myers, Mildred Taylor. I tried for a variety, but again, I didn't just go out and grab names because I needed diversity in the authors chosen. What I did was sample teachers and get suggestions from teachers and incorporate what teachers were asking for, but again, it's just a suggested list, too. It says suggested list in the curriculum, and then it says novel suggestions...I'm just a teacher. It's not like I have answers to all of this. I'm simply trying to listen to what I hear and put it into a document that's teacher friendly and can work for the majority of people." (Taylor 122)

While my ears had initially perked up at the mention of multicultural literature, I was soon left disappointed to hear the typical "diversity" creep into the conversation. I think it is great to incorporate African-American literature. I think the curriculum needs Hispanic writers to be included within it. But, I'm still wondering about all the other cultures which are completely neglected from our "diversified" curriculum. What about

the Cajun, Acadian, Zimbabwean, Caribbean, Nigerian, and Cuban writers whose heritage is represented in the secondary classrooms? Where is the literature to represent and connect with and relate to those ethnicities?

As an educator, Ms. Taylor is denying the benefits and even necessity of diverse literature selections in saying that she “didn’t just go out and grab names because [she] needed diversity in the authors chosen” (Taylor 122). Why wouldn’t that be a justifiable reason to make unique literature selections? Why would it be a bad thing for students to be exposed to different cultures and writing styles? While I agree that it would have taken a bit of work on the part of the curriculum writers and researchers, it certainly seems like they had enough resources available to be able to explore different avenues of literature and try to diversify the suggested selections for the benefit of the students who will be reading the material. Yes, the curriculum team would have had to utilize resources to ensure they chose reputable multicultural and multiethnic selections, but would the benefits the students would receive such exposure not surpass the amount of effort put into developing the plan? Is the goal not to improve education in the state in any and every way possible? While my interview with Ms. Taylor didn’t answer many of the questions I am posing, I will return to the topic later.

I was also incredibly disturbed to hear Ms. Taylor use the phrase “I’m just a teacher” as an excuse for the suggestions in the comprehensive curriculum perhaps not being all they could be (Taylor 122). If not a teacher to choose what is being taught, then who? Teachers are on the front line, in a matter of speaking; they are the ones who spend more time than anyone else with the students in the classroom. They have the best sense of what students are interested in, what they respond well to, and what method of instruction and materials seem to work best with them. Therefore, a teacher is the best person to make teaching suggestions. Teachers are just as human as anyone else, and on

average, they do not possess a knowledge base much greater than the average individual with comparable education. However, teachers must be just as eager about learning as the ideal student. Teachers must be willing to go out in search of new material, be it in book stores with the help of employees there, libraries with the help of young adult literature section librarians, workshops with teachers from other schools, districts, and states, and even book publishers, who are well informed about new publications in specific areas. “Just a teacher” is a great person to be when it comes to curriculum development because teachers have practical knowledge about what is likely to work in the classroom and what would address the needs of students (Taylor 122).

I have already poked many holes in not only the curriculum but even the rewrites which have not even been released into the school systems yet, but regardless of the improvements I would still like to see, I agree with Ms. Taylor in the fact that there must be basic standards in education. There must be criteria by which we rate our students’ education and progress and the effectiveness of our school systems to provide a comprehensive education to the future generations. Ms. Taylor made several concluding comments about the curriculum and the part she played in the rewrites in stating,

“I would separate myself from the fact that I am a curriculum writer and an advocate of the curriculum because really, it’s not because I’m involved...and...really, I don’t have ownership after all the rewrites that it goes through...I tried to incorporate what everybody else wanted and using my best judgment. There were some times I was allowed to argue, and there were some times I just put my foot down...There were some things I had some leeway in, but for the most part, I think I talked to groups of teachers. Like it or not, it keeps us all honest, and it keeps us on track and helps teachers to see what they’re supposed to be doing. We have pacing guides now that tell you when to teach things, but it keeps us all on track...It’s almost like writing a paper without organizing it first; we just didn’t have a focus. So, the curriculum to me gives teachers a focus. It makes sure we are delivering what we need to be delivering to the kids because we know that the standards and benchmarks and the curriculum and the testing are all linked. If the test is written to address the standards and the benchmarks and we know that’s the basis for the selection of the GLEs and writing of the comprehensive curriculum, then it stands to reason that we teach the curriculum. We have addressed all the GLEs necessary for the kids to be

successful. So, I think if you could compare before curriculum and after the curriculum, I think we have a stronger commodity now than we have ever had before. And as far as your multicultural issues, I can't speak for other people and other levels, all I can tell you is what I did and what I fought against and what I had to do. But again, suggestion...that's the word I kept trying to put in there." (Taylor 122-123)

Some sort of curriculum is needed to keep teachers on a clear path to a defined goal, and it is important to know that when students move from one grade level to another in schools across the state that they have all mastered the same skills and should be on a level comparable to one another. I also completely agree with Ms. Taylor in the sense that the GLEs must be addressed and that it is imperative to students' success that they acquire these benchmarks and skills and be able to apply them. However, I still feel Ms. Taylor along with other curriculum writers is missing the benefit of including my "multicultural issues" into the curriculum plan (Taylor 123).

In chapter 2, I will report my findings about the construction of the current ELA comprehensive curriculum as well as the state department's intentions for implementation in public schools. Throughout these explanations, I will point out an obvious disconnect between the intended implementation and how many public schools are misusing the document which is intended as a guide. Finally in chapter 3, I will make suggestions for bridging the gap between what is expected of teachers, administrators, and schools and what is actually happening in the state's school systems.

## **Chapter 2: Construction and Implementation of the Comprehensive Curriculum**

After speaking with each of my three interviewees, I was convinced that the state's comprehensive curriculum has its fair share of problems. However, I think a great deal of the issues attributed to it come from a misinterpretation of the document by a number of individuals, such as school district boards, principals, and teachers. While Ms. Taylor was a curriculum writer and stressed to me countless times that the document is intended as a guide only, even teachers who don't follow the curriculum for the most part like Ms. Young and Mrs. McDonald remarked to me that they had been told the same thing many times. But where is the lapse between what the writers intend and what educators who actually teach the curriculum understand and are doing? I may not have a concrete answer to that question, but in this chapter I will investigate the problem.

I was interested in knowing what Mrs. McDonald thinks about the way many schools East Baton Rouge (EBR) Parish particularly follows the comprehensive curriculum, not as a guide but as a concrete document closed to change, flexibility, and interpretation. While she was somewhat hesitant to provide insights because of the fact that she is not directly involved with the comprehensive curriculum in the same way typical EBR teachers are, she answered,

“Well, I see it from a distance because you know I'm definitely not in the trenches doing it, but from talking to the teachers I know and to the students who observe those teachers, they don't have time for some of the things they know based on solid research will help students improve reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary...the comprehensive curriculum, if it's followed exactly as it's written...one big gap is that it doesn't allow for is sustained silent reading, and that's something Lafayette Parish wrote into the curriculum because they had many years of their own research as well as national research on reading that showed them that students reading ten to thirty minutes a day jumped a grade level after they've read about a million words, about twenty books. So, they trust that research. They've seen it happen over time, and they weren't going to give it up. So that's something they really pushed; whereas in EBR, it's not there...if a teacher wants to try to push it in, she's risking...not following something she's

supposed to be following. Some of them are monitored, and some of them are just not allowed to do it.” (McDonald 91)

Lafayette Parish<sup>55</sup> is one that is constantly mentioned throughout my conversations with all three of my interviewees, and Mrs. McDonald makes an excellent point here about the importance of a reading component, a component the comprehensive curriculum’s first draft was definitely lacking. In a later chapter, I will discuss a rewrite element that Ms. Taylor informed me will be included in the newest version of the comprehensive curriculum that will be the first step towards righting this particular wrong.

### **Composing the ELA Comprehensive Curriculum**

Before diving deeper into issues with the implementation of the comprehensive curriculum, I thought it would be best to find out a little about how it was composed. I wanted to know if former teachers and administrators wrote the entire document or if the outside consultants about whom Ms. Taylor spoke played a large part in the writing process. I also wanted to know more about these outside consultants like who they were, where they came from, and why the state decided to hire them as part of our revamping process.

I began my search for information by questioning Ms. Taylor about what part she played in the writing of the curriculum. She explained,

“I’ve worked at the state level on different initiatives. Originally when there were standards setting, when we were deciding as a result of “No Child Left Behind” what standards needed to be addressed in ELA...I worked with them...to establish criteria and test design for the state test, the LEAP, all levels of LEAP, and I’ve worked on the GLE committee. So, I kind of have an understanding of how they interrelate and...the need-to-know things the state is trying to put forth

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<sup>55</sup> The Lab School and Lafayette Parish seem to work on a similar basis. Both of them have a standard for education and both of them (like all other schools within the state) must cover the GLEs prescribed for each grade level. However, they each do so without following the state’s curriculum with a “letter of the law” approach. My constant reference to them is to present the fact that both of them are teaching the content, but by allowing themselves the leniency to do so in whatever ways they please, they have surpassed average standards for education and are excelling based on national levels. There is an obvious benefit here in allowing schools and districts creative license to basically do what works to yield satisfactory results as long as the GLEs are being mastered.

in the area of ELA. Because of my extensive work, especially on different committees in regards to assessment, such as range finding, item review with the state department, I was asked to participate on the first curriculum-writing team for the state department. The state went about looking across the state at what they considered to be their strongest core of educators and finding the strongest educator at each level. I was tapped for the ninth grade ELA, so that was what I wrote to begin with.” (Taylor 113)

From just her introductory statements to me, I could already tell that Ms. Taylor has a great deal of experience in the education sector of our state, and it only made sense to me that someone with such credentials and understanding would participate on the comprehensive curriculum writing team. What surprised me, however, is what she explained to me next. Apparently when she was explaining this process to me initially, she left out the fact that this was not the first draft of a curriculum for the state.

Before any of these individuals were called in to form a curriculum-writing team, the state contracted out a company to come in and devise a document fitting the standards the state had previously developed based on “No Child Left Behind” and the GLEs, which all educators agree are a necessary component of any curriculum. Ms. Taylor explained, “The company that helped to develop the Model Curriculum Framework was Appalachian Education Laboratory out of West Virginia, but they contracted with teachers in the southern region to do the writing” (Taylor e-mail). She did not know a great deal about this company or the way they went about developing what became the curriculum’s framework, but she did know that their document would not suffice as the actual comprehensive curriculum because it did not meet the state’s expectations or requirements. She commented,

“There were some problems with it. To put it bluntly, the state wasn’t happy with it. Some of it didn’t appear to be authentic at times. Not only wasn’t it teacher friendly, sometimes there were things that didn’t seem doable within a classroom. There were also some problems in that some of the activities would lay out which GLEs it addressed, but when you read the activities, there was no sign of the GLE within the activity.” (Taylor 113)

This made me quite curious about the company to which the state entrusted the responsibility of developing a curriculum by which to teach our students, but because of her unfamiliarity with the issue, Ms. Taylor was not able to answer any more of my questions on the matter. She did tell me that the curriculum-writing teams the state formed were to dig through the mess of a document the Appalachian Education Laboratory wrote and adapt their ideas into a practical format which would work in a typical ELA classroom (Taylor 113). Ms. Taylor elaborated,

“Initially we were told to kind of try to keep the same titles on each of the activities, and if we changed the order of activities, to have a good reason for doing it. So do you understand? In the beginning, it was more of a tweaking we were asked to do, and as we got more into it, we were slowly given more freedom to work within the document because we realized that it was a little stuffy, too formal at times, and at times, it didn’t have a great deal of creativity.” (113)

Ms. Taylor went into more detail of how the curriculum-writing teams began their work. She explained,

“...once we got into the curriculum, we started making changes. We were given the task of doing a unit at a time, so we would make the revisions as we thought necessary...Then there was a curriculum coordinator for each area. We had one for English language arts, and she reviewed what we did and made suggestions and sent it back to us. And then we revised again, and eventually when she was done with it, it went to the state department. They made comments and returned it, and then it went to focus groups of teachers throughout the state, and then it came back to us to make revisions. Then it went back to the state department and came back to us, and we made revisions...So when I say I’m a comprehensive curriculum writer...I kind of feel like I was going through the motions, and I kind of lost ownership over it because I was changing it to meet the requirements of several different entities. (Taylor 114)

I was certainly pleased to hear about the number of rewrites and revisions done to the curriculum, and Ms. Taylor assured me that she does not have a negative perception of this process either. I agree with her in saying that the more input from a variety of sources the better. This document needed to be not only something compiled by various educators but also something that would be user friendly to all involved. Having people

from various positions within the education sector involved in the comprehensive curriculum writing process allowed this molded form to develop.

After listening to her comment on how much work was put into developing this first major draft of the curriculum, I was curious to know what Ms. Taylor thought about the nature of the document and its longevity. She replied, “I think that we came out with the best possible document we could at that time, but I said it then and I’ll say it now: I don’t think it should be a stagnant document. I don’t think it’s a document that’s meant to stay the same and that we’re meant to use for the next ten years” (Taylor 114). This point certainly makes sense considering that one of the reasons it was formulated was to prevent out-of-date lessons from being taught to our students year after year. Thankfully, as Ms. Taylor commented, the state obviously agrees with both of us in the fact that the curriculum is not meant to be a long-term document, because it is already in the process of being rewritten to include major revisions and additions.

### **Curriculum as a Guide**

Ms. Taylor thoughtfully explained all these elements about the curriculum development to me, and while she was speaking, I was constantly listening to her remind me that the curriculum itself is just a suggestion. After so much work and effort put into the document, I asked her what about the curriculum is required of every school throughout the entire state. She answered quite simply, “GLEs” (Taylor 116). While she couldn’t answer my question about whether or not it would be accurate to say that teachers don’t have to use any of the activities in the curriculum, she could tell me that the state department is mostly concerned with the GLEs. Ms. Taylor commented, “The curriculum is a handy tool to help us to ensure the delivery of the GLEs. This is how I feel about the curriculum; I use this when I talk to teachers a great deal: I contend that a lot of the problem that the students had passing state tests is simply because they were not

receiving the information to be successful” (117). She went on with an elaborate examples of how her daughter’s eighth grade honors English class spent an excessive amount of time on identifying parts of speech and how pre-curriculum teachers could spend unlimited amounts of time on any topic of their interests without regard to the valuable information the students were missing, which would be necessary to pass state-mandated testing (Taylor 117). Ms. Taylor continued, “...there were things being taught prior to a comprehensive curriculum that had no place in the English classroom, so I’m going to contend that the curriculum now makes it clear the things that need to be taught in the classroom. It gives the teacher direction” (117).

While the comprehensive curriculum is meant as a sense of direction for educators, Ms. Taylor was quick to point out that often times it is up to individual school districts or even principals to enforce the document as something that must be followed to the letter of the law. She explains,

“All these things say sample. But for heaven’s sake, if the teacher knows what she’s doing and she gets it and she understands those GLEs and she understands how to get them across and she has a creative way to do it, I don’t understand why she wouldn’t. Now there are some districts where the teachers are required to follow the curriculum to a tee. There are some schools where the principals require that they follow the curriculum.” (Taylor 121)

Her comments certainly make sense and relieve me as educator who has worked for the last six years to earn credentials and as many qualifications as possible before actually entering the work force. The question that remains is why would principals choose to adhere to the document so closely if they had qualified teachers employed? Why wouldn’t they let the instructors do what they have prepared for so long to do? And repeating the question I developed earlier, why would a school system hire an unqualified teacher if our common goal is to see progress in our state’s educational performance.

The majority of the small group of teachers who are not required to follow the comprehensive curriculum, such as Ms. Young, feel blessed to have free reign over what they teach their classes, when they teach whatever material they choose to use, and how they assess their students' comprehension. Ms. Young expressed nothing less than resistance to the idea of having to teach by a prescribed curriculum and found very few instances where such a plan would be an optimal way to go. She remarked,

“I think when you talk about the comprehensive curriculum, I keep going back to what Laree said...it's a guide only. The GLEs are what you have to do, and I just can't see anybody following it...unless...ok, let's say I'm a seventh grade teacher, and I'm not really a teacher and subbing...then that might work...I was lucky that even in public schools, I got to write my own curriculum. I have never had to follow a prescribed curriculum. I don't think I could...Oh, I know I wouldn't want to! I don't know if I could; I don't think I would...If I didn't believe in it and think it, I wouldn't do it.” (Young 110-111)

After twenty-five years as an educator, Ms. Young feels this strongly about teaching based on the state's document. She expressed nothing short of relief when reassuring me that the comprehensive curriculum is absolutely only a guide, but her comments left me with several questions. If a teacher with so much experience and credentials has such an unfavorable opinion about having to follow this document to the letter of the law as some schools and districts require, why would anyone force this as the most efficient method by which to teach students?

### **Implementation Options**

I wanted to know more about the state's implementation process, and Ms. Taylor wanted to clarify and continue her explanation of the state's intentions for the comprehensive curriculum. She stated,

“Originally, the state department gave districts three options: they could use the curriculum as we wrote it, they could write their own curriculum, or they could take the curriculum and adapt it to their own needs. But, they had to let the state department know which of the three they were going to do. And initially, I think there were only two, maybe three, districts that said, “We're writing our own.”

And I know that, St. Tammany was one of them; I'm not sure who else." (Taylor 121)

I was astonished to know that with all of the outrage expressed with the state's curriculum that school districts actually had the opportunity to write their own document and simply chose not to do so. How can they possibly complain about the repercussions of adhering to the strict plan if they didn't take their chance to devise something better, more effective? Apparently a few school districts did just that, though. Since I have heard so many wonderful things about the Lafayette Parish curriculum, I was curious to know what Ms. Taylor had to say about their document's development. She commented,

"I have a copy of the Lafayette curriculum because I love what they do. I see a lot of elements of the original curriculum. To me, there's seems like an adaptation...a darn good adaptation but an adaptation. I don't think they went off and wrote their own curriculum. After seeing theirs, I was encouraged to add those independent reading components that you're seeing across the units because of the initiative in Lafayette Parish." (Taylor 122)

### **"Spontaneous Professional Development"**

Another interesting point that I never before considered is how the comprehensive curriculum has sparked such heated conversation about education and what should be done for our state to see the progress we need to move up within the country's national educational ranking. As Ms. Taylor pointed out, education may not have received a lot of consideration beyond school board meetings and strictly educational settings, but once the comprehensive curriculum was released, people throughout the state, those both actively involved in the educational process and not, had an opinion about it and most times didn't mind sharing that opinion with others. She remarked,

"...the curriculum has provided spontaneous professional development. I've never heard people in all the years I've been in education talk about curriculum as much as they did once we got a comprehensive curriculum. Good or bad, like it or not, people are talking, and it makes me so happy that we are finally talking about what it's important that we teach children. And that is what the curriculum has provided for us more than anything else, which makes me thrilled." (Taylor 117)

This “spontaneous professional development” about which Ms. Taylor speaks is integral in defining an effective curriculum. As I stated earlier, we cannot rely on teachers alone to develop a flawless curriculum; we need to have input from various sectors, including but certainly not limited to administrators, educators, consultants, parents, test developers, and community members.

Chapter 3 deals with applying the examples set forth by the LSU Lab School to the state’s public school system to yield similarly high results during academic testing and assessment of student skill and comprehension. I use findings from both Connie McDonald and Carol Young to discuss best practice for teaching in the secondary ELA classroom and provide an in-depth study of the benefits of including a world literature program of study in all schools. Next, I present an argument for the benefits of integrating folkloristic elements and units of study into the ELA curriculum and use information from the Louisiana Folklife Program and Maida Owens to suggest possibilities for teaching such material. Finally, Ms. Young shares with me her comments on the current curriculum, and Laree Taylor emphasizes the progressive differences included in the 2008-2009 rewrite as well as her hopes for the future of the state’s comprehensive curriculum.

## **Chapter 3: Suggestions for Enhancements to the Curriculum**

### **Bridging the Gap between the LSU Lab School and Other Public Schools**

The LSU Lab School sets high standards for education, and the state's school systems could only benefit from taking an example from an institution striving for nothing short of excellence. To make such connections, we must consider the endless stream of resources available to the Lab School as opposed to the lack of funding from which most public schools suffer. After teaching in different environments, I knew Mrs. McDonald would be a good person to give me insight to this matter. However, even she was stumped when trying to reach a simple solution to such a complex issue, and the reason for that is because there is not a simple answer. She commented,

“I don't know enough to...know why it's not...equal. I just don't get it. I lived in Lafayette for ten years where there were five schools, and they were equal. And, I've never seen it anywhere else. I haven't been many places, but I know in the towns there are the rich schools and the really poor schools...and the test scores reflect socioeconomic levels more than anything...And so, what's fair about that? ...teachers don't want to be in the lower level schools. They teach there for a while, and then they try to transfer into a better school. I mean, there could be something there with maybe rotating teachers through schools. Those are problems I just haven't concerned myself with, I guess.” (McDonald 99)

While it might not be Mrs. McDonald's job to concern herself with this issue, it is the Louisiana State Department of Education's job, and to a certain extent, I supposed it does need to be a concern of all involved in the education field. Again, we see a reference to Lafayette Parish, a school district which has one more leg up on EBR...a way to level the available financial resources among its five schools. The more I hear about Lafayette Parish, the more I see it joining the ranks as a school system to which the state should look as an example, a model of potential for what all schools could function like with the right guidance.

Mrs. McDonald makes interesting and well-known observations about failing schools and socioeconomic levels, and her initial reasoning for this occurrence is concurrent with mine. I know that as a prospective educator, I have my ideals already set about in which schools I would or would not like to teach. Schools that are typically in lower-socioeconomic areas educating students of the same status typically have a hard time employing teachers who have worked hard to achieve credentials allowing them to have their pick of schools. The question then becomes how do we make these failing schools more attractive to attract the best teachers? After all, if school's test scores need to be revived, it only makes sense to have the best and brightest individuals working to achieve that goal to reach the end result in the most efficient time frame. The state department once offered a loan-forgiveness program in which it would lend prospective educators money while they were working to achieve a degree, and in return for signing a contract to teach in troubled schools for a set amount of time, the loans would be forgiven. To my knowledge, no such program exists any longer. While I could not get a definite answer on why this offer was discontinued, I know it was one means of attracting aspiring teachers to the environment in which they are perhaps most needed.

If the state would redistribute finances both among and toward the educational sector, there would be more available resources to develop in-classroom or at least in-school libraries which could bolster a sustained, silent reading (SSR) program like the Lab School and Lafayette Parish Schools offer. Mrs. McDonald, an educator who plays a large role encouraging this program at the Lab School, commented on its benefits in saying,

“We [at the Lab School] follow what we know to be best practice, which is a combination of research that endorsed by NCTE<sup>56</sup> and IRA<sup>57</sup> and just a few basic

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<sup>56</sup> National Council of Teachers of English

<sup>57</sup> International Reading Association

premises are that students need to be surrounded by books of all different levels and genres. Research tells us that the only time a student improves or a person improves his reading comprehension is when he reads on his own level for ten to thirty minutes, and if he passes from one class to another on a textbook that is too hard for him and he's not given time to read in class..., he could go days...without ever reading. And, that's what's happening to a lot of students in our country; ...our reading scores are really dismal...what books are given are the textbooks, and for many kids, those are too hard. So, they're just not reading. So, the best practice is to have books of all levels in the classroom and library and to give students time and choice...If we think that ten to thirty minutes is important, then we don't need to relegate that for home. We might do that also, but we want to get a jump start in the classroom...So, supplying books of all levels, giving them time to read, giving them a choice of reading materials, reading to them...read aloud. We encourage that from all the way up to every grade level...a little time to read aloud, and not round-robin reading when the kids are being forced to read a sentence or a paragraph, but teachers reading to the kids using voices and also getting kids to volunteer, kids who want to read, readers' theater...any kind of way of hearing the language spoken." (McDonald 92)

This statement is packed with many imperative points concerning reading level and comprehension. Not only does Mrs. McDonald speak volumes about the benefits of creating a library with which to surround students, but she also comments on the importance of teaching with resources beyond that of the traditional textbook. If students do not understand the material, one of two things must happen: a new tactic must be used to reach the necessary level of student comprehension or new material must be used. Otherwise, students are not successfully grasping the GLEs they must understand and be able to apply to any source to ascend grade levels. In many instances, I think a combination of those two suggestions would be the most beneficial for students, but after all the research by not only myself through interviews with long-time instructors but also that from educational professionals, it has been proven that challenging students and using material that is above their comprehension are two different things. Teachers must start with a basic concept and allow time for mastery before asking students to apply the new skill to difficult material. Textbooks alone do not always allow for this transitional period, and that is why a comprehensive curriculum, school districts, principals, and

teachers must allow room for and provide outside resources to help students build their proficiency with the GLEs.

Ogbu writes<sup>58</sup> about “hearing the language spoken” in relation to minority groups, and his points concerning the matter focus on the benefits of incorporating multicultural and multiethnic literature in the classroom, an issue I have already written much about and will continue to discuss in the next section of this chapter (McDonald A3). Ogbu writes,

“Minorities with oppositional cultural/language frames of reference do not define cultural or language differences they encounter in society as barriers to overcome, but as markers of *identity* to be *maintained*. For these minorities, there is “a White way” and a “minority way” of talking and behaving. These minorities feel strongly that their way of talking, walking, etc., is an expression of their group identity; and that the “White way” is an expression of White identity.” (289-290)

While Ogbu is a self-admitted anthropologist over educational specialist (as someone who acknowledges he has never even taken a single education course), he makes interesting notes about the way minorities interact in the classroom, and his studies are directly tied to my research. Ogbu’s comments can be directly applied to the way some students conduct themselves in the classroom and engage with the literature being taught to them. If students of African American, Haitian, Cuban, Acadian, and other descents are taught literature written by and about their people, they are more likely to feel comfortable in a classroom environment which is not only welcoming of all ethnicities but eager to learn and share about others’ cultures. Many multicultural and multiethnic texts include dialogue, colloquialisms which allow students a rare and beneficial opportunity to dive into a culture and experience it as if they were a part of it. And for those students who are a part of the culture in study, they will feel less of a need to

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<sup>58</sup> Ogbu, John U. “Adaptation to Minority Status and Impact on School Success.” *Theory into Practice* 31.4 (1992): 287-295. JSTOR. 3 March 2008 <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0040-5841%28199223%2931%3A4%3C287%3AATMSAI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S>>.

express themselves in the “White way” (Ogbu 290). Ogbu’s comments along with their implications about educational environment provide yet another support for diversifying the curriculum to include literature and writings representative of a variety of cultures in the form of subject matter as well as author.

### **World Literature Programs in Public Schools**

Another improvement to consider is the inclusion of world literature in the comprehensive curriculum plan for ELA. Ms. Young had a bit to say about the benefits of teaching such diverse literature that is not normally seen as part of the comprehensive curriculum. She explained,

“I think it makes them less reluctant, more open to new things rather than seeing it, like you said, as a foreign language. It makes a difference because it’s scary. I would feel threatened and intimidated and scared, especially if I were a struggling student, and I’ve only read the traditional dead, white men and then somebody gives me this. I would be afraid of it. I would think that I can’t do this...I think it does give them the advantage at college, because...It’s something we’ve already done. I’m hoping it gives them a greater sense of compassion...that they recognize that we’re more alike than different. I’m hoping that they understand responsibility but mostly just compassion and acceptance of others and differences...I would think they would have, perhaps, a better understanding, that it would be easier for them to connect to it [and] that they should be able to make more personal connections, I hope.” (Young 111 and 106)

Ms. Young makes a plethora of excellent points here about what students at typical public schools are missing because they don’t have this opportunity at experiencing world literature as part of their curriculum. And, reflecting on my previous discussion about schools with poor performance and failing standardized testing scores, exposure to such literature would avoid the culture shock about which Ms. Young speaks. Obviously, many of the students in the lower performing schools need factors working towards their progress rather than against it. If they become familiar with such material at a younger age, they won’t have such a difficult transition in their later years of education.

Another factor that must be considered here is the encouragement towards higher education that such worldly influence could make. Research<sup>59</sup> proves that students in lower socioeconomic school systems have higher drop-out rates, and of those graduating from high school, they are not as likely to attain post-secondary education as their higher socioeconomic peers. Teaching world literature as part of the ELA comprehensive curriculum could have multiple benefits, at least two of which are directly tied to encouraging continuing education. Firstly, if students become accustomed to various literary exposures, they will lose the reluctance about which Ms. Young speaks. While the material may not be something they have seen before, they will be accustomed to approaching new ventures and will not view the material as threatening but rather as challenging, something that students actually do enjoy when they feel well prepared to handle the trial. Returning to Henson's remarks about tradition and underestimating student potential as a reason for not teaching untraditional material, Ogbu writes<sup>60</sup> about "lowered teacher expectations" and even the incorrect assumption and "labeling of minority children as 'educationally handicapped'." These are not the students for which teachers need to make excuses as to why they cannot handle the material; these are the students who need to richness and cultural diversity that comes from multicultural, multiethnic, and folkloristic explorations.

Secondly, being better able to relate to the people about and authors from whom they read may provide direction for students who are unsure about what post-secondary educational ventures to pursue. As Ms. Young states, if all these students have read are "dead, old, white men," they are not likely to draw strong connections between these

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<sup>59</sup> [http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachingGoals/Goal\\_2/Dropouts.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachingGoals/Goal_2/Dropouts.html)

<sup>60</sup> Ogbu, John U. "Minority Education in Comparative Perspective." *The Journal of Negro Education* 59.1 (1990): 45-57. JSTOR. 3 March 2008 <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-2984%28199024%2959%3A1%3C45%3AMEICP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U>>.

authors and themselves. Louisiana is a state especially rich in heritage, a cultural melting pot in and of itself, and students in the school system are a direct reflection of this conglomeration. While many of the students may have been born and raised in America and perhaps even Louisiana, their ancestors were not. It is important for us as educators to teach students about their individual heritages and the legacies and traditions with which they are associated. According to Public Schools Review's statistics, 83.2% of the students in Louisiana public schools are from American-Indian, Asian, Hispanic, African-American, or backgrounds other than Caucasian, and this measurement doesn't even account for students with Cajun heritage that is being neglected in the current curriculum. Therefore, there is an obviously overwhelming need to appeal to the ethnicities and heritages of all these students.

Ms. Young also made a critical point in her discussion about understanding and empathy. Not only is it important for students to be aware of their own heritages, but it is also essential to a well-rounded education for students to have a grasp on a variety of cultures and ethnicities. As she comments, it is necessary for students to realize that "we're more alike than we are different" (Young 106). The IB curriculum which she teaches also emphasizes this point. She explains it in saying,

"...IB has one of its goals that is to make the student a world citizen rather than a Baton Rouge, Louisiana, American [citizen] but to realize you're a citizen of the world. And that is a world-wide curriculum. Every school around the world is held to the same standards and...it's a global curriculum, so...I would hope that whatever they read, they are able to connect to it because the idea is that you're a citizen of the world and responsible for the world. Another thing about IB, which I think is wonderful, is that they make...better connections, between the disciplines...and I would say that's one of the biggest benefits because they understand that education is not any one subject in isolation, and they begin to see that it all works together. That's an IB goal." (Young 107)

The idea of being a world citizen is one the Louisiana public school system desperately needs to adopt in order to see progress in the ELA classroom; this is the only way to

ensure a strong sense of empathy and compassion for peers, fellow world citizens, and guarantee that GLEs are applied in the most effective ways possible.

### **Inclusion of Folkloristic Elements**

Another excellent resource to teach students about their heritage and that of the state in which they live is The Louisiana Voices Folklife in Education Project. The chair of my thesis committee and an assistant professor in the English department at LSU, Dr. Solimar Otero, recommended that I speak to Maida Owens who is director of the Louisiana Folklife Program. Ms. Owen's immediately referred me to her website<sup>61</sup>, which is incredibly interactive and abundant in resources for teachers of any grade level and discipline. According to the website,

“The Louisiana Voices Folklife in Education Project provides teachers and other K-12 educational programmers with tools for teaching Louisiana folklife—including extensive teaching materials, training, research strategies, student activities, concepts, and content—via the Louisiana Voices Educator's Guide. Louisiana Voices supports educators with instruction and assistance on the use of these tools and provides forums of communication through which individuals may share information and offer feedback.” (*Louisiana Voices*)

Ms. Owens' website offers details about the extensive professional development opportunities in the forms of workshops at various locations as well as professional development sessions in which Louisiana Folklife Program specialists come to individual school districts or perhaps even schools to conduct sessions on how to teach folkloristic elements in the classroom.

The website works to simplify teachers' already hectic schedules by providing innumerable resources with which to teach students. The program's website states,

“The heart of the project is this Educator's Guide with nine study units that include dozens of lesson plans and student activities. They are theoretically and methodologically informed by the discipline of folklore and draw upon folklorists' research of Louisiana's traditional cultures. The Educator's Guide is flexible and easily adaptable to any curriculum, aligned with educational mandates, and

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.louisianavoices.org/>

accessible to teachers with no previous exposure to folklife studies. The lessons align with the Louisiana Content Standards, accentuating and augmenting existing curricula rather than creating extra work for teachers.” (*Louisiana Voices*)

These plans would be incredibly helpful for teachers who are working to include folklore projects, such as the one I briefly suggested as an example in my introduction, into their lessons and units. The educator’s guide clearly lays out all the resources at teachers’ fingertips once they are on the site, and provides a list of valuable resources from Ms. Owens herself through the individuals who are available for workshop presentations and professional development sessions.

The Louisiana Folklife Program once offered the opportunity for teachers to invite its folklorists into their classrooms as guest speakers on specific topics or to perform student-oriented workshops. Sadly, because of a lack of state funding, this avenue of the program is no longer active. A major suggestion I would make to the state is to redistribute funds in whatever ways possible to be able to get this program up and running in even the slightest capacity as soon as possible if for no reason other than the research-proven benefits of student comprehension through interaction and kinesthetically-based instruction<sup>62</sup>. Having the actual folklorists come into the classroom to energetically speak to student about firsthand experiences in the field working with different ethnicities of people is the most likely method to interest students and get them excited about completing a similar small-scale project of their own.

The benefits of such inclusions into the curriculum are indescribable, but the Louisiana Folklife Program’s website still does a stand-up job in saying,

“The goal of the project is to provide frameworks for the study of culture and an academically sound basis for both multicultural and technology education. The interdisciplinary study of traditional arts and community-based research in classrooms validates students’ heritages and traditions, while fostering critical-

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<sup>62</sup> Kramer, Susan. “Benefits of Kinesthetic Math and Language Lessons.” *BellaOnline*. 31 Mar 2008 <<http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art24248.asp>>.

inquiry skills, developing primary research skills, and relating curriculum and classroom to students' lives and communities because students participate as experts on their own folk groups and cultural traditions.” (*Louisiana Voices*)

This explanation not only zones in on the importance of emphasizing a student’s role as a world citizen but it also directly addresses ELA concerns of inquiry and researching skills and in turn simplifies the countless benefits of often times ignored fieldwork research. Only when students are exposed to the idea of research through other individuals will they truly see the deep-rooted connection between the entire world’s people and fully come to understand and appreciate how much more alike we are than different, as Ms. Young explained earlier.

### **Suggestions by an Established Educator**

After all the other possibilities I have explored, I wanted a credible outsider to tell me what revisions he or she would propose to the curriculum. With such a plethora of teaching experience in her past, I was curious to know what suggestions Ms. Young would make for enhancing, improving, and diversifying, what she terms the “hideous” comprehensive curriculum (Young 107). She replied,

“One of the important things I want the kids to know and be able to do before I pick the first piece of literature...what’s important? What do I want the kids to leave knowing and understanding? And then I build my curriculum around that. I think I would also stress that it’s not about how much but how deep. Can I transfer knowledge? Instead of doing fifteen poems, five might do if they really learn to read a poem. I would stress that it’s ok for them to enjoy literature...And I know it’s hard with a fifty-five-minute class. I know we are blessed with the block but even if you only have a fifty-five-minute class, if you can give those kids just ten minutes of reading...But still, that opportunity to read makes a big difference.” (Young B8)

I find the need to draw attention to Ms. Young revisiting her previous comment about quality over quantity, a benefit of the IB over AP curriculum. If mastery of the GLEs, the only required part of the comprehensive curriculum per Ms. Taylor, is what is truly critical, then teachers and curriculum writers alike must realize that not all students will

meet, much less exceed, the proficiency level on these standards with only basic exposure. When developing a program of study, writers must account for the differences in student learning and allocate room for multiple opportunities to master the same skill. And as Ms. Young states, that allowance may mean covering fewer literary pieces, but at least the students will truly understand what they have studied. She also reiterates the factor which I have heard so much about at this point, the importance of having an SSR program in every school, regardless of to what extent it can be implemented. Her final commentary concerning enrichments to the current comprehensive curriculum resided in her support of McTighe and Wiggins' *Understanding by Design* training and professional development; she stressed how influential such training has been on her teaching methods and strongly suggests that all teachers, especially those new to the profession, have the opportunity to work with such helpful strategies for reaching all students.

### **Changes in the Works**

Towards the end of our interview, Ms. Taylor began informing me about the revisions that were currently being made to the comprehensive curriculum with the intention of them being released before the 2008-2009 school year. I stumbled upon this line of questioning with her when I was raving about the SSR program intact at the Lab School, and when I asked Ms. Taylor if the state department structure allows for SSR in every English classroom, she responded,

“There better be [room] since I insisted on making that an activity in every single unit...there’s an independent reading activity as part of every single unit. Ok, I fought for that; I don’t mind telling you. And that could be Connie’s<sup>63</sup> influence on me. I saw the power of a strong independent reader program, especially because I worked fourteen years in alternative education with really struggling, urban kids, and the power of that independent reading program was phenomenal for them.” (Taylor 106-107)

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<sup>63</sup> Connie McDonald from the LSU Lab School

This one revision is bound to make a world of difference in the comprehensive curriculum; the state writers are finally taking the research that shows what is best practice and insisting that those methods are present in every English classroom. Even after hearing such exciting news, I was hesitant to assume that the comprehensive curriculum's SSR program would be as unrestrictive as that of the Lab School and Lafayette Parish's, but Ms. Taylor actually read a portion of the curriculum's newest version to me. It states,

“The teacher should facilitate intimate reading of student-selected novels by providing time for sustained, silent reading on a daily basis. A portion of this time may be dedicated to reading aloud from engaging texts. This practice may be especially important if students are reluctant readers or not accustomed to reading independently for sustained time. The teacher should monitor this reading making sure to incorporate both oral and written response to the text. Response may be initiated through a variety of strategies including response logs, dialogue letters or learning logs'... 'informal discussions at the end of SSR and book talks. Whatever the strategy or combination of strategies, students must go beyond summarization if their responses are to meet the GLEs listed above. The GLEs may be genre-specific, but they are not meant to restrict student choice or to require teachers to design special focus lessons to accommodate student choice. The teacher may facilitate reflection in higher level with Bloom's taxonomy through written response, individual student-teacher conferences and/or whole-class questioning. Lists of the works students have read should be maintained and monitored.” (Taylor 107)

This portion of the curriculum is well worded to include suggestions for reading aloud as well as multiple student response options, all of which are implemented at the Lab School and in Lafayette Parish. It is also important to make note that the revised version stresses to teachers the importance of effectively assessing the students' mastery of the GLEs by pushing for beyond-summarization responses.

I also found it interesting that these revisions also tell teachers to have the students' lists of works read maintained and monitored; this is a good practice for a couple reasons. First, students are encouraged when they are able to track their own progress, and it is rewarding to them to see their lists of books read grow throughout the

year. This practice encourages the reluctant reader and will maybe even form a pattern of genre preference to aid the student in selecting future works to read during SSR.

Secondly, this list will also provide an excellent means by which to tie incentives for students achieving certain levels; for example, perhaps after the class has read so many books or each student has read so many books, the teacher could reward the class with some sort of celebration or maybe a class-period trip to the library for students to browse new works. This inclusion of independent reading is the first step towards a stronger ELA curriculum, which is in turn going to produce stronger, more efficient readers.

Ms. Taylor continued by explaining to me that three other additions have been made to the comprehensive curriculum, and from the moment she began describing them to me, I could see a strong Lab School influence. In addition to the independent reading activity, she stated,

“What you are going to find is that the first four activities of every unit is the same...One of them is going to be...an ongoing vocabulary study...There will be a writing prompt, and it encourages teachers to have kids write often...then there’s a grammar component...which basically suggests these mini lessons as needed and as appropriate, and then what we’ll have is a sample mini lesson that relates to one of the activities that will come later in the unit.” (Taylor 106-107)

These are all necessary and progressive changes being made to the state’s comprehensive curriculum, and what is dually beneficial about them is the fact that the students’ comprehension rates will soar while the teachers will work with what Ms. Taylor is describing as activities unbound by restraints.

### **Hopes for the Future**

As a curriculum writer, Ms. Taylor has an optimistic outlook for not only the future of the comprehensive curriculum but also the educational ranking of the state of Louisiana. I was curious to know what Ms. Taylor’s hopes are for the prospective

curriculum and what the main goals she hoped the curriculum-writing team would accomplish from all these revisions were. She commented,

“I see a growing, living document, which is what I hope it will be. I want to see it grow as the needs of the learners grow. When we’re writing, we try to remember that we are not writing for the student we have today; we are writing for the needs of the student we hope to have tomorrow. So, what we’re trying to do is create a document that pushes teachers and students...sometimes teachers say, ‘Kids can’t possibly do all of this.’ Well...if they could do it all, there would be no reason for [teachers] to do it in the classroom...we want a document that pushes kids and pushes teachers to the next level. So what I’m hoping is that the kids will eventually get there and we’ll say...Now, we’ve got to bump it up a little bit. I hope it’s a living document. I hope it’s not one that becomes stagnant and becomes the end all and be all. I hope three, four more years from now that there’s another curriculum team, and it probably shouldn’t be me...somebody that’s fresh to look at it and to revise it again to meet the needs of teachers and students who have hopefully moved beyond the needs of that document. That’s what I hope in my fondest hopes. I don’t know if it happens that way or not; I don’t have a crystal ball. But that would be my fondest hope is that nobody says, ‘Oh yes, that is a great document. This is where we need to be!’ because I don’t think education works that way. You have to continue to build. After being in this profession, it’s the growing and the changing that you’re forced to do year after year...” (Taylor 123)

I fully agree with Ms. Taylor in her assessment of the curriculum as “growing and living;” it is only in considering the document in this way that Louisiana will see actual and continued progress in the education department. She is also accurate in looking at the curriculum as something that is being written to produce the students we want to have in the future. The education department as a whole must work to attack our problem of low student testing scores by acknowledging that it is a problem, firstly, with comprehension. In developing a curriculum that will strengthen student comprehension, the state should see a dramatic increase in testing scores, but the most critical benefit will be that the students emerging from such a more conducive learning environment will be better prepared to successfully face the future and embrace all its challenges.

## **Conclusion**

After extensive research, I am now convinced that the comprehensive curriculum is not a completely unprogressive plan. More than anything, the revisions which are to go into practice next school year encourage me about the potential effectiveness of the document. Many implementations I would like to have seen made into the curriculum are part of the newest revisions, and I am quite interested to see how teachers, principals, and school districts will respond to the new ideas. I also expect to see a rise in test scores at the end of the upcoming school year that is at least somewhat more significant than the rises seen since the implementation of the first draft of the comprehensive curriculum in 2005. As I have stated throughout my thesis, I will attribute this newly-found success to a stronger emphasis being placed in reading across the curriculum by using literary tactics once absent from traditional public schools throughout the state, such as sustained, silent reading, writing prompts, vocabulary, and grammar as maintenance rather than weeks of direct instruction.

While I make the suggestion of the state looking to the LSU Lab School as a prime example to try to imitate in other schools because of its academic success, the state has already taken the first step to doing so in raising literacy and reading comprehension proficiency as main goals for the English language arts curriculum. Just as I performed fieldwork in the form of interviews with two highly respected educators and an ELA curriculum writer, I implore the state to find the funding to get the Louisiana Folklife Project operating again so students can learn the benefits of fieldwork firsthand and strengthen their understanding of and compassion for other cultures and ethnicities in addition to their own.

In addition to benefitting from a defined in-school reading program and the incorporation of folklore studies into the classroom, the two ideas merge in literature selection and availability within the school and individual ELA classroom. Best practice by worldly-renowned educational researchers, authors, and instructors proves that surrounding students with an abundance of reading materials at various levels and including an assortment of genres encourages active literacy which in turn improves students' reading rate and comprehension. Also, diverse selections including multicultural and multiethnic books appeal to students' sense of compassion for other cultures as well as an appreciation for their own heritage. Creating a learning environment where each student feels not only comfortable but proud of their own legacy and associated traditions is the best way to produce academically-successful students who are more encouraged to seek post-secondary schooling and thrive in the defined fields of their choice as educated world citizens.

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## Appendix A: Interview with Connie McDonald

**Connie McDonald:** At the lab school when the comprehensive curriculum first came out, which is only within the last few years, we weren't following it and we felt pretty confident about what we were doing. We just didn't know much about it, even though some of us were involved in the state department with committee work with the GEE. We felt like we had a handle on the test, the kids did well, and we just really didn't pay attention to the comprehensive curriculum. But through a series of events that just kind of came together, a confluence of events, we started working with Lafayette Parish, and they showed us how they had done some revisions to the comprehensive curriculum. And we had them come over for a two or three day retreat, pretty much camped out in Lod Cook, and had the lead teacher from Lafayette Parish do what she called unpacking the comprehensive curriculum. This was Harriet Mayer, and she just sort of opened our eyes to what a good job and thoughtful job the state committee and especially the Lafayette Parish teachers who revised it had actually done with it. We understood...we knew *Understanding By Design*<sup>64</sup>, Grant Wiggins and Jay Mctigh, and we were familiar with that and we were able to see how that had been used to do the comprehensive curriculum. We had pretty much not taken a hard look at it and felt like ours was good enough, but when we looked at it, we realized that we could use it and started using it or started using it as much as we saw fit to use it and really saw how the units were designed and how they fit better together...so we recommend that for our new teachers when they come, and most of us...and certainly all of us...follow the GLEs. We saw how they had coordinated them, and we just felt differently about it. We haven't totally jumped in, but we respect it a lot more than we did at first when we thought we just don't need it.

**Adriane Comeaux:** What are some of the major differences between the revisions Lafayette Parish did and just the comprehensive curriculum that's followed by most of the rest of the state?

**CM:** From what I can see, they ordered the activities. They took the activities that were recommended, and they sort of translated them into more student-friendly, teacher-friendly activities using maybe the GLEs but incorporating best practice with it so there's a mixture of small group, partner work...in a class period there might be direct instruction a little bit and then there might be partner work, small group work, whole class work, a lot of different configurations of group work for the kids to get their hands on and apply some of the things they were learning. So, that was something we felt like we always did and we just hadn't seen what we thought were really great activities in the curriculum guide, but when we got the revised version of the Lafayette, which I think is online or I could get it for you, it made sense. We liked...we liked...with best practice kind of infused sort of woven in through it, the activities seemed better. We were like yeah...that makes more sense to us. Other differences...it's just more thoughtful. I think that they had a little more time. I mean somebody did the groundwork, the state committee, and they were pretty pressured and rushed, and the Lafayette teachers were paid to go back into it. And, I think they spent a summer of pretty intensive everyday work going in and really thinking it through. You can tell a classroom teacher did it. It

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<sup>64</sup> McTighe, Jay and Grant P. Wiggins. *Understanding By Design*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD): Alexandria, VA, 2005.

was sort of like state department meets Nancy Atwell, and then it comes out as something we can live with and do and maybe even admire and steal from sometimes.

**AC:** Is it in just as restrictive of a timeline that needs to be followed to get the activities done?

**CM:** Well, it's not at all. Where the word restrictive would come in is from an individual parish and how they choose to interpret the comprehensive curriculum. Because it was designed by the state not as a you have to do this but as here's a guide. The main thing is follow the GLEs; here's a way you can have a unit and follow the GLEs. So, the Leap test, the GEE test, and even the upcoming end-of-year, end-of-course...we may need to talk about that because GEE is over. It's like dying, and the end-of-course test is kicking in this year as a pilot and next year for real and none of those tests are content driven. It's not like if you didn't do *Beowulf*, you're going to fail. So, the original plan, even though that wasn't the word that got out, at least in EBR, the way the state presented it is here's a guide, the comprehensive curriculum, and if you follow this, you are going to be following the GLEs, they're automatically in there. And so, EBR and several other parishes in the state take it almost literally and objectives on the board and monitored and the activities all have to be done and have to be done in this order, and that's different from the way Lafayette interpreted it as a school system, and there's was give it a try...they thought it was a good idea for everyone to start with short stories in tenth grade, say, but as far as what they did and how they did it, you know it was truly a guide.

**AC:** So, what are the major problems you see with the way EBR follows it to the letter of the law, in this order, in this way...what are the major problems you see with that?

**CM:** Well, I see it from a distance because you know I'm definitely not in the trenches doing it, but from talking to the teachers I know and to the students who observe those teachers, they don't have time for some of the things they know based on solid research will help students improve reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary...they don't have...the comprehensive curriculum, if it's followed exactly as it's written, one big gap is that it doesn't allow for sustained silent reading, and that's something Lafayette Parish wrote into the curriculum because they had many years of their own research as well as national research on reading that showed them that students reading ten to thirty minutes a day jumped a grade level after they've read about a million words, about twenty books. So, they trust that research...they've seen it happen over time, and they weren't going to give it up, so that's something they really pushed, whereas in EBR it's not there so that if a teacher wants to try to push it in, she's risking...she's risking not following something she's supposed to be following. Some of them are monitored and some of them are just not allowed to do it.

**AC:** And I mean, I know from teaching at the school, but for the sake of my research, could you tell me a little about silent sustained reading?

**CM:** We follow what we know to be best practice, which is a combination of research that endorsed by NCTE and IRA and just a few basic premises are that students need to be surrounded by books of all different levels and genres. Research tells us that the only time a student improves or a person improves his reading comprehension is when he

reads on his own level for ten to thirty minutes, and if he passes from one class to another on a textbook that is too hard for him and he's not given time to read in class and there's not much reading going on, he could go days and days and days without ever reading. And, that's what's happening to a lot of students in our country; I mean, our reading scores are really dismal. So there's...what books are given are the textbooks, and for many kids, those are too hard. So, they're just not reading. So, the best practice is to have books of all levels in the classroom and library and to give students time and choice...let them choose a book that they want, give them time to read it... If we think that ten to thirty minutes is important, then we don't need to relegate that for home. We might do that also, but we want to get a jump start in the classroom. Even if we have a fifty-minute class, we'll give them longer; if we have longer, then some days we might give them longer. So, supplying books of all levels, giving them time to read, giving them a choice of reading materials, reading to them...read aloud. We encourage that from all the way up to every grade level...a little time to read aloud, and not round-robin reading when the kids are being forced to read a sentence or a paragraph...but teachers reading to the kids using voices and also getting kids to volunteer, kids who want to read, readers' theater...any kind of way of hearing the language spoken.

**AC:** I know that doesn't seem to expire at any age level because I know when we had our creative writing juniors and seniors, they loved it...reading our little book, *Tuck Everlasting*. It was precious, and they loved it...and that is at the highest level for high school students.

**CM:** And they chose it and were enchanted by it all over again. Low accountability is recommended for the independent reading so the teacher is not testing so much or feeling like she has to police if they're reading but you know, progress checks...looking over their shoulder to see how much they're reading, see what page they're on, talking to them, getting them to write you letters about the book, doing book talks or low stress kind of activities to encourage the reading. And, book talks are an important part of that because research says that students tend to read books that are recommended by peers more than anyone else, teachers, or things that they might read or even the librarian...all those things are good, but they do tend to read books that their friends have read, so we try to give them a lot of chances to talk to each other about books...

**AC:** ...which really makes sense if you think about it because I'm the same way. I can walk into Barnes & Noble, walk around for two hours, and walk out with nothing. But a friend says, "Oh, this is a great book," and I'll say, "Oh ok, I'll try it out."

**CM:** And I think that's true for almost every part of teaching, if we just think about how it is for us, then we get the answers...that works for almost everything. The thing I get tripped up on is the reading logs. I use them, and yet, I think sometimes that it's a mistake...you know, they don't like it.

**AC:** Tell me a little about that...

**CM:** Reading logs for me...I guess this is about the twentieth year I've done them or maybe twenty-fifth year, something like that...but I've chosen that as the way to make the student accountable for his reading because it didn't feel quite right to me to do just free reading. At the same time, I didn't want to test them...we rejected accelerated

reader, any kind of test on reading, and so I guess I've gotten lighter handed on the reading logs...I've gone through it. It used to be you have to write it, you have to have this many pages, and it's sort of evolved into a combination of writing about the book, writing letters...letters directly to me or each other about the book, sort of dialogue journals. We do most of it in class; it's usually guided. It might be a collage including a lot of artwork or symbols about the book and also giving them credit for reading log if it's out loud, if they do a book talk or readers' theater or something in a group that can also count. So, I guess it's expanded as I've read more and more about what other teachers are doing and that research that says that it needs to be low accountability...it didn't feel quite right to say that, you know, every chapter you read you have to write.

**AC:** Well, it's not meant to be a punishment; it's meant to be encouraging.

**CM:** That's right. So we are just constantly trying to work on it, and when I think ok, about this time of year when the kids say, "We hate reading logs!" I think well, I should just quit, but it's like what I said earlier about going back to yourself...I go back to my own reading logs, and I think...some of my best writing is what I've written down in response to something that I have read...I've gotten an idea from an author or you know, a book talk that I have done or written a note to somebody about a book...so, I know it's valuable. I don't want to cut it out; I want to just keep thinking of ways that make it fun for them.

**AC:** Right. Well, I know when I was working here, I saw how much effort a lot of the students put into it...making it look great and everything, and especially considering the fact that it's something to do in class, it's not something extra that they are taking home...I never...I mean, I heard a lot of feedback that was negative about them not liking it. Why do you think that is...why do you think they are so resistant to it? Being that it's not extra work for them, it can't be that...

**CM:** I think it's thinking. Writing is thinking, and they love, you know, so luckily most of them get to a point where they like to read or they love to read, and some never. But most of them, maybe ninety percent get to where they really like to read or they love to read, and some of those kids just hate to have to stop and write about it. They want to just keep reading. To write about it seems more like school, seems more like slowing down and having to say something, and thinking is hard work.

**AC:** Besides accountability, what benefit are you hoping they gain from having to write about their reading?

**CM:** Well, I hope that they...it is the thinking part...it's that those high levels of thinking will give them those choices of reading log ideas...even something like, "I can't understand... or I relate to this because..." All those are the little jump starts that get them into the higher levels of thinking. They might not get there, or at least it slows down their thoughts, slows down their process, and I think that's valuable. You know, those fleeting thoughts we get while we are reading...I mean that's really great and good for us, but I think it's also good once in a while to get some of those thoughts down, to look at it. They lead to discussions, they lead to literary analysis...it's that kind of expressive writing that can lead to all sorts of things, that can even lead to poetry. It's so valuable as expressive writing.

**AC:** Do you use any textbooks with your students? I mean, I don't recall us every using any...

**CM:** No...no, I don't think I have any. I have some textbooks, and I do rely pretty heavily on them personally...on *The Writer's Craft*, which is McDougal-Letell, and it's been around forever. And last year on a whim, I thought I'll get a set, but unfortunately, I haven't use them as a classroom set. You know the kids get them and they take them home, but I've never found a time when I want the kids to take out a book and open the book...but I use it because it's Peter Elbow and Applebee and some really famous writers and thinkers and teacher researchers, and they've created a really wonderful book that could be the comprehensive curriculum...like when we do the up-and-down charts or when we do the autobiographical writing, I like to look at those books and get ideas from them, so I've saved a lot of money just by kind of staying with my one little copy. But, it's also sort of handy in these days...and I did this when the comprehensive curriculum first came out...I wasn't sure where that was going to go, and I wanted each kid to have a book at home just in case he needed to look up a rule, look up something, clarify something we've done in class...I wanted them to have a resource. And that's kind of how it goes. I can say, "Well, look on page 247 to check on these comma rules." Even though they might not, I feel like I'm covering it in class, and if they want extra work with a tutor or with a parent or by themselves they can go look...and that's been kind of nice.

**AC:** So, how is that different from the structure of the comprehensive curriculum? Because I know in the classrooms that I've gone into...I've done some work with Dutchtown in Ascension Parish and just different schools, and they're very reliant on textbooks. I know I'm about seven or eight years removed from the kids I taught, but I know when I was in school, we went though the Glencoe literary series. And every year we had a new textbook with the same format, the same way, and all we relied on was that textbook...and when I was teaching with you, we had individual resources, we pulled things from files, we did a lot of handouts, and we never relied on a textbook. So what are the differences you see in that? What do you think the benefit is over using the same book all the time?

**CM:** Well, I have two thoughts on that. I think one is what I know about best practice, and this is a book by Steven Tchudi. And, it's an old book, but he and his teacher researchers pulled together a list of most effective ways to teach, and the least effective was chronological, textbook bound. And, I think a lot of school systems buy the textbooks, and the teachers follow it...and it's all about the textbooks and the textbook money and the textbook companies, so they follow them. But that is the least effective way, and then it moves on down in different approaches. The best, of course, is one on one, but the second best is reading-writing workshop where the teacher is selecting things that are appropriate for the kids and they are reading and responding and thematic grouping...thematic units are the recommendation there, a reading-writing workshop with a thematic unit. And that is kind of hard to do if you have to follow a textbook, but the teachers that I know who know that and are trying to work within the textbook chose something, say from that literary period, and they try to link it up with an article or a poem or a story and kind of achieve that thematic feel even though they are being required to go through the textbook. And the other thought I had on that was...about it

being used...One of the things the state is pushing and each parish seems to really think is important, and I guess it is, is that if everybody is on the same page at the same time, then if somebody moves in, they can...so there's that.

**AC:** Well, my major issue with that is it seems like that was also...I wouldn't say the central driving force, but a major part of the comprehensive curriculum. You want students to be able to make an easy transition. However, another theory that I've heard behind it is that they wanted to prevent teachers who are more stuck in their ways and wanted to teach the same thing every year. At the lab school, we're blessed with such wonderful accommodations like the ELMO system and all this modern technology, and some of these older, veteran teachers not...they don't want to use it. It's not even that they just don't understand, you know, they need more training. They don't even want to consider the idea of it, so it just seems like creating a comprehensive curriculum that just revamps all of this...if it's not done every few years, I seem to think the same problem would come out of it all over again because even though you're doing something new, once you've done that new thing five, six, ten years, it's old.

**CM:** That's right, and we know there are teachers who are starting with the nouns and moving on through the parts of speech maybe even twelve weeks, and their schools scores are actually...even some of the schools that are gifted schools...are taking a dive. They're not...even though the scores are fairly high, they're not moving up. That's really some old, old stuff, and I think that's why let's say a parish like Lafayette Parish where that's happened where the teachers are determined that this is the first two six weeks, we are going to do grammar...I think that's one reason why they do push the comprehensive curriculum in the public schools...really to make it more equitable; it's a matter of equity. Some of the teachers are good teachers I guess, or qualified teachers, and they're using an old model and some of them are...I don't know how to define them and I'm not exactly sure why...but some of them aren't doing their jobs. They're not teaching at all. So, by having a comprehensive curriculum you would encourage those people who are teaching from crumbly notes and teachers who really just didn't know what to do or couldn't do it or just being negligent...if they had to do it, then that's going to give some kids in some schools who weren't getting anything to get something...because the teachers have to. I've seen that to. I've seen almost a matter of equity, especially those at-risk schools where sometimes the teachers are not really doing anything because they say, "My kids can't do this; this is too hard for my kids." With the comprehensive curriculum, the whole theory behind it is that they can do this, and you've got to teach this because we're on this unit. So, in some ways...you know...

**AC:** Well then on the other hand, I look at a school like the lab school... When I walked in on the first day, I was surprised to see that we were teaching our sophomore English II students American literature because that's an English III curriculum based on the other... So, what's the difference between that and the lab school? Is that a Lafayette Parish idea? Do they offer World literature their senior year?

**CM:** No, they follow British lit senior year, American lit junior year...I think that's just a few elitist kind of schools like maybe Episcopal had the idea that maybe somebody somewhere thought our kids are so much smarter than that that we should just go ahead with that. But, it's not a good idea, and it's not one we really follow. We focus on American writers like Langston Hughes but we're certainly not taking it literally like

starting with the Puritans this year. But, some private schools have thought that their students are so smart that they should have junior courses that are going through the textbook that year. I've known sophomores forever, and I just don't think that's the right fit. I don't want to do that. I like wide reading and wide choices and sort of tailoring it to their interests, and junior and senior year if they need to go into an IB curriculum, see at this school they just don't really get anything lock-step through the curriculum because I don't even know if they would have a good timeline...they know the romantics...they kind of pull it together when they are seniors, but they get such a hodge-podge in ninth grade world lit and then American lit and other stuff thematically in the sophomore year, and if they go into IB they are having thematic units again. If they stay in regular, I guess that would be the closest because they do have a textbook and if they're in regular junior English, they're getting British lit and if they're in regular senior English, they're getting world lit here.

**AC:** So, I guess that would be something to talk to Mrs. Young about because I know she's worked a lot with the World literature. But briefly, what does she try to incorporate into that? Does she look at a lot of different cultures with the World literature? Is there a set curriculum I guess that maybe she has made up on her own?

**CM:** She has, and I think she uses the IB...because IB is worldwide, global...and through that she'll tell you about that...but I think she's used a lot of that material with regular kids. It's a rich curriculum; she'd be a good one to talk to about that.

**AC:** So, in your curriculum, since you have a lot more open space, a lot more choices of what you're going to incorporate, do you find you try to incorporate different kinds of maybe women's writings, folklore elements, different cultures?

**CM:** I don't know enough about folklore elements; I don't think I can tell you that I use that. I did try to use...we do [inaudible], we do Langston Hughes, I'm trying to think of the short stories that we use...some of them are not, some of them are dead and old and white. I think Eudora Welty. We do some Native American writing and poetry and prayers. We do *The Crucible*, excerpts from *When I was Puerto Rican*, Esmerelda Santiago, but I think they're limited by what the teacher knows.

**AC:** Well, and I guess you are teaching American literature, though; even though you have a free reign on your resources, you do need to keep it restrained within...

**CM:** Yeah, but say you came in and were the student teacher and knew what you know now, of course we would do folklore.

**AC:** What benefit do you see the students gaining from that kind of exposure?

**CM:** Well, I think it's always great if they can broaden their horizons just a little because the kids we have are generally pretty well traveled but they don't know anything about where they've been but they had a crummy McDonald's or the McDonald's was built just like the castle. It's just limited...

**AC:** like in a pop culture sense...

**CM:** Yeah, and so I think it would be really fun to broaden them up a little bit.

**AC:** I was thinking more on the perspective that I've worked at the writing center on campus, I work with student athletes now, and at the writing center I guess more so I saw a wide variety of students. Typically of my student athletes, the ones that I work with for a main basis came from a lot of lower socioeconomic schools or their high schools just weren't ranked very high as far as standardized testing scores go but it seems like...if they would have had exposure to different kinds of literature...like you said the dead, old white people comment...I've heard that a lot actually...and it just seems like if they would have had exposure to things beyond that, in addition to it, they would have had less difficulty adjusting to a post-secondary education. They get into these classrooms...and you know, even taking African-American literature classes and history classes, they still haven't been exposed to much of that...and I know personally, when I was in high school, if there was anything we went into beyond the traditional canon, it would be a little African-American literature. So even in the closest related element, they're still not sure how to approach it. They look at the language that's a little bit different, and they look at the structure that's different, and they feel really overwhelmed by it. So, what kind of benefit do you see the students who are looking into a post-secondary education gaining from these kinds of different studies.

**CM:** I'm not sure how to answer that one. But, I do see that that's what IB is all about, and that's probably a question for Carol because she'd probably say something smart. I think that's what IB is all about, exposing kids to that kind of stretch and making connections and it's all in that literature...it's all in the little booklets about IB. It reminded me when you were talking. But I think she'll give you a smart answer for that one.

**AC:** Well, I look at some of the student, and I think a lot of seniors...and the lab school doesn't have this problem and it surprises me coming from a small town and an interparochial school environment for the thirteen years of my education...that you know, there really are people who don't go off to college...there really are people who don't graduate from high school, and it just seems like the more experiences, the more exposure these students can have to different literature, just based on the English sector, it could possibly spark something. It could make them more interested, help them see this does apply to me. There is such a diverse population in Louisiana schools, if we were tapping into these Puerto Rican descents and Cuban descents, Haitian, Zimbabwean, Nigerian...all these different cultures, these students are from these different places, these different cultures...their families are at least, and it seems like they are more easily identifiable with their own things instead of the dead, old white people curriculum. And besides just keeping them in school to get their high school diploma, maybe this could be something to make them think that they want to study more about this and you know be more encouraging to follow up their secondary education.

**CM:** Oh...I think that's a great answer; I wish I would have said that! And you know, we have the intercultural center right here. We don't use it, and we so could. It seems like with IB we should. We need to talk to them and make it real to them. I thought of something else, and I might have to dig if you need them...but they're online...in the GLEs, there are quite a few that are about other cultures, about exploring the literature of other cultures just for what that's worth. If you need any actual GLEs to refer to.

**AC:** Any more, I guess, overarching comments?

**CM:** Umm....

**AC:** Well, I was thinking about the library here at the lab school, and just in the five or six months that I taught here, I remember Canty the librarian coming in and saying, “Oh well, we have such and such a budget and got a grant, so just let me know what kind of books you’d like me to order.” Are you ever able to utilize that for the kids, picking out specific things you want them to have? And what are the benefits you see that funding being a benefit over the less fortunate schools that don’t have all these wonderful resources that the lab school has in addition to the university?

**CM:** I just don’t know what to say... We’re just so lucky here, and we do take advantage of it. And what the library can’t afford...they can just about afford anything, but if we think up something...if we can dream it up, there is generally a way to get it, and that is so not the way it is in a normal public school. And, I know in Lafayette, the Arts Council and several civic organizations...we were able to write grants in small amounts, two to three hundred dollars...for a couple hours of your time you might get two to three hundred dollars...and teachers are willing to put in those hours to get that much for their classroom. Here it is just ideal and not at all typical because we’re offered the chance to order what we need and if we want something beyond that, we can write a grant for our school foundation, and there is such a support there. So, it’s just not even fair.

**AC:** Well, I realize this is a highly idealized setting, but how much do you think the way the curriculum is structured and the materials that the traditional public schools use...how much do you think that’s hindered by funding and the fact that they don’t have the unlimited resources of the lab school? Do you think that maybe...I hate to use such strong language, but do you think that in some form the students’ education is suffering from this lack of funding?

**CM:** I do. I do. I think it can be so much richer. I know that in some of the schools I’ve taught in, we actually hand down books from our new, wonderful, rich school in Calcasieu Parish, we would send boxes of tattered books to lower schools, lower socioeconomic level schools, and I didn’t realize that until a teacher transferred from one of those schools into our school and said, “We used to get you guys discarded textbooks, and that’s what we were using.” So, I still don’t think we’ve worked all that out, but one good thing is that reading and writing don’t cost very much. English is really not an expensive thing, and it’s really nice to have some technology so that you can project things and record things, but if you have a classroom and have lots of books for the kids to read and paper and pencils, you can have a pretty good English class.

**AC:** Do you have maybe any suggestions or do you think there is a solution even if you don’t have one as to how the gap could be bridged slightly between such wealthy, blessed, affluent schools and some of the schools which just don’t have this money, don’t have this parental involvement, don’t have this support system?

**CM:** I don’t know enough to...I don’t know why it’s not sort of like equal. I just don’t get it. I lived in Lafayette for ten years where there were five schools, and they were

equal. And, I've never seen it anywhere else. I haven't been many places, but I know in the towns there are the rich schools and the really poor schools...and the test scores reflect socioeconomic levels more than anything.

**AC:** Because I think it's all based on resources as far as that's concerned. I mean, think about it and how much more the school that's wealthy could have than the school that's not.

**CM:** And so, what's fair about that? And the teachers don't want to be in the lower level schools. They teach there for a while, and then they try to transfer into a better school. I mean, there could be something there with maybe rotating teachers through schools. Those are problems I just haven't concerned myself with, I guess.

**AC:** Speaking of having the resources, you have a great library that you've built for your students in this classroom. How have you, I guess, come to gather all these resources?

**CM:** A lot of these came from the grants I wrote in Lafayette for books, and then because those students didn't have as much money as the kids do here...here I ask students to donate books, and I collect books that parents might give me and exchange them for books that are appropriate for the kids and write grants to get books and spend a whole lot of my own money to get books.

**AC:** Well, I know when I was teaching here, we had a young African American student come to us and ask for reading that was more about his culture, the background he was from, his ethnicity. He wanted to read about someone "like him," which makes sense. We were just talking about relating to peers, your peer recommends something that you want to read and you feel the same way, that's what he read. So, let's say you had a student that came to you that was of Puerto Rican descent or Cuban descent, Hispanic of some sort, do you have any resources like that that you could maybe send them to?

**CM:** I do. We do have quite a few fiction books, which we try to stay abreast of that group by Ms. Canty coming in and saying I have these new *How the Garcia Girls Got Their Accent* books." She tries to talk to us about those books. We have so few students from other cultures, which is one of the problems, but she does talk about the books and do book talks on them.

**AC:** And she tries to keep the library fairly well stocked with multicultural literature?

**CM:** She does. Lots of it goes unread...maybe we need to do a better job of advertising it or doing book talks about it...because the kids are interested in themselves, and the books that are going right now...I see more and more are *Gossip Girls*, shopping books, and the boys are doing sports.

**AC:** I agree because you ask them to pick something like that, and they think about all the classes they are taking and they see it as...that's work; I'm reading all these books, and that's work. And I can't argue with them, and I realize that I'm fairly close to their age level, and I know when I'm forced to read something for one of my classes, most of the time, it's not something I enjoy because I don't want to be told what to read. But, I know when I got up there and gave book talks, we talked about Eli Weisel's *Night* and they loved it...and a lot of them read it and enjoyed it...and I know it was a shorter read,

but that's not necessarily something...I think they can sympathize with it, but it's harder for them to empathize with it because they are so far removed from the situation like that. So I do think that incorporating...having people come in like Ms. Canty and talking about things like that could really help them.

**CM:** I think so. I think that that is going to put a face on it, and that's given me some ideas about those multicultural students, too. And then a kid might read a book about another culture and get it...

**AC:** I think it's based on emotion. You do want to relate to the character, but I think it's relation more than just the physical appearance or a lifestyle, which is what I think a lot of these kids try to pick if they go out on their own...like with the *Gossip Girls* series...that's a lifestyle, a physical appearance that they can relate to. But, when you show them something like *Night*, they try to draw from their emotional experience, their intrinsic feelings. And, that's why I think they could still find a draw from the different multicultural literature.

**CM:** The IB is all about multicultural literature. They read from all over; they sample all sorts of different cultures...and I think that in some ways, the students have to read what they want to read...a reluctant reader is going to read until he's full of whatever it is about himself, and then he might be willing...what Carol says if these kids can come to her and they've read twenty books this year and they've read twenty books last year and they've got a lot of books under their belt, they're more willing to look at *Madame Bovary*, or to look at *Marques*, or look at something different than they would be if they had to read *The Scarlet Letter* this year...and that was one of two books we really made you read and write. She says that they're much more open because they have done such wide reading, even if it was all young adult themed. I haven't paid attention to their multicultural independent reading, mostly it's going to be from what we might present in a short story or poems.

## Appendix B: Interview with Carol Young

**Carol Young:** Years ago when I started teaching AP...you know, the AP list is a mile wide and like most AP teachers, it was how many pieces can we cover. And, I think that kind of broadened my base as far as what do I like, what do the kids like, what do we do with it, how do they relate to it, and then, later...many years later...after going through *Understanding By Design*<sup>65</sup> by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe...I went through that training...and it made a world of difference because some of the things that were stressed were: Why am I teaching this? so that before I teach it, I...you know, where am I going? What do I want the kids to get from it? Now, for years and years and years intuitively, I'm making connections between student life and book material. And, I've always told my students that if I can't connect it to your life, I'm not going to teach it because then it's just superfluous. But then with *Understanding By Design*, I had a better understanding of the how and why it should connect to their lives, and I also came to realize that less is more, and if the student is truly learning the skills, then they'll transfer it. If they can read this short story and do a good job with it, then they should be able to read independently other short stories. So, that was a kind of big influence. But then because of AP and having been through so many pieces, I kind of had an inkling of what worked and didn't work, so now as I read a new piece, I'm thinking...I put on my kind of student brain with what can I do with this that the kids will get. And then of course teaching world lit, it's been a wonderful experience because, again with the *Understanding By Design*, I create thematic units, and... So, I sort of thought about as far as my syllabus goes for my regular seniors, it's thematic and I start with a nonfiction unit. We generally read whatever LSU freshmen are reading and often try to go to the convocation so they can hear the author. And, the idea, I start with my central idea and questions...(phone rings)

Since I teach seniors, and I like the thematic approach, I've got my year divided up into five units. The first unit is nonfiction, and I'm trying to focus on as far as using the *Understanding By Design* the idea that nonfiction is important, and if we're going to be lifelong consumers of information, we need to know how to read information. So, we talk about how nonfiction...why it's important, how it's important, and how we judge, and we look for bias and we look for...the one we read this year was *Breach of Faith*, which was a book on Katrina which none of us liked, but it was really a good book for jig-sawing because there was so much bias in it and the kids could pick it out just like that and we could talk about how it's slanted and even though...we talked about how you could tell a half-truth and call it nonfiction, but anyway... So, that was kind of there, and then we read a couple of articles and since my students this year are eligible for concurrent enrollment, we had to do the same papers the students are doing across campus.

**Adriane Comeaux:** So, the concurrent enrollment just means that they get LSU credit for...

**CY:** They get English 1001 credit if they have a 23 on the ACT in English, and a couple of those papers involved non-English or non-literary research for a couple of papers. So

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<sup>65</sup> McTighe, Jay and Grant P. Wiggins. *Understanding By Design*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD): Alexandria, VA, 2005.

again, that's kind of feeding into the nonfiction, and then after that unit, I moved to kind of preparing the kids for accepting responsibility for their choices, their habits, and helping them understand that ignorance is not an excuse. They're leaving home, so we focus on things like what it means to be human, what do we have in common with other cultures, and how the human condition...people don't change. We all have the same needs and the same desires, so this makes it easy to bring in pieces from wherever...looking for those common human elements and things like trying to understand our world, make sense of our world and trying to find some speck of immortality. So, we read things like "Gilgamesh," *Perceval*...we'll talk about the importance of communication...so all of these things sort of pick pieces that feed into whatever it is, in my *Understanding By Design*, whatever my theme is. So, that's basically now how I choose: what do they have to know and be able to do, and then I fit the literature to my purposes instead of the other way around.

**AC:** How often do you find you change your plans, either between what you want your theme to be or what your literature selection are even if you keep the same theme?

**CY:** I'll change one or two things every year simply to keep me fresh because I find if I teach the same thing too many times, I begin to assume that they know something that they may not know, so I need fresh eyes. And, I just like doing stuff. There are a few things that...standards that...just like every junior is going to read *Macbeth*, there are a few things, like *Oedipus*. That's a given; we're going to do *Oedipus* because it's important for so many other pieces when thinking about the tragic hero and the different kinds of irony, so it's important. I used to teach *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which of course it's American but it's woman and black, and I like the idea of giving a voice to the voiceless. But then after watching the movie, I'm having trouble with it because the movie was so bad.

**AC:** *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?

**CY:** Yeah...It's Hallie Berry.

**AC:** I did see it.

**CY:** And the movie just completely distorts the real meaning.

**AC:** The essence of the book, it just ruins it. Just like *The Kite Runner*. I don't know if you've ever read the book...

**CY:** Oh, I love the book!

**AC:** I refuse to watch the movie because the book...I will sell that book to absolutely anyone. I said I cannot watch this movie because there is no way the theater could do it justice.

**CY:** And, I'm thinking about working *The Kite Runner* in next year because it is such a beautiful book. I'm thinking that next year I have to put it in because I didn't read it until this year.

**AC:** Well to use that as an example, when you talk about drawing connections between your students' lives and the book material that you use, what about if you were to present a book like that? I know I worked with younger student than you did...

**CY:** Well, I've got... I think I would probably use something like developing an identity as a dynamic process because he is on a quest. And that's one of my themes...and it's how others influence us, how we influence others, responsibility to self and others, perception, and I think it would fit beautifully with all of those. Now, with my IB students, I teach *Huck Finn*, which, of course, is highly controversial, but you lay the groundwork. And you talk about, for example in *Huck Finn* how so many people misread it and you talk about satire and what did Mark Twain really intend. And if you lay the ground work and you tell the kids that there's going to be some stuff in this book that today may seem inappropriate but if you put it into the context of when the book was written, who wrote the book, and the intent, then you can get away with it, and I've not had any problems with teaching *Huck Finn*. The rape scene in *The Kite Runner*...I think if you lay the groundwork, I don't think it's an issue because the kids I teach watch R-rated movies, and they're very much aware of it. I think a lot of it depends on your students and the maturity level.

**AC:** It's understanding what purpose that played in the literature; it wasn't just for shock value.

**CY:** Exactly.

**AC:** Well between your mainstream students and your IB students, what are some differences in your literature selection, the process that you go through, or how different is your lesson plans for the two of them?

**CY:** I like to use *Understanding By Design* with both groups. IB has a little different structure because it's divided into four parts. Part one is for an external essay, part two is for an oral presentation, part three works are for the exam they sit for, part four works are for an informal class presentation. So there's a little bit of difference, but we still work in poetry, drama, short story, novel...all the different genres. They're just connected a little differently. As far as teaching style, I think I have my regular kids write more.

**AC:** Why is that?

**CY:** Because they'll write more papers but shorter papers. My IB kids do longer papers. My IB students are required to make formal, oral presentations, so I give them oral practice. We probably cover maybe fewer works in IB, but they're longer works. We'll do several more novels. We'll do maybe ten or fifteen novels in the two years, whereas with my regular kids were maybe doing two novels in the summer and throughout the school year maybe three or four.

**AC:** So, you have World literature students for two years?

**CY:** My IB students I have for two years, and that is a World lit course.

**AC:** How does that exactly work, the IB Program? I think that's going to be a foundation for everything else I'm setting up.

**CY:** It's a two-year program, and I like it much better than AP.

**AC:** Why?

**CY:** Why? Because they get no multiple choice. AP is one-shot wonder. You sit for the exam, and whatever you get on the exam...that's it. And they have these hideous multiple choice questions, and the premise is that if you try to teach a kid to think and then you give him a multiple-choice test, well, am I really trying to teach him to think or am I trying to teach him how to think like me? And, I have argued with kids prepping them for AP because they'll have a perfectly logical explanation and answer, and it's not the right answer. But, IB offers multiple chances. Part one they do an external essay, and it's mailed somewhere in the world for somebody else to grade. Part two they do a formal take. We sit together. They will do an oral commentary on an excerpt or poem, and IB will chose seven or eight tapes, my really high, middle, and low, and they get mailed somewhere in the world. They do another paper that gets mailed somewhere in the world. They do an informal presentation that just I assess, and then they sit for an exam. And, I like the fact too...AP, they sit for an exam for like four hours. IB breaks it up into two two-hour exams, so I think IB is just more...allows the student more room for expression and multiple opportunities. So, if you're not feeling well one day or if you don't do well here, you can still make it up there.

**AC:** And, it seems like it gives them a variety of testing. If you shine more on an oral exam, you still have your opportunity...

**CY:** There you go. And it adds room for creativity because the second paper can be a creative paper as in adding a chapter, writing a parody, having two authors have a discussion. You can do creative stuff. You can also do creative stuff with the informal oral presentation in the classroom...like last year, I had two girls. We were doing *Waiting for Godot*...they took *Waiting for Godot*, and wrote their own music...the theme of meaninglessness, talking at each other, and they had the same motif in their music. One was on the keyboard, and one was on the violin. It was fabulous, and then they did some improve in which it was sort of a cacophony where it went back into that meaningless theme again. And, their verbal explanation of what they were doing and why they did it...it just blew me away. They were just awesome, so IB encourages creativity and thinking as well as analysis, and I don't think AP does.

**AC:** Does the program itself give any definition or restrictions or guidelines for the curriculum that you're teaching?

**CY:** Yeah. The first three...part one books must be in translation, and there has to be something that holds them together. But, in literature you can find almost any theme...or maybe it's imagery that holds them together, but they have to be in translation. Part two works must include at least one Shakespeare, must include two or three poets, a novel...so, while there are guidelines and while there is what's called a prescribed book list, there are about eight thousand, ten thousand books on the list and major authors from every country in the world, so it's pretty easy to use.

**AC:** Is that something you take into consideration when you are trying to pick novels or books of any sort, trying to make sure you incorporate things from different countries or...

**CY:** One of the things I'm working on right now is incorporating more non-Western lit because even though I have got from a lot of different countries, I have tried different books from different countries and taught them like *Devil on the Cross*...I think it's from Kenya...I just can't do the ending; the ending is too contrived. I have tried *Sand Child* from India, and it starts out pretty good where the father has so many daughters and the last child, he swears will be a son and when it's a girl and it's time for the circumcision, he puts his finger in the baby's diaper and cuts off the end of his finger. And she grows up as a boy, and she gets accustomed to the power and control. So, when she becomes a young woman and hits puberty, she refuses to be a woman...she still wants to be a man. The content I didn't have a problem with until you get to the ending, and then it was kind of a write-your-own ending. And I didn't like that. I think next year I will change one of my readings for *Fires on the Plane*, which is the story of a Japanese soldier. It's sort of a memoir in the sense that the guy really was a prisoner of war in World War II, and it's the Japanese in the Philippines resulting to cannibalism...again it's a quest for identity, for who am I? Again, I'm not crazy for the ending because at the end of this book, he is institutionalized, he's lost his mind, and it's his memories as told from the insane asylum. So, one of my problems with non-Western literature is that they don't know how to end the book. Don't look at me!

**AC:** What about the women's writing and the women's literature?

**CY:** I do Zora Neale Hurston. With my IB kids we do *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is the crazy woman in the attic from *Jane Eyre*. I love that book. I do with my regular kids, we're doing *Like Water for Chocolate*, again kind of giving voice for the voiceless. And then of course, in poetry we'll read some of the feminist writers. Off the top of my head...we'll read an excerpt from "A Walk to the Jetty" by Jamaica Kincaid and yeah, we do a lot of dead, white men. We do...One poem that I always do is "Barbie Doll." It's great. It was written in the sixties by Marge Piercy. And it starts out...she was born normal and then by the end, she has offered herself up because she just can't figure it out and it's really good. We talk about that and identity and how in middle school, girl or boy, you feel so awkward and uncomfortable. And someone looked at her when she hit puberty and said you have a big nose and fat legs, and from then on that's all she could see was the big nose and fat legs no matter what she did.

**AC:** And how common is that?

**CY:** Oh yeah. It's a great poem. And I always end the year with my regular seniors watching the movie *The Fisher King*.

**AC:** I sat in with them for part of that...

**CY:** I love that movie, and it's got kind of all the things...and it's got some existentialism and some romanticism and it talks a little about Niche and its got some

surrealism, so it's got all the different isms in it besides being a good movie...so that's how we end the year.

**AC:** Well, besides the students reading the same thing the LSU students do and getting all the obvious benefits when they're here, what do you think they're taking beyond high school having this variety of World literature they're reading with you?

**CY:** Hopefully...

**AC:** I mean opportunities that students at public schools are missing because they don't have this opportunity at World literature.

**CY:** Well, I think it does give them the advantage at college because I have kids come back and say, "Oh, we're reading this or we're reading that." It's something we've already done. I'm hoping it gives them a greater sense of compassion...that they recognize that we're more alike than different. I'm hoping that they understand responsibility but mostly just compassion and acceptance of others and differences. But I think one of the things that...most of the kids here have done some sort of volunteer work in the community, so I don't know how much influence the literature has versus their volunteer work. I don't know.

**AC:** Well besides just covering some of the same things in college that they read with you here, what about when they approach something different in college but it's still part of that world literature, something they still had exposure to here? How do you think they're better able to work with that?

**CY:** I would think they would have, perhaps, a better understanding...that it would be easier for them to connect to it...that they should be able to make more personal connections, I hope.

**AC:** I don't think I phrased that question too well. I guess my main thing I would like to look at is what do you think is the overall, overarching benefit of having your two years with these students and being able to teach different literature, different writing?

**CY:** Well, that's IB. IB is two years.

**AC:** Right.

**CY:** Ok, so we're asking the benefits of the IB?

**AC:** Well, we can talk about both...IB first.

**CY:** Well, IB has one of its goals that is to make the student a world citizen rather than a Baton Rouge, Louisiana, American but to realize you're a citizen of the world. And that is a world-wide curriculum. Every school around the world is held to the same standards and that it's a global curriculum, so yeah, I would hope that whatever they read, they are able to connect to it because the idea is that you're a citizen of the world and responsible for the world. Another thing about IB, which I think is wonderful, is that they make connections, better connections, between the disciplines. For example, Cynthia

Edmunston and I will always pick at least one book that we share. They'll see it in English class, and it'll be, "Oh gee, we talked about this in science or now I get it." And the students by the end of the year are making connections between the disciplines, and I would say that's one of the biggest benefits because they understand that education is not any one subject in isolation, and they begin to see that it all works together. That's an IB goal. That is a little tougher in the regular class, but that is something that we as a school are working on...that is making connections between the disciplines.

**AC:** The main part of research is focusing on the comprehensive curriculum. I guess I'll start my questions by saying how much experience do you have with the curriculum? Have you ever had to work firsthand with it in teaching it? Do you just know of it secondhand...I mean I know you've been able to see it before, but do you...

**CY:** We did a three-day workshop in the department this summer in the comprehensive curriculum 6-12 and looked at what Lafayette is doing, and we helped write some units for the middle school by taking the comprehensive curriculum and applying it...because I will say this, the comprehensive curriculum does work pretty well with *Understanding By Design*, and it's not so bad until you get to the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade is much more prescriptive. The 11<sup>th</sup> grade, of course, is American lit, and the 12<sup>th</sup> grade is British lit. I think it's hideous.

**AC:** Why?

**CY:** I don't think I could do first unit in the year a literary research paper and six weeks *Beowulf*. I would just gag. I would lose those kids before they ever drove up. That's just hideous. I think some of the...I don't think a senior in high school really needs to know synecdoche and metonymy. I don't think parallel episode and pathetic fallacy are really that important to a high school kid. Whoever wrote it I think was just showing off saying I know these big words. Yes, my IB students do know synecdoche; they can identify it. We read a lot of it when we read Eliot, but I really don't think it's that important in the curriculum. But at the workshop, we also had somebody from the state department tell us that the comprehensive curriculum is really just a suggestion, that it is not etched in stone as long as we are covering the GLEs. I think the GLEs are fine. I think the comprehensive curriculum 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade is unrealistic. It is not engaging, not even for me much less a kid. I think it has...I think the GLEs are fine, but I don't like the comprehensive curriculum. I don't think you start them off day one with a literary research paper.

**AC:** So, with all of your experiences teaching, what are maybe some suggestions you would make for enhancing it, improving it, diversifying it?

**CY:** I think the first thing I would do...One of the important things I want the kids to know and be able to do before I pick the first piece of literature...what's important? What do I want the kids to leave knowing and understanding? And then I build my curriculum around that. I think I would also stress that it's not about how much but how deep. Can I transfer knowledge? Instead of doing fifteen poems, five might do if they really learn to read a poem. I would stress that it's ok for them to enjoy literature, and one of the things I have to say is that since Connie McDonald has been at this school, she has sent me more readers than I've ever gotten...in that ten fifteen minutes of their

personal-choice reading...makes a world of difference. When we did research...she, Connie and Teri Gudou did research on the number of books checked out by students, and after Connie and Teri had been here a few years, the number of books checked out went from like down here to up here, I mean from a few hundred to thousands. And, that I think I would tell any beginning teacher is an important thing to look at. And I know it's hard with a fifty-five-minute class. I know we are blessed with the block but even if you only have a fifty-five-minute class, if you can give those kids just ten minutes of reading...I'm no good with journals; I can't do logs and all that. I don't know how she does it. I've tried; I'm a failure. But still, that opportunity to read makes a big difference.

**AC:** Do you do the SSR with your classes?

**CY:** Mmm hmm.

**AC:** Do they have free reign over what they choose to read?

**CY:** Absolutely. I mean, I'll walk around and look at it, you know, and...or I'll make a recommendation. I don't keep the books in my room like Connie does. I let them go to the library, but I do...I give them ten, fifteen minutes, and they read. And I think that is probably one of the best life skills you can give any kid.

**AC:** I think so because it teaches them to want on their own. It gives them the desire to want to know more, and as Mrs. McDonald was saying when we were talking together, it's the freedom. I know even as a person who loves to read, an English teacher, if you sit me down and say you have to read this book, I don't want to read that book, most likely.

**CY:** You're going to be somewhat reluctant.

**AC:** Very reluctant.

**CY:** And I for years would ask kids when did you decide you don't like to read? And without fail, almost every one of them would pinpoint the fifth grade. And I would say why? And they would say that's the first year they told us what to read...so yeah.

**AC:** What do you think about the literature selections that are typically incorporated into the comprehensive curriculum...I mean for the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade you seem to have a little more experience...versus what you get to choose for your students?

**CY:** I don't think they're all bad. Like, *Beowulf* I think is wonderful; I just don't think it's six weeks worth. I mean, come on. I mean, first of all it's...in fact, I love *Beowulf*. I love the book *Grendel*. I just don't see spending that much time on it. I just don't see making the kids try to write a kenning and you know...it's...and I'm also noticing kids today don't know...and Connie and I were talking about this; are we a dying breed? They don't get as many of the allusions. They don't know fairy tales, certainly don't know the Bible, some of the common myths... They grew up on a different genre and a different...what, would it be a mythology? It's not the same stuff I grew up on. And so, I think that maybe we need to rethink some of the things we teach because they don't get it, and it's not that they're dumb. It's just because they have trouble connecting. Percival...and when he visits the castle of the Fisher King; they don't all understand the

symbolism of the lamps, the grail...because they don't know the Bible, they don't know the Last Supper, so you have to tell them all of this before they can get that, and I think we kind of lose them before we ever get them...

**AC:** You get so lost in back stories that you lose the point of the main focus.

**CY:** Exactly. And I don't know if maybe we need to rethink some of what we teach because of that, or if we go back to third grade and make sure they've got the fairy tales, and... I don't know; what do you think?

**AC:** That's what I was thinking...more of a change in hardwiring of the actual students or a change in exposure in a more commercialized society...the more we go, the more we are losing sight of...I don't want to say "traditional" because I don't like that word in that context as it makes me think of the "dead, old white men" comment that you made, but it's just exposure.

**CY:** Yeah, they have a different background.

**AC:** It's a different background, and I think it's becoming more sanitized in a way that's becoming very hindering because you're so worried about...

**CY:** politically correct and not offending anybody...

**AC:** Exactly. And it's not that I have a problem with that, it's just that there's a limit to everything. There's a point when it becomes hindering rather than progressive.

**CY:** Which is why, depending on the maturity of the class, I love to teach something controversial because I think it does kind of shake them out of that sanitized everything's got to be this way. We just got through with my regular seniors watching *Othello*, and we talked about the mixed cultures and we're going to do some more discussion on it Monday. But, it's more than just that. We talked about why would *Othello* be so susceptible to Iago's manipulation, and it's because he's not part of the culture. If you put me down in China, where I know nothing about the culture, I'm going to do whatever somebody tells me...and, so...yeah...

**AC:** Well, and it allows for students to become critics, and how often do they really get that opportunity? Especially in their upbringings, how often do they get the chance to sit there and criticize? It's just like what you were saying that they read a book and hated it and were just tearing it apart...I think that's wonderful that they can actually say I'm not just going to take this author's word as the end-all-be-all. This is my opinion on it.

**CY:** Well what was great was as they were tearing it apart, they're able to say...point out where he is using loaded language, strong bias and alienating the reader because of that, and I haven't found anybody who liked the book...but that's ok.

**AC:** I was thinking about that as well when we were talking about the fairy tales. We read *Enchanted Maidens* by Taggart...I can't remember his first name...in my women and folklore class this past semester with Solimar Otero. But, as a class, we hated the way he wrote. He presented the tales in a part, and you see all the fairy tales and think I know this one from Disney. And you realize no, this is a folk tale that was

commercialized by Disney, and this is the nice little pretty picture we get out of it. But, it was so fun seeing where it came from and seeing how different countries and cultures and women versus men told the same tale in so many different ways and changed just this little part of it that made it just a completely different experience for the reader. But in the opposite part, it was like he had a follow up to each tale that he put in there, and he put his own two-sense into it and said, “this is what it means,” not “perhaps an audience could interpret this” but “this is what it means.” But through our dislike for his forced opinions, we were able to make suggestions, say what we did like about it, and I was getting all these ideas thinking that the majority of the students that I taught were sophomores and would have loved going through something like this because it is so different. And I guess that’s what makes me so hesitant about the possibility of being a new teacher teaching under the comprehensive curriculum and thinking where do we put something like this? I guess it seems that there aren’t very many holes left for that individual creativity.

**CY:** I think when you talk about the comprehensive curriculum, I keep going back to what Laree said...it’s a guide only. The GLEs are what you have to do, and I just can’t see anybody following it...unless...ok, let’s say I’m a seventh grade teacher, and I’m not really a teacher and subbing...then that might work, but I don’t see it as...

**AC:** Do you have any other comments about the curriculum or world literature or women’s literature or your experiences being able to teach here in this environment instead of a more restrictive one?

**CY:** No, except I wish that I had had some of the training a long time ago, like UBD. If I would have had that fifteen years ago or twenty years ago...and I think new teachers today, in some ways you’re going to have a harder struggle because the kids are different, but in some ways I think you have it much better because I think more people are thinking about what really is best practice. And I know that you had the best mentor teacher in the whole world.

**AC:** I did. I tell everyone I was so blessed.

**CY:** In some ways I think you’re lucky. I think more teachers are going to be aware of what best practice is, and I would just hope that this state will encourage professional development, and that was one of the things when I did teach in public school, professional development was not really supported and encouraged the way it is here. Many times I took a personal day or a sick day to go something whereas the coaches had what’s called “B days,” but I was lucky that even in public schools, I got to write my own curriculum. I have never had to follow a prescribed curriculum. I don’t think I could.

**AC:** Or if you’d want to, maybe?

**CY:** Oh, I know I wouldn’t want to! I don’t know if I could; I don’t think I would. I think they would have to...I couldn’t do it. If I didn’t believe in it and think it, I wouldn’t do it.

**AC:** One more question that I thought about that I had left out...I work with the student athletes now at LSU. I do get a wide variety of students and not just a stereotypical view,

but I work mainly with Directed Studies program which is designed to work with students who come from schools with a lower socioeconomic background or maybe have learning disabilities. And, I know the way they interact with some of their English classes or some of their African American history classes, anytime they have to approach a different literature...multicultural literature, women's literature, something they didn't see in high school, they kind of freak out when they get it. They're not sure what to do with it, like it's a different language. How do you think the exposure students are getting here in being able to take world literature...how is that giving them the advantage over that other student?

**CY:** I think it makes them less reluctant, more open to new things rather than seeing it like you said as a foreign language. It makes a difference, because it's scary. I would feel threatened and intimidated and scared especially if I were a struggling student and I've only read the traditional dead, white men and then somebody gives me this, I would be afraid of it. I would think that I can't do this.

**AC:** I find it makes them very intimidated because...in a bad way, though...because they like it...*(tape malfunctioned)*

**CY:** I remember teaching *Romeo and Juliet* to freshmen, and you kind of do a translation. Maybe lay a little groundwork like, ok...if you're in the lower socioeconomic group, you know what gangs are...and you kind of do a little translation here of the gangs. And this guy...well, first of all, Romeo was a Rome; he was a flirt and fickle and here today and there tomorrow...and now there's a cousin, and he's putting the moves on her. And now they're all ready to rumble because you know... And then you say...kind of introduce it like that and maybe even break them into groups and let them take a scene at a time and rewrite it. What's going on here? How would you put it into your world? I think if you give them that basic premise they could take it and run with it.

**AC:** I think so too, and that's also why I think the professional development hours you were talking about are so important.

**CY:** Well, I think it goes back to the *Understanding By Design*, too. This may be fun, and it may be engaging, but so what. It's got to have a purpose. What are the kids supposed to come away with? It's just like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I will never show that movie again, ever. I don't know if you have ever read *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin...

**AC:** I have...

**CY:** Have you ever seen the movie *Grand Isle*?

**AC:** No, I haven't. I've never heard of it.

**CY:** It's hideous.

**AC:** If I can, I just want to get a little biographical plug so I can put you in there...just a little about your teaching experiences, how many years you've been teaching, where you've taught...

**CY:** This is number twenty-five. This is my eighteenth year here. I have a Master's in English, National Board certification, and I have taught everything from eighth grade through college freshmen. I've taught seniors more than any other age group. I've only been teaching juniors since IB, for the past maybe ten years, but there's a sweetness with them. But the only juniors I've ever taught are the IB kids, so maybe that's distorted. I like the older kids.

## Appendix C: Interview with Laree Taylor

**Adriane Comeaux:** I guess a good place to start would be what part did you play in the writing of the comprehensive curriculum?

**Laree Taylor:** Let's see... Where do I begin? I've worked at the state level on different initiatives. Originally when there were standards setting...when we were deciding as a result of "No Child Left Behind" what standards needed to be addressed in ELA...that's my area, ELA, so that's all I can really speak to...the...I worked with them in that to establish criteria and test design for the state test, the LEAP, all levels of LEAP, and I've worked on the GLE committee. So, I kind of have an understanding of how they interrelate and kind of the need to know things the state is trying to put forth in the area of ELA. Because of my extensive work, especially on different committees in regards to assessment, such as range finding, item review...with the state department, I was asked to participate on the first curriculum-writing team for the state department. The state went about looking across the state at what they considered to be their strongest core of educators and finding the strongest educator at each level. I was tapped for the ninth grade ELA, so that was what I wrote to begin with. Ok? I originally wrote that using the GLEs that had been assigned to the ninth grade... Actually, it's almost a misrepresentation to say I wrote it, so let me get back to where we started. Originally, the state employed a company that came in and wrote a curriculum. Initially...

**AC:** Do you remember the name of that company?

**LT:** No, I don't, but I could find out and e-mail it to you. There were some problems with it. To put it bluntly, the state wasn't happy with it. Some of it didn't appear to be authentic at times. Not only wasn't it teacher friendly, sometimes there were things that didn't seem doable within a classroom. There were also some problems in that some of the activities would lay out which GLEs it addressed, but when you read the activities, there was no sign of the GLE within the activity. So we were asked to come in and initially asked for lack of a better word to tweak it, take a look at it and adapt it to what we would do in the classroom. There was a theme in a bag, and it said...what that activity was in order to teach things, the kids go home and put five things that would relate to the short story's theme in the bag, and I kept thinking...Ok, *To Kill a Mockingbird*...maybe justice. What five things am I going to go put in a bag? That wasn't very doable for me, so it wasn't going to be very doable for my kids. So there were some things in there that we thought...we didn't know how they would work. So, we were asked to tweak it to make it something that we would use. We were asked to verify the GLEs. Initially we were told to kind of try to keep the same titles on each of the activities, and if we changed the order of activities, to have a good reason for doing it. So do you understand? In the beginning, it was more of a tweaking we were asked to do, and as we got more into it, we were slowly given more freedom to work within the document because we realized that it was a little stuffy, too formal at times, and at times, it didn't have a great deal of creativity.

**AC:** Do you know how this company was selected to write the original foundation for the curriculum?

**LT:** No, I don't. All I know is that the state contracted them to do so. But once we got into the curriculum, we started making changes. We were given the task of doing a unit at a time, so we would make the revisions as we thought necessary, and then there was a curriculum coordinator for each area. We had one for English Language Arts, and she reviewed what we did and made suggestions and sent it back to us. And then we revised again, and eventually when she was done with it, it went to the state department. They made comments and returned it, and then it went to focus groups of teachers throughout the state, and then it came back to us to make revisions. Then it went back to the state department and came back to us, and we made revisions. Ok? So when I say I'm a comprehensive curriculum writer, it's almost like if you've taught kids in the classroom, you know sometimes they get really funny about you messing with their writing. You know...and eventually you lose ownership of it. So, the first round of writing the curriculum, I kind of feel like I was going through the motions, and I kind of lost ownership over it because I was changing it to meet the requirements of several different entities. You know...am I saying that that was a bad process? No. I think we had lots of input. I think the state went to great lengths to ensure it was a document that was acceptable to all parties. I think that we came out with the best possible document we could at that time, but I said it then and I'll say it now: I don't think it should be a stagnant document. I don't think it's a document that's meant to stay the same and that we're meant to use for the next ten years.

**AC:** Do you think that's what the state department intended it to be?

**LT:** No. I never go that feeling. And I don't want to speak for them because I don't know, but I can tell you the impression that I have. And obviously it wasn't because now we're in the midst of rewriting again. We are on the next rewrite which will come out this year.

**AC:** What kinds of changes are being made with the English Language Arts section?

**LT:** I can tell you that what we had was...there was a period of time when teachers across the state were asked...when you're using this document, there was a place on the state department's website where you could write your comments. You could send your feedback, and we encouraged teachers. Even at the lab school, I remember telling Connie and that group from the lab school, "Please, here's the web address. As you're using this curriculum, this document, please send your comments in." And teachers did, so we got a good number of comments from teachers throughout the state, but also the state hired a group of consultants. The state hired outside consultants, a team of consultants...people that I didn't know but Connie knew, so they were people of obvious national prominence in the area of ELA, but they didn't ring a bell to me. What happened was they gave us a review of each unit with specific recommendations. The state department had things they wanted changed, and then there were comments from teachers throughout the state. So, we were asked to do many things in the revisions. Some were as simple as the activities were...in many of the activities, there were an enormous amount of GLEs for the activities. You might have an activity that is a little, short paragraph and you might have eighteen GLEs. See if you could pare those down, and underline the significant GLE. What GLE is it that you are really trying to address? So we ended up underlining two or three GLEs to help teachers see more what the focus of the activity is intended to be. We had to do little things...check links...make sure all

the web links were still current and things like that. Bigger things were looking at the order of the units because some of the teachers talked about switching some units because the order would allow them to address these things before LEAP testing. Or...like I had a drama unit that fell around Thanksgiving and Christmas, and most teachers felt that because the drama unit mostly focused on one literary work that it was all broken up, so they would prefer it at a different time. So, it was things like that...looking at changing those orders we were looking at. We were also able to make any changes to activities that we wanted. We had to make sure that we included... The department of education didn't just give us all of those teacher comments and say do all of these things just because we got the comments. They went through and sorted of sifted through them and got to what they wanted us to do and what they thought were really valid concerns. So, we were given the consultants' feedback on the units, the teacher recommendations, and the state department of education's recommendations, and we were to look at all of those recommendations and incorporate them into the revisions that we're doing now. Like I said, some units changed, some activities changed. Where we changed activities and unit orders, there will be when this is published...there is an explanation of major changes and why those changes were made. Two other things... Another thing is now we were required to include a materials list in each activity so that teachers would have a complete list of what was necessary for those activities. A major change is the addition of black line masters, to where if I say, "Use a rubric to score this comparison and contrast essay," I had to create a comparison and contrast rubric and attach it as a link to the curriculum.

**AC:** So, I wasn't under the impression before that the comprehensive curriculum also told teachers how to evaluate a student's work. But, it did tell them to use a rubric, or...?

**LT:** It did. It would say that the teacher should follow the writing process and score the writing with a rubric. A teacher- or a state-created rubric. Yeah, on the different activities it would say that. But wherever we said a rubric, we had to create them.

**AC:** What do you think about that? What is your own opinion about the fact that the people who were writing the curriculum were creating the rubric instead of the teachers with the students?

**LT:** Yeah, see...that's why I made an effort when I made...I put a teacher-created or class-specific rubric, or the comparison-contrast black line master. Either/or, I wanted an option. See that's where the issue is to me with teachers. And, I work with teachers in my capacity I deal with job-embedded professional development here, and that's the issue. I always laugh because I went to a workshop up in Michigan, the *\*unintelligible\** Institute in Michigan, which was beautiful, and one of the classes I took there was with Donald Graves. He said, "Do you know the most remarkable thing is that teachers hear voices?" And I always remember him saying that...and this was years ago...I mean fifteen years ago, and I thought what does he mean? I can't do that. We have to do this. Well, who told you you have to do this? Well, it's what they want you to do. And who is the 'they'? You never understand who the 'they' are, and why they do the things they do. Sometimes they do it because they think that's just what's expected. The curriculum says sample activities. That's what it says before you ever read a single activity. It says sample activities. Does the state mean for teachers to take this as a lesson plan and follow it straight through? No. They never said that. Ok? If it's an activity, here is what I tell teachers to do... Here's the activity, and it's a good way you can address the GLEs.

Now, if you can find a sound, creative way that fits your kids better and the needs of your students better but still attacks the same GLEs, go for it. I just really believe that teachers sometimes think that because it's proposed...that's why we had a huge argument over, in the first writing, of whether to include titles or not. That was a huge discussion, and I don't mind telling you that I was on the side saying no way because the minute we put a title in here, then principles across the state are going to require teachers to use those specific titles. And I felt like it was taking creativity out of teaching, and it was taking that...and also what it was doing was not taking into account the diversity of the student population, so I fought vehemently against putting titles in. I've lost that battle because the outside examiners for this rewrite are now telling us that without titles you can't ensure rigor. So, we are now required to put titles in, and I've put titles in. But, where I've been required to put titles in, I made sure that they were multicultural, like if I'm going to make a recommendation for a short story, I might use a Sandra Cisneros. Then I may have something from Tony Caves. I may have hers in there, and then I may have something more mainstream. And I've made an effort...and I can't speak for the other writers, certainly knowing them I know it's a consideration, but I know we fought in the beginning not to put them in there. And we were criticized because if you didn't have certain titles, you couldn't speak to the rigor. So, we have certainly put things in there and again like I said, do we have rubric? Yeah. Do I like the idea? Not really, to be truthful. And they wanted more of a document...for it to be more user friendly as well. So, what it does is that it gives a teacher an option. A lot of times when we say that they students need to create a chart of some sort, a lot of times they require that we make a black line master of what that student handout would look like. Mostly black line masters that will be attached to the new curriculum are student handouts. Ok? So, there are probably anywhere from three to ten black line masters attached to each unit of the new curriculum. It's almost like doing some of the legwork for the teachers. You know what I mean? And providing them even with the worksheet, you know, or the handouts that they are going to use.

**AC:** I thought of one question when you were talking about the activities and how they are suggestions and how they don't necessarily have to be used. How much of the curriculum is required? I mean, obviously the GLEs, but literature selections?

**LT:** GLEs.

**AC:** That's it?

**LT:** GLEs.

**AC:** So a teacher doesn't have to use any of the activities...?

**LT:** See now you're asking me a question that outside my realm because I'm going to tell you this. There are districts...there are schools where they are not required to follow the curriculum. That's not the state department's stance.

**AC:** Well, what is the state department's stance?

**LT:** That's a hard thing for me to answer, but what I can tell you is that we are mostly concerned about GLEs. The curriculum is a handy tool to help us to ensure the delivery of the GLEs. This is how I feel about the curriculum; I use this when I talk to teachers a

great deal: I contend that a lot of the problem that the students had passing state tests is simply because they were not receiving the information to be successful. My daughter and her English class, in her honor's English class in the eighth grade, spent an inordinate amount of time on POS lists. After teaching English for twenty years, I still didn't know what that was until the teacher informed me that when she reads and writes she does fine, but the POS lists are killing her. That would be parts of speech. On Fridays she would need to list the eight most common compound prepositions. You know what? I taught English for over twenty years, and I couldn't do it. So, there were things being taught prior to a comprehensive curriculum that had no place in the English classroom, so I'm going to contend that the curriculum now makes it clear the things that need to be taught in the classroom. It gives the teacher direction. Prior to the curriculum, if you were a social studies teacher and liked the Civil War, you might spend six, seven weeks on it. Ok? Also, the curriculum has provided spontaneous professional development. I've never heard people in all the years I've been in education talk about curriculum as much as they did once we got a comprehensive curriculum. Good or bad, like it or not, people are talking, and it makes me so happy that we are finally talking about what it's important that we teach children. And that is what the curriculum has provided for us more than anything else, which makes me thrilled. Like it or not, I go places, and when I say I'm a curriculum writer, people want to throw things at me, and they say, "You're the one we blame! It's because of you!" But, if people would take it for what it is, which is a guide...

**AC:** Well I can't really speak for the entire state, but I know the up-and-coming teachers, my generation of people who have graduated from college in the last couple years and are getting certified, I don't think many of them do have an understanding of what the curriculum is, especially if you didn't have to use it for student teaching. I know I personally am afraid to have to go into a traditional public school and have to work with something like that because the feedback I hear from it is, "I don't know why we have a degree anymore. I don't know why we have to go through all these education classes for them to tell us what we have to teach, when we have to teach it, how we have to teach it," and I think that's kind of intimidating.

**LT:** And I disagree. I think there's room for creativity. Here's what I'm going to tell you. Administrators fall back on a word-for-word interpretation with teachers who need extreme guidance. In the schools in which I've worked, when you have teachers who are strong who understand the GLEs and what it is that's important and what's important to know, I see principles willing to provide some room for teachers to do what they need to do in order to deliver the GLEs. I think before I go any further, I do need to say this. Probably the biggest difference you will see, and it will be an enormous difference in curriculum, is that we are embedding literacy strategies in every single curriculum. We worked with Dr. William Brozo out of, I think it's, James Madison University. Dr. Brozo has identified thirteen literacy strategies that are to be incorporated throughout not only ELA but all of the curriculums. The general rule of thumb is that one-third of all the activities in each unit must include literacy strategies. So, basically the way I looked at it is that for every three activities, I must have one literacy strategy. So, some of your units have three or four. Some of my units have six or eight of these strategies, and they are things that some teachers have probably used before. Some of them would be...there are things like RAFT writing. There might be SPAWN writing. It's an acronym for like special powers. I did one for To Kill a Mockingbird. If you had the power to change one

part of the text which part would you change? Something like that, and each part has a different almost question-like starter to be able to examine the text. But then graphic organizers, brainstorming, learning logs all fall under the category of literacy strategies and are also being used in math, science, and social studies. SO a lot that was already part of our English curriculum and was actually good practice within the English classes are now going to be across the curriculum, and we embed those strategies and once we wrote those in, Dr. Brozo personally reviewed every single unit in every single curriculum to see that not only that we mentioned the strategy but that it was exemplified within the activity. Not only did we say, "Here would be a good place to use SPAWN" or "Here would be a good place to use this type of writing," but we had to show how you would use it in that activity. So, I think there's going to be a huge difference as far as literacy strategies are concerned.

**AC:** Are you familiar with the sustained, silent reading program that they use at the lab school?

**LT:** I am.

**AC:** Do you think that with the state department structure there's room for that program in every English classroom?

**LT:** There better be since I insisted on making that an activity in every single unit, so that when you look at the high school curriculum, and I think middle school may do it as well, and again, I did ninth grade, so I can only speak to ninth. What you are going to find is that the first four activities of every unit is the same. The first one is going to be...I can't remember the order; you caught me off guard. One of them is going to be vocabulary, and it's how I used vocabulary in my classroom, how I knew it worked for my students and how to study vocabulary. So, it would be an ongoing vocabulary study and doing it the same way through each unit. There will be a writing prompt, and it encourages teachers to have kids write often. Even if it's not listed in the activities, to find ways to have kids interact with text, interact with ideas presented. There's one that's independent reading...is what it's titled. So there's an independent reading activity as part of every single unit. Ok, I fought for that; I don't mind telling you. And that could be Connie's influence on me. I saw the power of a strong independent reader program, especially because I worked fourteen years in alternative education with really struggling, urban kids, and the power of that independent reading program was phenomenal for them. So that's up there as well, and then there's a grammar component as well where it suggests ideas for mini lessons so that if in the GLEs...one of the GLEs was on double negatives...it might in this grammar section, it has the same like paragraph saying how to address grammar which basically suggests these mini lessons as needed and as appropriate, and then what we'll have is a sample mini lesson that relates to one of the activities that will come later in the unit. So what you're going to see is that we basically did a cut-and-paste with ongoing vocabulary, ongoing writing prompts, ongoing independent reading, and ongoing grammar instruction, so all four of them were basically pasted through all the units. So, yeah, there will be an independent reading component to it.

**AC:** Is it always going to be literature reading that are presented by the teacher or are students encouraged to bring in their own types of literature? Is every student reading the same thing, or do they have choices?

**LT:** No, no, no, no, no. And I think...there may be something in it that says something about choice. I can show you what it looks like... There's an FTP site which I upload all my writings for the curriculum to, and that's what I'm taking you to...our private site. I'll open the fifth unit to show you. I do my writing of it, my unit five. And then my reviewer gives it back, and I do things. And then I give it to my literacy specialist, and he gives me things. And then I give it to the state department, and they give me things. So these are all of the drafts you are seeing here. Ok? This is my final on my English I unit five. Here's what I've got, so you can see it. See we're underlining the ones that are most important. This is the reading, the ongoing reading I was telling you about. It says, "The teacher should facilitate intimate reading of student-selected novels by providing time for sustained, silent reading on a daily basis. A portion of this time may be dedicated to reading aloud from engaging texts. This practice may be especially important if students are reluctant readers or not accustomed to reading independently for sustained time. The teacher should monitor this reading making sure to incorporate both oral and written response to the text. Response may be initiated through a variety of strategies including response logs, dialogue letters or learning logs..." ...which Dr. Brozo has indentified as a literacy strategy, so that kind of gets me off the hook for embedding too many because I use learning logs. "...informal discussions at the end of SSR and book talks. Whatever the strategy or combination of strategies, students must go beyond summarization if their responses are to meet the GLEs listed above. The GLEs may be genre-specific, but they are not meant to restrict student choice or to require teachers to design special focus lessons to accommodate student choice. The teacher may facilitate reflection in higher level with Bloom's taxonomy through written response, individual student-teacher conferences and/or whole-class questioning. Lists of the works students have read should be maintained and monitored." Ok? That just gives you an idea of what the reading component would look like. Likewise, there is ongoing vocabulary where I've suggested a way to do it in the beginning and suggested that you continue to do it throughout the units. Then there's the writing prompts to make real-life connections and to access understanding; these will be ongoing as well. Again, this is activity three in every single unit. And what I suggest for the writing prompts is to use SPAWN. In other words, if I'm doing Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the S on SPAWN stands for special powers. When Scout complains about her teacher, Atticus tells her, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." If you had the power, with whom would you trade places? Ok? And when you do this kind of writing, I wanted to make the point that SPAWN stands for special powers, problem solving, alternative viewpoint, what if, and next. Ok? That's what it stands for, but you don't have to use all of them with all your writing prompts. You know...it might be what if...what if you could go back and change one event in your life, which event would you change and why? ...based on something Scout says in the novel. So, this is how I'm doing ongoing writing prompts. I'm suggesting teachers use one of these SPAWN ideas, and then I gave them suggestions as to how to do it? Then you have the grammar usage mini lessons, which is ongoing through each unit. And this is really a departure from the previous curriculum...

**AC:** That's what I was going to ask...all this is new in the revisions?

**LT:** These four new that you see in every single one, yes. Actually, I may have already had the vocabulary in the other one, but the other three, yes. Then what happens is that we have the grammar mini lessons, and it explains, "The teacher will facilitate classroom discussions in the beginning of the class period or activity on sentence-formation problems, such as...or standard rules of usage and mechanics, such as...Discussion will be based on common errors in student writing samples. Basically, ideally, the mini lessons become differentiated for student-specific needs and will be integrated within student writing and assignments and not taught in isolation." Ok? It's making it the idea that what you should do is obtain student permission basically...the suggestion is that you obtain student permission to use their papers to teach whatever the next mini lesson is that you're going to use. And then I would put a sample mini lesson, like I know that double negatives were used, were part of the GLEs for this particular unit, and so what I did was, the teacher will explain double negatives, they will work cooperatively to correct the double negatives in sample song lyrics. So, I did "We Don't Need No Education, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," and I had Good Charlotte, Al Jolson, Tom Petty, Bob Dylan...just a whole variety in there. So it's giving them some mini lessons that they might want to use with their kids that the kids might actually be engaged in to deal with some of those things. See those are always going to be the same, those four. The mini lesson changes to be unit specific. But then you start...the fifth activity is where you really start the meat of the unit. Ok? Here's what happens. See, when I had this before, I wouldn't have given you the novel, but I had to add in "see novel suggestions located in the..."

**AC:** But again, they're just suggestions?

**LT:** See that word there? That word is put there for a reason. It doesn't say the novel you have to cover. It says novel suggestions. Now, I used *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a model for the unit because it cried out for a model I could be really specific with, but no, because when you go down to the bottom of the unit, I have Sandra Cisneros, Charles Dickens, Harper Lee, Lois Lowry, Walter Dean Myers... *\*unintelligible\** I tried to get a good variety in there and at different levels as well for kids. But again, I made sure to put this note in there, "Please note that this is simply a suggested list. Student-teacher preferences as well as student ability should be considered." It's there because believe me, I'm the one who rallies against having to give titles! But when I was required to, I did it as gently as I could so teachers could have some choice there. I'm going to go back to what I wanted to show you as how these literacy things are embedded. Here's what happens. "One of the strategies is questioning the author. The teacher and students will work to build understanding during novel reading by using the questioning the author (QTA) literacy strategy." What's going to happen is when I mention this strategy, there's a link that will link you to a full description of what that strategy is. So, you'll be able to go on and say, "What's this QTA?" Of course, you don't really need that because I've already embedded it in this unit if you follow it. Here's a sample question the author chart. The goal of the question is to initiate discussion, so the teacher may say, "What's the author talking about? And then the students form their own questions, so it's embedded in there. Then you've got things that come in...throughout the unit, you'll see the blue links. What you'll also see are these BLMs, black line masters, and basically, what the black line masters are...here is one. They're all going to be linked together like

this. Here's my first one...characterization chart. This is where we're going to record reasons why you favor this character, and you're going to be comparing your two favorite characters. So you've got a handout that will be here. Every one is titled just like this. We also have RAFT writing: role, audience, format, topic. Now, because I wanted them to do writing, it needed to be scored, so since I mentioned a rubric, I was required to write one. So, what I did was...role: How much does your writing sound like the voice of the character you wrote in? Did you take that role? For a great deal, pretty well, somewhat... So this is a sample rubric for the teachers, but I tried again in the activities to make the point that it is a suggested rubric. All these things say sample. But for heaven's sake, if the teacher knows what she's doing and she gets it and she understands those GLEs and she understands how to get them across and she has a creative way to do it, I don't understand why she wouldn't. Now there are some districts where the teachers are required to follow the curriculum to a tee. There are some schools where the principles require that the follow the curriculum.

**AC:** But, that's not a state department decision?

**LT:** I don't think so. Originally, the state department gave districts three options: they could use the curriculum as we wrote it, they could write their own curriculum, or they could take the curriculum and adapt it to their own needs. But, they had to let the state department know which of the three they were going to do. And initially, I think there were only two, maybe three, districts that said, "We're writing our own." And I know that, St. Tammany was one of them; I'm not sure who else.

**AC:** Was Lafayette one of them?

**LT:** Lafayette...you know what, I don't know. Here's what I can tell you. I have a copy of the Lafayette curriculum because I love what they do. I see a lot of elements of the original curriculum. To me, there's seems like an adaptation...a darn good adaptation but an adaptation. I don't think they went off and wrote their own curriculum. After seeing theirs, I was encouraged to add those independent reading components that you're seeing across the units because of the initiative in Lafayette Parish. But anyway...

**AC:** How did you go about choosing your suggested literature for the curriculum? Again, I know they are just suggestions, but how did you go about selecting the ones you were going to include as suggestions?

**LT:** How did I go about these? It comes from several different things. First of all, at our curriculum writers meetings, we sat around and discussed books that had been used at different levels and why teachers preferred to use them at whatever level they used them at. We, as a curriculum team talked about it and made suggestions... We would say, "When I taught tenth grade, I had success teaching this novel." I taught at all four levels in high school, so I was able to offer all sorts of suggestions. And likewise, the teachers that I was working with were all experienced educators and were able to make suggestions. And then I went back to my high school and got suggestions from people in the department there, and I talked to people like Connie McDonald because I wanted people...I am traditionally in low-performing schools, and then we've got the lab school. So, what I did was make an effort to talk to teachers who run things and find out what books are working in their classrooms, and that's what I did. But also paying attention to

multicultural literature as best as I could. SO, those are suggestions that come from teachers.

**AC:** When you say multicultural literature, do you mean works that are by authors from around the world or books about people around the world?

**LT:** No, no, no, no, no. It's books by authors. It was the authors I was concerned with because I have two Hispanic writers, British, and certainly American...but then we have African-American writers...Harper Lee, Walter Dean Myers, Mildred Taylor. I tried for a variety, but again, I didn't just go out and grab names because I needed diversity in the authors chosen. What I did was sample teachers and get suggestions from teachers and incorporate what teachers were asking for, but again, it's just a suggested list, too. It say suggested list in the curriculum, and then it says novel suggestions. Then there's a note below that says, "Please note that this is simply a suggested list." If you can't get that across, I don't know what else to do. But still, mark my words, there will be districts and schools that will require teachers to choose from this list because that's what they want us to do. I'm just a teacher. It's not like I have answers to all of this. I'm simply trying to listen to what I hear and put it into a document that teacher friendly and can work for the majority of people.

**AC:** You were telling me about how you listen to the state department, to the teachers, to the consultants. Has any research been done or outlets been made available for the students to comment? Because it just seems to me that kids must notice a difference going into a classroom pre-curriculum and now post-curriculum.

**LT:** I would think so, too, but you know what, that's not a question I could answer. I don't know. None to my knowledge; there may be some. I don't know.

**AC:** Where do you see the future of the curriculum going? I mean, I see all these rewrites... What do you hope to accomplish from these rewrites? What are your main goals?

**LT:** I think what I think...I can only speak for me. I see a growing, living document, which is what I hope it will be. I want to see it grow as the needs of the learners grow. When we're writing, we try to remember that we are not writing for the student we have today; we are writing for the needs of the student we hope to have tomorrow. SO what we're trying to do is create a document that pushes teachers and students...you know sometimes teachers say, "Kids can't possibly do all of this." Well, dag gummit, if they could do it all, there would be no reason for you to do it in the classroom. I realize one of the biggest teacher complaints is that there's too much to do here or the kids can't do that. Remember, we want a document that pushes kids and pushes teachers to the next level. So what I'm hoping is that the kids will eventually get there and we'll say, like we see with the state test...ok, we got this. Now, we've got to bump it up a little bit. I hope it's a living document. I hope it's not one that becomes stagnant and becomes the end all and be all. I hope three, four more years from now that there's another curriculum team, and it probably shouldn't be me...somebody that's fresh to look at it and to revise it again to meet the needs of teachers and students who have hopefully moved beyond the needs of that document. That's what I hope in my fondest hopes. I don't know if it happens that way or not; I don't have a crystal ball. But that would be my fondest hope is that nobody

says, “Oh yes, that is a great document. This is where we need to be!” because I don’t think education works that way. You have to continue to build. After being in this profession, it’s the growing and the changing that you’re forced to do year after year after year. Hopefully we’re making it a lot more teacher friendly.

**AC:** Are there any other comments you want to make about the curriculum or your views on it or what I’ve been asking you about multicultural literature or women’s writing or literature?

**LT:** No, I can’t think of anything. I would separate myself from the fact that I am a curriculum writer and an advocate of the curriculum because really, it’s not because I’m involved...and like I say, really I don’t have ownership after all the rewrites that it goes through, so if you condemn it, if you have any problems with it... It’s what you think about your own writing. I mean, I had to learn a lesson with my own children. Well, why don’t you just rewrite the thing yourself? And you know, I don’t have a great deal of ownership. I tried to incorporate what everybody else wanted and using my best judgment. There were some times I was allowed to argue, and there were some times I just put my foot down. Things like, I was told to create a Black Line Master of a Venn Diagram, and I thought, “If you want that to happen, it ain’t gonna be from me.” Because I would never create handouts of a Venn Diagram to give to my students. If they can’t draw it, then we need to forget it. There were some things I had some leeway in, but for the most part, I think I taught to groups of teachers. Like it or not, it keeps us all honest, and it keeps us on track and helps teachers to see what they’re supposed to be doing. We have pacing guides now that tell you when to teach things, but it keeps us all on track. I’m telling you, you would have had to been in this game in the early eighties, when the social studies teachers might have loved the Civil War and we might have spent eight, nine weeks... When I first started teaching, I hated poetry, so it would be relegated to one week towards the end of the year, and we’d do formula poems. You know what I mean? I feel guilty saying that to you. And was there an exit exam? Yeah, there was. But without that pacing and without that curriculum, we got off track. It’s almost like writing a paper without organizing it first; we just didn’t have a focus. So, the curriculum to me gives teachers a focus. It makes sure we are delivering what we need to be delivering to the kids because we know that the standards and benchmarks and the curriculum and the testing are all linked. If the test is written to address the standards and the benchmarks and we know that’s the basis for the selection of the GLEs and writing of the comprehensive curriculum, then it stands to reason that we teach the curriculum. We have addressed all the GLEs necessary for the kids to be successful. So, I think if you could compare before curriculum and after the curriculum, I think we have a stronger commodity now than we have ever had before. And as far as your multicultural issues, I can’t speak for other people and other levels, all I can tell you is what I did and what I fought against and what I had to do. But again suggestion...that’s the word I kept trying to put in there.

## **VITA**

Adriane Renee Comeaux is a native of New Roads, Louisiana, where she attended and graduated with high honors from Catholic Interparochial School of Pointe Coupee. She earned a bachelor's degree in secondary education from Louisiana State University in 2006 and proceeded to pursue a master's degree in liberal arts with an emphasis in English at LSU. Her anticipated graduation date is in May 2008. Adriane is also a certified secondary English teacher, and she intends to seek employment as a high school educator upon the completion of her master's degree.