Candidate: Kathy L. Stewart
For the degree of: Doctor of Philosophy
Department: Educational Leadership, Research and Technology

Title: A Phenomenological Study of Practicing Educators’ Personal and Collaborative Experiences Within a Climate of High Stakes Individual Accountability

Committee: Dr. Patricia Reeves, Chair
Dr. Sue Poppink
Dr. Craig Douglas

Time/Place: Friday, October 28, 2016
2 to 4 p.m.
4402 Sangren Hall

With the national focus turning to increasing student achievement and closing achievement gaps between demographic groups, Federal and State policy extended responsibility and high stakes accountability for student growth and achievement. Overall student achievement status and elimination of achievement gaps between demographically defined sub-groups of students remain cornerstones of accountability under ESEA and now ESSA. Under the Obama administration, however, accountability for academic student growth was extended to individual classroom teachers and individual school and district level administrators through Federal policy provisions tying student growth to performance evaluation. As a result, many states, including Michigan, enacted legislation to mandate high stakes teacher and administrator evaluation tied to student achievement. With
statutory changes to the Michigan School Code enacted July, 2011, Michigan came on board with performance ratings tied to student growth with implications for contract renewal, layoff, recall, and even compensation.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how teachers responded to the shift to a high stakes individual accountability system and how they are making sense of the changes related to their individual professional practices and collegial collaborative practices. Specifically, I examined how teachers are experiencing the implementation of the legislated evaluation requirements in two areas: (1) influences on individual practice as a classroom teacher; (2) impact on collegiality and collaboration with peers. I also explored how the teachers who participated in this study think about and take personal meaning from their experiences with the accountability measures embedded in the statutory provisions for teacher performance reviews, and the implications of those reviews for job security and compensation related to the student growth component required in the evaluation legislation.

This phenomenological study included fourteen practicing teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Participants responded to a criterion based recruitment from a large pool of teachers in eastern mid-Michigan and participated in an online interview experience. Through an extensive, multi-layered, and recursive data analysis method utilizing open-coding and emergent analysis processes, I discovered and gave voice to four themes from the study participants: (a) teachers adjusted to a rubric system for performance evaluation purposes, (b) teachers adapted their professional practices following the implementation the high stakes accountability evaluations, (c) teachers discovered changes in their collaborative practices, and (d) teachers developed specific views on the inclusion of growth data in the performance evaluation system.