Effective Middle School Teachers: Becoming "Real"

Rhoda C. Sommers
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Andrews University
School of Education

EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS:
BECOMING "REAL"

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Rhoda C. Sommers
July 1999
EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS: BECOMING "REAL"

A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by
Rhoda C. Sommers

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ABSTRACT

EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS:
BECOMING "REAL"

by

Rhoda C. Sommers

Chair: Shirley A. Freed
Title: EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS: BECOMING “REAL”
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Problem

This study looks at four effective middle school teachers' stories in order to understand the experiences and beliefs which impact their choice to use developmentally responsive classroom practices. There is general agreement in the literature concerning characteristics of effective middle school teachers, but little has been done to understand what influences these teachers to teach the way they do.

Method

A qualitative case study design was used for this study. Two male and two female middle school teachers were observed and interviewed during the course of 1 school year. Each teacher's life experiences, classroom practices, and beliefs are described in narrative form. An analysis of the four teachers'
practices and beliefs was conducted using the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development’s *Turning Points* (1989) and the National Middle School Association’s *This We Believe* (1995). Further analysis of similarities and differences in the teachers’ lives led to the emergence of other themes.

**Results**

The four teachers’ classroom practices and beliefs matched the descriptions of developmentally appropriate practices in *Turning Points* and *This We Believe*. In addition to the beliefs and practices previously identified in the literature, receptivity to growth, treasured relationships, and living intertwined personal and professional lives emerged as themes in each of the four teachers’ lives.

**Conclusions**

The concept of “Real” as portrayed in *The Velveteen Rabbit* describes the lives of the four middle school teachers who participated in this study. These teachers love and give of themselves freely to others. They have experienced growing pains, but choose to look beyond the discomfort and allow it to mold and shape their lives. Though they are Real and recognize the contributions they are making to others, they continue to open themselves up to continued growth.
To Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark

Thank you for sharing your stories and lives with me. My life is richer because it has been touched by yours.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES......................................................................................................... ix

Chapter

1. COMING TO THE QUESTION........................................................................ 1
   Introduction................................................................................................. 1
   Discovering Middle Schoolers.................................................................... 1
   The Junior High School Movement........................................................... 6
   The Middle School Movement.................................................................. 9
   The Questions Crystallize........................................................................ 12
      Statement of the Problem................................................................. 14
      Purpose of the Study........................................................................... 15
      Focus of the Study.............................................................................. 15
   Overview of the Dissertation................................................................... 16

2. METHODOLOGY.......................................................................................... 18
   Introduction.............................................................................................. 18
   Qualitative Case Studies.......................................................................... 18
   Narrative Inquiry....................................................................................... 20
   Selecting Participants............................................................................. 21
   Data Collection and Analysis.................................................................. 23
      Phase One.......................................................................................... 23
      Phase Two....................................................................................... 23
      Phase Three.................................................................................... 24
   Interview Protocol.................................................................................. 25
   Trustworthiness Issues.......................................................................... 26
      Credibility......................................................................................... 26
      Transferability.................................................................................... 28
      Role of the Researcher....................................................................... 29
   Ethical Considerations............................................................................ 31
   Summary................................................................................................ 31

3. DEBBIE—MY STUDENTS, MY CHILDREN............................................. 32
   Introduction.............................................................................................. 32
   Debbie's Story.......................................................................................... 34
   Family Influences.................................................................................... 34

iv

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influences at School</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming an Educator</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;My Best Friend&quot;</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie's Classroom</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Advisory.................................................</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Science..................................................</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Exploratory Class....................................</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating to Students</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Management</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Involvement</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Relationships Are Valuable..............................</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Love Unconditionally.......................................</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Enjoy the Present........................................</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Create a Safe Classroom...................................</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. JACK—MY CLASSROOM, MY HOME........................................ 74

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack's Story</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................The Early Years........................................</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Meeting the World.....................................</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Becoming an Educator..................................</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Continued Growth........................................</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack's Classroom</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Daily Oral Language.....................................</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Spelling....................................................</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Reading.....................................................</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Logs........................................................</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Writing......................................................</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Management</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Making Choices...........................................</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................School Is Life............................................</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Gray Lens...................................................</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................The Classroom, My Home................................</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.............................Reflective Educator....................................</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5.</th>
<th>RENAE--MY STUDENTS, MY FAMILY</th>
<th>111</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renae’s Story</td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Life</td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The College Years</td>
<td>117</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming an Educator</td>
<td>118</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Middle Schoolers</td>
<td>123</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renae’s Classroom</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>128</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>129</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>132</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>136</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>143</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Management</td>
<td>144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>148</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using One’s Gifts</td>
<td>148</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping Others</td>
<td>149</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Are Valuable</td>
<td>151</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Is Lifelong</td>
<td>152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Are Family</td>
<td>153</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>154</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>MARK--MY STUDENTS, MY MINISTRY</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>156</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark’s Story</td>
<td>157</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing Up</td>
<td>157</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-High School</td>
<td>159</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming an Educator</td>
<td>161</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic Change</td>
<td>164</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark’s Classroom</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>168</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections</td>
<td>172</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correcting Homework</td>
<td>172</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Math</td>
<td>173</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Algebra</td>
<td>176</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devotions</td>
<td>179</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Management</td>
<td>181</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing With Tragedy</td>
<td>184</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark’s Students</td>
<td>185</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

1. Comparison of *Turning Points* and *This We Believe* .................. 13
2. Build Relationships With Students.................................................. 199
3. Deliver a Student-Centered Curriculum........................................... 201
4. Practice Student-Centered Instruction............................................. 204
5. Understand and Enjoy Middle Schoolers......................................... 208
6. Create a Positive Classroom Climate.............................................. 212
7. Receptive to Growth.......................................................................... 215
8. Treasured Relationships....................................................................... 218
9. Live Intertwined Personal and Professional Lives.............................. 220
10. Beliefs of Effective Middle School Teachers.................................... 229
CHAPTER 1

COMING TO THE QUESTION

There was once a velveteen rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid. He was fat and bumpy, as a rabbit should be; his coat was spotted brown and white, he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink sateen. . . . For a long time he lived in the toy cupboard or on the nursery floor, and no one thought very much about him.

Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit

Introduction

This research study has been a journey for me. It is a journey that began many years before I was even cognizant that I would one day be embarking on such an all-consuming task. Since many of my life experiences have prepared me for this endeavor, it is impossible to identify the beginnings of my journey. Neither do I see the writing of this document as the completion of a journey; it is merely the synopsis of a journey thus far. Were I to undertake a similar research study in the future, I would experience it differently because in the course of time I would have changed as all individuals change in the ebb and flow of life. I do, however, want to articulate experiences and events which led me to choose this particular research study at this time in my life.

Discovering Middle Schoolers

My interest in and commitment to middle school students began in 1993. Prior to this year I considered myself an elementary teacher, having taught a variety of elementary grades for 10 years. I had no interest in teaching
middle schoolers and periodically found myself saying that I would never teach those grades. Had the truth been told, I was afraid of middle schoolers. I heard stories about how unruly and disrespectful they were. I disliked having to interact with them when I entered the middle school wing of the buildings where I taught my elementary students. The less interaction I had with young adolescents, the more comfortable I felt.

As I was nearing the end of my 10th year as a teacher, I realized that it was time for a new challenge. I knew that I could not continue teaching fourth grade because my small school no longer needed two sections of Grade 4. In the midst of contemplating what my next step should be, the thought of transferring to the middle school entered my mind. This thought, however, was a frightening proposition. Being a religious person, I told God that if this awful idea was from Him, then He needed to show me in a dramatic way by having my principal broach this topic. Under no circumstances would I breathe a word about the possibility of teaching middle school to another human being. After my conversation with God, I promptly dismissed this preposterous idea.

One day not too long after my pact with God, my principal stopped me at the door of his office and calmly asked if I would consider teaching in the middle school for the following school year. I was stunned and vividly remember the suffocating fear and anxiety I felt during our conversation. Of course my earlier proposition with God came rushing to the forefront of my mind. In the midst of my swirling thoughts, I heard myself calmly say that I would consider his suggestion. After much deliberation, observing in the middle school, and talking with various friends and teachers, I finally agreed
to interview for a middle school position. The interview went well, I was
offered a teaching position, and I was asked to provide leadership to
restructuring the existing program into one that reflected current research on
effective middle schools. To this day, I have no idea why the school board
entrusted their students and program to my inexperienced hands, but I am
grateful.

I had no specific training and very little practical knowledge in teaching
middle schoolers. I recognized my urgent need for practical and theoretical
information in determining how to best teach these students and what steps
to take in developing a program designed especially for middle schoolers.

At that time I was also in the process of completing studies for my
master's degree; consequently, I chose to delve deeply into the middle school
literature and discuss the unique needs of middle schoolers with experienced
educators. As my knowledge grew, so did my excitement and commitment to
designing a program which took into consideration the developmental
characteristics of young adolescents.

As I got acquainted with the other teachers assigned to the middle
school, I discovered that we shared similar educational philosophies. We
quickly became a team of educators committed to teaching middle schoolers
effectively. Though part of our task was to evaluate and restructure the
existing program for these grades, we had very little voice in shaping the basic
structure and program at the outset of our first year together. That, however,
did not stop us from changing things over which we did have control. All of
us worked to develop relationships with our students which made our
classrooms positive places where students were listened to, valued, and
respected. We discovered that we had a great deal of freedom in determining what would occur in our classrooms and the kind of atmosphere we created in spite of structural constraints. Then during our second year as a team, we instigated changes in the structure of our school to reflect the programs commonly found in exemplary middle schools.

Through these years I discovered that I loved teaching middle schoolers. I was able to establish meaningful relationships with students and impact them at this crucial stage in their lives. We had wonderful discussions in our Language Arts classes about the books we were reading. I learned and grew along with my middle schoolers and began feeling very defensive when I heard others speak negatively about young adolescents. To me, they were wonderful, unpredictable creatures with a desire to grow as they learned about life.

My heart was also heavy during those years as I searched for other educators in Christian schools with a similar vision. I found very few of these schools committed to implementing the middle school philosophy, though I was aware of a number of public schools which had adopted and were implementing the middle school concept. My questions, reflections, reading, and visits to various schools led me to conclude that teachers play a large role in determining the quality of young adolescents’ school experiences. It is in teachers’ day-to-day interactions with students that the middle school concept is lived out. While administrators can institute programs suggested in the literature and provide curriculum touted as developmentally responsive, it is ultimately what teachers choose to do behind classroom doors that determines the effectiveness of the educational program (Hunt, Wiseman, &
Bowden, 1998). I have met effective middle school teachers who were like a breath of fresh air in schools which appeared to have little vision for restructuring their programs in spite of evidence in the literature concerning the needs of middle schoolers. Other schools have the suggested programs and structures, but to my disappointment I encountered teachers whose classrooms felt stifling because they were using developmentally responsive programs in ways which reflected the old junior high philosophy.

Further reflections led me to consider why some middle school teachers choose to teach in developmentally responsive ways while others seem unable or unwilling to embrace practices which meet the unique needs of early adolescents. As I compared the members of the team I led, I realized that our professional preparation and experiences, personalities, and personal backgrounds were very different yet our educational philosophies were similar. With all of our differences, what motivated us to teach the way we chose to teach? Were there any similar threads running through our lives which motivated us to adopt the practices we utilized?

An important aspect of my personal journey leading into my research study was understanding the historical context of the middle school movement. This pursuit introduced me to the evolution of the junior high school movement. Understanding the beginnings of both of these movements further deepened my convictions for the need of understanding who effective middle school teachers are and why they have chosen to teach in developmentally responsive ways in their classrooms. I will now discuss the inception of both the junior high and middle school movements.
The Junior High School Movement

The junior high school concept had its beginnings in the late 1800s when educational leaders began calling for reorganization of secondary education. Charles W. Eliot, then president of Harvard University, wanted to lower the age when young people entered college; consequently, in 1888 he proposed to the National Education Association (NEA) that secondary education begin with seventh grade (Moss, 1969). Beginning secondary education earlier allowed students headed for college to begin their college preparatory courses at a younger age and also allowed those desiring vocational training to prepare for their vocation earlier (Howard, 1968). During this period there was a high dropout rate after sixth grade and during the early high school years; educators hoped that beginning secondary education with Grade 7 would change this trend (Moss, 1969).

During this same period, G. Stanley Hall, a psychologist, was researching and writing about adolescent development and stimulated thinking about the developmental needs of young adolescents (Howard, 1968; Moss, 1969). According to Moss, it became increasingly clear to educators that young adolescents did not belong in elementary schools because of their developmental characteristics.

These influences and ideas resulted in a series of recommendations by the NEA from 1894 to 1918 relating to the education of students in early adolescence. The first statement in 1894 suggested that the secondary program include Grades 7 and 8 as an intermediate school to form a bridge between elementary and high schools. By 1899 the NEA recommended that elementary schools consist of Grades 1-6 and that Grades 7-12 compose
secondary schools to allow for earlier subject area specialization. It became apparent that students in Grades 7 and 8 needed a special program separate from Grades 9-12; therefore, in 1918 secondary education was divided into two sections, junior high for Grades 7-9 and senior high for Grades 10-12. Schools adopted this configuration until the rise of the middle school movement in the early 1960s (Alexander, William, Compton, Hines, & Prescot, 1968).

The original purposes of the junior high school movement were to:
(1) provide secondary education for younger students; (2) form a bridge between elementary and high schools; (3) provide exploratory activities for students; and (4) provide students with guidance for academic, vocational, and personal matters (Alexander et al., 1968).

As the junior high school movement gained momentum, educators continued debating its objectives. Leonard Koos (1927), an influential leader in the junior high movement, summarized functions of the junior high school. At that time, the most widely recognized functions included having students spend less time in the elementary school, providing for individual differences, opportunities for exploration and guidance, allowing for vocational training, retention of students, and providing an educational program which takes students' physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral changes into consideration. A number of these functions are similar to the ones stated at the turn of the century by those first calling for reorganization of secondary education.

William T. Gruhn and Harl R. Douglass drafted a statement in the 1940s which remains as the "foundational framework for defining an effective middle school" to this day (Lounsbury, 1996, p. 2). Gruhn and
Douglass (1956) saw the six basic functions of the junior high school as: (1) integration: integrating skills, attitudes, interests, ideals, and understandings students have acquired and are acquiring into their behavior and understanding; (2) exploration: giving students the opportunity to investigate, discover, and broaden their personal interests and abilities in order to help them make vocational and educational decisions in the future; (3) guidance: allowing teachers to help students make good decisions and adjust socially and emotionally in this phase of their development; (4) differentiation: addressing the individual needs of students and their unique differences so they can benefit from their educational experiences to the fullest extent possible; (5) socialization: providing learning experiences for students and promoting the development and utilization of their social skills; and (6) articulation: preparing students for a smooth transition from elementary school to their secondary educational experiences.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the junior high school enjoyed widespread acceptance, but by the late 1950s educators began recognizing its inadequacies (Alexander et al., 1968). Criticisms leveled against junior high schools which led to their demise included: (1) replication of the senior high school program, (2) providing an inadequate bridge between elementary and senior high schools, (3) utilizing a departmentalized program instead of an interdisciplinary approach, (4) lack of a well-developed exploratory program, (5) failure to provide personal guidance for students, (6) trying to fit ninth grade into the junior high program when ninth graders' needs didn't match those of seventh and eighth graders, and (7) failure to adequately prepare teachers for the special needs of young adolescents.

The lack of success of the junior high movement in achieving its objectives and the criticism leveled against it became the spawning grounds for the middle school movement in the 1960s. Societal issues such as widespread criticism of American education, pressure to end racial segregation, and an increase in school enrollment which led to overcrowding also paved the way for reorganizing schools (Wiles & Bondi, 1986). William Alexander, Donald Eickhorn, and Judith Murphy helped lay the foundation for middle schools by calling for a separate educational structure for young adolescents (Baldwin, 1974). Alexander is credited with reviving the term middle school which had been used in some private American schools and in European schools (Wiles & Bondi, 1986). Educators disillusioned with the junior high school saw the middle school as a means of starting over though they still believed and supported the original junior high objectives while recognizing that they had never been met (Alexander et al., 1968).

The Middle School Movement

Middle schools, much like the junior high schools, began largely as an administrative organizational plan before having clearly articulated purposes (Moss, 1969). As middle schools received favorable reviews, administrators chose to restructure their schools according to this new pattern (Wiles & Bondi, 1986). Many schools, however, reconfigured and attached the term middle school to the building housing the middle grades without ever making philosophical, curricular, or program changes. A survey in 1967-1968 indicated that few so-called middle schools differed significantly from junior high schools (Alexander & Kealy, 1973).
Efforts were made to articulate distinctions of middle schools which would best meet the needs of young adolescents. In 1966 William Alexander developed an educational plan of elements integral to middle schools: (1) An organizational structure of either Grades 5-8 or Grades 6-8, (2) team teaching, (3) teachers providing guidance for students, (4) teachers as subject area specialists, (5) opportunities for individualized instruction and independent study, (6) instruction in study skills, (7) a core academic curriculum providing continuity between elementary and high school, (8) exploratory experiences, (9) intramural sports program instead of interscholastic sports, and (10) involvement of parents and community agencies in the school (Alexander, 1969). Alexander's ideas remain prevalent in the middle school literature.

No discussion of middle school literature is complete without noting two crucial publications cited widely in the current literature, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development's *Turning Points* (1989) and the National Middle School Association's (NMSA) *This We Believe* (1995). *Turning Points* was published after an examination of American middle schools to see how well schools were meeting students' needs and calls the young adolescent years many students' "last best chance to avoid a diminished future" (Carnegie Council, 1989, p. 8).

The Carnegie Council's study resulted in eight recommendations and an urgent call for reform in middle school education. These recommendations are:

2. Teach a core academic program.
3. Ensure success for all students.
4. Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students.

5. Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents.

6. Improve academic performance through fostering health and fitness.

7. Reengage families in the education of young adolescents.

8. Connect schools with communities.

The first draft of *This We Believe* was printed in 1982 during a time when "no single comprehensive statement appeared that seemed to crystallize the educational beliefs inherent in [the middle school movement]" (NMSA, 1995, p. 1). As NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe* had a tremendous impact on middle school education and became the "most widely cited statement about the education of young adolescents" (p. 1).

NMSA revisited the original position statement which resulted in the 1995 publication of *This We Believe*. It is not intended to be a "blueprint" for middle schools but to call attention to middle school philosophy and practices (NMSA, 1995, p. 2).

NMSA's characteristics of developmentally responsive middle schools are:

1. Educators committed to young adolescents
2. A shared vision
3. High expectations for all
4. An adult advocate for every student
5. Family and community partnerships
6. A positive school climate
7. Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory
8. Varied teaching and learning approaches
9. Assessment and evaluation that promote learning
10. Flexible organizational structures
11. Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
12. Comprehensive guidance and support services.

Both *Turning Points* (1989) and *This We Believe* (1995) address the structures found in exemplary middle schools and emphasize the need for teachers specifically trained for and committed to teaching middle schoolers. These documents also address characteristics and practices of effective middle school teachers. I was intrigued when I placed the ideas in these documents side by side and identified the items individual teachers are free to implement regardless of the structures and programs determined by administrators in their schools. Table 1 illustrates this. The items in italics are ones which can be implemented by individual teachers in their classrooms.

*The Questions Crystallize*

My questions concerning who effective middle school teachers are and what has led to their commitment to young adolescents remained. As a result, my journey led me to become interested in delving into the stories of effective middle school teachers. As a teacher myself, I am aware that teachers constantly tell stories about their professional and personal lives. Stories lend understanding to what happens in classrooms, what teachers value and believe, events which deeply impact teachers, and what drives them to persevere in spite of increasing challenges (Mattingly, 1991; Schmidt, 1997; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). I finally concluded that listening to and
Table 1

Comparison of Turning Points (1989) and This We Believe (1995)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turning Points</th>
<th>This We Believe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create small communities for learning</td>
<td>An adult advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexible organizational structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach a core academic program</td>
<td>Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure success for all students</td>
<td>High expectations for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Varied teaching and learning approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment and evaluation that promote learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents</td>
<td>Educators committed to young adolescents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve academic performance through fostering health and fitness</td>
<td>Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehensive guidance and support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reengage families in the education of young adolescents</td>
<td>Family and community partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect schools (classrooms) with communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students</td>
<td>A shared vision which includes all school and community stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A positive school (classroom) climate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Items in italics can be implemented by individual classroom teachers.
examining the stories of effective middle school teachers were the keys to use in gaining an inside look at who they are as individuals and what has shaped them into teachers committed to young adolescents.

Statement of the Problem

Throughout the history of the middle school movement, educators have attempted to describe effective middle schools. Many discussions about middle school practices focus on the structures which constitute an exemplary school program, but effective teachers are found in schools with diverse programs. They are found in schools which have completely adopted a middle school philosophy and the recommended programs; other effective middle school teachers find themselves in an environment which is structured much like the old junior high schools or a revised elementary school program. Regardless of their setting, all middle school teachers have the challenge of being a bright light in young adolescents' school experiences. Effective middle school teachers ultimately make choices concerning their instruction and relationships with students regardless of their school setting.

While there is general agreement in the literature concerning characteristics of effective middle school teachers, little has been done to understand what has influenced these teachers to teach the way they do. A need exists to understand and discover the beliefs and experiences of effective middle school teachers which may give insight into the change and development process, both professionally and personally, that these teachers have gone through to become who they are.
Purpose of the Study

My research study adds to the middle school knowledge base an understanding of the life experiences, practices, and beliefs of effective middle school teachers which impact their choice to use developmentally responsive classroom practices. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) suggest that “what is missing from the knowledge base for teaching . . . are the voices of teachers themselves” (p. 2), and my study is designed to hear teachers’ voices and stories as I gain an understanding of their lives as individuals and middle school teachers. My goal is to share these teachers’ stories with other educators so they may be motivated to restory their own teaching experiences and also become more effective middle school teachers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991).

The purpose of this dissertation is to describe the life experiences, beliefs, and practices of effective middle school teachers and what has influenced them to become effective teachers. Three questions provided direction for my study:

1. What life experiences have molded educators into effective middle school teachers?
2. What curriculum and instruction are employed by effective middle school teachers?
3. What beliefs guide the practices of effective middle school teachers?

Focus of the Study

I limited my study to four effective middle school teachers in the Michiana area. Two males and two females representing both public and Christian schools opened up their classrooms and their lives to me. They
teach a variety of academic subjects in the sixth, seventh, or eighth grades. All of them have taught more than 10 years and have had experience teaching grade levels other than middle school. Though their stories are unique and will not necessarily mirror the experiences of other teachers, Debbie, Jack, Mark, and Renae provide a window into the hearts and lives of effective middle school teachers. (These are pseudonyms as are the names of all other individuals throughout this document.)

Overview of the Dissertation

This chapter relates a number of significant events in the journey I have taken in coming to this study. It also presents the context for the study by discussing the history of both the junior high school and middle school movements and the theoretical framework built on the two crucial middle school documents, *Turning Points* and *This We Believe*. Boundaries of the study are set through the research questions and purposes of the study.

Chapter 2 discusses the methodology used for the study. I not only leave a trail for others to follow in conducting a similar study, but I also discuss selected literature concerning qualitative case studies.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 are the personal stories of the four participants in my study. They describe these teachers' journeys in the process of becoming Real. Each chapter includes a brief description of their school settings, life experiences, classroom practices, and beliefs which guide their lives.

Chapter 7 is the cross-case analysis. In it I return to the theoretical framework of my study presented in Table 1 and discussed in this chapter. As I discuss themes evident in the participants' lives, I include a discussion of selected literature on effective teachers at the middle school level.
Chapter 8 summarizes the study by returning to the original research questions presented in this chapter. I also discuss several recommendations for middle school teachers, teacher educators, and considerations for further study.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. . . . He had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive . . . and pass away. . . . He knew they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit

Introduction

I used a qualitative case study design for this study since it would allow me to draw from the wisdom and insight of those who have experienced and understand the myriad facets of teaching middle schoolers. This design allowed me to listen to the stories of those who have “lived [long] in the [middle school classroom]” (Williams, 1981, p. 12) and have blazed a trail for others to follow in the quest for excellence in middle school education.

Qualitative Case Studies

Merriam (1988) defines a qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. [They] are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and rely heavily on inductive reasoning” (p. 16). A case study is particularistic because it focuses on a specific phenomenon such as a program, event, process, person, institution, or group. When Merriam states that a case study is descriptive,
she is referring to the end product of the study which is a “rich, thick
description of the phenomenon under study” (p. 11). Heuristic refers to a case
study’s power to “illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon
under study” (p. 13), and Merriam (1988), quoting from Stake, says
“previously unknown relationships and variables can emerge from case
studies leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 13).
Case studies utilize inductive reasoning since new understandings, concepts,
and relationships arise from studying the data (Merriam, 1988).

According to Yin (1994), a case study “investigates a contemporary
phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries
between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). Using this
method is appropriate when contextual conditions impact the phenomenon
under study. Yin also notes that a case study relies on multiple sources of data
collection, triangulation of data, and benefits from prior development of a
theoretical framework which guides data collection and analysis.

Though Tellis (1997) does not specifically define case studies, he
introduces another idea by saying that a case study “is done in a way that
incorporates the views of the ‘actors’ in the case under study” (p. 2). The
voices of the participants in the research study are included in reporting the
research rather than only the voice of the researcher.

Drawing from Merriam (1988), Yin (1994), and Tellis (1997), my study
fell well within a qualitative case study design. It focused on four individual
middle school teachers as I sought to describe their beliefs, practices, and lives.
I used inductive reasoning as I analyzed the data, searching for relationships
and themes. Yin (1994) stresses that a case study occurs “within its real-life
context” (p. 13) and this was an important emphasis in my study. I not only listened to the voices of the teachers participating in my study as Tellis suggests, but I also observed in their classrooms to gain an understanding of the context within which they teach. As Yin suggests, I developed a theoretical framework through my review of the literature, but I chose not to use it while collecting data so I could, as Clandinin and Connelly (1994) suggest, be “open to a rich and sometimes seemingly endless range of possible events and stories and . . . be prepared to follow leads in many directions” (p. 417). Consequently, my research study and design were emergent.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Within the qualitative case study design, I used narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state that “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). Connelly and Clandinin (1995a) specifically connect teachers and the use of narrative: “Teachers know their lives in terms of stories. They live stories, tell stories of those lives, retell stories with changed possibilities, and relive the changed stories” (p. 12). Mattingly (1991) reiterates this idea when she says that “storytelling is something that practitioners already do” (p. 255).

By listening to teachers’ stories I was able to share in their experiences and learn about the deeply held beliefs which inform their lives and teaching practices. At times it may be difficult to clearly articulate one’s theories, but teachers tell stories of their experiences within which are hidden their beliefs (Mattingly, 1991). Schmidt (1997) believes that the “stories of [teachers’] experiences constitute [their] authority and inform what [they] do in [their] classrooms” (p. 169). Narrative is the best way to understand teachers’
knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995a), and it gives us “insight into what motivates a teacher’s actions” (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991, p. 42).

Narrative inquiry was an appropriate tool to use in my study. In order to describe the beliefs of effective middle school teachers and what has influenced them to become effective teachers, I first needed to understand those deeply held, often implicit beliefs and experiences which precipitate teachers’ actions and decisions. This understanding came through listening to and analyzing the teachers’ stories.

Selecting Participants

A major task was to find effective middle school teachers willing to give of their time and themselves to participate in my study. I wanted the participants to be in the Michiana area, yet I wanted to work with teachers that not only I believed were effective, but ones whom others also recognized as effective middle school teachers. Further selection criteria included middle school teachers with more than 5 years of experience, and I wanted one male and one female teaching in two different public schools and one male and one female teaching in two different Christian schools.

These boundaries (Miles & Huberman, 1994) led me to follow Maxwell’s (1996) suggestion of using purposeful sampling when persons are “selected deliberately in order to provide important information that [cannot] be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 70). I combined my purposeful sampling with reputational selection, or participants “chosen on the recommendation of an ‘expert’ or ‘key informant’” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). I drew from others’ expertise in choosing participants because they, like the Skin Horse, have had experiences I have not been privy to.
I used reputational selection twice in the process of identifying effective middle school teachers. My first step was to contact professors at Michiana colleges and universities who have direct contact with middle school principals and teachers, requesting them to identify schools where they have met effective middle school teachers or schools which they believe have effective middle school programs. I phrased my inquiry so that these experienced educators would use their own criteria in nominating schools or specific teachers. From these conversations I formed a list of approximately 12 public and Christian schools. One school I added to the list as a result of my own reading. George and Alexander (1993) included a roster of middle schools which have “become known because of their level of excellence to researchers and practitioners on a local, state, national, or international basis” (p. 535), and one of the schools on the roster is in the Michiana area.

The second step in my search was to reduce this list of schools to four public and four Christian schools based on a number of factors: (1) Proximity to Andrews University, (2) reputation for excellence in Michiana, and (3) previous involvement with Andrews University. I then contacted the eight principals via letter and asked them to select teachers whom they consider effective. Principals used their own criteria in nominating effective teachers.

After the principals selected effective teachers in their schools, each teacher was given a questionnaire concerning his or her beliefs and practices. This questionnaire, designed by Smith (1992), was “found to be statistically valid and reliable in discriminating among teachers whose self-reported knowledge, practices, attitudes, and beliefs [are] or [are] not aligned with the findings about effective middle school teachers in a review of the literature”
(p. 108). From the returned questionnaires, I contacted four teachers who had expressed interest in participating in my study. These four effective middle school teachers committed themselves to journey with me through my study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Phase One

Data were collected and analyzed in three phases. Phase one began when I contacted professors and principals for their recommendations concerning participants for my study. During this time I also conducted semi-structured interviews with each principal to discover his or her professional training, educational experiences, basic information about the school, and beliefs concerning characteristics of effective middle school teachers.

After conducting semi-structured interviews with the eight principals and asking them to discuss criteria they used to identify effective middle school teachers in their schools, I compiled a list of characteristics from their criteria. I then placed these in six different categories, looking for similarities among the characteristics. I concluded my task by naming the categories: Personality traits, classroom atmosphere, understanding middle schoolers, enjoyment of students, curriculum and instruction, and communication with stakeholders.

Phase Two

Of the 38 questionnaires I distributed, 30 of them were completed and returned. After analyzing the returned questionnaires, I targeted the 17 questionnaires completed by teachers who indicated an interest in participating further in my study. I divided these into four categories: Male
teachers in public schools, male teachers in Christian schools, female teachers in public schools, and female teachers in Christian schools. I then contacted the four teachers whose questionnaires indicated that they were the most effective middle school teachers in their specific category. All four were enthusiastic about participating in the next phase of my study.

Phase Three

Yin (1994) describes six sources of data used in qualitative case study research: Documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. As part of observation, Merriam (1988) suggests completing accurate field notes which include both actual occurrences as well as the observer’s comments or interpretations. Of the data collection sources mentioned, I relied on classroom observations, interviews, and field notes. I also collected some documents such as student handouts, assessment instruments, and letters.

Since data collection consisted largely of observations, interviews, and field notes, all of which were directly influenced by me, I became the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Being the primary instrument allowed me to view the context within which my research phenomenon occurred. This gave me freedom to clarify and summarize while collecting data and to pursue new ideas and lines of thought. A degree of data analysis occurred simultaneously with collection and allowed for member checks to enhance the trustworthiness of my interpretations (Merriam, 1988).

I conducted the more formal phase of analysis by coding the interview transcripts and field notes. My initial coding categories consisted of significant life experiences, classroom practices and atmosphere, beliefs, and motivation.
Later as I spent more time writing about the teachers' lives and classroom practices, I revised my coding categories and called them life experiences, classroom practices, and beliefs. For me, this was largely an intuitive process, but I also, as Merriam (1988) stresses, considered issues such as frequency, uniqueness, and previously unrecognized areas. After I had identified the overarching categories for my data, I sorted through each category and looked for ways to break the data down into manageable pieces which fit together. Each teacher's story is unique, which required that each chapter I devoted to him or her be unique. My goal was to have each chapter reflect the teacher's lived experiences, classroom practices, and beliefs.

After completing chapters 3-6, I presented a copy to each teacher and asked him or her to review it. I also gave each teacher an open-ended questionnaire (Yin, 1994) to provide direction for member checks (Merriam, 1988). A final interview was conducted with each one to discuss the accuracy of my portrayal, needed corrections, and suggested additions and items to delete. Based on these final interviews, I revised each teacher's chapter.

**Interview Protocol**

I began my study with broad categories of questions concerning the stories of each participant. I wanted to hear about their lives as children, academic preparation, and circumstances surrounding various teaching positions during their careers. My questions became more focused as the study emerged. Though I knew when I began my study that I wanted participants to draw a life map of significant events, I waited until the final months to make this request. Even then I was apprehensive about voicing my desire because of the walls I often build around the stories which
constitute my life, but each teacher willingly and openly shared his or her life map.

Prior to each interview, I prepared a list of questions though each conversation took a life of its own. Many of the questions came from classroom observations or comments made during earlier conversations; these questions often led to the telling of a story as explanation for a given practice or belief. In many ways I felt like a sleuth, searching for experiences which have shaped each participant. I worked hard to be a considerate sleuth who treated these teachers with respect and sensitivity because we sometimes discussed less than pleasant experiences in their lives. Though Jack and I laughed after his comment that “This is like psychotherapy” (Vol. II, p. 128), the parallel seemed accurate as I probed for explanations and clarification.

Trustworthiness Issues

Instead of addressing issues of validity and reliability, qualitative researchers use terms such as trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and consistency. Merriam (1988) suggests that these are enhanced through member checks, triangulation of data and methods, an audit trail, and stating researcher biases.

Credibility

During data collection and analysis, I used member checks by asking for clarification during conversations with the four participants. Each of the teachers reviewed his or her own chapter, suggesting corrections, additions, and commenting on interpretations. By using interviews, observations, and collecting documents, allowing for triangulation of data and methods, I was
able to corroborate what I saw emerging as each teacher's beliefs and practices.

By describing the steps taken during data collection and analysis, I am creating an audit trail. Each researcher's biases, past experiences, and implicit thoughts impact his or her research interpretations (Eisner, 1998); however, another researcher would be able to use the trail I am leaving behind as an "operating manual" to recreate my study (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 216). Part of my audit trail includes an organized research notebook of data collected from each of my four participants, and the "narrative . . . report [in chapters 3-6 are] a history of the research project" (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 15).

The relationship that I as the researcher negotiated with each teacher participant varied (Maxwell, 1996). My face-to-face conversations began in November and continued through June of the following year. The number of classroom observations ranged in number from five to seven, but some visits were longer than others due to each teacher's schedule, classroom activities, and my personal constraints. I conducted from four to six interviews with the teachers. The length of the interviews varied, the time spent conversing following the interviews varied, and with two participants I also had significant telephone conversations which I included in my field notes. By the end of data collection, I felt like each participant had become a friend; in each case I viewed them as my personal "teachers" as I sought to understand their lives and settings (Spradley, 1979, p. 25).

During my study I found myself periodically going down "rabbit trails" concerning possible conclusions about the characteristics and beliefs of effective middle school teachers. At times I discussed these with one or more of my participants and other educators, but as I returned to the data I realized
that these interpretations were premature and not consistent with the experiences and beliefs of all four participants.

Transferability

Merriam (1988) writes that “one selects a case study approach because one wishes to understand the particular in depth” (p. 173). The purpose of my study was to describe the experiences, practices, and beliefs of individual, effective middle school teachers. It was important to me that I understand enough of their lives and characteristics that I be able to re-present (Glesne, 1997) them for other educators to read and restory their own lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). Patton says that qualitative research should “provide perspective” (as cited in Merriam, 1988, p. 175) rather than identify truths reflective of a vast number of individuals. In my study I was able to, according to the participants, provide an accurate perspective of their experiences, practices, and beliefs. I have provided readers with a description of four effective middle school teachers that “they would have missed without [my] observations” (Eisner, 1998, p. 114).

In the chapters following this one, I provide a “rich, thick description” (Merriam, 1988, p. 177) so that those who read the stories of these teachers will be able to evaluate the degree of transferability to their own settings. I do not expect all other effective middle school teachers to “share identical . . . features but rather that these are features one might look for in other [effective middle school teachers]” (Eisner, 1998, p. 103). My goal has been to articulate one perspective of effective middle school teachers and disseminate it for others to consider and find applicable truths.
Role of the Researcher

I have already mentioned that I, as the researcher, was the primary instrument of data collection throughout the study and would like to make some of my biases explicit. I have spent time as a middle school teacher and have given leadership to implementing the middle school philosophy at the school where I was teaching. I believe middle school instruction and curriculum should be student-centered and teachers need to build relationships with middle schoolers. From my personal exposure to middle schools and the literature, I believe that schools which have adopted and implemented the middle school philosophy are more effective in reaching students than schools closer to the junior high-school end of the continuum.

Merriam (1988) sees tolerance for ambiguity, good communication skills, and sensitivity to context, data, and personal bias as characteristics needed by the researcher as the primary instrument. My tolerance for ambiguity has grown considerably through my graduate studies and I enjoy the challenge of a less-structured process which allows me the freedom to "search for pieces to the puzzle" (Merriam, 1988, p. 37). I consider myself a good communicator and have had this verified by those around me. I find it relatively easy to establish rapport with others and to listen carefully.

Yin (1994) also discusses commonly required skills for case study researchers. Some of his ideas mirror those discussed by Merriam; skills he adds are the ability to ask good questions, being a good listener, having a firm grasp of the issues being studied, and the ability to remain unbiased by preconceived notions (Yin, 1994, p. 56). Several of the participants indicated that they found me to be a good listener during our conversations, and as I
reviewed transcripts of our interviews, I noticed that the amount of words recorded for the questions I asked are minute compared to the length of the answers given. This to me is indicative that I was both a good listener and able to ask appropriate questions.

Understanding the issues surrounding middle school education has occurred through both my personal experiences, review of the literature, and conversations with other educators. I liken this to Eisner’s (1998) concept of connoisseurship which he describes as “the means through which we come to know the complexities, nuances, and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have a special interest” (p. 68). My past experiences as a middle school teacher and observer in middle schools allowed me to recognize the practices of effective middle school teachers. I see this as an asset rather than a hindrance. I have seen both effective and ineffective instruction in middle schools which allowed me to compare the responses of students, non-verbal messages, and classroom atmospheres of the four classrooms I observed with those of less-effective middle school classrooms I have visited.

Yin’s (1994) comments about a researcher’s need to be willing to set aside preconceived ideas deserve special attention. I did submit a partially completed theoretical framework with the proposal of my study, and one of my concerns was that it not blind my eyes to seeing and hearing things which were outside or contrary to the framework. Consequently, I laid aside the framework and refused to review it until I was ready for the cross-case analysis. At one point during the data collection phase of my study, another educator questioned me about the theoretical framework and I was able to articulate only its broad concepts. Though the incident was slightly
embarrassing, I also experienced a sense of relief that I had been able to remove its contents from the forefront of my thoughts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in my study include confidentiality of data, anonymity of participants and sites, and informed consent. The middle school teachers who participated in the interviews and opened up their classrooms for observations, as well as their principals, were given an abstract of the intended research study and a consent form explaining the research protocol. During my initial interviews with the participants, I alluded to Eisner’s (1998) comments about the fallibility of informed consent; that “researchers usually do not know what will emerge . . . and therefore are not in a good position to inform those to be observed about what to expect” (p. 215).

Summary

The method used in this study was a qualitative case study design. I relied both on the wisdom and insight of expert informants and a questionnaire to find effective middle school teachers to participate in my study. Data collection included classroom observations, interviews, and document collection during the course of 1 school year. Participants provided feedback concerning the interpretations of the study. The results of data analysis and the participants’ journey toward becoming Real constitute the remainder of this document.
CHAPTER 3

DEBBIE—MY STUDENTS, MY CHILDREN

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day. . . . "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit

Introduction

During my years as a student teacher supervisor in the Michiana area, I had been in and out of a number of the schools in Debbie's district, but never the middle school. When I noticed the words "junior high school" on the side of the building, I wondered whether the school had adopted the middle school philosophy or if they clung tenaciously to more traditional curriculum and instruction. I found myself feeling both curious and surprised when a university professor recommended that I contact Debbie's principal as a possible site for my research study.

Of the middle schools that participated in my study, Debbie's school is the largest with 735 students in Grades 6-8. The school recently completed an expansion project which allowed for larger classrooms, increased student experiences with technology, and an attractive media center. During a tour of the school with the principal, I was impressed with his enthusiasm about the building and programs available for students.

32
This school’s transition from a junior high to a middle school approach to education began in the mid-1990s and was made slowly, with careful training and thought. Initially various speakers addressed faculty, and faculty members had the opportunity to visit other middle schools. The next step involved piloting a middle school program for the sixth graders. After a successful pilot, the seventh-grade team began the formal transition. The year of my research study and visits to Debbie’s school was the year of transition for the eighth-grade team.

Though Debbie has been teaching for 12 years, this was her first year in this district. This created extra challenges for her and she talked about how hard it has been to, in essence, go through another first year. She mentioned things like making new friends, getting used to different personalities, preparing things for the “copy machine lady” (Vol. I, p. 70), learning the quirks of the school, and even which way to turn the key to unlock her room as things she needed to adjust to.

I got the sense that this was also a year of transitioning loyalties and relationships from one school to another. Debbie still kept in touch with her colleagues from the school she left last year and was disappointed when she was unable to meet them for dinner because Lent made her week extra busy. I saw and heard Debbie reaching out to the teachers at her current school while also maintaining previous relationships. One evening when I tried unsuccessfully to reach her at home, she later told me she “went out with the girls” after parent-teacher conferences (Vol. I, p. 1).

Debbie was bothered that she had not yet unpacked all of her boxes since transferring to this school and periodically had to rummage through
them looking for things she wanted to use in her classes. Debbie and her husband also bought and moved to a new house during Christmas vacation which added more stress to her personal life. In spite of this sense of upheaval, Debbie willingly opened her classroom and life to me.

Debbie's life has created a cheerful, welcoming house. It is bright and sunny inside with large windows and a pleasant decor. Her house is overflowing with love and care for others. It reaches out and welcomes all who pass by, freely giving of its abundant love to nurture others.

**Debbie's Story**

**Family Influences**

Debbie was born and grew up in the Michiana area and has always called this home. When I asked her to explain the life map she drew for me, Debbie said,

I first thought of my two loving, supportive parents and just the many, many memories I have of special times. Just feeling loved and supported, basically unconditional love. [I remember] a lot of special times when I was alone with them doing different things or we were together as a family. . . . I always felt very much like they always had time for me. I was never imposing upon them. I was an only child. I guess I got a lot of special times with them because I was the only one. Maybe that was part of it. I had a lot of time with my parents and feeling like they [loved] me no matter what, supported me no matter what I did. (Vol. I, p. 90)

Not only did Debbie experience a lot of love and support from her immediate family, but her extended family was also an integral part of her world. She said, "We're a close-knit family where I would visit and do things and have a lot of interactions with my other relatives that were close by" (Vol. I, p. 75). These relatives included her grandparents and uncles and aunts. This extended family had "a lot of reunions, a lot of family vacations,
and getting together for holidays and all kinds of happiness" (Vol. I, p. 90).

Debbie called her parents her "two main teachers" and said "they taught [her] how important it was to be excited about things and to enjoy life and be happy and have fun [and] to explore the world" (Vol. I, p. 41). Part of exploring the world included spending a lot of time with her dad:

I would be outside when my dad would come home from hunting if he went without me. He'd bring home animals and he'd clean them himself. . . . When I got a little bit older he would show me things and teach me how to clean fish. (Vol. I, p. 77)

A big part of Debbie's love for science she attributes to the time she spent with her dad "being out in the woods and walking around hunting [and looking at] plants and animals" (Vol. I, p. 29). Debbie said, "Whenever [Dad] would do something, he would always show me" (Vol. I, p. 30). From her dad Debbie learned a variety of things ranging from changing oil in the car to gutting fish.

Debbie's mother did not enjoy the outdoors as much as Debbie and her father, but she provided different experiences for Debbie: "My mom encouraged me in . . . gymnastics and jazz and those kinds of interests, but she wasn't an outdoorsy person" (Vol. I, p. 30).

As a team, Debbie's parents encouraged her to become involved in various activities and modeled this type of lifestyle for her:

My mom and dad were real active . . . and definitely encouraged me to pursue different interests, lots of different interests (Vol. I, p. 30). [My parents] made the activities I was involved in . . . really important to them. They always showed interest in what I was doing and they were always there for me, to help me to feel successful. . . . They also were real good role models in terms of the way that they lived their lives. . . . They read the paper, they . . . modeled things like making sure that reading was important and watching the right kind of TV shows, like Discovery [Channel] and . . . learning type of programs. (Vol. I, p. 74)
During Debbie’s teenage years, she was active in a number of service activities. She volunteered with the Brownies and tutored through the National Honor Society. During the summer she was a camp counselor and a leader at cheerleading camp. Being a camp counselor allowed her to be close to and explore one of her main interests, nature and science. At a young age, Debbie gave of herself to others just as she saw her parents give to her.

An active, giving lifestyle coupled with the encouragement to try new things that Debbie’s parents provided for her has shaped who she is today. She said,

Being involved in a lot of different things when I was little helped to make me open to new . . . and different things when I was older. I always could see the benefit of trying something that . . . I might not have been extremely interested in, but I was encouraged to try to see how I like it. . . . Having that exposure as a child to a lot of variety and learning that sometimes you try something that you initially aren’t going to think that [you will] like that well and then you try it and you actually do end up enjoying more than you thought you would has helped me as an adult to try new things. So opportunities present themselves and I’m generally one to say, “Oh, I’ll try that and see how it goes.” (Vol. I, pp. 30-31)

Debbie has always felt unconditional love and support from her parents; they were not, however, parents who allowed her to do whatever she pleased. She recalled,

My father’s a real strict disciplinarian so I grew up with a lot of discipline. I knew right from wrong. I knew where the boundary line was and so I wasn’t really in one of those situations where I had to make a lot of choices because I knew there would be consequences for inappropriate choices (Vol. I, p. 78).

I always knew where I stood as far as what I was expected to do and yet I always knew I had help to do it. They held up high expectations . . . [but] not unreasonable expectations. (Vol. I, p. 74)

These high expectations Debbie’s parents had for her included making
school a priority. They expected Debbie to do well, but there was “always a willingness to sit down . . . and help . . . out with whatever it was [she] was doing in school” (Vol. I, p. 74). Debbie recalled, “If I was having problems . . . I knew I could go to [my parents] and they’d help me solve them” (Vol. I, p. 74).

Debbie’s middle school years were challenging years for her “even though [she] had a really good set of parents” (Vol. I, p. 78). She described these years:

Just like all kids, [I struggled] with so many things. Fitting in: Where do I belong? What do I want to do? . . . I remember [being] a cheerleader, but yet I wasn’t quite like the popular crowd. I was a cheerleader which to some people meant that I was kind of in that crowd, but I never really felt like it. It’s kind of a part of being popular but sort of not at the same time, kind of an awkward spot to be. . . . It’s just a difficult time in life. You’re dealing with so many friendship issues and so many issues that are just so painful. You don’t like your hair, you don’t like the way you look, just all those things. (Vol. I, p. 78)

Debbie’s parents are not college graduates, but they valued higher education. Debbie’s parents

come from families where their siblings are not college graduates. They also come from large families so I think that when they were growing up there was always a kind of struggle and it was hard. Then when they had me . . . they saw the opportunity to provide me with a lot of experiences by only having one child versus maybe six or seven siblings the way that they grew up. It was always a real priority for them to see me go on to college. I think they had that in the plans right at the beginning. (Vol. I, pp. 74-75)

To summarize the role her immediate and extended families played in her life, Debbie commented that “everybody was just a really good role model in terms of no alcoholism, good work ethic, everybody had a job, everybody valued church and valued helping others” (Vol. I, p. 75).
Influences at School

Not only did Debbie's family influence her as she was growing up, but she also recalled several teachers who impacted her life:

[There were] a few select teachers along the way that I can remember and really loved. The one thing that I always remember about those teachers is that I really can't remember specifically what they taught me, but I remember I liked them and that I enjoyed being in their classroom. I can't really remember curriculum-wise what exactly I learned, but I just know that I respected them and enjoyed them as individual people. I knew that they cared about me and that they were really interested in me beyond just a student but about my life in general. (Vol. I, p. 75)

Most of these teachers who touched Debbie's life were science teachers. She specifically remembers teachers bringing in animals and things from nature to show the class. Since Debbie has always loved living things, she found this fascinating. These teachers were more interested in utilizing teachable moments rather than sticking closely to the textbook. Debbie remarked, "[I had] science teachers that were just really dynamic and real fun and easy going. I just loved their classes. [We did] a lot of hands-on [activities] and they were just neat people" (Vol. I, p. 29).

One incident involving animals which Debbie remembers was not a pleasant one. It was her first snake experience and she recalls,

It was terrible because [the teacher] passed around a box and in the shoe box was a snake. [This teacher] was a real crack up; he was just hilarious. ... He put the snake in the box, [but] he didn't tell us it was alive so I assumed it was dead. So I'm like poking it and it's hissing and I'm just like ahhhhh! I didn't know it was alive! (Vol. I, p. 76)

When Debbie got close to graduating from high school, she realized that she needed to make decisions regarding her career. Concerning this decision she said,

I talked to my parents about what I like doing. [I thought], What do I like doing? What do I enjoy doing? Where do I see myself in ten years? I
always loved science and I always loved working with kids. I always liked being outdoors. And I just thought that teaching was something that would give me an opportunity, especially being a science teacher, to take my class outdoors and do things hands on. The main thing was the science and yet I wasn’t really interested in being some of the things that would go with science like [being] a nurse. . . . So I felt like teaching was a good [choice]. . . . I just had some teachers I really respected and I thought that they seemed like they loved their jobs. I just had a lot of respect for them and I thought, boy, [teaching] would be just a neat thing to do. (Vol. I, p. 29)

Debbie also sees her interest in teaching middle school students as beginning in high school. She recalled,

Back when I was in high school I was a cheerleader and just involved in a lot of different . . . groups. If I had an opportunity to work with kids younger than myself, I always took those opportunities, like cheerleading camp. . . . I always just thought it was fun to work with . . . middle school kids. (Vol. I, p. 28)

Debbie recalls her undergraduate years as difficult because she missed her family. She did, however, “[travel] home quite a bit on the weekends [and] brought home all the laundry” (Vol. I, p. 81). Missing family was made a bit easier since Debbie’s best friend from high school went to the same college she did and the two were roommates. Debbie recalled, “That was a real strong help having such a close friend there. [College was] busy. I worked . . . odd jobs to help pay the cost because my family’s not real wealthy. Fortunately I had some scholarships” (Vol. I, p. 81).

Student teaching was a positive experience for Debbie. She said,

I student taught with third graders who were so cute. . . . My only problem with student teaching was . . . a 50-minute commute. That made it tough. . . . It was hard to be that young and be on the road that long. I wished I would have gotten placed closer. . . . But I enjoyed [student teaching]. . . . I had a really good supervising teacher and good staff I was working with and great kids. (Vol. I, p. 81)

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After graduating from college, Debbie moved even farther away from her family and worked as a substitute teacher. She said, "I was kind of like a building sub . . . and then I was also their assistant track coach" (Vol. I, p. 81). Since she was so involved with this one school, she was confident of being offered a position when the school had an opening. That did not work out for her, however, and she took a job in a different district teaching seventh- and eighth-grade science.

Debbie began taking graduate classes once she secured a full time teaching position so her life became very busy. She said,

I was teaching and going to school at the same time. It was tough. That was a lot of work, but I felt it was really important. I gained a lot of science knowledge because I got my master's in elementary ed but I had a focus on science. All my electives . . . were science related. It was great [because] I got a lot of information that I shared with the kids and a lot of hands-on science that I was able to bring into the classroom. (Vol. I, p. 31)

Though Debbie's career was well underway she missed her family and continued traveling 4 hours to be home on weekends to spend time with her parents. She would also spend the entire summer with her parents.

Debbie has taught a variety of grades during her 12 years as a teacher. After beginning as a science teacher for Grades 7 and 8, she got transferred to teaching third grade. After she got married, she needed to relocate and find another job. This job began as fifth- and sixth-grade science, but then she took a fifth-grade self-contained classroom. For 6 years Debbie commuted almost 2 hours per day to teach. Periodically during this time she would go through the process of applying for a teaching position in districts that were closer to her home, but it was not until the summer before I met her that Debbie found
her current position.

I asked Debbie what kept her in teaching during her first few years, times of upheaval, missing her family, and energy expended on graduate classes. Debbie replied,

I always really enjoyed working with kids. I . . . enjoyed the satisfaction I got from my job. . . . I had a really, really supportive staff that I was working with, fellow mentoring type of teachers. [I had] people I could go and talk to and know that I could [tell them] the truth. [I knew] they weren’t really going to judge me or act like I was a bad teacher because I made a mistake or I did something that maybe I shouldn’t have done with a parent or a child. I had people that I could really call friends and [felt] like I could spill my guts. (Vol. I, p. 84)

During her years as a teacher, Debbie has seen changes in her approach to students:

I’ve learned a lot about kids over the years . . . and that you can get more out of a bee with honey than you can with vinegar! . . . [Earlier] I had a “These are the rules [attitude].” . . . I didn’t really care if [the students] liked me or they didn’t like me because I was trying to teach them the curriculum. [I] wasn’t extremely compassionate. (Vol. I, p. 38)

Debbie saw some of her students pass from one grade to the next, having the same problems each year. This motivated her to reach out to students. She explained,

I’ve gone that extra mile or done extra things for them. [I’ve had] a lot of discussions with them and I’ve seen some changes in their behavior and improvements that are gratifying. . . . I may not be able to move mountains, but if I can just help a little bit to change some of the negative things that they do or some of the problems that they have [I’m pleased]. It makes so much more sense to try that than to always beat your head up against a wall because they’re not doing exactly what you tell them to do. . . . I’ve learned that if you try . . . there’s a lot you can do. Sometimes it takes a lot of time and energy, and sometimes it doesn’t work either . . . . You have to realize that when kids go home and their environment doesn’t support what you’re doing that sometimes it’s very, very, very difficult to make a change. . . . Sometimes it’s really hard that you just don’t know how to help. (Vol. I, p. 39)
Debbie now takes time to get well-acquainted with her students and seeks to understand what is happening in their lives. Now she seeks answers to questions, "Why are they having difficulty in my class? Why are they unhappy? Why are they misbehaving?" (Vol. I, p. 39). Finding answers to these questions has helped Debbie understand "why [her students are] making the choices they’re making" (Vol. I, p. 39).

"My Best Friend"

It was not until Debbie met and married Jim that she moved back into the Michiana area. She said,

I was thrilled because I had an opportunity to move back which was wonderful . . . . All along I really wanted to move back, I just needed that road, that avenue. Then it was hard to think about leaving all the people I’d developed such close relationships with, but I desperately missed my family . . . and I did want to be with Jim! (Vol. I, p. 83-84)

Jim plays an integral role in Debbie’s life and she credits him with shaping who she is. She said,

Getting married . . . was like finding my best friend in life. [I feel] very fortunate to know that no matter what happens in my life, he will be there for me. I think it’s rare to find somebody that you can count on that much. I am very, very fortunate to have somebody like [Jim] in my life. (Vol. I, p. 90)

Debbie surprised me by saying, “I think one thing that makes me a good teacher is that I have a good marriage” (Vol. I, p. 44). When she elaborated, I understood her comment:

I can come to work and I don’t have any kind of personal issues outside of my job that maybe would cause me unhappiness. [Jim] comes in and he helps me a lot if I need something done here. For instance, I’m working on my computer and I need my grades entered, he’ll come and he’ll read the grades off so that I can just type them in without having to look back and forth. He’ll grade papers for me or help run off dittos. So that’s kind of a nice thing too that helps me be a better teacher, having that extra crutch.
of help... He also respects my need for... time when I come home. [My need for] not watching TV and having quiet time to do my work. He respects my need to bring my job home. He supports me in that... [A good marriage] helps [me] to be a more energetic and good teacher because I'm not bringing issues from home or having any kind of personal [crisis]. (Vol. I, p. 44)

Jim shares Debbie's love for the outdoors and her desire to be part of his interests have motivated her to broaden her interests. Debbie said,

We've gone deer hunting, pheasant hunting, [but] not rabbits. I like rabbits too well... It was interesting, not because I'm interested in hunting, but because I'm willing to try something new... I went to enjoy his passion... I think he hoped that I would become a huntress, but I didn't enjoy [his] passion that well. I like to go for nature walks and things like that, but I don't really enjoy the hunt the way that he does... It was fascinating to be out there and it was real interesting too to be in the woods on the first day of gun hunting season and hear all the shots. I was petrified because you hear all these shots and you think, "Geez, I hope that bullet is not coming any closer!" (Vol. I, p. 42)

I found Debbie's love for animals and her compassionate, nurturing nature to be contradictory with her attitude toward hunting animals. I asked her about it and she explained her reasoning:

I look at it from the perspective of we eat meat, and some animals in the wintertime struggle for survival because there's only so much food available... We eat all the meat and we tan the hides... [Jim] makes things out of the hides... I look at it from a practical standpoint... A lot of the stuff that he gets in the woods we bring into the classroom. I've [got] his turkey feet... I've got the turkey feathers. I've got a deer head; I've got some of his antlers. So a lot of the stuff I can bring in and talk to the kids about... [Jim is] extremely accurate so I know that when he takes a shot, it's a very good chance that it's going to be a quick kill type of shot... I accept hunting. It's not my favorite thing, but I accept it. (Vol. I, pp. 42-43)

It was with Jim's help that Debbie was able to deal with her fear of snakes which began during her elementary school years. When one of Debbie's students chanted, "Girls are afraid of snakes; girls are afraid of snakes" (Vol. I, p. 77), Debbie decided that she needed to deal with this fear.
She explained:

I went home and had my husband catch a snake because he's very unafraid of snakes. . . . We sat down for probably three hours and he helped me overcome [my fear] by . . . in little increments getting me to the point where I could handle the snake. I was able to go into my [classroom with a snake] after I had [one] at my house for awhile, and I got really accustomed to handling it. [It] was extremely hard because I was drop-dead frightened of snakes, as frightened as any kid that I've ever known. I was deathly afraid of snakes. I overcame my fears and I was able to confidently come into the classroom and handle the snake. Since then I've been able to help a lot of . . . kids overcome their fear because I know what that fear is like. . . . That's why I really like having a classroom snake for a pet because I think that a lot of kids are just naturally afraid of snakes, but when they see other kids handling it they [think it is] no big deal. (Vol. I, p. 77)

When I asked Debbie if she talks to Jim about school, she laughed and said, "Oh yeah. The poor sucker!" (Vol. I, p. 85). She went on to say,

He helps me a lot by making me laugh about something that maybe I needed to laugh about, to just let it go. [He gives] me some ideas on how to deal with things. He's a supervisor [at work] so he deals with people all the time too. He's real good at saying, "Well, you know, maybe you should have done this." He's a good listener. (Vol. I, p. 85)

The way Jim lives his life has challenged Debbie. She explained, "He lives his life . . . just savoring every day. [He has helped] me to realize that I need to be that way too. . . . He just treats people well and does things for people" (Vol. I, p. 84)

Debbie's Classroom

Appearance

Debbie's classroom is one of two science rooms in the sixth-grade wing. When entering the sixth-grade wing, one is welcomed with a banner, "Oh, the Places You'll Go," announcing this year's theme for sixth grade. Inside Debbie's classroom I see a connection to the theme on one of her bulletin
boards; there is a picture of a scientist and the phrase, "Oh, the chemistry we will do." Other items in Debbie's room include character-building posters and things unique to a science classroom. Some of the posters I saw read: "Tolerance is seeing with your heart," "Success comes in CANS not in cannots," and "No one is a failure who keeps trying." Debbie also identifies the scientific method on one wall: Purpose, hypothesis, experiment, analysis, and conclusion.

Several large cabinets with glass doors hold the skulls of various animals and other animal artifacts. Charlie, the pet snake, has his own terrarium with an easily removable lid, allowing students to play with him during the day. Debbie also has some goldfish in her classroom.

Debbie's room appears to be divided into two sections though there is no actual divider. On the one side are individual student desks resting on the inside of bright yellow tennis balls. The second half of the room has lab tables surrounded with chairs. White boards run the entire length of the room, making it easy for Debbie to use the board regardless of where students are sitting. An over-stuffed chair rests in one corner of the room; however, I never saw anyone sitting in this chair during my visits. Tall windows opposite the classroom's entrance allow natural light into the classroom though they face another wing of the building. Debbie also has her own storage room and an office with doorways into her classroom, but I only occasionally noticed her using them. She always seemed to be in the classroom or hallway surrounded by her students.

On several occasions, I noticed unusual additions to Debbie's classroom. In the dead of winter she had a vase of cut flowers brightening up
the raised lab table she uses as a desk. These flowers quietly performed the task of cheering up the classroom, unlike the Furby who visited her classroom another day.

Furby belonged to one of the students and Debbie had the task of babysitting him while the student was absent. His presence got the students excited even though he began the period by sleeping. In the midst of Debbie making an important announcement, Furby awakened and began talking. With some difficulty Debbie quieted the students down and said with laughter, “I’ll talk about Furby in a second” (Vol. I, p. 49). When she did turn her attention to Furby, she told the students that she was “excited to actually see one” because the only one she had seen until now was on TV (Vol. I, p. 49). Debbie then told the students she does not know much about Furby and got them to share about Furbys they have at home by asking them who owns one, what they look like, and what they do.

Curriculum and Instruction

Debbie begins each day with an advisory group of sixth graders, teaches five sections of sixth-grade science during the day, and then teaches an exploratory science class the last period of the day. Throughout each responsibility assumed by Debbie, I saw her caring, nurturing, motherly nature reaching out to students.

I rarely saw Debbie sit down during class times. She was always where the students were. In the morning as students filtered into the classroom, she was available to welcome them, between classes she was busy answering questions or chatting about a student’s personal life, and during class she was roaming the room. When Debbie told me her favorite quote, “One on her feet
is worth three in her seat" (Vol. I, p. 45), I recognized how effectively she embodies this truth.

As I look back on my experiences in Debbie's classroom, I feel like there was always something unusual happening. When I contacted her in December she talked about special holiday activities the sixth grade team was planning, there were a number of field trips, a video to go with a trade book they read, special reviews for semester exams, an interdisciplinary Medieval Times unit, job shadowing, and science fair projects. I finally concluded that the unusual must be the norm in Debbie's school.

**Advisory**

Debbie's view of her advisory group falls well within the purpose generally identified in the literature. Cole (1992), *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1995), and *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council, 1989) discuss the need for middle schoolers to be known well by at least one adult who is in touch with students' personal and academic needs. Through a variety of activities, Debbie works to establish relationships with students in her advisory group. She explained her goals:

I think that it is a really important quality for a teacher to show interest [in kids] beyond the classroom setting, to show interest in what kind of life they are leading at home and what kinds of things they do outside of school, to get to know them beyond just [the classroom]. Advisory helps with that . . . because that is the first group I have in the morning and I tend to talk to them a little bit more and get a little bit closer to them. (Vol. I, p. 75)

**Science**

The written curriculum is important to Debbie and she works hard to ensure that students are prepared for the next grade level. I asked her what
guides her curriculum and she responded:

We have a list of objectives that were [developed] by a . . . science committee. . . . How you meet your objective is up to you, but there is a list of objectives that we are responsible to teach so that when the kids get into seventh grade and the seventh-grade teacher mentions . . . "kingdoms" the kids have some preknowledge. When she gets the kids in seventh grade, she will assume that they have had exposure to that concept, classification, and that will not be all new information. So there are things that I am supposed to teach this year to help lead them in seventh grade. Of course that all ties into MEAP [Michigan Educational Assessment Program] testing. (Vol. I, pp. 36-37)

Debbie's ultimate goal for her students, however, is not merely preparing them for the next grade level or covering a textbook. She explained:

I think that you can teach science out of a book or you can teach science by exposing the kids to science. Those are really two different ways of teaching. We have a book . . . and we look at the book as something that we have as a tool, but if I did not have a book that would be okay too. It is something that we have that is available to us, and it is not that we do not use it. We do use it because there just are some kids who benefit from the security of knowing that they have a book. But I think it is more important to do science and to see things and do labs, talk about it and experience [science] more than the book can provide (Vol. I, p. 36).

I have . . . a real big responsibility to [help] kids to love science, not to learn science, but enjoy science and want to . . . pursue science. I think if they are bored or they are not exposed to a lot of exciting things that they may see science as kind of a boring . . . not very interesting sort of area. (Vol. I, p. 37)

As their teacher, Debbie seeks to teach her students much more than science content. She wants them "to be excited about learning new things, to see what they are really capable of, [to take] responsibility for their own actions and learning, and [learn] that they can control their behavior" (Vol. I, p. 41). Debbie said, "The most important gift I can give them is just the gift of enjoying school and wanting to be here" (Vol. I, p. 41). As I watched Debbie relate to her students, I saw her making individual students feel welcome and
part of the classroom. Her easy-going cheerfulness creates a warm, accepting atmosphere in her classroom.

Debbie is a strong proponent of utilizing teachable moments in the classroom. She saw this in the science teachers she admired and from whom she learned the most. Having Charlie, the pet snake, in her classroom provided an opportunity for such a moment. One weekend Charlie shed his skin, so, on Monday, Debbie showed her students the skin and talked about what had happened. Even though it did not fit into Debbie's written curriculum, she chose to discuss this with the students because Charlie was their pet and they were interested in the fact that he had shed his skin. Debbie said, "If you can get off tangent you can sometimes [teach] more than just sticking to the pages [of the textbook]" (Vol. I, p. 76).

Semester exams

When Debbie first told me her sixth graders needed to take semester exams, she mentioned that she feels sorry for them. This would be their first experience in taking semester exams and the students were pretty scared and nervous about it. Debbie and the other sixth-grade science teacher worked together to make up the science exam, they prepared review packets for the students, and were spending class time reviewing and preparing for the exam. The entire sixth-grade team voted to have exam scores account for only 10% of the students' grades though the seventh and eighth graders' semester exam scores composed 20% of their semester average.

One of my visits to Debbie's classroom coincided with a review day for the semester exam. This topic was of utmost concern to students and they immediately began discussing the exam when class began. One student
complained, "[The information] doesn't stay in my head that long" (Vol. I, p. 18). Debbie chuckled at this comment and began giving students mnemonic devices for recalling information. She sympathized, "It is a lot to remember" (Vol. I, p. 18). Another student asked, "If I fail [the exam], will I go to seventh grade?" (Vol. I, p. 18) and again Debbie chuckled sympathetically and referred to students' review packets. She kept telling them that there would be no surprises on the exam and if they studied the things in their review packets they should do well. She also mentioned that paying careful attention while the class played bingo would help them prepare for the exam.

Debbie asked students to write vocabulary words from the list she distributed on yellow bingo boards while she took attendance. After students finished writing the words on the boards, they were to move over to the lab tables where they would play bingo. Throughout this time, students continued to express concern about their semester exam and Debbie kept reassuring them, "You will be in good shape as long as you study right. I promise" (Vol. I, p. 18).

Once students arrived at the lab tables, their first task was to cut green strips of paper into small squares to use as markers during the bingo game. When the class was ready to begin playing, Debbie explained the rules. She would read a definition to students and they were to search for the vocabulary word on their bingo boards and cover the word with their green squares. Students were allowed to quietly share answers with others sitting in their group. Winners would be allowed to choose a goodie out of the treat box. Since Debbie wanted as many students as possible to be winners, only winners would clear their boards when they had bingo and the rest of the class would
simply leave their squares on their boards.

Debbie sat on the edge of an empty lab table to read the definitions to students, and she kept putting the pencil she was holding behind her ear. When a student yelled bingo, she got excited herself. At one point a student said, “I think I got something” to which Debbie responded, “So you say?” (Vol. I, p. 19) while gesturing wildly with her arms for him to say bingo. To another student who got bingo, Debbie said, “So you are a winner! You were so worried about the science exam!” (Vol. I, p. 19). Once students said “Bingo!” Debbie asked them to read off their words and checked to see if they had covered the correct words. She also asked students to pick a treat out of the treat box and soon I saw students eating treats.

Periodically during the game Debbie walked around the room to see how students were progressing with their bingo cards. She made encouraging comments, “I see some people that are pretty close” (Vol. I, p. 19) and “Be real good listeners right now” (Vol. I, p. 20). At one point an entire group of girls yelled “Bingo!” and Debbie stepped back in astonishment. Another time a student thought he had bingo, but when he read off his words, Debbie said, “We have not used ‘atoms’ yet. Bummer! I am sorry” (Vol. I, p. 20). One student eagerly told Debbie that he was close to getting bingo, and Debbie responded, “I have my fingers crossed!” (Vol. I, p. 20).

I was intrigued by Debbie’s facial expressions and gestures during bingo. She smiled and nodded at students reading off their bingo words, when she read a definition she looked around the room with a hopeful expression, and she often said, “Yeah!” when someone got bingo (Vol. I, p. 20). Throughout the entire game, Debbie communicated with her body language and words
that she genuinely wanted students to be successful.

At the close of the period, Debbie told students she had four things to tell them before the bell rings: Please remember to go to bed early tonight, make sure you eat breakfast in the morning, make sure you take your review packet home and study, and do not let yourself get stressed out. She reminded them again that there would be "no surprises" on the exam and the information covered in the review packet is what would be on the exam (Vol. I, p. 20). As she dismissed the students she said, "I want each and every one of you to walk out of here with an A+ tomorrow" (Vol. I, pp. 20-21). After the students left, Debbie confided in me that it makes her sad to know that some of the students will not do well on the exam because they will not take it seriously and study for it.

Medieval Times unit

I have to admit that when Debbie first talked to me about the sixth-grade team's plans for a Medieval Times interdisciplinary unit, I wondered how science fit into this type of unit. I had forgotten, however, about the Bubonic Plague. Debbie used this opportunity to introduce students to using microscopes and they did a simulation of the plague which the students enjoyed and I found fascinating.

Prior to the simulation, Debbie's students learned about the possible causes and cure for the plague. A video they watched showed how people's reactions to the plague ranged from extreme fear to viewing it fatalistically to assuming it had supernatural causes. I was impressed with the way Debbie attempted to make the Bubonic Plague something students could understand and relate to; she and the class concluded that people in the Middle Ages...
must have had the same feelings about the plague as we do today about AIDS and cancer. We are afraid of them and we want someone to find a cure.

For the simulation students were given different roles that villagers would have had during Medieval Times. Each student was also given a bag with his or her job description and a list of villagers to visit. On the inside of the bag were 10 beans. The bags of students playing select roles contained seven white beans and three black beans. As students visited their fellow villagers, they needed to take a bean from the villager’s bag. If a student got a black bean from someone’s bag, they needed to roll a die to find out how many of their white beans to exchange for black beans. Once a student had 10 black beans in his or her bag, he or she had died because of the plague and had to lay motionless in the morgue located at the back of the classroom.

Students enjoyed the simulation tremendously though there was a problem keeping those in the morgue quiet. Debbie told me she also enjoyed the simulation but that next time she would do things differently. She said she would like to ask either parents or older students to help because there were a number of things in the simulation which needed monitoring such as exchanging beans, keeping students focused, and keeping the “dead” quietly contained in the morgue. The other thing Debbie regretted was that they had a field trip planned the following day which did not allow her to discuss the simulation with students while it was fresh in their minds.

Science projects

Since this was Debbie’s first year teaching sixth grade at this particular school, there were several established sixth-grade traditions for which she was unprepared. One of these happened to be a science project. In her
conversations with students, Debbie struggled to use the words "science project" instead of "science fair." In the past she had her students do projects for a science fair and the new vocabulary was difficult for her to adjust to. In this particular school all sixth graders were required to do a "science project" but only those who specifically wanted to entered a separate "science fair." My visits to Debbie's classroom ended before the students completed their projects, but Debbie's response to the beginning of the projects speak to her caring nurturance of students and her desire to help them experience success.

To help stimulate students' thinking about possible topics for their science projects, Debbie and her fellow science teacher gathered a number of science books for students to peruse. The first step was to simply look through the books, record ideas, and note the book and page number in which they found the idea. While looking through the books for ideas, the students were also instructed to ask Debbie questions and discuss their ideas with her.

Students struggled with the process and Debbie empathized with them. While students were looking at the books, Debbie seemed to be everywhere at once helping students. She was virtually swallowed up by the students because of her petite stature. Even so, Debbie patiently and persistently questioned and probed students. Though the deadline for making a decision was at hand, Debbie stressed that she wanted students to work on something they found genuinely interesting and did not want them to make a hurried decision just to meet the deadline.

Since students needed to do these projects individually or in pairs, Debbie was constantly jumping from one conversation to the next. She went from discussing a project which involved planting beans in different types of
soil and warning the girls that the seeds might die, to a male student who
wanted to do something that would explode. Another student told Debbie
that his aunt is "into chemistry" (Vol. I, p. 58) and would be visiting him that
evening. Debbie suggested that he browse through the chemistry books for
ideas and then talk to his aunt for more direction. One girl informed Debbie
that her mother told her she was not allowed to hatch baby chicks. Debbie
commented that baby chicks would be a big investment and that giving them
up after the project is hard. It is easy to get attached to baby chicks, but
chickens do not make good pets. Two girls were interested in doing
something in the medical field so Debbie suggested they test for the amount
of fat in various foods. When one of the girls asked if they could test for fats
in pizza, Debbie called that an "original idea" (Vol. I, p. 51) and suggested they
include their parents in the project. Though Debbie gave suggestions, probed
students' thinking, discussed possible problems, kept the students on task,
and heaped encouragement on the students, she made it clear that students,
with the approval of their parents, needed to make their own decision
concerning their science project.

Exploratory Class

I asked Debbie to describe the difference between the exploratory class
she offered and her regular science classes. In response to my question she
said:

The academic expectations are a lot lower. . . . It is just supposed to be a
little bit of an introduction to spark some interest in an area. . . . There is
not a test; there is not a quiz. Generally there may not be any homework at
all. It is a real relaxed high interest, get them to talk, get them to learn
something about the topic [class]. . . . Normally everybody walks away with
an A. It is more of a participatory sort of experience. . . . You have to really
mess up not to do well in exploratory. . . . It is a high success feeling class.
which is great. They walk away feeling like they did a great job in exploratory. . . . It is a good way to end the day because it is real high interest. I think by seventh hour when you are 12 years old and you've been going through the day you are tired by seventh hour. You are kind of overwhelmed. You've got a lot of homework, maybe you have a lot of things on your mind . . . so it is kind of nice to come in and do something that is real high interest and fun. . . . It is pretty safe . . . and the teachers love it. (Vol. I, pp. 32-33)

In the exploratory class Debbie offered, 1 day in each cycle was spent dissecting lungs. When I told her I really wanted to observe that day, she warned me that the students get very excited and rather wild because this is usually one of their first dissecting experiences. She also told me that I may want to wear old clothes because it is a bloody project. Debbie's warnings did not deter me, and I doubted that I would find the cow lungs she talked about disgusting since I grew up on a farm and as a child had watched my dad and neighbors butcher a cow. In retrospect, I should have taken Debbie's cautions more seriously because I was unprepared for what I witnessed.

When I walked into the classroom, students and Debbie had already donned black garbage bags with holes for heads and arms. Everyone was wearing white latex gloves and the lab tables were covered with black garbage bags. After giving students, who were too excited to really listen, last-minute directions, Debbie calmly reached into a large plastic garbage can and began distributing huge mounds of cow organs to each of the four groups of students. Students began groaning, some ran to the opposite side of the room, others began touching and exploring their specimens, and some students began predicting which of their peers would throw up sometime during the period. Debbie continued passing out specimens, merely chuckling at students' reactions.
Eventually students got busy following directions on their lab sheets and Debbie offered assistance as needed. As she circulated among the tables, I heard her comment to various students: "Oh, good job!" "That is the awesome part!" "I am so proud of you! You could be a doctor or a veterinarian." "Look at you! You are [still] here!" (Vol. I, pp. 8-9). That last comment was made to a student who was squeamish and had been uncertain about participating. Debbie again reminded students that the purpose of this dissection activity was so they could see what the inside of lungs look like.

One part of Debbie’s lab instructions asked students to

cut a chunk of lung off. Raise your hand and I will bring you a straw. Place the end of the straw firmly against a larger hole in the lung. Blow into the straw. Do not inhale . . . unless you are a vampire!!! (Vol. I, p. 13)

This activity generated an additional stir of excitement in the classroom which was already brimming with enthusiasm. When students followed Debbie’s directions carefully, they were able to inflate the section of lung they had cut off of their specimens. Debbie responded by smiling and celebrating students’ success and commenting, “You are amazing!” (Vol. I, p. 9).

One group of boys surprised everyone in the room by shouting for Debbie to come to their table because they had found the “poop cord” or as one of them chimed in, “the anus” (Vol. I, p. 9). Debbie chuckled a bit as she made her way to their table and said, “I am so glad you know your science vocabulary so well” (Vol. I, p. 9). She then used the opportunity to explain to the boys and the other students who rushed to their table that they had found the esophagus which leads to the cow’s stomach.

Clean-up time came very quickly and Debbie blew a whistle to get students’ attention. Students were asked to toss the garbage bags they were
wearing into the trash cans, their dissected specimens went into large yellow garbage bags, and they were to thoroughly wash their hands with soap in the restroom. After going over her expectations, Debbie addressed a few of the students as “honey” and commented on the clean-up process: “You did excellent!” and “I am very proud!” (Vol. I, p. 10)

One male student had not been able to find the bronchial tubes in his group’s specimen so he asked Debbie if he could work on it after school since his mother would be picking him up. When his mother arrived, Debbie spoke to her about the student, calling him “Dr. Jones.” The mother laughed and commented that “Dr. Jones” needed to get better grades, and she and Debbie then discussed the student’s work.

Later I discovered that Debbie drives as much as an hour to visit butcher shops willing to donate the specimens she uses in exploratory class. Generally she is able to get more specimens than she needs for a given class so she stores the extra ones in her freezer at home. The day prior to dissecting, she thaws the specimens in her bathtub and rinses them to remove as much blood as possible. She then drags them to her car and into school so the students can dissect them. When I asked her why she does it, she explained,

It’s fantastic for the kids. They love it! I think so much learning takes place [during dissection]. They go from having one concept of what they think a trachea is or esophagus or what the inside of the lungs are like . . . to seeing what it is [actually] like. . . . [I have] had kids that have walked away and said, “Oh, I want to be a doctor now” or “I want to be a nurse” or “I want to do something with science.” It is just really, really neat to see. (Vol. I, p. 34)

Debbie did admit that the cow specimens were much more of a challenge for her to handle than when she used pig specimens. Pig specimens are about half the size of the cow so they weigh less and students are not as
easily grossed out by them; Debbie said, “[The cow specimens] were nasty. They were big. I would not do cows again. They were gross” (Vol. I, p. 35).

Relating to Students

I asked Debbie about her caring attitude toward her students, and she replied,

What it has to really come down to is that you really have to care about them. It’s not so much the science I’m teaching as it is being happy at school, getting along well with others, interacting, cooperating, the basic life skills. It’s not going to be so important that they remember what a “protist” is as it’s going to be [whether] they like science. . . . I think that being happy at school and just enjoying learning is just paramount to success. If they’re unhappy because they’re always getting in trouble and they’re not doing their work, it’s just like this vicious snowball. . . . Sometimes kids come and they feel like they’re dumb or they can’t do [schoolwork] or other kids don’t like them. There are so many issues that they come with. Maybe their parents are getting divorced or they come with a lot of unhappiness from home. Their parents get in a fight; things aren’t everything [they] should be. I think it’s so important to have them feel like school is a safe, fun, enjoyable place to be and that they can overcome. They’re not dumb. They can participate. Other kids can work well with them. Sometimes they just need to be shown how though or helped [with] making friends or helped in different ways that make them feel successful at school. (Vol. I, pp. 40-41)

Debbie expressed enjoyment and an understanding of middle school students. She described her students,

Twelve year olds and 11 year olds are just so full of energy and are so anxious to learn. If you can tap into that, they are thrilled about school and they’re so much fun to work with. There are so many things they don’t know and yet they’re ready to learn. . . . It’s just a really fun, energetic kind of quirky sort of weird group to work with. They’ve got . . . things that you have to be so tolerant of. They’re bouncing off the walls and they can hardly contain themselves. Their little bodies are just everywhere and [their stuff is] all over the floor. . . . Most of them are so disorganized. . . . The things that we find so incredibly important they just don’t get. They just don’t get where our perspective is coming from. . . . They’re just these fascinating creatures. I just really enjoy the age group. (Vol. I, p. 28)
In my very first conversation with Debbie, she commented that she feels sorry for middle schoolers whose teachers do not understand them. Empathy toward students is an essential characteristic for teachers to have. The teachers' roles in the middle school classroom go far beyond merely teaching academic content. Debbie believes teachers need to help students get organized and learn how to conduct themselves. She said, "If they already knew how to discipline themselves they wouldn't need us" (Vol. I, p. 2).

When relating to her students and determining how to deal with a given situation, Debbie said,

I think . . . "If [this] was my child in this classroom, what would I want for them? . . . If I was a parent and I was in this classroom watching the teacher, Am I doing what that parent would want? Am I interacting? Am I building the esteem? Am I giving the positive strokes? . . . Would that parent be happy that I was treating their child that way?" I try to teach that way. . . . If I'm having a private conversation with a kid I always try to think to myself, "If the parent was standing right there listening to this conversation, would this be the way they wanted me to approach their child and help their child?" . . . By thinking about it from other adults' perspective, especially important adults to that child's life, I think that helps me maintain my composure and my patience in the . . . things I say to the kids. (Vol. I, p. 37)

In addition to establishing trusting relationships with her students and looking at them through the eyes of a parent, Debbie also seeks out a few students who seem especially troubled and with whom she senses she can make a difference:

Every year I try to make a special connection with somebody that I know is really floundering and that maybe I can help . . . . I can tell we have a good match in personalities . . . and that maybe I can make a difference. I try, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't . . . Sometimes it's a couple, two or three kids, that I think I can maybe help out in some way. I just really try to give them a lot of positive strokes and put notes in their lockers and just really try to build them up. (Vol. I, p. 39)
The fact that students are constantly milling around in Debbie’s classroom before and after school presents evidence that they feel welcome in her classroom. In many ways, her classroom environment feels like a homey kitchen with a stay-at-home mom whose entire life is devoted to her children. Debbie laughed and talked comfortably with her students about their day and events in their lives. To a student who kept repeating that she had “thrown up” after dissecting the cow lungs, Debbie placed her arm around the girl’s shoulder and suggested they call it a “tummy rumble” (Vol. I, p. 10). At the same time several students were playing with Charlie, Debbie’s snake, and the goldfish in the classroom. These students were also involved in easy conversation with Debbie.

Recognizing how important appearance is to middle school females, Debbie frequently compliments her girls. These compliments range from noticing a new barrette to an entire outfit. One day Sandi, a petite female, walked past Debbie, Debbie commented that she liked her dress and asked if it was new. Sandi remarked that the dress belonged to her sister, but she herself had never worn it before. Sandi elaborated that her sister gave her permission to wear the dress to school, and Debbie remarked that she must have a nice sister. A few minutes after the conversation with Sandi, Jackie walked past Debbie. Jackie was wearing a long, light blue, flowered skirt with big, clumsy sneakers. One of the sneakers was untied. Though Debbie and I exchanged amused glances, Debbie complimented Jackie on her skirt which was indeed an attractive article of clothing.

Debbie not only relates to students at school but also in her home. One of her students lives on the same street as Debbie, and this student is a
frequent visitor at Debbie’s home. Other students also know where she lives and periodically come by to visit.

The students respond to Debbie’s love and care for them in kind. One student bought a rose for Debbie and brought it over to her house. It was at the end of a particularly stressful day for Debbie, and she had a cold at the time so the gift from her student was especially meaningful.

Some of Debbie’s previous students continue to keep in touch with her. A student Debbie had last year called to tell her that she had just gotten a dog. Earlier when Debbie was her teacher, this student was devastated because she thought she was going to get a dog, but then it did not work out for her. She called Debbie long distance to share her excitement.

Debbie discovered that one of her former male students developed an unusual reaction to a Hepatitis-B shot he received. He was paralyzed and in the hospital. His prognosis was uncertain and Debbie lamented the fact that she lived too far away to make a trip to the hospital to visit him and his family. She did, however, find pictures she had of him and his class from a weekend they had spent at Debbie’s cabin by the lake. Debbie mailed a card and the pictures to the student.

Classroom Management

Debbie manages student behavior by building relationships with her students. Understanding students’ lives, their personal situations, and challenges is a top priority of hers. This requires extra effort and time on Debbie’s part, but she does it because she cares deeply about each student and wants to make school a safe, enjoyable place for them. She said,

It’s just really important . . . when we see stress [in students’ lives] or we see that maybe something is on their minds to try to reach out and find
out what’s going on and talk to them. . . . Sometimes it can make a really big difference. (Vol. I, p. 80)

Finding those few minutes for one-on-one interaction with students is a continuing challenge for Debbie. She commented that when she taught in a self-contained classroom, it was much easier to find time to speak with individual students. In the middle school where she sees students only for a 44-minute period it is much more difficult to establish individual rapport with students. There are times when Debbie gives up her lunch time and asks students to come to her classroom so they have some time alone to talk about the students’ personal needs. Understanding if students’ troubled behavior is the result of a dying grandmother, a dog’s death, a fight with a friend, or a conflict with a parent allows Debbie to deal with deeper issues in students’ lives rather than attempting to merely change inappropriate behavior.

Debbie is quick to build up her students with positive reinforcement and expressing appreciation and praise for their behavior. After the lung dissection project, a student was helping Debbie clean up the classroom. As he was carrying the large, heavy yellow garbage bags of leftover organ parts, Debbie complimented him on the job he was doing and expressed her gratitude for his assistance.

There are times when Debbie addresses specific behavior with her class. During a discussion about students’ science projects, the students’ excitement outweighed their desire to listen to Debbie’s directions. While she was addressing the entire class, the students began a number of conversations among themselves. Debbie interrupted their conversations by saying, “Excuse me. I am talking. Are you going to listen?” (Vol. I, p. 58). Even when Debbie does decide to be confrontive, she does it in a polite, caring manner.
One morning a male student came speeding into the classroom. As he passed Debbie, she said, “Are you in a hurry to get to science today?” (Vol. I, p. 62) and chuckled a bit. Debbie was able to communicate her message about his need to slow down in a positive, relaxed manner rather than allowing herself to be upset and confrontive by his choice of behavior.

I was intrigued by Debbie’s method of getting students to clean up after themselves. When they had completed reviewing for the science semester exam by playing a bingo game, the students left the lab tables where they had been playing the game in a mess and moved back to their individual desks. Debbie asked, “Did you like bingo? Do you want to play bingo again?” to which the students enthusiastically responded, “Yes!” Then Debbie continued, “Do I want to pick up candy wrappers? Do I want to pick up green squares? Do I want to make sure there are four chairs at each lab table?” (Vol. I, p. 20). Even before Debbie was finished asking these questions, the students en masse rushed over to clean up the lab section of the classroom. Debbie kept moving among them saying, “It’s looking better!” (Vol. I, p. 20).

Parental Involvement

Debbie sees students’ parents as an important part of the school family. Repeatedly in our conversations about the various schools in which she had taught, she would not only mention her colleagues in a positive light and her students as having been wonderful, but she also talked about how supportive many of the students’ parents were. I also noticed that parents frequently visited Debbie’s classroom. Sometimes it was to pick up assignments because a child had missed school due to illness, while other times it was to pick up the student after school. Regardless of the reason for the parents’ visit, Debbie
always took time to chat with them.

One morning when I arrived in Debbie’s classroom, she was excited about some animal specimens one student’s mother brought for her. This parent works for a veterinarian and had brought things from recent surgeries that she thought Debbie might be interested in showing to her science classes. The specimens included a tape worm and a dog ovary with a tumor. Debbie was thrilled by the gift and eagerly anticipated showing them to her students so they could see what these actually looked like rather than just reading and hearing about them. She also commented that she wants to see if this veterinary clinic would be willing to regularly donate things to her classroom.

During the weeks that students were working on their science projects, Debbie set aside Tuesday evenings, 6:30-8:30 p.m. for parents and students to come to her classroom and work on the projects. This allowed Debbie to talk directly with the parents and answer any questions they may have had about the project. It also allowed parents to partner with their students on a topic of interest to the student. During this time students and their parents used the internet, various reference books, and worked on students’ displays. Debbie’s husband, Jim, was also present during some of these evenings which allowed him to interact with students and parents and for them to get acquainted with him.

In spite of the current level of involvement parents have in Debbie’s classroom, she would like to see them even more involved. She is already planning to arrange for parents to clean lab supplies, gather items for future labs, make bulletin boards, and help with special classroom projects next school year.
Beliefs

From the moment I first spoke with Debbie via telephone until my final meeting with her, I was impressed with her caring, positive, cheerful, attitude toward life and about people. I was intrigued by this and wondered where it came from. Was this attitude a "Pollyanna" approach to life? Had Debbie's life always been happy and sheltered from sorrow? Or was this attitude one that she adopted and integrated into her life?

As I got to know Debbie, I realized that she has experienced difficulties in life and has not been immune to pain. She has made a deliberate choice to approach life in a positive manner and to share her happiness with others. I saw this attitude permeate what Debbie does and is. In sharing herself with others, I see four beliefs which undergird Debbie's life: Relationships are valuable, love unconditionally, enjoy the present, and create a safe classroom. I will now discuss these four beliefs and how I observed them in Debbie's life.

Relationships Are Valuable

It was not until our last formal interview that I asked Debbie to draw a life map for me. Debbie drew her life map as a semantic web. The center she labeled "My Life" (Vol. I, p. 92) with six spokes leading out of the center. Each of these spokes dealt with relationships in her life, and it is relationships which give Debbie meaning and joy in life.

As an only child Debbie had the opportunity to develop close relationships with her parents. These relationships remain an integral part of her life as an adult. My first clue to this came one Saturday when I called Debbie, and her husband, Jim, told me Debbie was shopping with her mother. Debbie later told me she sees her parents almost every weekend and "We're

Teaching allows Debbie to develop relationships. The times Debbie mentioned the difficulty she experienced in switching to another school, she always included the need to establish new relationships. She also expressed regret that students she once taught were unable to come back to her classroom to visit as they moved on to other grades because she was in a different district. As Debbie observed, “I am always interacting with kids” (Vol. I, p. 36) which allows her to develop deep relationships with them. Receiving long-distance phone calls from students in the district where she once taught attest to the depth of these relationships.

It is also easy to sense and observe that students enjoy relating to Debbie. Seldom was she alone in her classroom. Students were constantly milling around her classroom, chatting with Debbie about life and their interests, or playing with the animals in her room. Students’ reluctance to leave her classroom at the end of the day points to the level of comfort they feel in relating to Debbie.

Students’ parents are also valued in Debbie’s classroom and it appears that they sense her welcome. Debbie seeks to develop relationships with students’ parents and to become part of their lives and the wider community. Parents feel free to drop in to talk about students, pick up study materials, and contribute items to the classroom.

Throughout her teaching career, Debbie’s colleagues have been an essential part of her life. She spoke of the “fellow mentoring type of teachers that [she] could . . . talk to and know that [she] could say the truth” to during her early years of teaching (Vol. I, p. 84). This interaction was not limited to
Debbie's professional life, but also included her personal life:

[Having] somebody that you can vent to is really important in the teaching profession and . . . venting about things that are going on in your personal life too. Having that support of knowing that there are people that you can tell really what's going on behind the scenes and get emotional support from . . . is really important. (Vol. I, p. 84)

Love Unconditionally

A number of times when Debbie discussed her life map, she talked about being loved unconditionally and how important it was and is for her to experience this love. She in turn gives this love to others: Her husband, parents, extended family, students, and people in general. I too was touched by her love in a personal way.

Debbie spoke of three specific relationships she currently has in which she experiences unconditional love. Her parents were the first to love her. She knew that she could always rely on them and that “they loved [her] no matter what, supported [her] no matter what [she] did” (Vol. I, p. 90). Her husband, Jim, is also an essential aspect of feeling loved. She said, “[I feel] very fortunate to know that no matter what happens in my life he will be there for me” (Vol. I, p. 90). The third relationship where Debbie feels and has felt unconditional love is with her pets. She commented, “I’ve had a lot of pets. I always think pets are a really important part of life because they are unconditional in their love. So no matter how you’re feeling, they are there for you” (Vol. I, p. 90).

In the classroom, Debbie is constantly reaching out to her students. She does this both through her words and actions. Debbie talked about the fact that she does not have an actual desk in her classroom because she never uses one. She is constantly roaming the classroom and interacting with students.
This allows her to help students more effectively with academic content while also sending the message that she is interested and concerned enough about them as individuals to come to them instead of waiting for them to come to her.

Debbie believes an important quality for a teacher to have is to show interest in students outside of the classroom setting, to see students in the whole of their lives rather than focusing only on their academic performance in the classroom. Debbie takes the time to talk with students and find out about their home lives, their interests, and their hurts. She sometimes writes encouraging notes to students who are struggling and places the notes in their lockers. Debbie understands that students have difficulty focusing on academic tasks when they are overwhelmed by personal problems.

Debbie frequently expressed an interest in my life at both professional and personal levels. She often asked about my work as a student teacher supervisor and became very interested in my efforts at finding my first full-time job in teacher education. Her encouragement and advice touched my heart and helped me believe in myself, and her genuine joy when I was successful in landing a job allowed me to experience firsthand the power of her care for others.

Enjoy the Present

As a child Debbie was taught that life is to be enjoyed and experienced. Her parents encouraged her to become involved in a wide variety of activities and to accept new challenges. They urged her to try activities which may not have appealed to her initially but to at least see if she might not find them enjoyable and appealing. Debbie credits this attitude in her parents as helping
her to willingly accept new challenges and to try new things. As a result, Debbie views life as an adventure to be lived and explored.

Debbie is genuinely contented with life and is a happy person. She commented,

I'm happy with myself. I'm happy with where I'm at in my life. I'm happy with my marriage. I'm happy with my job. . . . I'm not consumed by beating myself up over the fact that I don't have the job I want or I don't have the marriage I really want or I don't have the family that I want. I have a lot of happiness in my life. (Vol. I, p. 79)

This happiness is not merely the consequence of an easy life or one lived without disappointments and unexpected changes. Debbie discussed a number of challenging times in her life. Living far away from her family during the early years as a professional and seeing the relationship with the person she and everyone else assumed would become her husband disintegrate were difficult years for her. One of Debbie's close friends died suddenly at the age of 41 of a brain aneurysm, and Debbie and her husband know what it means to live constantly with illness because Jim is diabetic.

Enjoying life is a conscious decision Debbie has made and she works to focus on the positive aspects of life. She said,

I know what [it] is to walk that fine line between enjoying every single day the best that you can possibly enjoy it because you really have absolutely no guarantee about the next hour. . . . You don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. . . . I have to look at where I'm expending my energy and where I'm going to get the most bang for my buck. . . . I just look at each day as . . . I might as well be happy. I might as well enjoy it. . . . [I have] a real appreciation that life can be very short. . . . Live in the present. Enjoy right now. Don't worry about tomorrow or yesterday. I can't change yesterday. I'm here right now. I should be enjoying our [time] with each other as much as possible. . . . Why worry about tomorrow? Tomorrow's not here yet and what if tomorrow doesn't come? So I really try to . . . say to myself, especially when I'm having a frustrating moment, "Now we should be enjoying this moment. What good can we gather from this moment right now? What positives can I pull out of this because this is it.
This is life. . . . I really try to focus on enjoying every day. (Vol. I, pp. 79-80)

Each day Debbie and her husband write in their gratitude journals. They write down four or five things they consider good things which occurred during that day. It may be something small such as receiving a chocolate chip cookie from a student or noting that Jim did the dishes, but daily Debbie identifies things about which to be grateful. This helps her realize that there is much in life to enjoy and also motivates her to reach out to others.

Create a Safe Classroom

It is important to Debbie that students feel loved, accepted, safe, and happy in her classroom. Her positive outlook on life is evident in her interactions with students. She greets them cheerfully as they enter the classroom, she takes time to ask about events in their personal lives, she comments on their interests, and she welcomes the times they initiate conversations with her.

I was frequently struck with Debbie’s nurturance of her students. In many ways she seemed like a mother hen looking after her flock of baby chicks on the verge of venturing out into a cold, unknown world. Debbie is motherly with her students, she looks after them, she protects them, and she nurtures them. She was quick to recognize how nervous and stressed some of the sixth graders were about taking their first semester exams so she tried to build their confidence and prepared study guides that addressed what students needed to know to do well on the exams. When some of her exploratory students felt unable to stomach dissection day, she made provisions for them to go elsewhere while the rest of the class worked with
animal lungs. Sixth graders who participated in choir were unable to take
Debbie's exploratory science class so she set aside a special time for them to
dissect lungs. Debbie also frequently devoted her lunch period to meeting
with students who had special needs or were struggling academically.

Students felt a sense of belonging and ownership in Debbie's room.
Before and after school they often wandered in to play with the classroom
pets or to visit with Debbie. When a mother brought in some unusual animal
specimens, students eagerly picked up the jars and inspected the contents.
Debbie's commitment to providing opportunities for her students to learn
science through exploring science creates a sense of community in the
classroom.

Having come from a nurturing home and providing the same type of
environment for students is important to Debbie. She said,

I feel like I'm part of [students'] family. I touch their lives like their
families touch their lives and sometimes I... spend more time with them
... than some of their families do. I think that showing them love and
giving them guidance the way my parents and family [gave] me is a really
important part of teaching. I feel like I'm close to them the way their
families are close to them. I give them hugs. [This is their] home away
from home. (Vol. I, p. 91)

The "home away from home" which Debbie provides for her students is a
safe haven for them where they are valued and loved unconditionally.

Summary

Debbie summarized her professional life:

To teach is to touch a life forever. I think that when you touch a life, it's
really important to do it in a positive way. We have such power, such
power to either crush [students] and just make them feel horrible about
themselves and the world and learning and school. Or we have the power
to bring them up to such heights that they... have never experienced
before or to believe in themselves that they could do things they never
thought they could do before. I think that as a teacher you need to keep in mind that the way you react to everything is such a motivator to your students. [It is] such an important thing to always be a role model and react with love and kindness because that’s what they learn if that’s what they see. (Vol. I, p. 91)

Not only does Debbie touch the lives of her students with love and kindness, but she uses the same powerful tools to touch the lives of those around her, her family, her colleagues, and others she meets. Debbie is by nature a nurturer and gives her cheerful love and acceptance to those whose lives intersect with hers. The house her life has built is full of unconditional love just waiting to be distributed to others.
CHAPTER 4

JACK—MY CLASSROOM, MY HOME

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

*Margery Williams*, The Velveteen Rabbit

**Introduction**

Jack teaches sixth-grade Language Arts in a building housing Grades 5-8 with an enrollment of 320 students. The middle school lies at the edge of a town with a population of 2,300. Surrounding the town are vineyards, corn fields, and wooded areas. Though this is a small district of 935 students, during the 1990s it received national recognition as an exemplary district.

The district in which Jack teaches has been part of his life for 28 years and is the place that will witness his last days as an educator. Jack plans to retire from teaching within the next few years and then look for new challenges. When reflecting on retirement, Jack commented:

I have so many teacher friends who have retired. When you run into them, they are so glad to be out. . . . I plan to do something else, but I will not be the person at the cocktail party saying I’m so glad to be out. I really will be kind of sad. (Vol. II, p. 36)

This sadness will be tempered with feelings of satisfaction at having devoted his career to one district:

There is something proud about saying you have spent a chunk of time in a district. . . . There is something that is personally satisfying to me about
that... I can say... that I made a commitment through thick and thin, through the ups and downs of school boards, colorful superintendents, some really unusual building principals, and all sorts of varieties of kids. (Vol. II, pp. 35-36)

In spite of devoting himself to one district, Jack likes change and new challenges. He has assumed various responsibilities within the district, state, and nationally which have kept him growing professionally and personally. These experiences have allowed Jack to build of his life a stately home. The table is set, dinner is waiting, and Jack is welcoming us inside. We have an opportunity to learn and grow as we explore the rooms in his home. There is warmth inside, and the rooms are filled with priceless treasures, inviting nooks and crannies, cherished mementos, bathed in shadow and light.

*Jack's Story*

**The Early Years**

Jack's earliest memory is a pleasant one which happened when he was 2 1/2 years old. His parents moved from an apartment into a house:

Moving was a good experience for me because it allowed me freedom. My parents [and I] lived in an apartment, an upper flat, and I had to be quiet because the lady downstairs did not like noise. I can remember moving into [our] house and going crazy, having fun running around... [I was] fascinated by the fact that there was a china cabinet built into the dining room. I could sit in the bottom of the china cabinet and play which I thought was kind of fun. I kept my coloring books and stuff in there. (Vol. II, p. 119)

Jack's elementary school years were not good years for him. He said, "I really did not fit in as a kid" (Vol. II, p. 119). "I was very shy. I had a depth-perception problem. I simply could not see a ball coming at me so that is why I wasn't any good at sports. I just felt that I never fit in" (Vol. II, p. 127). By the
time he reached second grade, he explains,

I was a non-reader and in the low group, . . . the buzzards or whatever you want to call them. By fourth grade it just got to the point that school was really hard. I tried really hard, but I never got any place. (Vol. II, p. 120).

School became more enjoyable for Jack once he entered sixth grade. In the years that followed, some of his teachers played a crucial role in altering his view of school and ultimately changing his life:

I had a great sixth-grade teacher. She liked to do plays and things like that which excited me. I thought that was really cool. I had an excellent seventh grade teacher, a social studies teacher, whom I also had for eighth grade. (Vol. II, p. 120)

This social studies teacher believed in Jack, which motivated him to work hard on projects:

I can remember doing projects for him and being really turned on by his acceptance of what I did. I kept always pushing [myself]. That is also the very first time I ever skipped school. [I stayed] home to work on a map. . . . I spent the whole day in my dad’s darkroom making a Civil War map on his enlarger. (Vol. II, p. 120)

Though Jack enjoyed some of his teachers and was motivated to work hard on certain projects, he said,

I was a terrible student. I worked really hard, and I think I was probably the first ADD kid that they ever had. I could never stay focused. I would bring home everything from my locker. I would spread it all out. Nobody taught me any study skills. Basically it was a huge effort at trying to stay afloat and I was not doing it unless I really became focused. (Vol. II, pp. 120-121)

In ninth grade, each Wednesday was “group writing day” and Jack’s teacher wrote “abstract things on the board [for us to respond to] and [I thought], ‘Couldn’t I be sick?’ but I always did really well” (Vol. II, p. 121). Jack’s teacher recognized his abilities and encouraged him by observing, “You have some good writing skills” (Vol. II, p. 121).
The other high school teacher who built into Jack's life was also an English teacher, a female he had in 12th grade. Jack reflected:

I admired this woman for two reasons. One, I thought she was extremely intelligent. The other reason that I admired her was the fact that she did not have to work. She drove [45 to 50 minutes] everyday. Her husband was a stock broker. . . . She made everybody else, by her appearance, look a little shabby, but that is just because of who she was. . . . I thought, "Now this is what I really want to be. I want to be somebody that has some standards, has some knowledge that helps kids reach their goals and extend themselves" (Vol. II, p. 121). Though she never said this, her attitude in the classroom was . . . "I don't need a job. I am here because this is what I love doing . . . I have some knowledge that you might want to know. I think . . . I can help you along the way." (Vol. II, pp. 36-37)

One of the books Jack remembers reading in high school was Silas Marner; however, the memory focuses more on the teacher than on the book. Jack said,

[This teacher] could walk on water as far as I was concerned and so I happen to remember that story. I can remember him as one of those teachers that knew so much about what I was interested in. When I was in his class he had so much to say, and he said it with a sense of humor. (Vol. II, p. 65)

In the mid-1960s while enrolled in a university, Jack moved out of the dorm and into an apartment with three other guys. He remembers, "It was a disastrous experience, totally disastrous. I had no place to study" (Vol. II, p. 121). At the time Jack was taking a writing course and it was extremely difficult for him to write because of his living situation; however, the instructor cared enough to be understanding.

She said, "[Jack], why can't you just get the papers to me. You can bring them to my house." I never took advantage of her, but [my papers] were never on time. They were always half a day late. I would have to wait for [my roommates] to go to class in order to sit down and type my paper because I had no place to take my typewriter. [My professor] knew my schedule, and I told her, "I don't have class on Tuesday morning. I will have the paper in at 11:00." I always did. It was just too bad that I could
never go to [my apartment] to work. It was like I was a prisoner in my own home. (Vol. II, p. 121)

Jack also reminisced about another college professor who impacted his thinking and increased his interest in Language Arts. Jack described an encounter with this teacher:

You would meet him in the parking lot and you would say to him, "It's a cold morning!" And he would say, "I'd say it is brisk!" And you know for the rest of the day you would think, why didn't I say brisk because that's really the word that encapsulates it. (Vol. II, p. 37)

As I listened to Jack describe these teachers, I couldn't help but notice similarities between things his teachers had done and what I saw him doing in his classroom. Jack also recognized this connection and spoke of it. He actually tells his students:

I think I have some stuff that you might want to know. I can't get you to where you want to go, but I can push you along the way. My kids know I drive an hour every day to work, an hour here and an hour home. Why do I do it? I guess I really like what I do. (Vol. II, p. 37)

The fact that Jack enjoys teaching is evident in the way he relates to his students. I was also impressed with the fact that on the initial survey he completed for me he indicated that he strongly agrees with the statement "I genuinely enjoy going to work each day."

These teachers' sense of humor and love for students that Jack remembers are also incorporated into Jack's own classroom and teaching philosophy. He stated,

Your curriculum is important, but . . . the kids need to know that you are a people person. I guess if you're not a people person, you can have the best curriculum knowledge and you're going to be missing the boat with the kids and with yourself because you'll never laugh at your job. (Vol. II, p. 65)
Meeting the World

In 1969 Jack was drafted. After Basic Training he moved to San Francisco as a military policeman, but he soon had the opportunity to work as company clerk. Though Jack lived in San Francisco for only 18 months, this experience did much to shape his view of life and the world. He describes it as both “a neat time” and as “a very upsetting time” (Vol. II, p. 39).

Jack grew up in the Midwest in a two-parent home with one younger brother in a suburb of a large industrial city. Though his middle-class parents spent much of their 2-week summer vacations traveling with their family in the United States, Jack’s stint with the military showed him the world was much different than he thought it was. He said, “I think I was a judgmental person before California. I think I was a judgmental person growing up. I grew up in White [suburbia]. How could you not be judgmental about racial things?” (Vol. II, p. 40). In another conversation we had, Jack described his time in California: “It taught me that [the world] was not as self-centered as I thought [it] was. I thought the world pretty much revolved around me so [that experience] was kind of a new awakening for me” (Vol. II, p. 122).

Jack reflected on events which transpired during his job as a clerk:

The Presidio of San Francisco was a receiving point for [soldiers] who had been in Vietnam and had less than 60 days left. . . . The crap they made these people do after sending them on two tours of duty in combat situations [was awful]! I thought, “You can’t treat people like this.” Nobody has the right to humiliate people even though some of these people were pretty unusual. They were pretty unpolished. But some of them lived in swamps and rice paddies and had nothing to eat or had not been able to shave or shower for months. . . . It was a very upsetting time for me. Many times I helped people out when I could have gotten myself into a lot of trouble. There were conversations I listened in on and let people know what was coming. These people were being purposely set up so they would fail and could be dishonorably discharged. I am thinking, “Wait a minute. They only have this little bit of time left and look what
they gave. They are screwed up. All the marbles are not clicking, but they are trying to readjust to a society that does not see the need for this conflict. Do we really have to play with their minds here in this environment?" That was my first exposure to the ugly side of the world. (Vol. II, pp. 39-40)

Gaining a more realistic picture of the world as a whole impacts the way Jack views people, including his students, today:

I found some compassion along the way. I think [the military] was basically where I started seeing life differently. [Before California] kids were black and white. There were good kids and there were bad kids. [I do not see] kids today as black or white. They struggle everyday to get to school. They struggle everyday with their homework just like I struggle everyday, just like you struggle everyday. We are all struggling people. I am not going to judge anybody. (Vol. II, p. 40)

Becoming an Educator

In 1971 Jack became part of the district in which he currently works. Though Jack’s initial certification was in secondary education, the district filed a waiver and as Jack describes:

I spent six months subbing in sixth grade for a teacher whose husband had cancer and was dying. And you know, I absolutely loved it. . . . The age group was perfect and so that’s what prompted me to go back and get my elementary certificate. (Vol. II, p. 38)

This presents a sharp contrast to Jack’s experience as a secondary teacher: “I absolutely hated secondary education. I felt like a policeman” (Vol. II, p. 35).

Jack’s first full-time teaching position was in fourth grade. When I asked him to describe his classroom and teaching approach at that point in his career, he explained:

You would have seen kids in groups because I’ve always been a person who likes kids grouped for interaction. There were learning centers around the room because I was self-contained. I used [learning centers] as a way of dividing math up into groups. . . . I was a demonstration classroom helping teachers to learn how to mainstream special education students
into the classroom. (Vol. II, p. 35)

Some of Jack's colleagues during these early years of teaching served to soften his view of others. An important turning point occurred in 1974:

I had the best elementary principal, and she is still my dearest friend. . . . She is now a superintendent of [a large school district in the Michiana area]. She is an absolutely remarkable woman. She basically told me I had the potential to be a good teacher, but I need to work on some of my people skills. And I said, "Excuse me." She said, "Yeah!" and proceeded to list about five million of them. She was brutally honest and I appreciated that. (Vol. II, p. 122)

This principal was willing to not only mentor Jack in his people skills, but she also mentored him professionally:

When I was a new teacher and did not know all the ropes, did not know when I was 12 years old as a teacher, somebody gave me the benefit of the doubt and took the time to explain the A's, the B's, and the C's. (Vol. II, p. 63)

Another person who deeply influenced Jack during these early years as an educator was a fellow teacher. Jack noticed her kindness and set out to make the qualities of giving others the benefit of the doubt and treating them with respect part of his own life. Jack described Susan:

I cannot imagine [Susan] being an unkind person. . . . She was the type of person that would always see the other side of the kids which does not mean that she was always perfect, but she always said, "But look . . ." and I admired that. (Vol. II, p. 65)

Continued Growth

Though Jack found teaching enjoyable and grew professionally and personally while teaching fourth grade, after 7 years he recognized the need for a change:

I can remember . . . the last day of school. The students were all gone. And I was putting things away in a closet, and I thought to myself "I can't do this one more year. There is no challenge left in this job. I really need to
move on.” (Vol. II, p. 35)

These thoughts coincided with an opportunity to become a curriculum coordinator for the district. This administrative post appealed to Jack and he remembers thinking, “Let’s try this; it could be really exciting” (Vol. II, p. 35). This position did bring new challenges and opportunities for him:

The district was woefully [behind] in the area of language arts. They were in the dark ages. We were still using basal texts that were [outdated] and still had people cranking out purple worksheets. Writing was something we called penmanship. (Vol. II, p. 35).

For the next 12 years Jack worked as a curriculum coordinator. Not only was he actively working to improve curriculum and instruction within his district, but he also branched out to become involved in both a regional and international professional organization. Jack pointed out, “The professional opportunities outside the district allowed me to come back and do my job better” (Vol. II, p. 38).

One of Jack’s proudest professional achievements occurred during these years. He started Kaleidoscope, a literary magazine, for the district. For 5 years he published this magazine which contained a piece of writing from every student in Grades K-8. Jack then took this project to a state organization, and they adopted his idea and magazine name. Kaleidoscope is now published at the state level.

Jack explained his motivation for seeking professional involvement beyond his district: “So many people that I was working with at the time [did not view] education as . . . a profession. . . . I really wasn’t getting any professional nourishment in my district so I went elsewhere” (Vol. II, p. 37). His involvement in the state organization increased and he eventually
became president. He commented, "It was the first time I had ever run for something and did what I said I wanted to do" (Vol. II, p. 124). As president, Jack was responsible for the state conference. Planning these conferences, brought not only professional but also personal satisfaction to Jack.

These stretching professional opportunities came to Jack during a time of great personal upheaval, divorce. Dealing with the divorce, Jack says, put me into therapy. . . . [I had been] in a situation where I did not acknowledge who I was as a person or understand that the world is made up of a whole lot of different people. I was an out of control person for about 20 years as far as temper. I was a doer. . . . I would mow my lawn three times a week to get rid of the tire marks on the lawn. I was a really frustrated individual. After therapy, my personality basically changed. . . . It was a really wretched experience, but in the long run it worked out really well. (Vol. II, p. 123)

By 1993 Jack was ready for another change:

I thought . . . I do not want to start all over. . . . I do not need to prove myself professionally. I have made my mark as a person in the state. . . . The issue really was that I felt I needed to get back to kids. Even though I had been in an administrative job and I still worked with kids. [But] they were not my own . . . that was something that was missing. (Vol. II, p. 36)

Jack began teaching sixth-grade Language Arts, his position during my study.

Jack's personal life evened out during this time also. He noted, "I returned to the classroom, I met my partner [Steve], and liked that balance. . . . I say to kids, you have to make sure you keep life as a balance" (Vol. II, p. 128).

Jack's Classroom

Appearance

Even before I began visiting Jack's classroom as part of this study, I was able to visualize it. I had supervised a student teacher in Jack's classroom. The room, and Jack himself, remained much as I remembered from my previous
visits. The room is comfortable, not cozy or cutesy, and lacks educational clutter prevalent in many classrooms. Was this intentional or coincidental?

My first formal classroom observation occurred during December, and Jack's classroom had its own tree, decorated by students in his advisory group. The rest of the classroom appeared oblivious to the season, however. Many of Jack's bulletin boards displayed posters, some of them framed, about reading. One of my favorite posters proclaimed: "The World Belongs to Readers." A free-standing, brown lattice wall created a cozy library corner complete with its own rocking chair. Individual student mailboxes located close to Jack's desk were also located conveniently for students' access. A number of filing cabinets, some two- and some four-drawer, were scattered throughout the edges of the room and labeled with numbers. Their location indicated that these cabinets were most likely for student rather than teacher use.

I was most intrigued, however, by the number and size of live plants growing in Jack's classroom. Two huge ferns perched on top of filing cabinets, a ficus tree stood proudly in the center back of the classroom, and other plants were nestled around the library corner. It appeared that Jack was hoping to add another plant to his collection because a slip was attempting to grow roots in a plastic water bottle. Jack also had a table lamp on his desk which was often glowing though its light seemed insignificant due to generous overhead lights and natural light provided through the windows by Jack's desk.

The arrangement of student desks in Jack's classroom was constantly changing. Since they were individual desks with an attached table, they were easy to move. Jack also had a few tables with chairs for students to occupy during class. The desks were often arranged in some type of group formation...
though Jack did have them in straight rows during one of my visits. Students did not have assigned seats, but I noticed that many of them chose to sit in the same general location.

Jack's room always appeared neat and tidy during my visits. Often before one group of students left his classroom and the next group arrived, Jack moved rapidly around the classroom straightening desks, and checking for scraps of paper or forgotten possessions. One day Jack happened upon a pile of scraps on a desk and though students were already exiting, he stopped them and called their attention to the mess. As students cleaned up the bits of paper, Jack said, "I had a gerbil once that did this" (Vol. II, p. 17). Another time as Jack pointed out personal belongings to a student, he commented, "It's a good thing I'm your mother" (Vol. II, p. 53) as the student retrieved them.

During my second visit to Jack's classroom, I sensed disruption and an undercurrent of turmoil in the hallway. Jack was not at his usual spot by the door to welcome students. When one of the students asked if I was the substitute, I knew something was amiss. Another student informed me that Jack was down the hall which immediately alleviated my concerns about his absence. Jack quietly explained the disquiet in the sixth-grade wing; they were dealing with a drug-related discipline problem that day. Jack motioned me into the classroom and said, "My home is your home" (Vol. II, p. 27).

Jack again introduced his view of the classroom being his home when he explained his beliefs about its decor. When he first began teaching, he decorated his classroom much like the traditional elementary classroom with bright, colorful bulletin boards, objects hanging from the ceiling, and things scattered along the walls. This changed when his district experienced an
influx of Montessori-trained teachers. Jack explained his metamorphosis:

I started looking at that Montessori approach. . . . I really did not want my classroom to look like a school room. I thought, “Where in your house do you have bulletin boards? Where do you have things hanging from the ceiling unnecessarily?” (Vol. II, p. 57)

From then on Jack determined not to clutter up his classroom and to be intentional about the items he chose to display. During my visits, I saw little student work covering the walls of Jack’s classroom; however, he does like to display their work and does so periodically.

Students make posters advertising their favorite book. Most of the time I put [their projects] in the hallway. . . . There is more traffic so kids can see them [and] I do not want a lot of [things in the room]. . . . I am not a “clutter person” and I think for a lot of these kids clutter is their middle name so it makes it easy for them to come in here [if there is less clutter]. (Vol. II, p. 58)

Curriculum and Instruction

Routine and variety describe the learning experiences Jack plans for his 65-70-minute blocks with students. Basic learning experiences for Language Arts can be broken down into Daily Oral Language (DOL), Spelling, Reading, and Writing. While these at times appeared as discreet activities, they are also integrated. At times moving from one of these aspects to another meant clearing students’ desks, at other times they flowed naturally from one to the other with little fanfare. Jack and the students frequently referred to content learned from previous experiences, making connections with the current topic, and creating continuity. These connections were made naturally and consistently which served to integrate the entire Language Arts experience; however, I would like to break apart the learning experiences and describe some of the activities which Jack did with his students.
Daily Oral Language

Each Language Arts block began with DOL. As students entered the classroom, Jack slid a transparency on the overhead projector. These transparencies had three sentences for students to consider. The first two sentences need corrections and the third sentence was called a “kernel” or simple sentence and students were to expand that sentence by adding phrases of their choice. These phrases were to tell how, when, where, and/or why, giving more details and making the sentence more interesting.

Jack’s students appear to have the routine of beginning Language Arts with DOL down to a science. After choosing a desk, students found their notebooks and began correcting DOL sentences. As students worked, Jack moved around the room monitoring progress, giving assistance, and encouraging on-task behavior. Jack’s gracious assistance to students included asking their opinion about sentence corrections. A student pointed to a sentence and asked, “Is that good?” Jack responded with, “Is that the right question to ask? You tell me” (Vol. II, p. 27). Another time while looking over students’ corrections, Jack paused and asked a student to orally read the sentence he was correcting. After the student read his work, Jack said, “You stumbled at the same place I stumbled” and mentioned that sometimes word order causes “road bumps” that make a sentence difficult to read (Vol. II, p. 27). Jack then suggested the student continue working on his sentence to eliminate road bumps.

The task of correcting DOL sentences was undertaken by the entire class. Jack began by calling on a student to suggest a correction after which Jack wrote the correction on the transparency. Sometimes Jack called on another
student and other times he asked students to call on each other. Students eagerly waved their arms indicating that they wanted to share a correction with the class. During occasions when students chose each other to make corrections, they tended to fall into the rut of selecting students who had already given a correction. Jack would then say, “Remember, there are lots of people here to be called on” (Vol. II, p. 18). During one class, a student indicated that the class had made all the necessary corrections. Jack responded, “Only in your dreams!” (Vol. II, p. 28) and students continued their quest to find all the mistakes. Jack also gave hints during these exchanges when students struggled to find all the errors. Following a student’s incorrect suggestion, Jack said, “No, but . . . you are thinking in the right direction” (Vol. II, p. 28).

I was intrigued by students’ responses to the third DOL sentence which allowed them to add their own ideas and use creativity. Often times as many as half of the students eagerly waved their arms hoping to be one of the four students selected to write a new sentence on the board. These waving appendages were also accompanied by “Pick me, pick me!” (Vol. II, p. 28).

As students wrote their sentences on the board, Jack commented, “Remember that part of your communication skills is having your writing legible from different parts of the room” (Vol. II, p. 28). Another time he pointed out, “It is a distraction to [students writing on the board] if you comment on their work” (Vol. II, p. 28). Jack also quickly scanned each of the four sentences and at times quietly pointed out errors to individual students.

Jack used students’ DOL sentences to discuss ways of improving sentences in students’ personal writing. One day Jack asked a particular
student if she wanted to add more to her sentence since she had heard the other three students' sentences. She responded, "Do I have to?" and Jack replied, "There is nothing in life you have to do but eat and breathe, but I would suggest you expand [your sentence]" (Vol. II, p. 18). Though Jack asked that students not change the kernel sentence he gave them, it was not unusual for students to make some type of alteration. After one student changed the kernel sentence, Jack pointed out that the student actually made the kernel sentence better as a result of the changes.

Jack often appeared pleased with and complimented students on their work: "When we first started adding to kernel sentences, you wrote short sentences and now we have people writing rich sentences and going into more detail" (Vol. II, p. 28). One day Jack asked students to reflect on which of the four sentences gave a more detailed picture of the event described. He requested they not state their observations publicly, but to reflect on the question. He then referred to the sixth-grade writing rubric and explained that the rubric's reference to interesting sentences means sentences that provide detailed description and paint pictures in their minds.

Spelling

Some type of spelling activity often follows DOL in the Language Arts block. Students' spelling word lists consist of 18 words targeting specific spelling strategy and eight content area words. When giving students the pretest, Jack made comments and gave them hints to help them be successful. He talked freely about the spelling words following a specific strategy and alerted them when the strategy changed.

One day Jack gave a set of five words, then said, "Did you do something
different with these last five words? Let's see how astute you are. It changes slightly in the last three words.” Stephen spoke up, “I know!” to which Jack asked, “Who said ‘I know’?” When Stephen identified himself, Jack said, “[Stephen] and I need to have a bonding moment” and approached Stephen’s desk. After looking at Stephen’s paper, Jack remarked with surprise and delight, “Oh, you do know!” (Vol. II, p. 94).

The pretest was immediately corrected. Jack orally spelled the words while simultaneously writing them on a transparency so students could check their own work. After completing a group of words which followed the same pattern, Jack stopped to discuss the pattern with students. When he moved to the next group of words, Jack changed the color of the transparency marker. Jack recalled Stephen’s success in identifying the spelling strategy during the pretest and asked him to explain it to the rest of the class.

Students also have what Jack calls spelling packets. They consist of a number of pages similar to what one would find in a spelling workbook. Students were periodically given pages in their packets for homework, and these were then reviewed in class at a later date. Sometimes Jack asked students to write answers to the spelling homework on a transparency. When using this approach, Jack required students to say the spelling word, write it, and orally spell it. He periodically reminded them, “For those of us who learn better by hearing, would you spell the word?” (Vol. II, p. 19).

Jack’s students also have individual spelling logs. Jack explained their purpose: “[Students] do a strategy in their spelling log. They write the strategy without looking at their packet. Usually I give them a word or two as a clue and tell them, ‘You can use these two words as examples’” (Vol. II, p. 109).
When students write about a particular spelling strategy, Jack allows them to choose their own method of organization:

[Students] can do [their] strategy either in paragraph form, as bullets, as a map, or whatever. . . . I really push the idea that there is no one way to organize your thoughts. It is how it makes sense to you so that you can retrieve the information. (Vol. II, p. 110)

Students then study spelling words with a peer, followed by the final test. Any words students miss on the final tests are written correctly in their individual spelling dictionaries. Students also cross-reference each word they enter in the dictionary so they can review the strategy which matches each particular word. At the end of the quarter or semester, students choose words from their spelling dictionary, review the strategies, and then Jack gives them an individual spelling test. This gives students a "second chance" at spelling the words correctly (Vol. II, p. 109).

Reading

It is important to Jack that his students learn how to talk about books so he provides ample opportunity to practice this skill. As part of the school's reading curriculum, Jack has a series published by Great Books Foundation called Junior Great Books, but Jack chooses not to use these books until the second semester. During the first semester he uses picture books since they are easier to comprehend, and he teaches students how to talk about themes and to enjoy books. Once students are comfortable with these skills, he uses the Junior Great Books. He believes this approach allows students to better transfer listening, reading, and discussion skills to longer texts.

Jack was very excited about his reading plans for the month of December. He explained that in the past his class has often quickly read some
literature about the holidays, but he always felt dissatisfied since this lacked depth. This year he decided to do something different. He elaborated, "I'm doing this for myself because I want to do it. I'm following my heart rather than what I should do as a teacher" (Vol. II, pp. 8-9). Jack read a number of picture books to his class about homeless people. These stories focused on reaching out to others and individuals giving of themselves to those around them. Students were then asked to make connections between the books they listened to and the Christmas holiday. One student informed Jack that he could not make any connections between the books Jack had chosen and Christmas. Jack responded with, "If you are looking for trees and Santa, there aren't any connections. But maybe there are some other connections to make" (Vol. II, p. 9).

I visited the day Jack read December by Eve Bunting. Before showing students the book, Jack asked them to remove everything from their desks, creating a sense of anticipation and adding significance to the upcoming activity. Each student also received a "strip" which consisted of a 4.25-inch by 11-inch paper. This strip provided space for students to record observations, wonderings, links to literature, and links to life as Jack read the book.

Jack introduced the book: "Does anyone want to speculate from the cover of the book?" (Vol. II, p. 20). Students gave various suggestions while Jack mostly listened. He then read the book and showed students the illustrations. Some students sat and listened as Jack read while others wrote busily on their strips. At one point a student softly made an observation which Jack overhead. He responded, "That is a good observation, whoever just said that!" (Vol. II, p. 21). Students who had not completed their strips by
the end of the book were given a few extra minutes to complete them.

The next time the class met, Jack asked students to move into self-selected groups. He set the following criteria: Not all male or all female members; groups need to be inclusive when someone else asks to join; and groups need at least three members, but no more than four. In these groups students discussed their observations and wonderings. They were asked to focus on things that are important to the story, and compare group members' individual observations and wonderings. Each group also received a "group strip" on which to, by consensus, record group observations and wonderings. Groups' responses were largely profound and insightful with some trivia tossed in. Jack closed the activity by complimenting students on their thinking and commenting, "It is not an easy story" (Vol. II, p. 30).

When Jack uses the Junior Great Books, he picks and chooses from the suggestions included in the teacher's manual. He observed, "[The publishers] really make [the curriculum] pretty fool-proof for the teacher who is real uncomfortable with this [approach]. . . . I kind of like to find the things that interest me the most and go with them" (Vol. II, p. 106). Jack also asks students to complete the strips while reading stories in the Junior Great Books. A section in students' reading logs provided paper for personal reflections on stories they read. One day students read a story entitled "Allah Will Provide" in which Bou Azza notices that a certain snake does not need to work in order to have its needs met. Bou Azza decides to follow the snake's example and quit his job, believing that Allah would provide for him and his wife. His wife is unhappy with this choice and assumes the responsibility of searching for food. During her search she discovers a pot of gold coins which
will provide amply for Bou Azza and her during the rest of their lives. Bou Azza concludes that he made the right choice in quitting his job because Allah provided the gold coins for him and his wife.

Jack gave students 10-12 minutes to reflect on this question: Why is Bou Azza content once he decides to quit working so hard? Students wrote their reflections in the designated section of their reading logs. The class then discussed the question as a whole group. These are the ideas I heard expressed in the discussion. Student refers to various sixth graders who chose to contribute their thoughts during the discussion.

Jack: “Why is Bou Azza content once he decides to quit working so hard?”

Student: “He didn’t like working so hard.”

Jack: “Does that cause problems in the story?”

Student: “Things got rough at home. His wife was upset. She took over.”

Jack: “Let’s get back to the question.”

Student: “Bou Azza thought he did not have to work so hard because the viper did not. The viper hypnotized the bird. Bou Azza thought that if he just sat still in one spot Allah would provide for him.”

Student: “Bou Azza was a couch potato.”

Jack: “That is a word for the 1990s but certainly not in the original translation. Why doesn’t everyone just stop working because Allah will provide?”

Student: “That is kind of a bad message in a kids’ story.”

Jack: “A bad message just for kids?”

Student: “Adults too.”

Jack: “That’s a good observation. [Mark], I will call on you next because I know you have a lot to share.” (Mark was talking to peers pretty consistently during the class discussion, but when Jack asked him to
comment, he gave an off-the-wall response.)

Jack: “I’m not sure how that fits in. Can you give me the context?”

Mark: “Maybe someone prepared a treasure hunt for Bou Azza.”

Student: “Someone could be like the Aztecs, bury gold and forget where they hid it. Then years later someone could find it. Allah could make a treasure hunt for us.”

Jack: “That would be fun, but there are some things that you know at your age are not real. Let’s put an end to the treasure hunt idea since there wasn’t one in the story. There’s a message here that we would like to work with and unpack.”

Student: “The snake did have to work to hypnotize the bird though it looked like he didn’t. Some people don’t work today but they still survive.”

Jack: “What do we call that today?”

Student: “Welfare.”

Student: “Street people.”

Jack: “Clarify that. Let’s jump back to the welfare idea. We need to be careful to say some people on welfare since there are people who really need to be on welfare.”

Student: “Some people hunt through garbage to look for food.”

Jack: “Are they working?”

Student: “I guess they are.”

Jack: “We’re out of time but not out of ideas.” (Vol. II, pp. 88-89)

Jack closed the discussion by telling students they had interesting ideas and that some of the other Language Arts sections had not “jumped into the story” the way this group did (Vol. II, p. 90).

A few days after I listened to the class’ conversation about Bou Azza,
Jack reflected on his practices and beliefs about the Junior Great Books Series:

[I asked the students], "Why does Bou Azza feel comfortable once his decision is made?" . . . [This question] gives me some insight into how well the kids read the story. I do not want to ask a bunch of literal recall. I would find that cheapening the story. But on the other hand, when kids can write three-fourths of a page and tie in [aspects] of the story, you just know that they have read [it]. It is really easy for me to get a grasp of who did the work and who did not. If [students] have [a story strip] they can make some connections [as they read the story]. I just think it makes the story a little richer for them. If nothing else it forces them to think beyond just, plop myself on the bus and read this story for class. The program in Junior Great Books . . . forces kids to think. It allows for good discussion and sometimes for not so good discussion. . . . The other thing I like about Junior Great Books is that it gets students into some other types of literature. It forces kids into some more sophisticated material than they might normally read. There are really no right answers to so many of the questions [in the Junior Great Books]. The purpose is testing your value system and your belief system and how well you can support what you say. I like that as opposed to [finding] the right answer. (Vol. II, pp. 106-107)

Logs

Jack designed the Sixth Grade Reading Log which students used to record reflections on various selections from the Junior Great Books Series. These logs have three other sections. The first section allows students to record books they have read during sixth grade and information about these books: title, author, genre, reasons for choosing the book, reason for abandoning the book, and with whom the book was shared. During one of my visits, I overheard one student sharing a book she had read with another student. After listening to her opinions, the second student signed his name in the first student’s reading log. Section two is entitled “Responding to Literature” and lists 19 questions for students to consider when writing a journal entry about literature they have read. A number of lined notebook pages await students’ thoughts. The final section is called “A Plan for
Reading.” It includes space for students to reflect on their reading skills and set goals for themselves. There is also a form for students to set a summer reading goal. Students who reach their summer reading goal and send the completed contract to Jack by August 15 receive a certificate to put in their portfolio and are recognized in the school’s newsletter. The first year Jack tried this, only five students received a certificate; however, during the most recent summer 22 out of 63 sixth graders completed their reading goals.

Celebration Logs are also part of the sixth-grade Language Arts curriculum. Each student has his or her own three-by-five inch spiral-bound notebook. Jack got the idea after meeting and reading Byrd Baylor’s Celebration. He tells students they can create their own celebrations. Once each week they “have to write a date, an event, and why it is important to [them]” (Vol. II, p. 42). Jack reads only the “why” section of students’ entries. Students insert a paper clip indicating where Jack should start reading. The Celebration Logs allow students to record events and thoughts which can later be developed into a longer paper. Jack also tells students that their logs are a record of things that happened during sixth grade, things that are happy or sad, things they want to remember or things they would like to forget.

Writing

Jack’s students incorporate their writing skills into all other aspects of the Language Arts program. They use writing skills in DOL, in clarifying spelling strategies, in reflecting on their reading selections, and in their various logs. They also spend time on specific writing assignments.

During one of my visits, Jack’s students were sharing persuasive essays in peer groups. To write these essays, students took a position on an issue of
their choice, identified three supporting reasons, and ordered these reasons from least persuasive to most persuasive. The entire essay was to be five paragraphs long.

Each student in the group had a specific job: Reader, questioner, praiser, summarizer, or suggester. The student reading his or her essay became the reader and the other jobs rotated as well. Each reader also needed to complete a "Group Writing Conference Response Sheet" which included the reader’s name, summarizer’s comments, questioner’s comments, suggester’s comments, and the praiser’s comments (Vol. II, p. 75).

Among the topics I heard students addressing in their essays were: Giving students homework, animal experiments, coed sports, background checks for foreigners, women running for president, and adding bagpipes to the middle school band. The quality of feedback students received from their peers varied from group to group. I heard students saying things like: Where is the conclusion? What is your introduction? You should not use "fans" and "also" so much; and two paragraphs repeat each other. Other suggestions included specific ideas for improving writing, using facts instead of opinions to support a position, stating the position clearly in the introduction, and ideas for strengthening a case.

One group spent almost the entire time giving feedback to a student who had written about giving homework. Two group members immediately noticed that this reader did not actually state his opinion; he was riding the fence and giving both reasons for having homework and reasons for eliminating homework. The summarizer reflected this problem when she stated that she did not think she could summarize what the reader had said
because she was not sure what he was actually saying. The remaining group members disagreed about whether the reader was for or against homework. Jack helped this group by asking questions, which got students to articulate suggestions in a manner the reader could understand and use.

While most of the students appeared to value their peers’ feedback, others got defensive and chose to explain why others’ ideas would not strengthen his or her essay. One group had a member who did not appear interested in participating in the assignment. He was given the job as summarizer but refused to summarize the reader’s ideas. His said he had not heard what the reader said, and another group member had been staring at him. His peers kept urging him to at least say something and they would then help him, but he adamantly refused.

Toward the end of group review, Jack wrote the following words: First, Also, Another, Besides, Finally, and The most important. He explained that these are transition words and could be used to connect ideas and help the essay flow more smoothly. Jack suggested using “first” in students’ second paragraph; “also,” “another,” or “besides” in the third paragraph; and “finally” or “the most important” in the fourth paragraph. Then some groups continued giving feedback to each other, other groups dispersed and students worked on altering their essays based on feedback received, and a few students were far enough along in the writing process that they sought out one peer to use Jack’s writing rubric for additional feedback.

Jack debriefed students by asking them to talk about what good things had happened in their groups. The majority of students indicated that feedback they received was very helpful. I heard comments like: I realized I
needed to change my conclusion; I became convinced of my classmate's point of view which gave me ideas on how to make my essay more persuasive; Hearing others' writing style gave me ideas about improving mine; and I discovered that my opening paragraph needs to be changed. Before dismissing students, Jack reminded them to complete the last draft which needs to be typed or handwritten in cursive using black ink. Students also needed to ask one adult to use the writing rubric to review their essay.

When Jack reflected on his writing practices, he explained, "I want to see if by the end of the year kids can actually notice that their writing has changed" (Vol. II, p. 103). He has found that helping students discover ways to improve their own writing works best. His process "is not . . . threatening to kids because they get to play with their own work" (Vol. II, p. 103).

DOL activities and teaching students how to analyze their sentences are tools Jack uses to help students grow as writers. He has seen students become more creative and free to share sentences they have written during DOL since giving them kernel sentences to expand. Initially students responded to Jack's request with "I can't do this. What do you mean?" (Vol. II, p. 101). Jack attributes part of students' growth to "feeling safe in the environment" (Vol. II, p. 101). When students regularly practice writing sentences that vary from the monotonous subject-verb pattern and are encouraged to use different words in their writing, it becomes easier for them to write interesting sentences with a clear voice as capable and mature writers do.

Jack teaches his students tricks of the trade:

I tell them that they have really good ideas but butcher the ideas by putting them down in very short, choppy sentences. . . . [If] you have two sentences that are kernel sentences, two that begin with some of the same words, or you are repeating the same words, that is cheapening the quality of your writing. (Vol. II, p. 101)
Students do a sentence analysis before submitting their final draft to Jack. This is done by numbering each sentence then recording the first three words of the sentence beside the number. As students analyze this list, Jack tells them, “If you see repeated words, you know that you have an obligation to fix them. Because if I see them, I will have the obligation to mark your work down” (Vol. II, p. 101).

Jack also asks students to count the number of words in each sentence. They talk about the fact that if you come up with 19 or 20 words that means it must be a pretty full sentence. [If you] come up with six or you come up with 40, what do you think you probably have? . . . [It] is [a] technique kids can walk away with and if they wish to put forth the extra effort, they can actually get some real insights about their writing. (Vol. II, p. 102)

Some students who opted to write a peace essay for a contest realized when they analyzed paragraphs that three of the five sentences in a given paragraph had the word peace as one of the first three words. Jack encourages them, “You do not have to change them all. Maybe there is a sentence that you really love that you do not want to change” (Vol. II, p. 103). Sometimes students will discover that all of their sentences in a given paper are kernel sentences. They know this indicates a need to rearrange and change at least one sentence in each paragraph. Students are quick to ask Jack for assistance, but he is just as quick to ask them to try it on their own. Jack explained, “I want them to use [these techniques] on their own. It is not going to work if my classroom is the only time they use them” (Vol. II, p. 103).

Classroom Management

When I attempt to describe Jack’s classroom management, I feel a bit
like the preservice teachers I have the opportunity to mentor. They often inform me that their supervising teacher has no management plan because there are no discipline problems. These supervising teachers control the classroom so subtly and unobtrusively that it is challenging to describe their method. Jack is like that. I seldom saw students acting inappropriately in Jack's classroom, but I consistently saw students following routines.

Jack makes it clear to his students through what he says and through his actions that he enjoys being with them. By listening to Jack's stories or brief comments about students' lives or special challenges specific individuals face at home, with peers, or academically, I became aware that Jack knows his students well.

Periodically when Jack did need to address student behavior in the classroom, his approach was direct in a nonabrasive way. One afternoon students were busy creating more noise than usual. Some of the noise was from student movement, some of it came from conversations, and some of it was noise that middle schoolers mysteriously make regardless of the activity. After 20 minutes of this, Jack said, "Excuse me. I would like to have everyone sit down. Everyone. Fifty-five minutes is too long for this much racket!" (Vol. II, p. 86). Students did quiet down and the class resumed at a lower decibel.

Jack's nonabrasive direct manner of confronting students about their behavior sometimes had a twinge of humor also. One morning I arrived between Jack's advisory time and his first Language Arts block. As students settled in for Language Arts, Jack casually mentioned new contracts students had received. One student said, "What contracts?" Jack's tone included surprise and concern when he said, "Who said that?" The student felt safe
enough to raise his hand, and Jack asked if his advisor talked to them about
the contracts during advisory. In an offhanded tone, the student said, "Oh,
yeah." Jack looked relieved and jokingly said, "It is only seven minutes since
advisory and you've already forgotten . . . " (Vol. II, p. 50). Later Jack informed
me that he had received a grant to take the sixth grade to see "Oliver Twist" at
a community college. He wanted students to realize that their behavior before
and during the field trip needed to be appropriate, so the sixth-grade teachers
established a plan for holding students accountable by using contracts.

Jack is committed to seeing his students through a gray, rather than
black and white, lens. He often referred to this as being liberal and recognized
that it affected classroom management:

I don't think that anything can be broken down to a black and white issue,
especially with kids at this age. There are always intervening things going
on that you need to consider. If nothing else, the fact that they are only 12
years old. . . . You have to remember they are 12 year old kids! . . . I would
like to think that before I pass judgment, I kind of flip the coin over and
say, "Okay, now have we really looked under this? Have we looked at the
reverse side of this? Is there anything else we need to consider before we
pass judgment?" . . . I would like to give kids a second chance. Rather than
saying, "Becky, your behavior is inappropriate. You have got to have this
written warning." I would rather sit down and say, "Okay, what is our
problem here? Why is this occurring? How can we overcome it? Maybe
what we need to do is try to problem-solve and let you come up with a
strategy or two to [make sure we do] not have this happen again." This
does not mean it will not happen again because students are only learning
and they are only 12 years old. They are not perfect so I guess I would
rather bend the rules sometimes. Yet you [the researcher] have been in my
classroom long enough to know that . . . I do not have discipline problems
in my classroom. (Vol. II, pp. 62-63)

Through unsolicited comments, several students expressed their
feelings toward Jack. These conversations with students often arose from
their curiosity about my presence in their classroom. One male student asked
whether I was there to evaluate Jack. When I explained my purpose, the student expressed relief because he did not want Jack to lose his job. Another student wondered if I was planning to replace Jack. After hearing the purpose of my visits, this student informed me that he was glad Jack was not leaving the classroom because Jack is a good teacher.

I had no such conversations with female students; however, I do not see that as an indication that the girls liked Jack less than the boys. I see it as an indication that Jack is able to develop a different kind of relationship with the male students which the boys relish since their elementary school years are dominated by female teachers. Jack confirmed my thoughts:

Guys see school as being a woman's world. . . . I used to have kids come into fourth grade and teachers would say, " . . . These boys are just awful." But I did not have a problem with them. . . . I have no interest in a lot of stuff they are interested in, but I am male as opposed to female so I just approach things a little bit differently. It was kind of developmentally where they needed to be, and I think it is the same way on [the middle school] level. . . . Guys come into my classroom and there is a different sort of thing going on. I think they appreciate that perspective. (Vol. II, p. 38)

**Beliefs**

**Making Choices**

Jack’s deep belief that middle schoolers are capable of making decisions and should have the opportunity to make choices is the result of reading *Night of the Twisters* by Ivy Ruchman the summer before beginning his current assignment. In this book Jack saw young adolescents making life or death decisions for themselves and other humans. As each school year begins, Jack discusses his philosophy with his students:

You will not always have choices on everything that you can do, but whenever there is an assignment I will always try to give you an option so you do not feel that you are backed into a situation that you cannot get out
of. On the other hand, doing the work is not a choice. When it is an assignment you are . . . required to complete it or there are consequences. (Vol. II, p. 112)

Jack believes that “kids feel they are pretty much respected as young people . . . when they have a choice in what is going on at school” (Vol. II, p. 113).

Students are given freedom, but it is freedom Jack has given to them. Jack said,

Kids assume it is their structure. I give them the framework and they put in the pieces to shore up the structure (Vol. II, p. 41). I try to empower kids, to say, “You are accountable. There are things I cannot do for you, things I could do for you, but I choose not to because in the end that is going to be an enabling behavior.” (Vol. II, p. 33)

By allowing students to make choices, some of which will be better than others, Jack has a natural opportunity to teach them how to deal with mistakes and poor choices. He tells them, “You may choose the wrong [option] but you can learn from it. We learn from our mistakes. Making a mistake is not bad” (Vol. II, p. 34).

Jack expressed concern that the very structure of schooling in America teaches students that they have no choices to make:

So many kids come to school on the yellow bus. They get dropped off. They are handed a schedule. They do the schedule. They do it everyday for 180 days. They get on the bus and go home, and school is over. They never once made a decision about anything in their lives. Adults do not function that way, and we do not grow as people if everything is planned out for us. (Vol. II, p. 34)

School Is Life

Allowing students to make choices is connected to another belief Jack holds deeply: He believes that school is life. Jack said, “I think that school is really about teaching kids about life and so I use language to connect to life”
Vol. II, p. 33). He went on to explain his belief that

school is basically society under a magnifying glass. The problems we have at school are really the same problems we have in society. . . . There are little people . . . and big people trying to control them. . . . If you think about what goes on in school, it is the same stuff that goes on in society, and kids can come to appreciate that. Kids can appreciate the fact that they really are responsible for each other regardless of ethnic background, gender differences, or whatever [differences] there may be. (Vol. II, p. 34)

As a Language Arts teacher, Jack believes learning skills to use language effectively is a crucial aspect in everyone's life. He acknowledged that some of his students may choose to write for a living, but

if they do not earn their livelihood from language, maybe they will use it as a way of clarifying their own thoughts, as a way to be introspective, . . . and grow to be the person they can be. I think language is such a powerful tool and offers such potential to people who have command of it (Vol. II, p. 6).

I want them to be literate. I want them to use language. I want them to understand that language is powerful and their success is based on their ability to convey thought. . . . I do not want them to just be ready for seventh grade. I want them to be ready to go out the door and become members of society. (Vol. II, p. 115)

Because school is life, Jack plans learning experiences for students that "are not school-based as much as life-based or personal growth-based" (Vol. II, p. 58). One example of this is an employability unit Jack designed:

The guidance counselor came in and talked about employability skills. Then we talked about how to do an interview, and students conducted an interview with someone they consider successful. . . . They wrote their notes, filed their notes, and now we . . . are working at writing a five-paragraph paper. . . . I could have done that assignment in a much different way, but I wanted it to mirror the fact that I want them to start thinking about career choices. I want them to look outside the school setting at people they might consider successful, and also see how things they do in school actually flow over into real life. (Vol. II, p. 58)
Gray Lens

Jack’s time in San Francisco with the military changed his view of the world and his perceptions of people. As a result of his beliefs, Jack said, “I know I am branded a liberal” (Vol. II, p. 40). For Jack, “liberal is being gray” (Vol. II, p. 62), it means “to look at both sides of the coin” (Vol. II, p. 40), and that change is always an option. In the classroom, being liberal means that Jack is committed “to giving kids a second chance” (Vol. II, p. 62). Jack’s liberal beliefs are seen in his interactions with students and adults alike.

Periodically Jack gives his students a DOL test. It consists of 10 sentences for students to correct and rewrite on a sheet of notebook paper. The majority of students are able to complete the test in the time allotted; however, I noticed Angie found it difficult to complete her task. As the end of the period approached, Jack checked to see how much she had completed and told her she needed only to rewrite 2 of the 10 sentences on her notebook paper. When Jack dismissed the class, Angie was again falling behind the others in gathering up her materials. Jack helped her get organized and record assignments before she left. After she exited, Jack told me that Angie is very disorganized and gets distracted easily. He feels that Angie’s mother adds to Angie’s problems by not being organized herself. Though he sometimes feels impatient with Angie, he looks at her home environment and chooses to treat her with compassion.

After I observed Jack’s class discussing a piece of literature, Jack told me about Jessie. Jessie finds it difficult to respond to a question without slipping all over the place, but many times she has wonderful answers. [Jessie] was a special education student until last year. She told her mother, “Mom, I know if I work hard I do not have to be a special education student.” She did not work hard the first marking period . . . and we had a conference. Her mother [told Jessie], “It is up to you. Either you get B’s and
C’s or you are back in special education.” [Jessie] is doing B and C work [now]. Her contributions to the discussion, if you can get over the giggling and the nonsense, are very good points. What was so disheartening [yesterday] was that [Jessie] was in her giggling mode. It set off the other kids so our discussion was not as focused as it could have been. But . . . [Jessie] made her points and they were validated. That is what is really important. (Vol. II, pp. 107-108)

Jack’s parents are elderly with a variety of medical and physical conditions which sometimes make it a challenge to see them through a gray lens. Jack described a recent issue he had to deal with:

My mother is driving me absolutely crazy right now with all the health issues. It could blow my mind, but I stop and think, “Wait a minute. She is doing the best she can with the memory loss which has occurred.” . . . She is supposed to be taking these pills once a day. Technically she should be out of them, but she isn’t which means she did not [take one daily]. . . . When I asked my mom, “Do you still have any pills left?” She said, “Oh yes, I have a few” and counted out 20 of them. I thought, “This is not good!” So I decided to buy a 28-day container and I labeled it with the month and days so she just matches them up. She is doing the best she can. She is frustrated by her own lack of memory. She would not purposely want to [omit her medication]. Why get on her case about it? (Vol. II, p. 64)

The Classroom, My Home

Jack sees his classroom as his home. The American Heritage Dictionary (1993) defines home as “an environment offering security and happiness.” Jack’s classroom is a safe place where students are encouraged to share their ideas, where making a mistake and learning from it is acceptable, and a place where laughter and happiness are intermingled with hard work.

Developing relationships with others is valued in Jack’s classroom: “Teaching is a relationship. You have to have something to teach, but you have to build relationships with kids” (Vol. II, p. 61). “The kids need to know that you are a people person. If you are not a people person, you can have the
best curriculum knowledge and you are going to be missing the boat” (Vol. II, p. 65). Part of Jack’s relationship with his students includes being a role model for them.

Jack’s classroom environment is important to him. He chooses to decorate with items one might find in a house. He prefers to think of the classroom as a learning environment, a place where individuals can learn from each other. Jack himself is an essential part of the classroom environment. He assumes an unpretentious air though he has been recognized at local, county, state, and national levels for excellence in teaching and education. A quick grin sends the message that he has a sense of humor, and his respectful interest in others says, “I value you and your input. I am interested in knowing more about you.” Jack has the ability to put others at ease because he is at ease with himself.

Reflective Educator

During my first conversation with Jack about this study, he told me “the best thing ever said in education is that we need to be reflective persons” (Vol. II, p. 1). For Jack, reflection appears as natural as breathing, and he expects his students to be reflective as well. One of the reasons he agreed to mentor a student teacher was because it gave him “an opportunity to look at [himself] in the mirror one more time” (Vol. II, p. 60). He chose to become part of this research project because it was something he had never done before and not to participate in it would have been a missed opportunity to grow. Not only does Jack reflect on the big picture of education, but he also looks at each day in the classroom. His lengthy commute to and from school allows ample opportunity for reflection.
Self-talk is an invaluable part of Jack's reflection. He sees the two going hand-in-hand. This aspect of Jack's life has allowed him to become well-acquainted with himself and to be comfortable with who he is as a person and a professional. It allows him to experience great satisfaction with all he has accomplished in life while simultaneously reaching toward new and challenging horizons.

Summary

I asked Jack how he had changed and grown during his 28 years as a teacher. During his early years as a teacher, Jack was content-centered but is now child-centered:

I guess the biggest difference between then and now would not be the physical, it would be the attitudinal. I think I was more curriculum driven. . . . I knew kids were important, but there was a curriculum they just had to have or they would die because nobody else would give it to them. It was a pretty narrow focus. My philosophy in the 1970s was that I was a teacher, I was in charge, and I pretty much charged around the room doing that! I was a good teacher, but I wasn't having as much fun as I do now. (Vol. II, p. 33)

It is obvious to those who enter Jack's classroom that he loves being there and loves being with his students. His life experiences allow him to accept students as they are while also challenging them to grow academically and personally. Students in turn love and respect Jack for who he is. Together they create an environment conducive to learning and growth; it is a safe haven for all of them. It is their home.
CHAPTER 5

RENAE--MY STUDENTS, MY FAMILY

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit

Introduction

I knew nothing about Renae's school other than the fact that it existed until a university professor suggested I contact her principal about participating in my study. In my mind it was merely one of the many Lutheran elementary schools scattered across Michiana.

When I first visited Renae's school, I noted from the size of the building that enrollment must rank among the highest in Lutheran elementary schools for this area. The solid, brick buildings of both the school and the attached church suited well the shady, cobblestone street along which they are located. I felt an uncommon discomfort in approaching the school because there was a funeral in progress at the church. This unease, however, lasted only until I entered the school's double glass doors. There I was greeted with the aroma of lunch, a hallway decorated with students' work, a sign indicating the location of the office, and the typical sounds of busy classrooms.
At the time of my study, Renae was in her seventh year as the math teacher for Grades 5-8 though she has been an educator for 22 years. When I first spoke with her, I concluded that Renae must be an organized person and have an extremely full schedule, but much to my surprise she agreed to participate in my study. I was struck by her eagerness to share her students and her classroom with me. She explained that she believes they as a school have many positive things happening, and she was looking forward to sharing them with me.

The house Renae's life has built is surrounded by an impeccably manicured lawn. The flower beds are carefully mulched and full of an array of brightly blooming plants. The house itself is set back from the street with an air of privacy surrounding it. Through the windows one spies frilly curtains sending a message of warmth and welcome, almost contradicting the air of privacy. Once inside the house, one is surrounded by warmth, comfort, and love. It is a safe haven for all who take the time to enter and explore its furnishing.

**Renae's Story**

**Family Life**

When Renae drew her life map for me, she first wrote “Christian home environment” (Vol. III, p. 164). She explained to me why she began there,

I put the Christian home environment as the most important influence . . . because it set up a level of expectations that my parents had [for me]. [Expectations] of “This is why you’re in the world. This is what God has in mind for you. He’s given you gifts. Make sure that you use them for His glory.” . . . Responsibilities [and] citizenship . . . were all things that were just a natural part of our very close family. (Vol. III, p. 143)
It became increasingly obvious to me that the family in which Renae grew up continues to play an important role in her adult life. She frequently spoke of them in our conversations, she has pictures of them on her desk at school, and she spoke fondly of her nieces and nephews. Many times Renae’s comments about her siblings and their families were in conjunction with comments about her own children, two sons and a daughter. When I spoke with Renae shortly before the Christmas holidays, she was anticipating the arrival of her sister, a preschool teacher in Hong Kong, and her sister’s three teenage sons. In addition to these family guests, Renae’s daughter and boyfriend were coming home from college for the holidays as well. Renae was anticipating having a house full of people and spending time with family.

Renae spoke frequently of the influence her parents have had on shaping who she is today. She attributes her love for math to her father:

We’d play games in the car when we drove as kids. [Dad] . . . would . . . say, “Okay, we’re at mile marker 47. We’re getting off at mile marker 162. How many miles is that? We’re going this many miles per hour. How long will it take us to get there? Gas is this much and we average 31 miles to the gallon. How many gallons are we going to use? How much is this going to cost us?” We did this all mentally. This is what we did to entertain ourselves on long drives. I thought everybody did that [and] we just really enjoyed it. . . . It was [Dad’s] natural way of teaching. (Vol. III, pp. 47-48)

When Renae was a child, her father supplied customers with fuel oil. Renae recalled,

He never had a calculator. [Fuel oil] was always $0.319. It’s not 50 cents a gallon. It was always those odd things and he always multiplied things out by hand. [He] figured the degrees. . . . Today the temperature is 32. That means you’re at negative five degree days. That means that this customer is going to use this much oil so I’ll need to be there next Friday. (Vol. III, p. 47)

Renae’s father helped her realize that math is something used everyday, that

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it is real and fun.

Though Renae’s mother wanted to be a teacher, she quit college after one semester because her help was needed to run the family farm. Renae describes her mother as “the accountant [in the family] and she [kept] everything in line and [made] it neat and orderly. [She would] organize everything under the sun [and] make lists” (Vol. III, p. 46). It did not take me long to realize that Renae is extremely organized herself, and she explained, “That part of me came from [my mother]” (Vol. III, p. 46).

As a child Renae had rheumatic fever. From kindergarten to ninth grade, she missed approximately 6 weeks of school each year in December and January because of illness. Not only was she continually fighting illness, but this made her weak and doctors never expected her to be able to live a normal life of working and being a mother. Gradually Renae grew stronger and stronger. As an adult she suffers no ill effects from having had rheumatic fever and has accomplished many things which once appeared impossible.

Renae began kindergarten when she was 4 years old. She recalled her grade school and high school years:

I was a very young 4 when I started kindergarten so I wasn’t quite ready to be modeling leadership at that point. I remember being very average but later on as I went through school, I remember finding out that I was pretty good at some things. I was constantly being asked to help other kids and I really enjoyed working with [them]. I never minded giving up the time. So I felt God leading me to do something to help others. That [was my] gift.

. . . Then I went from a very small classroom in a Lutheran school to a very large public school. My class was over 600 in ninth grade so there were about 2,500 of us in the high school. [That was] a pretty good sized high school compared to my class of 11 or 12 in grade school! . . . My sister and brother had each gone ahead of me. . . . They were surviving fine [and] enjoying it. So I didn’t think of it as being beyond me. My question was, “Can I get all A’s? How am I going to accomplish this? How will I get to know the teachers?” I didn’t know any of them . . . but I made a point of making a friend out of each one of them because I wanted to have a
relationship with them. [I] loved high school. (Vol. III, pp. 143-144)

During Renae's high school years, she turned to her dad for help with the math she was required to do. She explained,

He couldn't do my high school math, but he always had good common sense. I could say, "Okay, Dad, here's my physics problem. This guy's in an airplane. He's flying this many miles an hour. He's going to bail out. Is he going to land here?" I could do the math and get an answer, but I didn't know if it was right. He could look at the problem and tell me about where he needed to land. His common sense and my math worked together. (Vol. III, p. 46)

Early in her life, Renae knew she would go to college. She knew her parents expected her to gain a college education:

When I was . . . a young child, . . . they had the ground breaking at . . . a 2-year [Lutheran] college. . . . [At] the ground breaking . . . all of the area [Lutheran] congregations were invited to attend. We went . . . and my parents' comment was, "This is where you are going to go to college." They had already planted the seed that [I was] going to be a teacher and this is where [I was] going to go to school. (Vol. III, p. 45)

Going into education seemed like a natural decision when Renae entered college. She explained,

I was always interested in helping other people. . . . My oldest sister was not strong in math and science so as she got into high school, algebra was very challenging to her while I loved math. Even though she was four years ahead of me, I wanted to know what she was doing. I would always sit next to her and read her book and help her with her math. My brother was 18 months older than me and was a year ahead of me, and I would help him too. He was one of those kids that would not do his homework, but then would ace the test. . . . My sister had to work and work and work, and math was just really difficult [for her]. . . . I just always enjoyed helping my brother and sister, and I always thought that teaching would be a really neat thing [to do]. (Vol. III, pp. 44-45)

Renae's family continues to look to each other for support; being involved in each others' lives remains a high priority for them. I am particularly fond of one story Renae told me about her parents because it
illustrates various aspects of Renae and how they come together to make her the person she is today. She told me this story because I asked her about the clothes she chooses to wear; it begins a few months before I began my study.

My first association with Renae occurred at an occasion when she spoke to a group of educators. She was chosen to speak because she had received an award for excellence in teaching in our county. Though I did not actually speak to her that evening, I was awed and intimidated by her. She appeared so accomplished and professional in her manners and dress. From her speech, I knew she was an outstanding middle school teacher.

When I contacted Renae’s principal about participation in my research study, he immediately suggested I contact Renae and her husband. Of course I recognized Renae’s name from the award she had received and remembered well my impressions of her. Consequently, I was very surprised the day I met Renae and her husband because Renae was wearing black corduroy bib overalls with Mickey Mouse embroidered on the bib. It made me curious to find out who Renae really is as a person. I wondered if she was the ultimate professional or if she was a down-to-earth person who liked Mickey Mouse.

After I felt comfortable enough with Renae to tell her my impressions during our initial interview, she told me the story behind the Mickey Mouse overalls and why she likes to wear them. Renae’s mother became ill, and her dad was overwhelmed by caring for her mother. Renae asked for 1 week off from school to be with her parents. She nursed her mother back to health and by the end of the week, Renae persuaded both of her parents to go shopping. While shopping, Renae spotted the Mickey Mouse overalls and casually commented that she liked them. Her dad immediately bought them for her.
Now whenever Renae wears the bibs, they are a special reminder of and connection to her dad.

The College Years

The seed Renae’s parents planted early in her life grew, and she enrolled in a 2-year Lutheran college. These were important years for her:

Going to a Christian college was really good for me because [I] went to chapel every morning. [I] had group devotions every night. [We] did the large worship experiences on Sunday and [we] were in devotions 15 times a week . . . so [I had] a chance to really understand what gifts are for and learn some fun ways to worship. (Vol. III, p. 144)

Renae grew in many aspects during these 2 years. Her faith in God was strengthened, she worked with students in more formal settings, she grew socially, and she met the man who later became her husband, Ken. Renae told me she was quite shy when she entered college and, having met her husband, I knew Ken to be an outgoing person. She and Ken met the first night of Renae’s college experience at what she describes as one of “those nasty mixers” (Vol. III, p. 49).

[Ken] was a sophomore and I was a freshman. He came in early [because] he . . . had a job on campus. . . . He wanted to check out the new crop of students coming in so he went to the mixer. . . . That’s when we got to know each other. . . . It was always kind of a “we thing” because [Ken’s] a twin. . . . [Ken] and [Kent] always came and spent time with me. . . . [Kent] dated my roommate; he dated my suite mate; he dated other girls on campus. He was always with somebody new, but usually the three of us spent most of our time together. . . . I got less shy as I got to know them. They [had] the same values, same background. (Vol. III, pp. 49-50)

Both Ken and Renae planned to be educators so they became teachers’ aides at a large Lutheran elementary school close to the college. During this time Renae worked mostly with a fourth-grade class, and every Sunday afternoon she worked with mentally handicapped adults. This gave her
another opportunity to be in a position of leadership and work in a more formal classroom setting.

Since the Lutheran college Renae attended was only a 2-year institution, she transferred to another college to complete her degree. Ken also transferred and was a year ahead of Renae. They wanted to get married, but Renae did not want to attend another whole year of college after Ken graduated. She was able to complete her undergraduate degree in 3 years and graduated in August. They got married after Ken’s graduation in May, but before Renae’s. The wedding was a week and a half before Renae had to start summer school so it was a busy time for them. They traveled out-of-state to celebrate Ken’s graduation, had a wedding shower, returned for the wedding, traveled to the western United States for a quick weekend honeymoon, and then came back so Renae could begin summer school and graduate in August.

Becoming an Educator

One week after Renae’s graduation, she and Ken began teaching. They had a “double Call” at a Lutheran elementary school (Vol. III, p. 50). In the Lutheran educational system, teachers are given a Call much like pastors in other churches are given. Renae explained, “We Call [teachers and pastors] Ministers of the Gospel. . . . [Teachers] have the direct contact with the kids . . . [and] pastors work with adults” (Vol. III, p. 51).

Renae’s first teaching assignment was 18 second graders, and Ken taught third and fourth grades. The following year the school had to adjust teaching assignments because of enrollment changes. The second year Renae taught second and part of third grade while Ken taught the other part of third grade and fourth grade. Since they both had third grade, Renae and Ken
decided to team teach. They took their combined 60 students and team taught for the next 2 years. Renae describes it as a "fun experience because [she and Ken] are a little bit different in how [they] teach" (Vol. III, p. 27). Renae recalls wanting to teach lower elementary because "the kids seemed 'safer' at that point" (Vol. III, p. 27).

Those first 3 years after college, Renae referred to as "beginnings" (Vol. III, p. 145). These were the years of beginning her "teaching ministry, beginning marriage, and then . . . [she] got her own private classroom" (Vol. III, p. 145). When Renae became pregnant with her daughter, she was forced to quit teaching because she was very sick during the pregnancy. For 18 months after her daughter was born, Renae stayed at home with her. Then, she explained,

My professional juices were just running and I . . . needed to do something. So I started subbing in the public schools. . . . Pretty soon I found myself subbing almost 5 days a week. Fortunately, I had a good babysitter. . . . I was getting to know the public schools. (Vol. III, p. 28)

Renae continued to do substitute teaching, and during this time her first son was also born. She "didn’t want to go back to teaching full time. [She] wanted to . . . stay at home with the kids" (Vol. III, p. 28). Concerning the years Renae substituted and stayed home with her children, she said,

[I had a] real sense of fulfillment. . . . [I] learned how to listen and how to get down on [children’s] level. I really think it’s been very good for me to be a parent because I have learned about kids as they grow up. . . . As my kids started growing up, it helped me a lot to understand what a child was going through at each age. I think it’s made me much more tolerant, much more patient and understanding. (Vol. III, p. 145)

While working as a substitute teacher, Renae was in and out of many different classrooms. She used this as an opportunity to make notes about
things other teachers did that she liked. Since Renae got called to substitute at
the high school frequently due to her ability to teach math, she developed an
understanding of teenagers.

During this time one of Renae’s friends was teaching night classes at a
college and encouraged Renae to join her. Renae said,

I started teaching business. I didn’t have a business background. I never
had a business course in my life... I subbed for two days for someone and
6 weeks later they called me to fill in one class a night. They were short a
teacher... Then I was teaching full time every semester... They liked
what I was doing, and I was learning... along with the [students]. These
were mostly mothers who had been in the workplace [and] coming back at
night to get a better job... They were [motivated]. They were not your
typical... highest part of the class students... They needed to hear things
a little more basically... [It was] good... to work with [students] who
wanted to learn and who were not going to pick it up automatically... I
taught there for 5 years. (Vol. III, pp. 28-29)

From her students, Renae learned about working with individuals
whose background differed from her own. Many of her students in the night
classes were from the inner city, very different from the farming community
where she lived. “Most of [my students] had children [and] marriages that had
not worked out very well... [They were] people who [were] struggling, who
really [needed] a job, who needed skills” (Vol. III, p. 146).

Eventually Renae became head of the Word Processing Department at
the college and was busy teaching and fulfilling her administrative duties.
Her second son was born during this time, she had a wonderful babysitter for
the children, and things were going very smoothly. Then Ken received a Call
from a Lutheran church in the Michiana area to teach in their school. Ken
accepted the Call and began teaching at the school where both he and Renae
are now employed.
Ken’s Call did not include Renae and after moving to the Michiana area, Renae decided that she wanted to take a break from working and stay at home for a little while. She thought this would allow her to adjust to living in a brand-new community. This decision lasted less than a month.

Renae and Ken’s church has a monthly newsletter. When they moved, the church put their picture in the newsletter and introduced the family. This introduction included the information that Renae had been teaching at a business college prior to their relocation. A church member teaching at a local business college noticed Renae’s past teaching experience and approached her:

[She] said, “We need a person to teach here this fall, will you do it?” I said, “No, I want to stay home.” She called 2 days later, “We really want you to teach this Records Management Class.” [I said,] “No, I don’t want to do that. I want to stay home.” Two days later the dean called, “We really need you!” [I said,] “Well, fine! There must be a plan here.” So I went to teach two classes . . . and part time . . . became full time. I just kept teaching a little bit more. . . . A friend of ours from church wondered if I would be the receptionist for his business for 6 weeks. [I said,] “Sure, I can do that during the day. Why not?” I was teaching nights . . . so I started doing that. It was kind of silly to have a master’s degree and [sit] there saying, “Hello.” It was fun because it was the workplace, and it [had] all different rules. It wasn’t school. It was the first time I had worked in a non-education setting. . . . Good learning [was] going on. . . . After 6 weeks . . . they said, “Well, would you like to stay?” I said, “Well, you’re great guys, but this just isn’t for me. Receptionist is fine, but I think I need something more. If you ever get something in word processing or something that is going to use my mind a little bit, let me know and I’ll think about it.” Well, they came back the next week and said, “Guess what. We created a new position.” . . . So I became the Engineering Systems Coordinator. . . . [I] spent a whole year there and really enjoyed the business part. But I knew that teaching was in my blood because after awhile I started organizing their bulletin board. Then I started putting borders on their bulletin board. Pretty soon little snowmen appeared on their bulletin board. I started putting up little sayings of the month. . . . And they [went], “Do you miss teaching or something?” [I said,] “Yeah!” But it was a really good experience to be out in the workplace and see the math that the engineers were using. (Vol. III, pp. 30-31)
As Renae summarized what this experience meant to her, she said, “There were all kinds of things . . . happening that were very good to open my eyes to something outside the classroom. It’s such a narrow view of the world to only be in the classroom” (Vol. III, p. 32).

Renae’s responsibilities at the business college also continued to increase and she became Director of Counseling Services, helping students choose their classes. Later, when the dean left, she became the acting dean. In spite of frustrations with the corporate office which chose to view students as a commodity, Renae enjoyed her experience. She said, “I had fallen in love with the students. There were such great needs there” (Vol. III, p. 32).

Eventually Renae found out about a fourth-grade opening at the school where Ken was teaching. She applied and was offered a teaching position at the school though it ended up being seventh grade. Renae explained,

Seventh grade social studies and I are not best of friends. It’s fine, but every time you open the paper, it changes. The populations change, the names [of countries] change, the leaders change. I thought, “I don’t have a love of this to really do a good job at this so let me do something that I love.” Then I started saying [to other teachers], “Hey, I’ll trade you seventh-grade social studies for fifth-grade math.” (Vol. III, p. 33)

Currently Renae teaches math for Grades 5-8 while Ken teaches science. Language Arts and Social Studies are taught by other teachers. Renae remarked, “I get to teach my best subject all the way through. . . . I knew [Social Studies] wasn’t my strength and if I can’t do well, I don’t want to do it” (Vol. III, pp. 33-34). Renae commented that because of the size of their middle school, the frequency with which students relate to their homeroom teachers, and the fact that teachers get to teach in their strongest content area all provide their students with “the best of both worlds” (Vol. III, p. 34).
Teaching Middle Schoolers

Renae's first year back in the classroom as a full-time teacher proved to be a challenge. She said, "It wasn't the way it was when I was teaching before" (Vol. III, p. 36). Renae's earlier full-time teaching experiences had been either with elementary students or in higher education. In recalling that first year she remarked,

I was trying to use a lower grade teaching strategy which didn't work.... It was hard.... If I didn't pray myself all the way here to get focused I [was] not going to make it through [the] day. But it just kept getting better as [I] got to know the kids. (Vol. III, pp. 53-54)

When Renae was trained to be a teacher, students sat in straight rows, but she quickly discovered that middle schoolers are social beings. This motivated her to change her teaching style:

If you don't give [middle schoolers] social [time], they'll take it, so it's built in.... I wasn't about to be frustrated by that so I learned [and] tried a lot of groupings. At first it didn't work for me, but I had to learn how to give them the freedom to work in the group. [I learned] there's going to be some noise, but there's also much better learning going on. When I started listening to what they were saying as opposed to the fact that they were talking [I discovered that] talking can be good or bad.... They've just kind of helped me learn that as I've gone through. They teach you if you're willing to listen. They're great teachers if you're willing to learn from them. I still will learn from them every day. There's always something to be discovered from them. (Vol. III, pp. 55-56)

In her return to the classroom Renae discovered that teachers now used manipulatives in math and taught integrated units. She had never heard of manipulatives, but she decided to take a crash course because she recognized a better way of helping students learn. Renae began taking classes through the local Intermediate School District (ISD), she joined the Michigan Council for Teachers of Mathematics, attended many conferences often
booking workshops right through lunch, and began networking with other educators who did the same kinds of things she wanted to do. She was driven to gain more “information so that [she] could teach the way [she] thought was better for kids” (Vol. III, p. 37). Watching students get excited about new teaching methods and understand the things she was teaching them motivated Renae to learn and grow.

One of the classes Renae took at the ISD dealt with using manipulatives in the classroom. Prior to joining this class, she had experienced some disappointments in workshops she attended to find out how to use manipulatives in algebra. During this class at the ISD, Renae said,

I started finding a way to include [manipulatives] more and more in what I was doing. . . . I found out there were a lot of kids out there that really needed to touch something, and I wanted to make it comfortable for all of them to do it. (Vol. III, p. 159)

The class was designed for middle elementary teachers, and Renae began using the ideas she gained with her fifth and sixth graders. Then, she explained, “I just started extending it myself. . . . I don’t have to have somebody lead [me] all the way to the faucet; just point me in the right direction” (Vol. III, p. 160).

Every year Renae teaches, she pushes herself to learn even more, to continue finding better ways to teach her students. She remarked,

Every year . . . I think, “Oh, cool. I’ve really learned a lot this year. I can help these kids a lot better.” Then the next year it’s like, “Boy, did I learn a lot this year! I thought I knew quite a bit. I didn’t know anything at all.” (Vol. III, p. 149)

Renae believes the continuing opportunities to grow during her 7 years as a middle school math teacher have motivated her to remain in her current position. During these years she has been challenged, stretched, and has
helped others around her grow and change professionally. She is part of a school which values professional development. Prior to accepting this position, Renae rarely stayed at one position more than 3 years. She contrasted herself with Ken to explain,

My husband’s life [story] is so much different. He went into Lutheran school and stayed there. After 13 years he [came] to this Lutheran school and he’s been here 11 years. His life is really straight and predictable. He feels safe and that’s where he operates. He needs to feel secure and then he does a great job. I really like this route. It’s good for me. If things become routine, then I’m out. That’s why often I went to a job and I was there 3 years. Then I would move to another area. . . . I like to be creating something and not just doing it. (Vol. III, p. 147)

**Renae’s Classroom**

**Appearance**

Renae’s classroom is on the top floor of a three-story building. The day care and preschool are housed in the lower level, Grades K-3 on the main floor along with the administrative offices, leaving the top floor for Grades 4-8. Though the fourth graders inhabit a classroom on the same story as the middle schoolers, Renae pointed out, “They don’t mingle a lot. They don’t even walk this way to go to lunch. No fourth grader wants to walk past the eighth grade room if he or she can help it” (Vol. III, p. 35).

Making my way to Renae’s classroom, I noticed students’ work displayed on the walls. The farther down the hallway I traveled, the more complex the displays became. Renae later commented that their classrooms are used each Sunday for adult Sunday School classes, and exhibiting students’ work is one way of promoting the school to church members.

I first observed in Renae’s classroom during December and her room reflected various traditions of the season. Strands of tinsel and nativity scenes

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made of construction paper hung from the ceiling; along the large windows which graced one wall was a string of lights; the large bulletin board at the back of the room displayed a nativity scene; and a Christmas tree found its place at the front of the room. While the decor of the classroom was largely seasonal, the atmosphere it created remained the same. Renae’s classroom was always dominated by students’ work or displays they had created, and it was always filled with numerous items giving me glimpses of daily life in this room. It was a room which belonged to students and they played a role in shaping their environment. In my reflections after my first visit, I wrote, “It made me want to stay” (Vol. III, p. 1).

Several items on the walls of Renae’s classroom remained constant. There were always a few inspirational posters scattered around the room, and one large green and white poster, to which Renae referred occasionally, reminded students of the value of team work:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We’re All On God’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A blackboard and white board covered large expanses of two walls. I discovered that Renae uses both of them to teach and remind students of events and expectations. Above the white board was a large, colorful banner proclaiming, “Today is a great day to learn something new!” (Vol. III, p. 67). As I observed Renae in action, I began to realize that this was an important
motto in her classroom. I was struck by the small, student-designed posters above the blackboard. Each one began with, “My goal for this month is . . .” (Vol. III, p. 8). The goals reflected issues I would classify as typical of middle schoolers: “getting along with the seventh graders,” “shooting a basket during basketball,” and “getting on honor roll” (Vol. III, p. 8).

I noticed a few things that were obviously designed and made by Renae to help her classroom function more smoothly. Two pocket charts hung side by side and held small cards with students’ names on them. One chart was labeled “Hot Lunch, Yes, Please” and the other one, “Hot Lunch, No, Thank You” (Vol. III, p. 8). Each day students positioned name cards on the correct chart signaling their lunch plans. Renae also had a laminated poster with colorful fish entitled “Prayer Changes Us!” I noticed students writing prayer needs on the fish, but there were also times when this poster remained blank.

Items in Renae’s classroom also indicated that she is a math teacher. Geometric shapes hung from pegs along the white board, a large compass for use on the chalk board hung within easy reach, a poster with a list of math terms found a spot by the windows, and plastic containers with calculators were always ready for students’ use.

Renae frequently rearranges the desks in her classroom. Since she teaches math classes for Grades 5-8, there are times when she has a number of empty desks. The largest class is fifth grade with 25 students and seventh grade is the smallest with 11 students. No matter how Renae chose to group the desks, students were constantly working with each other, looking to each other for assistance, and Renae seemed to be everywhere at once giving assistance and encouragement as needed.
I observed Renae teaching math to Grades 5-8 and found many similarities. A typical class begins with some type of warm-up activity which helps students focus their thoughts on math. Renae’s math classes emphasize learning mathematical skills because they have value in life, not just because math is part of the curriculum. For a school its size, Renae’s school has access to or owns an amazing collection of technology, and Renae regularly uses technology in her math classes. In addition to technological tools, Renae constantly provides other hands-on learning experiences for her students.

Renae keeps things moving at a fairly rapid pace in her classes. She explained,

They’re not going to listen to a lecture so I figure if I can’t say it in 3 minutes, it’s not worth saying. I have to engage them. They have to be talking back. They have to be doing something, working something out, doing an activity. They’re not going to just sit and listen. (Vol. III, p. 55)

It very quickly became obvious to me that Renae presents a challenging curriculum to her students. She wants her eighth graders to be well prepared for the high school math classes they will take. When students transfer into Renae’s school, especially in middle school, they frequently need to provide extra support. Renae commented,

Those are the [students] that are pulled into the tutoring session on Tuesday. We try to bring them along, especially if they don’t have the support at home. Either the parents can’t do [the math], don’t have time, or don’t want to. Lots of times the parents don’t have the ability. They didn’t do really well and you say, “Algebra” and they go, “Oh, that was the last math course I ever took, and I was terrible!” (Vol. III, p. 60)

In Renae’s classes, she exuded both the message that math is serious business and the message that part of her task is to nurture students. Though
these messages may initially seem contradictory, Renae was able to meld them together into a nurturing, businesslike approach. Though Renae spoke rapidly and expected students to follow her lead, she was willing to digress and recognize students' personal needs. Her gentle, compassionate, nurturing side which said, "I am doing all I can to help you be successful as you learn about math and life" kept jumping to the forefront as she conducted her classes. I will now describe the four math classes Renae teaches.

Grade 5

Even before I met any of the fifth graders, Renae told me about the class and that a number of the fifth graders make it a point to get a daily hug from her. She also pointed out that they are much quicker to show their enthusiasm about math class than the older students. Renae worked hard to accommodate the fifth graders' need for more tender loving care and individual attention.

Though I would seldom describe Renae's classroom during math class as quiet, I noticed immediately that the volume increased when the fifth graders were present with their 25 little bodies roving around the room. Renae always wrote the supplies or tools students needed for math class on the board. The fifth graders seemed to take more time to gather their materials and to talk more during the process. I heard Renae frequently encourage them to "keep moving" (Vol. III, p. 109) because they had a lot to do during their time together.

One mathematical concept Renae stresses heavily in fifth grade is estimation. After becoming familiar with the metric system, fifth graders write "Who Am I?" clues using the metric system. Renae then uses these
questions as warm-ups in math class. This allows students to learn how to estimate using the metric system. One of the clues read: “I’m a rectangular solid 48 cm high and 39 cm wide” (Vol. III, p. 128). Renae wrote this clue on the board and students wrote an answer on individual white boards. Renae then drew a name randomly to see who got to answer first. As students identified objects, Renae handed them a meter stick to measure the object. For the clue mentioned above, a student suggested a poster hanging on the wall. Someone else quickly pointed out that it is not a rectangular solid, but Renae allowed the student to measure the poster to see how close the dimensions were to the real object. The class realized the face of the poster was very close to the size of the actual object and someone was able to guess very quickly the plastic storage cupboard described in the clue.

When Renae wanted the fifth graders to understand the relationship between a circle’s diameter and its circumference, she asked the students to draw large circles and mark the diameter. They next cut yarn pieces the length of the diameter and glued them around the circumference. Students discovered that it takes three diameters and a “little more” to cover the circumference. When the class discovered that the “little more” was 1/5 instead of the 1/7 which is the fractional part of pi, Renae explained, “Remember, [we are] working with a physical model and they don’t always come out pure like numbers do” (Vol. III, p. 111).

The class then proceeded to estimate the diameters and circumferences of circles with varying measurements. Renae concluded by telling her fifth graders that all they need to remember this year about the relationship between the diameter and circumference is that three diameters and a “little
more” make the circumference. Though some of the students knew that three diameters and a “little more” is called $\pi$, Renae chose not to use $\pi$ consistently in class. After dismissing the students, Renae commented to me that what they were studying in class is difficult for fifth graders, but they can understand it if it is broken down step-by-step.

The fifth graders also learned how to find the area of circles. After estimating the area of circles inscribed in grids, they learned the formula for a circle’s area. I was amazed at how easily they moved from the formula to punching it out on their calculators. They used the $x^2$ and $\pi$ keys on their calculators without Renae having to point out these keys’ functions.

Renae was careful to stretch students’ vocabulary during math classes so I was a bit surprised to hear her tell the fifth graders to “put the pokey part [of your compass] in the center of the circle” (Vol. III, p. 112). This was part of the fifth graders learning how to draw arcs inside circles to create a perpendicular bisector of the diameter of the circle they had drawn.

After giving students directions, Renae moved around the classroom, touching various students, laughing with them, and making these comments: “Oops, yours fell off the edge,” and “You’re almost there. Shall I help you finish?” (Vol. III, p. 113). Renae then told students that she was going to draw a “magic box,” but the students found it difficult to pay attention and listen. She said, “I’m getting sadder and sadder. Pretty soon I’m going to ask you to do this, and I don’t ever want to ask you to do something I didn’t teach you” (Vol. III, p. 113).

The class ended on a more businesslike note. Renae told students, “We can have a good time drawing pictures in geometry. There are people who
have careers drawing things all day long. They're called engineers, artists, and architects. So if you like doing this you might want to talk to your parents about a career in one of these” (Vol. III, p. 113). She then proceeded to use phrases like “perpendicular bisector” and “inscribing a square inside a circle” as she referred to the homework assignment she was giving students to do in their workbooks (Vol. III, p. 113).

*Grade 6*

With the exception of content and number of students, Renae conducted sixth-grade math classes similarly to the fifth-grade classes. I observed the same businesslike approach tempered with love, nurture, and humor.

One day the sixth graders were working on the order of operations in number sentences. Renae had a mnemonic device which the class used:

- **P** - Please
- **E** - excuse
- **M** - my
- **D** - dear
- **A** - Aunt
- **S** - Sally

The first time Renae read the sentence aloud for the class, she said, “Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally and the eighth graders in the hallway” because of the extra noise outside as the eighth graders moved toward their next class (Vol. III, p. 115). A second digression occurred when Renae was addressing the need to move left to right when multiplying and dividing or adding and subtracting in a number sentence. She commented that the
Chinese would probably do their problems right to left since they read right to left. Some of the students were not aware that the Chinese language is read right to left and bottom to top so they expressed surprise. Renae emphasized that this was indeed true, before continuing the lesson.

In addition to using the mnemonic device to help the sixth graders remember the order of operations, Renae also used the analogy of a company. The CEO is like the numbers and operation found in parentheses. They come first and are most important in the company. The exponents are the plant manager and find themselves just under the CEO. Multiplication and division work together, and at the bottom of the totem pole are addition and subtraction, the workers on the floor.

When the class began working on one number sentence, a student suggested that they begin with addition. Renae remarked while pointing to her illustration, “This is a lowly little peon. Are you sure you want to start with this?” (Vol. III, p. 115). The student realized that addition was much too far down the ladder of importance since the number sentence also included multiplication.

Some of the sixth graders found addition and subtraction of negative numbers challenging so Renae placed a row of marks on her classroom floor using masking tape to help students visualize the process. The tape was arranged like this:

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|   |   |   |   |   |   |
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The circle in the center represents zero on a number line. To show
students how to add -4 + 6 Renae began in the center and walked toward the left four spaces. Then she walked forward six spaces and ended on positive two. After class Renae told me how the students had struggled initially to add and subtract negative numbers, but it became much easier for them after she placed the number line on the carpet and began demonstrating physically how to work with negative numbers.

Though Renae was intent on helping her sixth graders understand and be successful in computation, she took time to notice personal needs. Jenny got up during class to get a tissue and held it to her ear because it was draining. Renae noticed what she did and asked Jenny about it. Jenny let Renae look at the ear, and Renae suggested that she get the ear checked because she thought it might be an ear infection. After a short pause, Renae asked Jenny, “Are you going to day care?” and Jenny nodded (Vol. III, p. 135). Renae then said, “Make sure you tell them because you shouldn’t be where there’s a lot of noise. Maybe they can put you in a quiet spot” (Vol. III, p. 135). In the midst of a full agenda and students working on math concepts, Renae found time to express her concern about Jenny as an individual.

Renae frequently used ice cream sticks with students’ names on them to call on students randomly. Each grade level had its own jar of sticks. As Renae was preparing to draw sticks to see which sixth graders would be assigned specific math problems, some of the students said they wanted to draw the sticks. Renae smiled and joked, “I went to college to be a stick puller, you know!” (Vol. III, p. 135). The students responded, “You went to college to be a math teacher” (Vol. III, p. 135). Easy, lighthearted exchanges between Renae and her students occurred regularly during her classes.
During a math class just before Christmas, I observed the ease with which Renae dealt with unexpected interruptions. This was during a lesson in which students were challenged to write numbers in scientific notation. Though the class seemed a bit ill-fated due to reasons beyond Renae’s control, she calmly dealt with teaching the math content and the interruptions.

Early during the period, we heard the clanging of the fire alarm. All of us made an orderly, but rapid exit and stood on the sidewalk in the chilly breeze of a December morning. The wait to reenter seemed interminable, but I noticed Renae huddled with her arms and jacket around a group of girls. The minute we found ourselves back in the classroom, Renae jumped right back into the lesson as though the interruption had been planned.

A few minutes after the fire drill, Christmas lights fastened with tape to a window became too heavy for the tape. As they dropped, a student observed, “It broke” and without missing a beat, Renae said, “We’ll fix it” (Vol. III, p. 10) and continued with scientific notation. The third unplanned incident within 20 minutes came from a student. Students were using individual white boards and markers which is commonplace in Renae’s classes. One student suddenly felt it important to announce, “I have a black marker with a green cap on it.” Renae responded with, “Someone else probably has a green marker with a black cap. Maybe you’ll find your friend” (Vol. III, p. 11). I hesitate calling this exchange an interruption because Renae moved on as though nothing unusual had occurred. She kept her businesslike, professional composure throughout the entire lesson while also showing glimpses of her nurturing, compassionate side.

One day after assigning a section in students’ workbooks, Renae made
her usual rounds among students to check their progress. Without an explanation she took candy from her desk and began distributing it to certain students as she looked at the pages they were completing. It took students only a brief time to determine that Renae was giving candy to those who had written the date and time on top of their pages. After they figured this out, Renae reminded them that writing the date and time on their pages would tell them “I know this page. I am responsible for the information on this page” when they saw it in the future (Vol. III, p. 136).

Grade 7

Not only did Renae have the seventh graders for math class, but they were also part of her homeroom; she began and ended the day with these students and got more intimately acquainted with them. During one homeroom period I observed the seventh graders making thank-you cards for area businesses which had donated goods or services to the school’s Tech It Out auction. This is a yearly fund raiser for the school, and students participate in the effort; each homeroom prepares items for the auction. The seventh graders this year sold coupons for homemade cookies. Individuals who purchased the coupons alerted students when they were ready to redeem the coupon. Students then planned to gather at Renae’s house and bake the cookies. For the previous year’s auction, Renae’s homeroom created Feel Good Baskets which contained items like cough drops, teddy bears, and books.

Renae has her students working at three different levels in seventh-grade math so she is kept busy flipping back and forth between the groups and keeping all of them challenged and on task. The majority of students are working on pre-algebra, three students are completing seventh-grade general
math, and one female student, Cassie, is working at her own pace on pre-algebra. Renae explained to me that Cassie is a very bright girl who was not feeling challenged by the pace of the pre-algebra group. Cassie also wanted to enroll in an algebra class over the summer so Renae made arrangements for her to work ahead. Initially two other students were on the same plan, but they found it too difficult and rejoined the pre-algebra group. Renae explained that Cassie thinks differently than most students and Renae gives her choices whenever possible. Students and their parents decide whether students should enroll in general math or pre-algebra.

The seventh graders used calculators frequently. Both pre-algebra and general math students had ready access to the calculators whenever they felt the need to use them. During an independent work time, one student asked if he could use a calculator. Renae responded with, "If you want to" (Vol. III, p. 11) and the student chose to complete the assignment with the help of his "little black friend" (Vol. III, p. 68) as Renae sometimes called it. In spite of calculator availability and frequency of use, Renae suggested to a seventh-grade general math student, "Does [the book] want you to use the calculator or do it by hand? Some of these [decimals] you may know by memory from fifth grade" (Vol. III, p. 99).

The pre-algebra students spent some time learning about and using various problem-solving strategies. Renae discussed with the class how using these strategies is beneficial not only in solving mathematical problems but also in fulfilling other tasks. Students discovered that learning how to juggle various responsibilities after school while still completing homework and finding time for leisure activities is actually a problem to solve.
Renae wanted the students to understand how beneficial drawing sketches or pictures can be in solving problems. During this discussion she commented, “Tony, you’re a visual learner. A lot of us are visual learners” (Vol. III, p. 22). Renae then went on to illustrate how often she personally makes a sketch when she is faced with finding a solution in her personal life and reiterated the fact that learning various strategies for solving problems is a real life skill.

The class then turned to a problem to solve. They were responsible for setting up a hypothetical tournament. Renae asked students if they wanted this to be a basketball tournament, but one student said he would rather it be a golf tournament. This reminded Renae of a story about her son which she shared with the class. He decided to go outside in the middle of the winter and putt. Unfortunately this activity followed a significant snowfall in the Michiana area and Renae’s son lost his golf ball in an 8-foot snowdrift. Having Renae take a few moments to share a story about her son gave students a window into her personal life and allowed them to become part of the broader landscape of her life.

After Renae’s story, the class returned to working out logistics of the golf tournament. Students worked in groups during this time and Renae moved among them, offering assistance and encouragement. Various groups used different methods to plan the tournament and Renae validated their efforts and used the opportunity to compare the strategies used. As the class moved to other problems, students noted that one of the problems had not given them enough information. Renae asked students to provide the missing information on their own and solve the problem while
commenting, "You guys are marvelous! What problem solvers you’ve become!" (Vol. III, p. 22). Renae’s facetious tone continued as the class moved to grading homework. She asked them if they were ready to grade their homework. A student responded lazily with “I suppose” and Renae remarked, “What energy! What enthusiasm!” (Vol. III, p. 22).

Though Renae often moved through math class at a rapid pace, she took time to acknowledge students’ interests. As part of the seventh- and eighth-grade confirmation program, students have prayer partners from the church. Just before one math class began, a student had received a small gift from her prayer partner and asked Renae if she could take it to her locker. This of course piqued the interest of Renae and other students as well. Renae commented, “Your prayer partner must really be excited about you” (Vol. III, p. 21). Midway through the math class, students brought up the subject of prayer partners again and asked Renae if any of the teachers at the school were students’ prayer partners. Renae merely smiled, remaining noncommittal.

Another time when Renae allowed herself to be diverted from the subject of math, created what I think of as a teachable moment. A student commented about the book, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by C. S. Lewis. Instead of ignoring or brushing over the comment because they were in math class, Renae took time to discuss the book and ended this interlude by saying, “It is important to reread our favorite books, including the Bible, because we’re not the same person as we were the first time we read it” (Vol. III, pp. 21-22).
Grade 8

My classroom observations during eighth-grade algebra sometimes left me feeling like I had experienced a whirlwind. Part of this was the result of encountering content I was unfamiliar with or had not thought about since high school. Another aspect contributing to the whirlwind was the way Renae moved through various discussions and learning experiences in rapid-fire succession.

After learning how to graph lines and work with exponential notation, Renae and her husband prepared several experiments for the eighth graders. Renae began the class by telling students that so far their experiences with graphs have been largely from the textbook, but these graphs do have connections with nature and the world around them. She also warned them that when data are collected from the real world they are not always nice and neat like the data recorded in their textbooks. Since Renae's husband was teaching another class during this time, she explained that she would focus on their mathematical skills and her husband would address the issue of heat transfer.

The supplies for the experiments were lined up at the front of the classroom: hot water, snow, alcohol, and salt. Each group also had a TI-73 calculator and a temperature probe which could be connected to the calculator. Renae said, "You are eighth graders, and I know I will find equipment in the right places. Be responsible" (Vol. III, p. 77). Just prior to allowing students to begin their experiments, Renae said, "If you have difficulty understanding what to do, reread the directions and think about it. If I spoon-feed you, it will take the fun and discovery out of the experiment"
(Vol. III, p. 77).

As students got busy, Renae moved quickly from group to group. At times she encouraged them to use their time wisely lest they be unable to finish. She answered a lot of questions and helped the groups who encountered problems with their calculators or probes. In the midst of giving suggestions and answering questions, Renae found time to share jokes with the students. When a student announced that the water was no longer very hot, Renae calmly asked the student to replace that pot of water with another one on the coffee maker while continuing her conversation with a group who needed assistance. Renae seemed to be everywhere at once, attending to each groups’ needs, offering encouragement, and noting everyone’s progress while remaining composed. As students gathered data and exclaimed “We got a graph,” Renae enthusiastically responded with “That’s what it’s supposed to do!” and moved over to enjoy the group’s success (Vol. III, p. 78).

As the students completed their series of experiments, Renae asked to borrow one group’s calculator. She connected that to her overhead projector so the entire class could see what she was doing. As Renae and the class talked about linear regression, she kept probing. I heard questions such as “What type of graph [do we have]?” and “Which [option] makes sense for us?” (Vol. III, p. 79). Renae showed students how to find the coordinates for their graphs, the equation, and regression. Since both the graph of the equation and the graph of the actual data gathered were visible, Renae asked students to explore reasons for the variation.

Renae closed class by commenting, “We’re using math to understand science” to which a student remarked, “These equations are beginning to
make sense to me now" (Vol. III, p. 80). The eighth graders discovered how to use their mathematical skills to understand and graph temperature changes in objects as they moved toward room temperature.

Another morning the eighth-grade class focused on relative frequency. Renae wanted students to recognize that there is a difference between theoretical and experimental probability and that these two determine relative frequency. She began by writing relative frequency on the board with two lines emanating from the term, then asked students what terms would go on the "legs" (Vol. III, p. 18). She told students "I know you're smart" as they began considering her question (Vol. III, p. 18). One student chose to read an answer from his textbook and Renae responded by telling him that she wants to know from his head what relative frequency is, not from the book.

Students continued struggling to answer her questions so Renae pulled little bags of four dice from a container and began asking questions about the chances of getting a specific number when she rolled the dice. Throughout this quickly moving process, Renae also kept encouraging students to respond to her questions. When one student ventured an answer with the inflection of a question in his voice, Renae's immediate response was, "Don't ask me, tell me. Tell me what you're thinking" (Vol. III, p. 18). The class was eventually able to answer enough of Renae's questions about relative frequency that she wrote theoretical probability and experimental probability at the ends of the two legs connected to relative frequency.

Students then worked with the dice to find the experimental probability of rolling numbers 2-12 using two dice. They were to roll the dice 50 times and record the frequency with which they rolled each number. Up to
this point Renae was all serious business, keeping the class moving rapidly, cajoling the students into thinking and answering her questions, but as students prepared to roll the dice Renae commented, “If you can’t take the noise level, feel free to roll on the floor” and after a slight pause continued, “Not you, the dice!” (Vol. III, p. 19). Only then did she and the students laugh and I caught a glimpse of the nurturing, caring aspect of her personality.

Toward the end of class Renae asked students to review the different types of probability they had discussed during the period and gave them a homework assignment. While students worked on their homework, Renae moved around the room to monitor their progress. Periodically she stopped to joke with individual students. Sometimes I could hear the joke and other times I could not; however, what impressed me was that Renae and her students understood the jokes and laughed together. I felt like I was an outsider observing a close-knit group connected by many bonds.

Relationships

It quickly became obvious to me that Renae loves her students and they love her. Renae commented a number of times to the students in the course of teaching how much she enjoys being with them. The students in turn share their lives with Renae.

Renae makes herself available to her students. When they are changing classes, she is in the hallway because students often feel more comfortable approaching her there than in the classroom. Renae also said,

I don’t grade papers during school very often at all because I want that time to talk to [students]. If they come up to me, there’s a reason. In the mornings I won’t listen to [Bible] memory or do a lot of things between the time they come in and 8:00. They have that 15 minutes. Almost every one of them will come and check in. They won’t say, “I’m here. Do you
know?" but that's really what they're doing. . . . I want them to feel that they can come to me with emotional things, with spiritual things, with academic things because I care about all parts of them. (Vol. III, p. 155)

As I watched Renae with her students, I felt like I was observing a Norman Rockwell family at dinner. During the course of the hour she spent with each math class, Renae noticed students as individuals. I sensed that I was watching a large family with inside jokes, traditions, and methods of communication of which I was not a part. When I shared my observations with Renae, she replied,

I try to keep it that way. . . . They feel safe enough to let me know. . . . quibbly [things]. But if they’re safe enough to tell you that, they’re also going to tell you if they’re hurting or something’s happening at home that you need to step into either [to] help the child or [to] help the parent. . . . You hear a lot of things. [On] rare occasions you hear things about abuse. . . . but more often you hear that mom lost her job or dad can’t do this or he got hurt or he’s going to have surgery. [They are] little things where you can make a phone call or you can drop a note in the mail or you can put them on a prayer list. You can do something to help. (Vol. III, p. 51)

Renae nurtures relationships with both her students and their families. Frequently parents briefly stop in during the school day to see how their child is progressing or they call Renae. Each Friday Renae writes a letter to parents to inform them of school and classroom events, to honor students, and to share parenting tips. Parents are asked to sign and return a portion of the letter the following Monday. Renae includes the question, “How can I be of service to your family?” with the newsletter and it is not unusual for parents to include questions or concerns with the returned portion of the newsletter (Vol. III, p. 126).

Classroom Management

I rarely observed Renae’s students behaving appropriately though I
know they are typical middle schoolers. Her students struggle with many of the same issues middle schoolers struggle with everywhere, and a number of her students are also faced with personal and family challenges. I attribute this apparent lack of discipline problems to several things: Relationships Renae has developed with her students, how busy she keeps her students when they are in the classroom, and Renae's cajoling encouragement laced with humor. Part of Renae's success in managing her classroom stems from her instructional style. She explained, "If you keep the kids interested [in learning activities], discipline just goes out the door" (Vol. III, p. 54). Renae looks for clues from her students to determine when it is time to change to a different activity.

Renae frequently made encouraging and positive comments to her students throughout the classes she taught. I got the impression by her tone of voice that these comments were not meant only to encourage students but to also cajole them into doing what Renae wanted them to do: learn and understand mathematical skills and concepts. On the eve of spring break, Renae's fifth graders were bustling around the room gathering tools they needed for their class. Renae walked around the room encouraging students to keep moving on their tasks saying, "I feel happiest when you are working very hard" (Vol. III, p. 109).

Renae appeared unperturbed by things which are often deemed as disciplinary problems in larger schools. One morning the seventh graders only trickled into her classroom; as she waited for the rest to arrive she remarked, "Maybe the lockers ate them up today" (Vol. III, p. 21). Renae made her point about the importance of being on time, but she tempered her
comments with humor.

I sensed this same attitude when Renae wanted a student to sit down rather than stand up during math class. Renae asked her, "Did someone steal your chair?" to which the student replied, "No." Renae responded with, "Then please use it. I can’t see through you to see [Carrie]" (Vol. III, p. 97).

One day the seventh graders were working in groups and Renae overheard a comment to which she said, "My ears be offended" (Vol. III, p. 100). The student gave a comeback I could not hear, but Renae responded with, "Then don’t say things in the room you don’t want me to hear" (Vol. III, p. 100). This time the student responded jokingly, "You were spying on us" (Vol. III, p. 100).

Though Renae often communicated her expectations in a lighthearted manner, I did observe her being more direct on occasion. In answer to a question Renae had asked the fifth graders, quite a number of students replied simultaneously. Renae said, "I need to see hands, not hear voices. Hands tell me many things" (Vol. III, pp. 109-110). A few minutes later during the same class, students began bickering about who had been able to balance themselves on one foot for 15 seconds. Renae quickly quieted their chatter by saying, "We’re going to take your opinion of whether you did or not" (Vol. III, p. 110). One day I was intently listening to Renae discuss exponents with the eighth graders when I heard her say, "[Ivan], I want you to talk only when it’s really important. It can’t be continually important" (Vol. III, p. 69).

The relationships Renae has with her students allow her to know when to confront students and when to give them the benefit of the doubt. Renae told me about one of her eighth graders, Tony, who is a continuing
challenge. In 1 week Tony did not complete his homework 4 consecutive days. The first 3 days Renae felt he had legitimate reasons for not completing the work, but on the fourth morning Tony told her he failed to complete his homework because he had been watching TV. Renae immediately ushered Tony into the hallway. Tony asked her where they were going so Renae told him they were going to the principal’s office. Tony immediately said, “I’m not going” (Vol. III, p. 162). Renae knew she could not physically coerce Tony into going to the principal’s office so she explained to him that she would really like to see him maintain his A average in math class, but he needs to complete his homework in order to keep an A. Tony then went down to the principal’s office, completed his homework, and returned to Renae’s classroom at noon to rejoin his classmates.

At Renae’s school, chapel garb for males is a dress shirt and pants. Tony chooses to wear a black t-shirt underneath the dress shirt and leaves the shirt hanging open. While he technically is not in violation of chapel dress code, he does appear more sloppy than was intended by the dress code. One day Tony was assigned to be an usher for chapel. Renae pulled him aside and told him that a lot of little kids were going to be looking up to him at chapel that day and asked him if he would be willing to button his shirt. Tony got a bit defensive and asked Renae why she was telling him to button his shirt. Renae reminded him that she did not tell him he had to button the shirt, but she just wanted to remind him that he would be a role model to the younger students. After that statement Renae walked away. Tony ended up fulfilling his ushering duties with a buttoned, tucked in shirt. Renae finished this story by telling me that she knows the only reason Tony buttoned his shirt that day
is because she has established a relationship with him, and he knows that she genuinely cares about him.

**Beliefs**

I would now like to discuss five beliefs which undergird Renae's life, guide her classroom practices, and how she lives her life and makes decisions: Using one's gifts, helping others, students are valuable, learning is lifelong, and students are family.

**Using One's Gifts**

The belief that one is endowed with gifts which are to be used for God and others began early in Renae's life. As a child, her parents taught and modeled this belief for Renae. She developed a firm belief that she was born because God wanted her to be born, she was on earth because God has a plan for her, and God created her with special gifts to use during her time on earth.

Even in grade school Renae began sensing that one of her gifts is to give of her time and energy to help others. She said,

As I went through school, ... I was constantly being asked to help other kids, and I really enjoyed working with other kids. [I] never minded giving up the time. I felt God leading me to do something to help others. That's [my] gift [and I] use it. (Vol. III, p. 143)

Renae teaches her students that they too are born with different gifts and it is their responsibility to use the gifts God has given them. She points out to her students, "Everybody is different. . . . Different is good, but you need to be yourself. You need to find your strengths. You need to be aware of your weaknesses so that you can work through them but not be ashamed of them" (Vol. III, p. 153). Renae wants her students
to . . . [know] that they’re growing, that they’re capable of doing anything that they want to do. . . . [I say], “Do what God’s given [you] the gifts to do. Don’t be afraid to reach out there and take a risk. If you fall that just means you found something else that doesn’t work, but pick yourself up and go again.” (Vol. III, p. 161)

Providing students with an opportunity to use their gifts is important to Renae. The entire school promotes involving students in a variety of service opportunities which may help students find their unique gifts, be these gifts academic, in the arts, physically, or interpersonal. Renae frequently spoke of students’ involvement in the church. Students not only present special seasonal programs, plays, and operettas, but they also provide special music during the regular Sunday morning worship time. Since students frequently work in cooperative groups and in multi-grade settings, giving academic help to each other becomes second nature. The students also give of themselves and their talents by participating in various fund-raising activities sponsored by the school.

Renae provides opportunities for National Honor Society students from a public high school to develop and use their gifts by tutoring her middle school students each Tuesday. Some of Renae’s students are struggling with math while others are preparing for Math Counts, a competitive math program established by the Society of Professional Engineers. Renae explained that the program is also beneficial for the high schoolers because it helps them review for college entrance exams.

Helping Others

When I asked Renae why she chose to become an educator, she said, “I was always interested in helping other people” (Vol. III, p. 44). As a child
Renae helped her siblings with their math homework because she loved math, understood it, and her siblings struggled with the content. During her elementary years she often helped other schoolmates, during her college years she volunteered as a teacher’s aide and worked with mentally handicapped adults, and as an educator she continually pours herself into her students, helping them grow. In one of the weekly newsletters Renae sent to her students’ parents, she wrote, “My prayer remains that the Lord will use me for the glory of His kingdom and for the good of His people” (Vol. III, p. 126). Helping those around her is constantly at the forefront of Renae’s thoughts.

Renae received a county-wide award for excellence in teaching which forced her to start “evaluating really big time what [she] stood for, what [she] is doing. It was more soul searching than [she has] had to ever do” (Vol. III, p. 60). Out of this arose a deep desire to put into practice what she believes is best for her students, so Renae began writing grants to obtain technology and hands-on experiences for her students. Though writing grants takes a lot of Renae’s time, she is constantly motivated by helping her students learn and experience the best she can provide for them.

During the school year in which Renae participated in my study, the school had a grant which allowed their students to test and compare water quality in Lake Michigan, a small local lake, a large local river, and a small pond. They also test air and soil quality and temperature to determine which areas make better places to live. Part of this grant includes planning a presentation summarizing the results of the year-long study. This study allowed Renae and Ken’s middle schoolers to use their math and science skills combined with technology for real life purposes and to give something
meaningful back to the community.

Renae and Ken wrote another grant for the GTE Foundation which provides them with $12,000 worth of hand-held technological equipment to use as they write an integrated science and math curriculum. This includes an opportunity to study at the GTE laboratories for 7 days during the upcoming summer. Not only will Renae and Ken spend time this summer studying at GTE, but they also have the opportunity to spend 14 days with NASA engineers on site, including restricted areas, learning about ways they use science and math in their work. While Renae is honored and ecstatic about these opportunities, she is thrilled because they “will help [her] to be a better teacher, to find out how [she] can reach more kids” (Vol. III, p. 149).

Not only does Renae seek for ways to help her students grow, but she also enjoys promoting growth in her fellow educators. A student nominated Renae for Disney’s American Teacher Awards which “honor creativity in teaching” (Vol. III, p. 140). If Renae becomes one of the honorees, along with grant money will come a professional development opportunity. Renae expressed her excitement about this possibility because it would allow her to learn more to both help her students and also “work with [fellow] faculty [members] on professional development” (Vol. III, p. 149).

Students Are Valuable

Renae explained the lens through which she views her students:

Each child I see is a creation of God. Each child is valuable and loved and special. I don’t want their learning styles to affect my opinion of them. I figure that I need to work with them wherever they are. I think believing that God created these children makes it a lot easier for me to see them as special and unique. (Vol. III, pp. 151-152)
Seeing each of her students as a special creation of God motivates Renae to do all she can to help them grow and become what God has planned for them to become. She strives to provide the best education possible for them so they are “fully prepared to be whatever they want to be” in the future (Vol. III, p. 42). As God’s special creation, Renae believes each of her students has “something different to offer and a different strength” (Vol. III, p. 56). The value Renae attributes to students also motivates her to put effort into developing close relationships with them.

It was readily apparent during my observations in Renae’s classroom that she sees each of her students as a special gift. I also noticed that when Renae spoke of past teaching experiences, ranging from lower elementary to college, she saw those students in the same light. She spoke of her love and concern for the students facing special challenges as single parents in the business college where she taught, and she shared her frustration when working with an administration which treated students as a commodity rather than as valued individuals.

Learning Is Lifelong

Renae shared with me, “I just love learning” (Vol. III, p. 150). I was curious to see if Renae could identify for me the source of this passion. She reflected, “I really don’t know where it comes from. I know that it is modeled in my family. My parents are still [learning] even at retirement age. . . . I just am easily motivated to learn and keep trying new things” (Vol. III, p. 151).

Throughout Renae’s entire life she appears to have had an incredible thirst to learn more and find better ways of accomplishing the tasks before her. As she recounted the various positions, both in and out of education,
Renae frequently spoke of the things she learned through the experience. When she was working as a substitute teacher, she identified things she wanted to take into her own classroom in the future. During her stint in the business world, she learned how math is used in the real world and noted skills her students needed to acquire during their formal education. Some of these things Renae learned by observing and other times she learned by listening to others with different experiences. No matter what situation in which Renae found herself, she learned about people and sought ways to grow as a person and to increase her skills.

When I asked Renae about primary beliefs which have guided her life, she replied,

God's always at work in my life. . . . He's always getting me ready for the next event, the next opportunity, the next crisis, the next child. . . . I figure I need to take advantage of every opportunity I have to learn about people and about teaching because that's where He's put me. (Vol. III, p. 151)

Renae seeks to develop in her students this same commitment to life-long learning. What Renae really seeks to teach her students is not math content, "but the content gives me something to talk about to develop skills that are going to make them a life-long learner" (Vol. III, p. 161).

Students Are Family

The very first day I observed in Renae's classroom, I wrote in my field notes: "Students talk [without raising their hands] to [Renae] and each other in a controlled, respectful way. It's . . . comfortable, relaxed, and eager. [It is] like a family sharing about their day around the dinner table" (Vol. III, p. 9). This sense that Renae and her students operate like a family continued to grow as I spent more time in their school, and as I listened to Renae.
In a brief chat at the close of my second visit, Renae gestured to the classroom and told me that it was her world and her life. Renae spends an incredible amount of time giving to her school family. She and Ken allow themselves to become involved in every aspect of their students' lives. Renae and Ken attend students' sports events, special church functions, and seek to meet students' needs just like biological and adoptive parents do.

Renae continues to take parenting classes because she believes they allow her to better understand and work with her students. She credits the learning she has done in raising her biological children with allowing her to be more effective with her school children. The students share in each others' joys and sorrows just like a family does, and they feel secure in their classroom family.

Though Renae actually used the term family at various times in our conversations, it was not until the final interview that I asked her about the reason for her analogy. She replied,

Family is the basic unit that I can think of that's God's perfect group. He puts you together. . . . Families are put together to bring out the best in each other and that's what we're going to do. . . . We spend a lot of time talking about how we can work with each other. . . . You don't put anybody down and if there's a problem, we talk about it and what [we can] do to work through it. . . . As a family, we work together and we find out that it's good to help each other. We're not always going to be the one who knows everything. Just like in a family, not everybody will be the same. . . . Everybody has some role to make the family operate and there are benefits for everybody when we do. . . . I like to think of them as my family. (Vol. III, pp. 153-155)

Summary

Because Renae sees herself as having been given special gifts by God to use in giving to others who are also created by Him, she has given her life to
serving and helping those around her. She is motivated to become all she can possibly become because she has been given a sacred trust by God to help others dream big and achieve their dreams. At the core of Renae’s being is the belief that God has a plan and purpose for her life which she is to fulfill.

Renae explained,

I feel God’s always at work in my life. He has a purpose for me. He has a plan. He only reveals a little bit at a time. He doesn’t give [me] the whole book at a time. [I] only get one page. [I] can’t deal with it all. I’m never quite sure where He’s leading me, but I know that He’s always getting me ready for the next [step]. (Vol. III, p. 151)
CHAPTER 6

MARK--MY STUDENTS, MY MINISTRY

"Give me my bunny!" [the Boy] said, "You mustn't say that. He isn't a toy. He's REAL!"

When the little Rabbit heard that he was happy, for he knew that what the Skin Horse had said was true at last. The nursery magic had happened to him, and he was a toy no longer. He was Real. The Boy himself had said it.

Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit

Introduction

Mark teaches Grades 7 and 8 Math and Grade 8 Introduction to Algebra at a Christian school. This school has been in existence since the 1950s and is sponsored by a conference which is part of the Mennonite Church. The school first opened as a high school and later a middle school was added. Enrollment in the middle school is currently 70 students and is housed in a building separate from the high school though certain facilities such as the cafeteria, chapel, gym, library, computer lab, and guidance office are shared by both schools. The campus consists of 30 acres of land located at the edge of a city with a population of 25,000. The city is growing rapidly with an influx of minorities, and 10% of the students in Mark’s school represent minorities.

In the mid-1990s, community members expressed interest in adding a middle school. Careful planning by a group of educators, church leaders, and parents resulted in a middle school committed to providing developmentally responsive education for students in Grades 6-8. Mark became aware of this
venture, made the decision to apply, and became one of three full-time teachers in the middle school. It was during Mark’s third year at this school that I had the opportunity to observe his classes and hear his story. The college professor who suggested I contact Mark’s principal about my study also specifically mentioned Mark’s name as an excellent, reflective teacher.

When I first spoke with Mark via telephone about participating in my study, he startled me by his willingness to make time in his already full schedule to tell me his story. He mentioned that he was eager to tell me about his journey from being a traditional classroom teacher to who he is today. This story, he added, would lend understanding to his classroom practices.

As I listened to Mark, watched his interactions with students, and contemplated his relationships with people in general, I was intrigued by the house his life created. At first glance it may appear commonplace, but once inside one becomes aware of how well integrated the furnishings and rooms of his house are. It is difficult to distinguish the purpose of each separate room. The furnishings were and continue to be carefully chosen to reflect this home’s purpose—to provide for the needs of those who enter.

Mark’s Story

Growing Up

Mark grew up in Appalachia and appreciates his background. He recalled,

My dad grew up during the depression. He came from a family of 12 and started working when he was 12 [years old] for 10 cents an hour. . . . My dad is a very caring person. He would do anything to help somebody. I can remember him getting out of bed at 4:00 in the morning because someone called him on their way to the hospital. Their daughter was sick. They were wanting to get there in a hurry and their car broke down. [Dad]
ru sh ed out to help them get back on the road again. I'm sure he didn't charge them anything for that. I appreciate that aspect of him. He didn't have a lot of [money] and I think part of that was ... because of Dad's generous heart and compassion for others. (Vol. IV, pp. 99-100)

In Mark's small, elementary public school, Grades 1-3 had one teacher, Grades 4-6 had another teacher, and the principal taught Grades 7-8. One incident during his first years in school remains deeply etched in his mind:

I think back to my first- second- and third-grade teacher. . . . The memory is very vivid and I can probably tell you where I was sitting in the classroom and where the teacher was when it happened. . . . We had a first and a third grader who were brothers. Their family [life] was not a good situation and social services came to take them out of the home, but they did that at school and took them out of the classroom. Not [even] the teacher or anyone else was told and they came in and took the two boys out of the classroom. The teacher put her head down on her desk. We had three grades and probably seven [students] in each grade. . . . She had her head down for at least 10 minutes. No one said a word. She had her head on her desk and was crying. The rest of us weren't rich either, but we certainly didn't have to come to school the way they came to school. For her to have that kind of caring stuck with me. (Vol. IV, p. 62)

Mark's sixth-grade teacher was a first-year teacher who had just completed her college education. Mark also sees this teacher as having left a lasting legacy:

I got my first C . . . in her class; it was in conduct. . . . She had one of these paddles with a rubber band and a ball on it and I got swatted with that several times because of my misbehavior and . . . mischievousness. But as I look back, I had a different learning approach. . . . The thing I appreciate about her . . . is that in the midst of all this she never gave up on me even though I'm sure I was a . . . problematic student in her classroom. . . . She asked me to go into a county-wide speech competition and I did. [I] presented and that gave me a real boost of confidence in myself. . . . I would not have done that without her encouragement and help. (Vol. IV, p. 94)

The principal/teacher Mark had for Grades 7 and 8 "was a very strict person, a very strict teacher," but Mark knew this teacher cared about students
(Vol. IV, p. 95). Mark was somewhat afraid of him and thinks the teacher sometimes used this to his own advantage; however, Mark credits this teacher for teaching him fairness and consistency. Mark also recalled that this teacher helped students put a basketball hoop in a tree on the playground so they could play basketball.

Mark went to a very small high school where he again had “very caring teachers . . . who reached out and helped [him] with things [he] would never have done without their initiative” (Vol. IV, p. 95). Mark recalls,

I was not that outgoing. I am an introverted person by and large and I came from a family that was not really involved in social settings and events in school and education. Neither of my parents graduated from high school. My father only went to eighth grade . . . College was not even in my thoughts until my junior year in high school. (Vol. IV, p. 95)

During his high school years, Mark’s friends played an important role in shaping his future. As a sophomore he developed close friendships with some seniors who played basketball with him, were in his 4-H Club, and were in the National Honor Society when Mark was inducted. After these friends graduated, they came back from college and encouraged Mark to also enroll in college.

Post-High School

The summer after Mark graduated from high school, some of his friends invited him to attend a Billy Graham Crusade. Mark said, “I accepted Christ on June 13, 1964. The thing I appreciated about Billy Graham is that he sent literature to you and encouraged you to get involved in a local church” (Vol. IV, p. 62). Mark began attending a Methodist church with his friends. Later in his life he became part of the Mennonite church and remains there
today.

With the encouragement of his friends and the guidance counselor, Mark entered college:

Math was always one of my favorite subjects. . . . When I first started college, . . . I was going into accounting because I thought it was something I would enjoy. I actually got some experience with that because I dropped out [of college] after the first year so I could work before going back. I got a job at Good Year Tire and Rubber and I was the budget control coordinator. That gave me good experience working with spreadsheets and numbers. . . . I worked with numbers day in and day out. Sometimes I worked until 3:00 in the morning making sure they balanced down to the penny. . . . It was probably one of the best jobs I ever had salary wise, but I didn’t like working alone. In the meantime I had joined a church and started working with the youth group which I enjoyed very much. My former principal and junior high teacher encouraged me to go to another college and get into teaching. I’d be working with people then. . . . I did go into education at that time and decided I’d go with elementary [certification]. (Vol. IV, pp. 59-60)

Mark transferred to a smaller college and again found teachers who cared about him. One professor in particular exerted extra effort to keep Mark in school:

This one prof I had in American History was one of the best profs I had in college. His reputation as “motor mouth” was basically because he got so excited about the topic. . . . He had the reputation for being a very, very hard prof to get good grades from. I was convinced that I was going to make an A in that class. I studied really hard. Class participation was part of his grading system, and I was not participating in class. . . . I talked with him and he said, “Well, you have a presentation to make.” We had to pick an American character and do a 15 minute report. He said, “If you can speak for 15 minutes and not use a note, it will be good enough for your class participation.” I had Andrew Carnegie’s life memorized from birth to death and in between and I got an A out of that class. The next semester I wasn’t going to go back because I had to work to make money. . . . And he called me and said, “I hope you don’t mind. I talked with your roommate when I didn’t see your name on the roster and wondered why you didn’t come back. [Your roommate] said it was because of finances.” I said, “Yeah, but I’ll be back next fall.” And he said, “I hope you don’t mind, but I also took the initiative to go to the financial aid director. . . . I think there’s a package that might enable you to continue if you want to go down and
look at it.” (Vol. IV, p. 96)

The financial aid package Mark received allowed him to continue as a full-time student. He ended up becoming very involved in campus activities such as being a resident assistant, Student Body President, joined the College Christian Association, belonged to a fraternity, and held offices within the fraternity. He elaborated on his fraternity association:

They had no physical hazing in terms of the pledging program. They had study tables. They had the highest GPA on campus. . . . The Greek organizations certainly don’t fit into who I am, but it was a great experience. (Vol. IV, p. 97)

When Mark graduated from college, he went to his American History professor to tell him that he could in no way repay him for what he had done by helping Mark find a way to stay in college. Mark recalls the professor’s response,

He said, “You don’t owe me a thing. When you get out there, there are going to be a number of other people who need a helping hand and assistance. Do the same for them.” That has always been in the back of my mind. (Vol. IV, p. 97)

Becoming an Educator

For his first teaching job, Mark returned to Appalachia. Mark’s student teaching had been in Grade 1 and he was hoping to find a position in the primary grades. That did not work out, however. Mark explained:

The County Superintendent called and asked if I would consider a possible opening at one of the county schools. Out of respect for the fact that he called me and was interested in my teaching, I said “Yes, I [will] do that.” I had a very good interview and they also gave me a really nice position. . . . I started teaching seventh and eighth grades. (Vol. IV, p. 5)

This position included teaching science, health, physical education, and coaching.
This school consolidated and Mark was uncertain about his future. In the meantime, his alma mater contacted him about joining the college as their Director of Financial Aid. Mark accepted this position, but after a few years he “realized that [he] wanted to continue with and [stay] in teaching” (Vol. IV, p. 5). With the exception of working for 5 years in student development at another college, Mark’s experiences in education have been in the middle grades. These included another position in Appalachia, an administrative position in a school connected with the Mennonite church, a teaching position in Vermont, and now his current assignment.

The changes in Mark’s teaching positions were at times connected to events in the lives of others. These incidents point to the priority Mark places on relationships. Mark’s second teaching stint in Appalachia came about because of his dad’s retirement: “I moved back to . . . help my dad along in that transition in his life and got another job in a small county-like system” (Vol. IV, p. 6). This decision to relocate and provide support for his dad had a significant impact on their relationship. Mark reminisced:

I was in ROTC when I first went to college and enjoyed it. My dad was a [veteran] and very enthusiastic [about the military]. . . . I was encouraged to join the National Guard so I had to go to [Officer Training School]. It would give me military background once I graduated from college and I could be an officer. It was ideal. [However], through my own study and reading of the Scripture I began wondering if I could really take someone else’s life. Should I have that right to end someone’s life that God created? . . . Am I my brother’s keeper? (Vol. IV, p. 62)

Mark eventually concluded that he could not be part of the military because he did not want to take someone else’s life. Having made that decision, Mark needed to follow his convictions:

It was hard for my family. My dad had served in World War II and wanted me to be in the military. I knew it would be hard for him to hear about my
convictions. My mother reinforced that when she said that telling my dad would be like putting a gun to his head. It took a number of years for us to work through that. That was tough. (Vol. IV, p. 63)

Teaching in Appalachia during this important transition for his dad was essential in reestablishing a close relationship with his father. Mark said,

I moved back to be with him when he retired. We had never talked about [my decision to leave the military]. . . . One night [Dad and I] sat down and talked until 4:00 in the morning and he told me things about his time in the service. He’d never talked about it before. (Vol. IV, p. 63)

Currently Mark characterizes his relationship with his father as “better than [he] could have scripted it, better than [he] could have written up” (Vol. IV, p. 99). Mark also observed, “[My dad] is very trusting of me. . . . The relationship is very good and I will miss my dad a lot [when he passes away]” (Vol. IV, p. 100).

Another change in teaching assignment connected with a relationship involved the woman who is now Mark’s wife. Mark met Rochelle through church activities about 10 years before they married each other. By the time they decided to get married, Rochelle had already accepted a position to pastor a church in Vermont. Mark decided to move to Vermont—even though he knew it meant that he would not be teaching for a year—instead of asking Rochelle to go through the entire process of candidating for another position. Both Mark and Rochelle were in their 40s and knew “that might take some adjustment in itself” (Vol. IV, p. 6). Mark also recalls:

I [had never] been a pastor’s husband . . . so I decided that I would just take a year and be with her at conferences and meetings, just to know what she’s doing and support her in that. And I worked as a carpenter. . . . After a year, I decided I would start looking for a teaching position. I discovered that a [teaching job] was not easy to come by because of the number of years [I had taught] along with having my master’s [degree]. (Vol. IV, p. 6)
Mark's search for a job stretched into a second year. Then one Sunday he received a phone call from a principal asking if he would be willing to come for an interview on Monday. By Thursday of that week, Mark had been hired to teach math for Grades 5-8 in a small K-8 school with 125 students. Mark's describes his teaching approach:

I was teaching using a Silver Burdett and Ginn textbook I taught from earlier. I would go through the chapters and have the students do the introduction to different concepts that were in the book and maybe a thing or two on the side, but mostly I used that kind of approach. (Vol. IV, p. 6)

Dramatic Change

One of Mark's colleagues, the Language Arts teacher for Grades 7 and 8, approached Mark about attending a class taught through the Vermont State Department of Education called "Problem Solving and Writing." She had signed up for this week-long class but was unable to attend. Their school had already paid the tuition, and she thought Mark would be interested in the problem-solving aspect of the course because of his interest and expertise in math. Mark agreed to go "just to kind of brush up and do something different" (Vol. IV, p. 7). He describes his experience:

[The class] was being taught by teachers ... that came out of the classroom. ... I walked in and here were all these experiential things. They had manipulatives to work with. [They had posters like] I have [on my walls], listing Problem Solving 1, Problem Solving 2, Problem Solving 3, and Problem Solving 4. Then Communication 1, Communication 2 and 3. [The teacher] started going down through ... Problem Solving 1. [She talked about] looking at approach and reasoning and trying to get the students to understand the strategy they're using, why they're using the strategy, what they do with them, and then having them reason that through and explain it. By Wednesday I looked at [the teacher] and said, "This is just mind boggling. I'm kind of losing it. I'm not sure if I can follow all of it." She said, "Hang in there with it, I think you'll see it. It'll come through to you." (Vol. IV, p. 7)
By the end of the week, Mark felt that "things were coming around a little bit" (Vol. IV, p. 7). The instructor encouraged Mark to call her about questions he may have about this problem-solving approach. Mark did keep in touch with her and another teacher who taught nearby and found this contact invaluable:

It was that kind of networking that proved to be really crucial for me to maintain what seemed to be a really different style of teaching and instructing, but yet it seemed fascinating. . . . We were all collaborating in finding ways that we could do this. The collaboration helped because it wasn’t me just taking time to think of problems. We were piggy backing off of each other. (Vol. IV, p. 7-8)

During the fall after Mark’s summer class, his instructor contacted him about serving on an assessment committee for the State of Vermont. She was also on this committee along with seven or eight other teachers. Their assignment included designing an assessment format to use, defining benchmarks for students completing problem-solving tasks, and developing a rubric to score students’ work.

Through Mark’s work on this committee, he became involved with Opportunity to Perform, sponsored by the Vermont Institute of Science, Math, and Technology. Opportunity to Perform promoted teachers teaching teachers how to use a problem-solving approach in the classroom and how to learn in new ways. Mark became an instructor for Opportunity to Perform and taught three or four institutes over several summers. Eventually these institutes were offered through the math departments of two universities in Vermont which meant that Mark worked with the professors, used their facilities, and had them as a resource. Mark recalls one professor admitting, "We’re going to have to change our instruction at the college level because of
As Mark was leaving Vermont to assume his current responsibilities, he and his committee were putting the final touches on their assessment rubric for scoring students' responses to open-ended mathematics tasks. They also developed a matrix using the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) Standards so both students and teachers could keep a record of standards they are meeting. This matrix is part of a booklet which they also developed as a guide for teachers to use.

It was apparent to me that Mark's professional opportunities in Vermont were a source of great satisfaction. In his voice I heard his delight at being able to network with other educators. He spoke with pride and excitement about the academic results he saw in his middle school students. During this time his comfort level was stretched and a whole new world of possibilities in teaching and learning were opened.

What, I wondered, prompted Mark to leave Vermont and the work he so obviously enjoyed to move to Michiana for his current position? Mark explained:

I was at [a Mennonite school earlier in my career] and I enjoyed being in one of our church schools. . . . Ever since I started this [problem-solving approach in Vermont] I thought, “Wow, this is what our church schools should be doing. Learning in cooperative groups and working together just reinforces our theology.” That was probably one of the incentives in my coming. (Vol. IV, p. 9)

Mark's Classroom

Appearance

The middle school where Mark teaches is housed in a large, dark-brown building which has been remodeled for active, energetic middle
schoolers and their teachers. A large wood-shop area remains on the first floor and is used for both middle and high school woodworking classes. The middle school classrooms are on the second story and are reached by a lengthy climb up creaking, wooden stairs.

The students' tables and chairs claim a significant area in Mark's classroom. Instead of individual student desks, there are 12 tables with two chairs at each table. Around the walls are a teacher's desk, two computers, filing cabinets, shelves and crates for storing materials and students' work, a spot for the overhead projector, and an unusually large sink. Even without students, the room seems full with all of its furnishings.

Hanging on the walls are various items typically considered part of a school room. Mark has white boards which I have never seen totally empty, there is a place for announcements and a school schedule beside one of the two classroom doors, one bulletin board displays a calendar, and the other bulletin board says "Welcome to a Great Year" along with various small inspirational posters. Other posters and banners help brighten up what could be a rather dark, dreary room with its dark-brown paneling and limited window space. Though my visits to Mark's classroom spread over the period of 6 months, with the exception of a few posters, the decor in his classroom remained the same.

Three separate displays of posters and banners in Mark's room give clues as to what kind of teaching and learning occurs in his classroom. Two groups of displays proclaim that Mark teaches mathematics. There is a set of small computer printouts stating ways of tackling problem solving. On the wall above the sink, Mark has four handwritten posters made of poster board.
These posters remind students of Mark’s rubric for problem solving: Approach and Reasoning, Connections, Solution, and Communication. Each topic is also broken down into three or four different levels. A third display is a group of posters entitled Group Procedures: 1) Take responsibility for oneself. 2) Be respectful of one another. 3) Be willing to share and be helpful. 4) Be certain that everyone in the group understands all of the group work. (Underlining on original poster.)

Curriculum and Instruction

The driving force for Mark’s curriculum and instruction stems back to his involvement with the Vermont State Assessment Committee and the Opportunity to Perform program. The teachers he worked with believed that teachers need to help students learn by their own thinking, not with the teachers’ thinking. Mark explained what motivates him:

I do not want to teach [students] the way I was taught. I want to teach them the skills they need to take them into the next century. . . . The fact that they get engaged in the activities excites me. I think that has helped me get more of a passion for what I do. The other thing that motivates me is that I know what they are processing, how they are processing, and what they are coming up with. This is not just beneficial for mathematics, but for other disciplines as well. They are more apt to think about it, draw conclusions, and ask the question “What if?” That is a needed component in our educational process rather than [having teachers] feed students information for them to regurgitate. It empowers them . . . . They are not doing it for a grade; it is a learning experience. (Vol. IV, p. 56)

Though Mark has a textbook for his students to use, it is used only sporadically. He showed me different materials from various states and companies that he either uses or was considering for use. When I asked him what criteria he employs in choosing materials for his classroom, he replied that he relies heavily on the NCTM curriculum standards and refers to the
rubric he helped develop in Vermont.

It is important to Mark that he have his curriculum organized and written down. Mark likened his written curriculum to a human skeleton. Just as humans have the same basic skeleton, each year he follows the same basic outline for his classes. However, just as people look very different on the outside, so the way his curriculum is “really played out [is] going to take different forms and shapes” (Vol. IV, p. 101).

Since Mark teaches both seventh- and eighth-grade math, he is working to ensure that his program fits in with the scope and sequence of both sixth-grade math and with what the high school math teachers are doing. Mark sees the high school math teachers as having been very helpful in providing input for his curriculum.

Mark also looks to his past students when it comes to designing his curriculum. One day he told his students that he met with a group of freshmen to get feedback from them concerning the math they learned in eighth grade. He wanted to know what things they wish he would have stressed more and what things could be stressed less. Mark informed the eighth graders that the freshmen believed one of the most beneficial things for them was writing daily reflections on their homework.

The fact that Mark’s curriculum is challenging quickly became apparent to me. Though I do not consider myself an accomplished mathematician, I did well during my 4 years of high school math, the math I took as an undergraduate, and in my statistics classes as a graduate student. Even so, there were times in Mark’s class that I struggled to understand the concepts his students were learning. Mark was careful to scaffold, or build on students’
prior knowledge, before presenting them with problem-solving tasks. During this entire process, he always asked the students to think and reason their way through the concepts they were learning. A typical response from Mark when a student asked him a question was, "What do you think?" (Vol. IV, p. 19) or "See if it works" (Vol. IV, p. 47).

Asking questions is standard procedure in Mark's classes. One time he asked the class to look for similarities and differences in equations they had graphed, telling them to set their own parameters for making the comparisons. After giving them time to discuss this assignment in their groups, Mark chose a name randomly and asked a group to share their observations. When it became clear that this group had not formed any observations, Mark said, "Let me draw some out of you" (Vol. IV, p. 32) to the entire class. He then proceeded to ask a series of questions about their work: "What did you do to graph this one? What kind of table did you use? How would you know from looking at the equation that they have the same y-intercept? What would make these lines intercept?" (Vol. IV, p. 32).

Not only did Mark use this questioning strategy with the entire class, he also used it when groups or individuals were struggling to understand a concept or task. Mark recognizes that his problem-solving approach to mathematics challenges students, but he said, "I think it is a challenge that is an asset to them. It is helpful and does not distract from their learning process" (Vol. IV, p. 57).

Mark expects his students to help each other out. His classroom is a place where it is safe to think, to question, and to admit that one does not know an answer. When Patti, a student with learning disabilities, struggled to
understand a computational problem, Beth, another member of her group, began breaking the problem down further and further until Patti was able to understand how to solve it. As I watched the process, I was amazed at Beth’s commitment to helping Patti understand the problem and her expertise in breaking the problem into pieces until Patti understood what to do.

Since Mark groups students randomly, the possibility of having students who struggle most with math in one group is always present. When this occurs, Mark explained that he “stays close to that group, gives them more help, and tries to bring them along. In most cases there is always someone in a group who understands it and can help the others along” (Vol. IV, p. 55). Mark added,

I am just amazed as I walk around and listen to some of them talking to students who . . . struggle with learning. I feel good that they are saying, “Do you see this?” “Do you understand this?” “This is what I did.” . . . They are getting different perspectives and that is enriching. (Vol. IV, p. 55)

I was impressed with the vocabulary I heard students using in Mark’s classroom. They used with understanding words and phrases such as analyze, observations, extra input, intercept, parabola, functions, factor, quadratic, exponential, symmetrical, motaire, independent and dependent variables, Fibonacci’s sequence, permutations, and Pascal’s triangle. Once I did hear a few students use the words “thingy” and “curvy” in connection with the slope of the equation they had graphed (Vol. IV, p. 34); however, this was the exception, not the rule.

Using mathematical language is a phrase on Mark’s math rubric so I asked him why this is an important aspect of his math program. He replied,

It is part of students being able to articulate what they are doing and how they are doing it at higher levels of thinking. I want them to use the
appropriate mathematical language to coincide with [their thinking] so they are not talking about some rather sophisticated, complex concepts using very basic language. This is an important part of the NCTM standards. Later on in high school and college, it will be helpful for them to have the language and terminology that goes with the math they are doing. (Vol. IV, p. 58)

I will now describe what occurs in Mark’s classes.

Reflections

Mark begins each math class by asking students to write reflections on their homework. He also shares the agenda for their time together, and there is a mixture of individual and group activities. As students busily work on writing their reflections, Mark walks around the room and quietly speaks with individual students.

After giving students a few minutes to reflect on their homework, Mark asked a student to draw a name from an envelope. As the first student read the name he had drawn, I heard a “Yeah!” and was amazed to observe that the student whose name was called was genuinely eager to read what she had written. After the first student finished reading her reflections, Mark asked the class if someone has written something different they want to share. A number of students explained how their reflections differed, and one student even included an example from his homework.

Correcting Homework

The second activity on Mark’s agenda is to move students into groups to correct homework. To form random groups, Mark asked students to draw three names from the envelope and read them for the class. These three students became group members for the day and in some cases 2 days if their
project lasted more than one class session. After identifying the groups, students arrange themselves around the tables so that, for the most part, they are face-to-face in their groups.

The first thing students did in groups was correct their homework. One student in each group began reading his or her answers. Each individual was responsible for checking the accuracy of his or her answers. If students disagreed over an answer, they discussed the problem in the group. Students who had not understood the homework or missed a number of problems were immediately given explanations by their peers.

During this time I again observed Mark moving around the classroom, talking with various groups, and helping students resolve differences. One student remained at a table working by herself. She explained to me that she had not completed her homework so she needed to work on it while her group members corrected their work.

Mark dealt with the issue of giving credit of homework completed in various ways. Sometimes he asks students to report their grades orally while he recorded them. Other times when he had several different assignments for students to turn in for his review, Mark asked them to record points earned on the paper itself.

General Math

After correcting homework, the class next turned to their learning activities for the day. Though the concepts and experiences varied, I noticed similar threads running through each class Mark planned and taught. Sometimes, when time moved more quickly than problem solving, the class debriefed about work done the previous day. Each day I observed, students
were given some type of open-ended problem to solve utilizing mathematical, reasoning, and communication skills. Sometimes these problems were found in students' textbooks and other times they were on papers Mark passed out in class.

Debriefing is a time of reporting what students accomplished, extending and refining their understanding, making connections, and an opportunity to share one's perspective on the problem-solving process. To get started on debriefing, Mark asked someone to draw a name from his envelope and read his or her explanation of the work completed. Students' perspectives are valued and affirmed.

Students' work during debriefing was sometimes extended. One day Mark asked students to determine ways the trees in their problem could have been planted other than in the stair-step fashion illustrated thus far. In their groups they were to draw a diagram of their ideas including the varying heights of the trees. Students generated and illustrated a wide variety of answers to Mark's question. They spoke eagerly and someone said, "I have a cool idea!" (Vol. IV, p. 19) which was then shared with the class. After sharing a number of ideas, Mark moved on to the next class activity he had planned.

One day when I visited Mark's class, students were asked to determine the approximate ages of living trees. The following excerpts are taken from the textbook, Interactive Mathematics: Activities and Investigations (1995).

[A] method of finding the age of a tree is to measure the circumference of its trunk at a height of 5 feet above the ground. The measure of the circumference in inches is about the same as the number of years in its age. Most trees in temperate regions add an extra inch to their circumference each year. Some trees, like redwoods, firs, and eucalyptuses grow more than this in a year, while yews, limes, and horse chestnuts grow less. Palm trees tend to grow taller without the trunk's growing any fatter.

A passage in The Swiss Family Robinson reads as follows. "I gave Jack
some twine, and, scrambling up one of the curious open-air roots, he succeeded in measuring round the trunk itself, and made it out to be about eighteen yards.” Calculate the approximate age of the tree.

- Find the approximate circumference and diameter of trees that were started in: the year you were born, 1900, 1776, and 1492.
- Write an equation that you could use to determine the approximate age of a tree. Let the independent variable represent the tree’s diameter, given in feet.
- Use your equation to determine the ages of five trees in your neighborhood. Make a chart that includes the type of tree, its circumference of diameter, and its age. (Foster et al., 1995, p. 120)

Since this was an in-class, group assignment, Mark asked students to find the ages of two trees in the school yard instead of having them calculate the ages of trees in their neighborhood. There was snow on the ground at the time of this assignment, and Mark had shoveled paths to these two trees for students to walk on instead of asking them to wade through snow. Another teacher was assisting Mark that day, and she monitored students’ outside work while Mark remained indoors.

Mark constantly circulated among the groups of students as they tackled their assignment, encouraging them to think through the questions. He made comments such as, “Think about the independent and dependent variables to find the formula.” “Good question. Very good question.” “Well, what do you think?” (Vol. IV, p. 19). At one point Mark stopped the entire class because a number of the groups were struggling to recall how to find the circumference of a circle. He reminded them of an activity they had done last year when they measured lids to find the relationship between the circumference and diameter of a circle. The class was then able to recall the formula and move on with their project.

As the period drew to a close, Mark walked around the room to take
stock of students' progress. He murmured comments to various groups, “Good job!” and “Nice job!” (Vol. IV, p. 20). Mark then commented to the entire class that they had not been able to accomplish all he had planned for that period, but he was pleased with the work they had done.

Students were given the following homework assignment:

The largest living thing on Earth is a sequoia tree named the General Sherman, standing 274.9 feet tall, in the Sequoia National Park in California. In 1989, the circumference of the tree was 82.3 feet at 4.5 feet above the ground. A sequoia tree seed weighs only 1/6,000 of an ounce. If a mature sequoia tree weighs 1,300,000,000,000 times as much, how much does the average mature sequoia weigh?

Extension: How old would you predict that the General Sherman is? (Foster et al., 1995, p. 142)

Mark added these directions to students' homework, “Show and explain all your work. What mathematical concepts did you use to get the regular problem and the extension?” (Vol. IV, p. 18).

*Introduction to Algebra*

The majority of my observations in Mark’s classroom occurred during eighth-grade math class; however, when I heard that he teaches Introduction to Algebra using manipulatives, I also wanted to see what this class was like. I was surprised to learn that all eighth graders take this course during the second semester. Mark explained that he uses the same problem-solving approach with algebra as in the regular math classes. Since students are well-acquainted with this approach and with his use of manipulatives, he does not think that algebra should be classified as using higher-level math skills. In his experience with this approach, students with a wide range of academic abilities can understand and use algebraic concepts. He then told me that Patti,
a student with learning disabilities, commented to her mother that she is concerned because she can actually understand algebra.

Many practices and routines in Mark's algebra classes are the same as his general eighth-grade math classes. He began by asking students to reflect on their homework; they checked their homework in groups, addressed challenging problems that students struggled with, and were given algebraic problems to solve.

During parts of two classes, I watched students struggle with and eventually become successful in finding the perimeter of four figures. Each successive figure became more challenging. The first figure Mark put on the overhead looked like this:

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Mark asked students to find the perimeter, which they quickly determined was 20 because there are five squares on each side.

The next figure Mark flipped on the overhead was this one:

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Students were again asked to find the perimeter of the figure. This task was more challenging than the previous one had been, but I saw the same look on students' faces I had seen before. They first looked stumped, then thoughtful as they began talking with group members about what the solution might be. Instead of giving up because they find a task challenging, these students try different ways of answering the question.
After a brief interlude of discussion, one group reported that the perimeter is $2y + 10$ and another group said they got $10 + y + y$. Mark acknowledged that both groups were correct but did not explain why. Students did not appear confused and it appeared to be common knowledge that one group had combined like terms and the other one had not. Mark then asked students to simplify the equation by saying, "Is there another way to write $2y + 10$?" (Vol. IV, p. 77). The groups eventually responded with $2(y + 5)$ in answer to Mark's question.

The third figure Mark put on the overhead was this one:

I found myself wondering what the students knew that I did not which would enable them to find the perimeter. Mark let the students work on this task without offering much assistance. After they appeared unsuccessful, he suggested they use their algebra blocks to figure it out. These manipulatives are called *Algebra Log Gear* and come in white muslin bags with a drawstring top. Students got their blocks and began working again.

One student, without having used the blocks, asked Mark if they had found the perimeter. Mark replied, "Why don't you get one of those [blocks] and show me. It may not help you, but it will help me" (Vol. IV, p. 86). The student started explaining his thinking using the blocks. He had not found the correct answer so Mark kept asking him questions to guide him into figuring out for himself what the answer was. Students eventually found the perimeter, $2y + 12$. During the class discussion of how to find the perimeter,
one group commented, “That is not how we did it” (Vol. IV, p. 86) though they had found the same answer. Mark immediately responded with, “Good!” (Vol. IV, p. 86), asked them to explain their thinking, and validated their efforts.

The fourth and final figure Mark gave to students was this one:

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Some groups were able to quite quickly find the perimeter while others who had not understood clearly how to find the third figure struggled much more. In the end, however, they were successful and Mark gave them a follow-up activity to do in their groups using the algebra blocks.

**Devotions**

Since Mark teaches at a Christian school, I was not surprised to see chapel as part of the school’s master schedule. I would have been more surprised to learn that no part of the day or week was given to some type of religious activity. Mark also has devotions with the seventh and eighth graders during their first class meeting of the day.

During one devotional time, Mark told the class they would be reading from John, chap. 8. He had a large Bible in his hand and asked for student volunteers to read the passage. After a number of students raised their hands, Mark asked another student to draw a name from the envelope they use for random calls during math class. He wanted to see if the name pulled randomly matched any of the students who volunteered to read. Lori’s name was read, and since she was also a volunteer Mark gave her the Bible. Some
of the other students commented on the fact that Lori had just recently read the Scripture passage in class. Mark commented that it is just “the luck of the draw” that she was chosen to read again (Vol. IV, p. 71).

Lori began reading the designated verses, and the other students sat quietly. Some of them were doodling on papers or folders, but most of them just sat in their chairs staring into space or at some object in the room. It was impossible to tell from their behavior whether or not they were listening to the Scripture reading or exactly what was going through their minds.

Mark retrieved the Bible after Lori completed the reading, got out a pair of half-glasses, and picked up a devotional book. He pointed out the phrase “what if” in the Scripture passage and focused on it. He told students that one of the items on their math rubric which he uses to score their projects once had the phrase “what if” in it. Asking “what if,” Mark pointed out, leads to deeper, more thoughtful reflections. Mark then stressed the importance of not only asking “what if” in academic pursuits, but to also ask it in our personal lives: What if I go to the party? What if there is drinking there? What if I follow through on the teachings of Jesus Christ? Mark indicated that this last question was presented to Jesus’ disciples and still confronts people today. He read from the devotional book and challenged students to think carefully about walking like Jesus did in their interactions with others.

The students were then given an opportunity to comment on the Scripture reading and Mark’s comments, and to share prayer requests or praises. No students chose to comment on Mark’s challenge, but many of them used the next 15 minutes to share items for prayer and/or praise. I heard items like prayer for the upcoming middle school play, prayer for a
cousin getting married next month, prayer for a father who is traveling, praise that a student’s soccer team did well over the weekend, praise that a student’s ankle is healed and she no longer needs to use crutches, and prayer for a sister who is blind and wanting to find the right college to attend. Mark recorded each of the students’ items and occasionally asked questions to clarify what was said. He also reminded students to pray about an international conflict in Eastern Europe and the refugees involved, especially the children. Mark then prayed about each of the items students had mentioned to the class. After this interlude of focusing on spiritual issues, the class resumed its usual routine of learning about mathematical concepts.

Mark chooses devotional topics based on what is happening in the classroom and in the world at large. A recent school shooting in the United States prompted Mark to discuss issues with his students related to this tragedy. If the class members are experiencing challenges in getting along with each other, Mark makes this a devotional topic.

Classroom Management

My first impression of Mark led me to assume that he is a mild-mannered person who rarely asserts himself. I wondered about his classroom management style and who actually controls the classroom, he or his students. I also knew that the majority of Mark’s students come from middle-class homes where church attendance and participation are valued, and that many of his students, no matter what school they attended, would never be labeled at-risk students. These students’ parents for the most part are involved in their children’s lives and value education. I felt confident that the type of and degree of discipline problems Mark would face are minimal.
compared to a stereotypical middle school in the United States.

Mark’s success in managing his classroom is built on the relationships he cultivates with his students. Since he teaches in a small middle school, he knows most of the students and their parents well. Some of them attend the same church he does, are involved in a youth group he helps lead, and the majority of them are part of the larger Mennonite community surrounding the school which has family ties, church connections, and spiritual bonds ingrained into the very fabric of the community. Though Mark did not grow up in this community or even in the Mennonite church, he has become an accepted part of it through his personal beliefs and involvement in the school. It is in this context that Mark both meets and develops relationships with his students.

Expected behavior is actively taught at the beginning of each school year. While talking with students, Mark stumbles over his own feet. He ignores it and continues with the discussion. He stumbles again and again, but each time he pretends to ignore his clumsiness and the students follow his lead. Finally, he trips over his own feet yet again, but this time he chooses to laugh about it and the students respond by laughing with him. He then uses this example to drive home to students the difference between laughing at and with others. It is important to him that they learn to take cues from each other and never laugh unless the person who made a faux pas leads the way by laughing at him or herself.

Mark expects his students to learn how to work with others successfully regardless of personal likes and dislikes. At the beginning of the year he and his students spend time talking about the reason most employees
lose their jobs. Students often suggest reasons such as “people are incompetent, they do not like what they are doing, and they miss a lot of work” (Vol. IV, p. 55). Mark, however, tells them that “the number one reason people get pink slips is because of their inability to work with coworkers . . . and [stresses the] need to learn how to work with one another” (Vol. IV, p. 55). Because of this, Mark chooses to use random groups in his classroom. If there are students who are not getting along for whatever reason, Mark tells them, “We are in a job. You have an assignment. You need to put all that stuff behind you and leave it outside the classroom. Make the best of it” (Vol. IV, p. 55).

Another issue related to group work that Mark addresses at the beginning of the school year is the importance of making sure that every student in the group understands what the group is doing. He sets the stage by sending one student out of the room on an errand. While he or she is gone, Mark presents information to the rest of the class. After the student returns from the errand, Mark asks students if everyone understands the information he covered while the student was absent. He stresses that it is essential for everyone to understand this information, and if they do not, they need to let him know. At this point the student sent on the errand will usually raise his or her hand admitting a lack of understanding. Mark then uses this as a springboard to stress the need for all group members to be knowledgeable of what the group is doing. They are responsible for each other.

An essential element in Mark’s classroom management is empowering students. He does this by frequently giving them choices and taking seriously their thoughts and input in his classes. Though it is not always easy for him
to give up control, Mark believes

[students] are co-participants. It is not that I am empowering them by who I am or what I am. It is because of who they are. I model [giving up control]. . . . It is important to give [students] ownership. If students have an understanding that they have a part in [the classroom], it is easier to discipline than if it is seen as something I hand down. (Vol. IV, p. 61)

Mark’s students are real middle schoolers and as such will on occasion challenge him or choose to be less than cooperative. One day in the midst of a challenging algebra lesson, I suddenly heard Mark say, “[Rick] and [Jim], this is where it becomes very critical. Maybe you understand it and can explain it to the rest of us. Can you explain it to us?” (Vol. IV, p. 86). The two boys acknowledged that they did not understand the concept and could not explain it to the class; Mark then moved on as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Mark’s deep respect for his students is returned to him. His students spoke of their respect for him and appreciation of the way he treats them. They pointed out to me that they like him because he is personable; interested in their lives, not just in how they are doing academically; he lives his personal beliefs in the classroom; and he even takes time to do things like going to a recreation center with them outside of school hours.

Dealing With Tragedy

All lives are touched by pain and heartbreak at some time, and Mark’s students are no different. During one of my visits, Mark warned me that he had to tell his students about a death in the school family, a woman whose daughter was in the high school connected to the middle school. Many of the students and faculty knew this woman well. She had been active in the
Mennonite church, having been a pastor and at the time of her death held an office at the conference level.

Mark started by telling the students that this was not an easy announcement for him to make; his voice was quiet, but steady as he spoke. After telling students of the death, a few of them gasped, then silence pervaded the room followed by a few students’ tears. Mark reminded them how they had prayed for the woman and her family that very morning, and though they did not realize it then, it was close to the time she died. He then asked the students if they would like to take some time to pray about the situation. Immediately one student said, “Yes.” The entire class then moved into a circle and joined hands as Mark prayed aloud. After prayer a few of the students were crying and giving each other hugs. I realized that these students not only support each other academically, but also emotionally.

Mark’s Students

In Mark’s classroom, I was much more of a participant observer (Yin, 1994) than in the other classrooms I visited. Mark encouraged me to help in the classroom by answering students’ questions. When I told him of my fear that I would not be able to help students because of my lack of mathematical background, he told me to just ask questions. This allowed me to interact with the students during my visits.

I was surprised with the students’ polite manners. Their seemingly small gestures helped make me feel valued in their school community. This ranged from holding the door open for me when I arrived to excusing themselves when they walked in front of me. I was slightly amused when I accidentally tripped over the legs of one student’s chair. He had been leaning
forward so the legs stuck out farther than I expected. He immediately apologized and told me he thought he had gotten over the habit of leaning forward in his chair.

In a brief conversation I had with some students, they talked about the fact that Mark's classes are challenging. They said Mark "stretches" them and makes them think (Vol. IV, p. 85). One student mentioned that she likes the way he expects them to find answers to their own questions because it makes her feel good when she is able to solve a problem.

Students' objective was not merely to find an answer, but to understand concepts. One day a group of students was trying to simplify this quadratic equation: $2n^2 + 2n + 6$. I recognized immediately that they could factor out the 2, but struggled to communicate it to the students. Though I helped them find the correct answer, they appeared unsettled because they did not understand what happened when we simplified the equation. Later I noticed Mark conversing with this group, using manipulatives. They were attempting to simplify the same equation using algebra blocks, and this is what I saw:

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Mark asked students what each term had in common. The students responded by indicating the two smaller squares. Mark asked them to divide each term by the two squares, using rulers for parentheses, and pencils for the addition sign. Students ended up with this:
As I left the group, I noticed the students were smiling and nodding because they understood how to simplify the equation. Their body language expressed a sense of relief because they understood what happened to the equation when they simplified it.

Beliefs

I struggled to identify specific beliefs emerging in Mark’s professional and personal life because I kept coming back to one belief from which it appeared that all the others stemmed: His commitment to living out his religious beliefs. The more I understood what he identifies as core religious beliefs, the more I realized how integrated these beliefs are to his very being. This personal integration is one of Mark’s uniquenesses and is part of making him Real. I am choosing to discuss Mark’s commitment to living out his faith as one of five separate beliefs though it is foundational to the other beliefs. Other beliefs I want to discuss are valuing others, compassion for others, community, and preparing students for the future.

The other issue I want to address in connection with my efforts to articulate Mark’s beliefs is my own experience in the Mennonite church. I was raised in a Mennonite church, and I am familiar with the tenets of Mennonite theology. Mark personally adopted a Mennonite theology before joining a Mennonite church, and I, though I was taught this theology, have since left the Mennonite church. It has been a number of years since I have been part of a Mennonite church, so while I was familiar with Mark’s
religious beliefs, our journeys and experiences differ greatly. My past experiences, however, provided an understanding of the unique aspects of Mennonite theology to which Mark referred.

Living My Faith

From my first to my last conversation with Mark, he frequently referred to his faith or religious beliefs. As I learned more about the core beliefs which compose his faith, I discovered that Mark does not merely talk about his faith, but he is intentionally and thoughtfully living out his faith. It composes the very core of who he is and is integrated into the fabric of his entire life, including his educational philosophy.

When Mark began going through the change process in Vermont, he remembers thinking, “Wow, this is what our church schools should be doing. . . . It just kind of reinforces our theology. I thought [using this approach in a Mennonite school] would be great” (Vol. IV, p. 9). It was a difficult decision for Mark to leave his position in Vermont; however, his desire to again teach in a Mennonite school pulled him to the Michiana area. Though the move meant loss of prestige as an educator and a lower salary, Mark chose to teach in a school whose religious beliefs mirror his.

I asked Mark how much of his teaching philosophy is influenced by his religious affiliation. Without hesitation he replied,

I think it parallels closely. The Anabaptist, Mennonite understanding of community, shared responsibilities, and valuing everyone equally is very much a part of who I am. The process of problem-solving and using a variety of strategies to approach situations brings together teaching and my faith. This comes out of being a Mennonite. (Vol. IV, pp. 61-62)

The capacity to change and take risks Mark attributes to his faith. When
I asked him if he considers himself a risk taker, Mark replied,

[I am] a cautious risk taker. My dad is not a risk taker. I think that my faith has enabled me to take risks. [I] do some things not knowing how they’re going to turn out, but I know God is with me. I don’t think I would have done that without my faith in God. . . . I would probably have been more like my dad, getting into a routine and going with that. . . . I like when things are predictable. Taking risks is not easy for me. (Vol. IV, p. 100)

Mark sought to live out his faith not only in the classroom, but also in his relationship with me. His repeated encouragement that I become a participant observer in his classroom told me he valued my input in his classroom community. I sensed his efforts to make me, an outsider, feel part of this community of learners through reminding the students of my name and involving me in the class routines. Mark also asked for my input in the organization of his curriculum, which gave me an opportunity to share in his responsibilities.

Valuing Others

Mark’s religious beliefs motivate him to value human beings highly. This is seen in his convictions that he could no longer be part of the military lest he be forced to take someone’s life. When considering the issue of whether or not he could kill someone, Mark recalls thinking, “Am I my brother’s keeper? We’re brothers and sisters in the world” (Vol. IV, p. 62). Mark concluded that he valued his brothers and sisters too much to take their lives and ended his career with the military.

Valuing human beings is lived out in Mark’s classroom by both himself and his students. This begins with Mark; he models it and teaches his students to value each other. The very structure of Mark’s classroom shouts the message that students’ ideas and input are valued. Beginning each math
class with students writing and verbally sharing reflections on their homework demonstrates the importance of individual thoughts and ideas. Mark repeatedly gives students an opportunity to express their own unique ways of solving a given problem.

Mark valued and encouraged students' questions and believed in their abilities to solve difficult problems. He creates a classroom where students feel safe to ask questions when they do not understand concepts. Instead of quickly answering students' questions, Mark asks students to use their skills and reasoning abilities in order to answer their own questions. This was always done in a tone of voice which expressed confidence in students' abilities in finding answers. Mark sought to challenge his students, but along with these challenges came provisions for success.

One of Mark's Group Procedures in his classroom is "Be respectful of one another" (Vol. IV, p. 16). Mark consistently models this for his students by the respect he shows them. One day he interrupted a student who was speaking and immediately apologized for his action. When Mark and his students discussed ways to solve problems, he responded positively when someone had a unique idea and acknowledged times students' methods were new to his thinking.

Part of valuing his students is celebrating their successes, and students have learned to celebrate their own and others' success. Mark asked students to share observations with the class about a series of equations they had graphed. They were first to discuss these observations with group members then share them with the rest of the class. One male student was the spokesperson for his group and stated that all the equations were in the same
quadrant and were positive. His tone of voice and the hesitation with which he spoke gave away the uncertainty he felt about his answer. When Mark commended the group for their insightfulness, the male turned to one of the female group members and they gave each other a high-five.

Compassion for Others

Valuing individuals logically leads to showing compassion for others, and this is another belief Mark holds and lives. One of Mark’s students, Patti, faces both physical and academic challenges. It is Mark’s policy that students who have not completed their homework are responsible to complete it alone while the rest check their work in groups. I noticed Patti working on homework one day while other students were correcting theirs; however, she soon joined her assigned group. When I asked her about it, she explained that Mark told her she could join the group even though they had not yet completed grading the homework. This allowed the group to work with Patti and explain the concepts to her. Though Mark has policies which he follows, he does make exceptions to rules when it is in students’ best interest.

Mark’s gentle way of telling students about the death of another student’s mother impressed me greatly. He recognized that it would be difficult for some of the students to hear this news and gave them time to process the information before they had to leave for their next class. The entire class pulled together and showed compassion to each other through their prayers and by embracing those students who were closest to the family.

Mark’s students share prayer requests with him and their classmates. This can become a lengthy process, but Mark shows his interest and concern about each request by recording them and then actually praying about each
one specifically. Some of the requests appear almost trivial to adults, but Mark responded to each request with the same level of interest.

Community

Modeling and teaching students to value each other and showing compassion are essential to creating a sense of community within the classroom. Mark actively teaches his students the importance of ensuring that all group members, or a small segment of the classroom community, understand what the group is doing. Students have learned this lesson well. I heard them asking each other if they understood what the group was doing and explaining concepts to each other until everyone felt comfortable with the direction in which the group was moving.

Though Mark is the leader in his classroom community, he is not a dictator; he is a fellow traveler. I noticed him constantly giving control to students in his classroom. When I asked him about this practice, he replied,

When I think of education, it is about empowering the students as co-participants. . . . Students need to be stretched; they need to expand their intellectual abilities. It’s through their empowerment, through their processing of ideas and concepts that learning takes place. . . . It’s also a good model for them to know that there isn’t any one individual who has all the answers. As a teacher I don’t know everything, but together we can find what we need to learn. (Vol. IV, p. 61)

Helping others and being willing to be helped is an essential characteristic of Mark’s life and is crucial to creating a community. When Mark looked at his own life, he observed,

I cannot give enough credit to the people that have helped me. As I look back, that’s been my life. I’ve received a lot of help from others. I know people talk about pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps and those kinds of things. Yes, we do need to have some of that, but we also need other people who stand alongside of us. I’ve experienced that. (Vol. IV, 98)
Mark comes alongside his students and helps them grow in a safe community of learners, he stretches them to keep them from becoming stagnant and complacent, but all this is done within the context of a community committed to the success of all its members.

Preparing Students for the Future

A number of times in our conversations, Mark mentioned his goal to adequately prepare students for their future, to be successful wherever life may lead them. Part of this emphasis on students’ future involves not only the academic, intellectual part of students’ lives, but also addresses other aspects of students’ being. Mark keeps one eye on what students need in the future while integrating these skills into their current lives.

One of the motivating factors for Mark’s problem-solving approach to math is wanting “to teach [students] the skills they need to take them into the next century” (Vol. IV, p. 56). He wants his students to feel confident in their reasoning abilities, to be problem solvers, and to be able to work independently or in collaborative settings. It is important to Mark that his students are willing to look to others when they need help and realize the power of synergy. Mark’s entire classroom structure and modus operandi not only support this belief but also develop these skills and attitudes in students’ lives.

Mark’s concern for his students’ spiritual and emotional growth and preparation for the future permeates all he does and is. When making plans for the devotions he has with students, Mark looks at current issues students are dealing with and discusses them. These topics are not just for students’ immediate needs, but are chosen based on what Mark hopes they will become
in the future. He constantly seeks to view students in the future tense:

I always think about where [my students] will be, not where they are. I have to think that that's what [my] sixth-grade teacher thought about me. She probably thought, this is not who I am, where I am, it is where I am going to be. That's how I try to view students. (Vol. IV, p. 98)

Students' current situations, skills, and knowledge are bound together with their future needs in Mark's classroom. Mark's goal of preparing students for the next century does not make him blind to their current needs; he uses the immediate as a means to the end of developing students prepared to face an uncertain future.

Summary

Mark summarized his life for me in our last interview. After creating his life map and explaining various events, he said, "It's those kinds of experiences that have laid it out for me that my life is to be a life of giving. I think that's what has helped me get to where I am" (Vol. IV, p. 97). Mark gives unselfishly and humbly to those around him, his students, his colleagues, his church, and his family.

While giving to others and becoming part of their lives, Mark searches for ways to learn from them. Mark said,

There are things I need to learn. The people who have expertise . . . are the ones I want to learn from. It becomes reciprocal. I am not an island unto myself. Learning and teaching and doing [this] with important help from others only adds to the excellence of it. (Vol. IV, p. 60)

Mark's students are an important part of his learning and growing. Because they are different each year, he is challenged to stretch himself to meet their needs. Mark is constantly seeking ways to better tailor his curriculum and instructional strategies to what his students tell him they
need. He observed, "I think the students are really the ones that initiate some of [my curricular changes] too, the questions they ask, the things they want to do" (Vol. IV, p. 101). These keep Mark from growing stagnant. A lack of growth to Mark signals an indication that retirement is on the horizon, I want to stay in teaching as long as [improvement] can continue. When I begin to feel everything I've done, I'm doing over again and there isn't anything better to do, then it's probably time to retire. (Vol. IV, p. 101)

Mark's ministry to his students grows out of a life that has been ministered to by others. He has grown through the unselfish service of others and his goal is to pass on what he has freely received in hopes that his students will continue the cycle by living a life of ministry by giving to the world around them.
CHAPTER 7

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

By this time his coat had worn . . . thin and threadbare from hugging. . . . He thought of those long sunlit hours in the garden—how happy they were—and a great sadness came over him. . . . Then a strange thing happened. . . .

"I am the nursery magic Fairy," [the visitor] said. "I take care of all the playthings that the children have loved. When they are old and worn out and the children don't need them any more, then I come and turn them into Real."

"Wasn't I Real before?" asked the little Rabbit.

"You were Real to the Boy," the Fairy said, "because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to every one."

Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit

Introduction

As the Rabbit was Real to the Boy who knew him, so the participants in my study are Real to me. Throughout chapters 3-6, I have chronicled their journeys toward becoming Real. The question concerning similarities in their stories remains, and looking for themes is the purpose of this chapter.

I first refer to the theoretical framework introduced in chapter 1. Then I present other themes which emerged outside of the existing framework. I also discuss selected literature and data collected through semi-structured interviews with principals used as key informants in selecting participants.

Cross-Case Analysis Using Theoretical Framework

Build Relationships With Students

Van Hoose and Strahan (1988) write that "security, support, and success
may be the greatest needs faced in the middle grades. . . . [Young adolescents] are fragile, perhaps more fragile than at any other time in their lives” (p. 26). Middle school teachers have a wondrous opportunity as they relate to students in their classes to provide them with security and support. In many middle schools, special time is set aside in the schedule for students to meet in small groups with one advisor. Teachers, however, do not need to wait for designated advisory times to reach out to students and address their emotional needs.

*Turning Points* suggests that “close, trusting relationships with adults . . . create a climate for personal growth” which middle schoolers need during this complex, often confusing time of life (Carnegie Council, 1989, p. 37). Similar sentiments are expressed in *This We Believe* when it calls for “middle level educators [who] are advocates for . . . young adolescents” (NMSA, 1995, p. 13) and who “provide ongoing assistance to help students successfully negotiate early adolescence” (NMSA, 1995, p. 31). Effective middle school teachers foster nurturing relationships with their students.

Relationships with middle schoolers should not be limited to the classroom. Dorman (1995) suggests that positive relationships with students are fostered by informal contact between students and teachers outside the classroom setting and by cooperative learning activities inside the classroom. In a case study of a teacher’s interactions with students, Mills (1997) found that Suzan, a sixth-grade science teacher, created a caring environment in her classroom by teaching students to work together, sharing stories of her personal life, encouraging students to talk about their concerns, attending their sports activities, and eating lunch with them.
The structure and programs of the middle schools where Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark teach vary. Both Debbie and Jack have students assigned to them for separate advisory periods while Renae and Mark have students assigned to their homeroom. In spite of terminology or students especially assigned to them, all four of these teachers spoke of the need and desire to relate to students on a personal level. They saw students as more than young people in need of knowledge; they recognized that students are whole persons and sought to build relationships with them. An important part of their role as teachers included helping students deal with issues outside of the written curriculum. Table 2 notes comments the four teachers participating in my study made about building relationships with students.

Deliver a Student-Centered Curriculum

A student-centered curriculum is “based on the personal needs and interests of students as well as the social needs evolving from their everyday activities” (Hunt et al., 1998, p. 114). This type of curriculum often includes subject area and skills integration and service opportunities, and allows students to have input in the curriculum and make decisions about their learning experiences. For young adolescents, the curriculum must be “personally and socially relevant [and] interesting” (Hunt et al., 1998, p. 116).

Mark’s principal spoke specifically about the curriculum used by effective middle school teachers. He contends that teachers need to know their students well enough to recognize which students need to be pulled into the learning activities and when a change in activities is needed. These teachers know and love their content areas in what he called a “creative sense” (Vol. V, p. 14). He explained this by saying that teachers need to draw
Table 2

Build Relationships With Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debbie</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Renae</th>
<th>Mark</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It's important ... for a teacher to show interest [in kids] beyond the classroom. Vol. I, p. 75</td>
<td>Kids need to know that you are a people person. Vol. II, p. 65</td>
<td>I want them to feel that they can come to me with emotional things, with spiritual things, with academic things because I care about all parts of them. Vol. III, p. 55</td>
<td>My interest in students goes well beyond the academic. Vol. IV, p. 94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[It's important] to reach out and find out what's going on and talk to them. Vol. I, p. 80</td>
<td>I ... sit down and say, &quot;Okay, what is our problem here? Why is this occurring? How can we overcome it?&quot; Vol. II, p. 62</td>
<td>They feel safe enough to let me know ... if they're hurting. Vol. III, p. 51</td>
<td>It's the friendships that I try to emphasize with students. I'm not their buddy, but I'm their friend. Vol. IV, p. 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing [students] love and giving them guidance ... is a really important part of teaching. Vol. I, p. 91</td>
<td>Teaching is a relationship. You have to have something to teach, but you have to build relationships with kids. Vol. II, p. 61</td>
<td>I need to take time to listen to each one. Vol. III, p. 152</td>
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interesting aspects out of their content areas and connect these to middle schoolers in ways that arouse their curiosity. Once students are curious and involved with the content, teachers also need to look for ways to stretch students' understanding and knowledge.

Teachers are encouraged to consult students in determining curriculum (NMSA, 1995). Chock-Eng (1995) utilized interviews, focus groups, observation, and a survey to explore seventh graders' perceptions regarding school and classroom experiences which they believed improved and increased their learning. Participants in this study indicated that learning is enhanced when their own interests and questions are used in curriculum
development. It is important to note that this suggestion comes from young adolescents and not from researchers or middle school educators.

Content studied in the classroom should be relevant to students’ lives (Carnegie Council, 1989). Students need to be involved in “activities that help them understand themselves and the world around them” (NMSA, 1995, p. 21). The academic content should help students “integrate their developing capabilities, interests, and relationships into a sense of who they are” (Dorman, 1995, p. 40). In an observational study, Hendershott (1997) identifies utilizing a curriculum relevant to students’ experiences and interests as a developmentally appropriate strategy of effective middle school teachers. These teachers connected students’ learning experiences to real-world situations which gave meaning to their learning.

The four teachers who participated in my study loved their content areas, but they used the subjects they taught as a means of teaching students other skills necessary to be successful in life. Woven throughout their curriculum were life skills and connections to the real world outside of the classroom. Students were encouraged to make decisions about their learning and investigate their interests. Table 3 displays quotes from the four participants concerning their views of curriculum.

### Practice Student-Centered Instruction

Just as the curriculum for middle schoolers needs to be student-centered, so effective middle school teachers utilize teaching and learning strategies which are student-centered. Young adolescents’ developmental characteristics provide the foundation for choosing instructional strategies, and teachers need to utilize a vast repertoire of teaching and learning
Table 3

Deliver a Student-Centered Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debbie</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Renae</th>
<th>Mark</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It's . . . important to do science, to see things, do labs, talk, and experience [science] . . . if you want the kids to understand the curriculum. Vol. I, p. 36</td>
<td>The purpose is testing [students'] value system, . . . belief system, and how well [they] can support what [they] say. I like that as opposed to [finding] the right answer. Vol. II, p. 107</td>
<td>If they experience it . . ., [they] make the connection. They're going to . . . understand it and be able to apply it somewhere else. Vol. III, p. 38</td>
<td>I want to teach them the skills they need to take them into the next century. Vol. IV, p. 56</td>
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<td>[I want kids] to be excited about learning new things, to see what they are really capable of. [to take] responsibility for their own . . . learning. Vol. I, p. 41</td>
<td>I try to empower kids. Vol. II, p. 33</td>
<td>We wrote the grant for the [integrated] math/science . . . project . . . to compare water quality . . . and environmental influences [to see] whether it's a good or bad place to live. Vol. III, p. 61</td>
<td>These things . . . [are] not real easy kinds of [problems] and are ones that we would have in a real world kind of situation. Vol. IV, pp. 10-11</td>
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<tr>
<td>It's not so much the science I'm teaching as it is . . . getting along well with others, interacting, cooperating, the basic life skills. Vol. I, p. 40</td>
<td>I want them to use [these techniques] on their own. It is not going to work if my classroom is the only time they use them. Vol. II, p. 103</td>
<td>We can have a good time drawing pictures in geometry. There are people who have careers drawing things all day long. Vol. III, p. 113</td>
<td>They need to be stretched, they need to expand their intellectual abilities. [This occurs] through . . . empowerment [and] through . . . processing. Vol. IV, p. 61</td>
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<td>I feel a big responsibility to want kids to love science . . . and want to . . . pursue science. Vol. I, p. 37</td>
<td>I want them to be ready to go out the door and become members of society. Vol. II, p. 115</td>
<td></td>
<td>[Problem solving] is not just beneficial in mathematics, but for other disciplines [and] how they approach situations. Vol. IV, p. 56</td>
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strategies to accommodate students' needs (NMSA, 1995; Smith, 1992). Brunkhorst (1989) found that middle school science students' learning is enhanced when their teachers use a variety of instructional strategies which complement young adolescent development.

In choosing teaching methods, a primary goal is to involve young adolescents in "active, engaged thinking" (Carnegie Council, 1989, p. 43). In order to realize this goal, students need to be actively involved in their learning, participate in hands-on activities, be allowed to make choices, discover new approaches to solving problems, work in small groups, and utilize learning centers (Carnegie Council, 1989; Chock-Eng, 1995; Dorman, 1995; Eccles, 1993; Hendershott, 1997; NMSA, 1995; Spector & Gibson, 1989). These approaches mean that teachers see their role in a different light; they are no longer dispensers of knowledge, but "facilitators through which young people construct knowledge" (Carnegie Council, 1989, p. 43).

In both the Carnegie Council’s Turning Points (1989) and NMSA’s This We Believe (1995), teachers are encouraged to use cooperative learning. When teachers utilize cooperative learning, students have the opportunity to work together for the success of all and develop positive relationships with peers. Cooperative learning promotes cooperation among students rather than the competition often fostered by tracking or homogeneous ability grouping (Carnegie Council, 1989; Dorman, 1995). A study of sixth and seventh graders involved in heterogeneous cooperative groups found that students' regard for each other increased, they enjoyed receiving help from classmates, and they felt they learned more when working in groups (Farivar, 1992).
During the majority of my visits to Debbie's, Jack's, Renae's, and Mark's classrooms, students were busy working in pairs or small groups. Times of whole-class activities were marked by the teachers including all students as much as possible. Students were frequently moving around the room, learning activities were constantly changing, and I observed steady streams of interpersonal dialogue among students concerning the educational topics at hand. I saw students busily engaged in learning, not operating as passive observers. Table 4 is a compilation of the four participants' comments about their instructional beliefs and practices.

Understand and Enjoy Middle Schoolers

Teaching middle schoolers is challenging and requires individuals who find young adolescents enjoyable and who are dedicated to teaching them (Dorman, 1995). According to Moss (1969), one of the problems with the original junior high school movement was that many teachers saw their teaching assignment as temporary, which resulted in a lack of deep commitment to teaching this age group. In 1974, Baldwin discussed the need for specially trained teachers if the middle school movement was to be successful. He envisioned this as an ongoing process, allowing teachers to develop a commitment to meeting the needs of the middle schoolers in their classrooms. Baldwin's perspective is reiterated by John Lounsbury, a respected leader in the middle school movement. He states that success of the middle school movement is "as dependent upon teachers' attitudes and approaches as upon their technical skills and knowledge" (Lounsbury, 1996, p. 3).

This We Believe (NMSA, 1995) cites one of the characteristics of developmentally responsive middle schools as educators committed to young
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<th>Debbie</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Renae</th>
<th>Mark</th>
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<td>I got a lot of information that I shared with the kids and a lot of hands-on science that I was able to bring into the classroom. Vol. I, p. 31</td>
<td>I've always been a [teacher] who likes kids grouped for interaction. Vol. II, p. 35</td>
<td>I had to learn how to give them the freedom to work in a group. Vol. III, p. 55</td>
<td>[Problem-solving] is a needed component in our educational process rather than</td>
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<td>I look at kids and see what they're capable of doing. ... So many kids come to school ... [and] they never once [make] a decision about anything. ... Therefore when I give a writing assignment, there are always four or five choices. Vol. II, p. 34</td>
<td>There are some kids that ... can't read a book and follow the pattern. So why teach that way? Vol. III, p. 37</td>
<td>[having teachers] feed students information for them to regurgitate. Vol. IV, p. 56</td>
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<td>[Students] are co-participants. Vol. IV, p. 61</td>
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<td>I stress the fact that we need to learn how to work with one another. Vol. IV, p. 55</td>
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<td>A problem-solving approach allows students to use their own thinking and learning styles. Vol. IV, p. 11</td>
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adolescents. A survey distributed to members of the NMSA concerning characteristics of middle school teachers indicates that the most effective middle school teachers are committed to working with young adolescents (Steer, 1984). A study utilizing long-term classroom observations, interviews, and informal interactions was conducted by Mills (1997) and a classroom teacher to investigate effective teachers of young adolescents. Mills discovered that teaching the way this teacher taught requires "incredible resources of time, energy, and materials" and "great investment of personal time" (p. 38). She concludes that this great personal commitment implies that middle school teachers enjoy and value teaching at this level.

Not only is commitment to middle schoolers a crucial ingredient, but genuine enthusiasm and a desire to teach these students are also needed. The Turning Points (Carnegie Council, 1989) report laments that many middle school teachers dislike their work or question their ability to adequately teach these students. It then states that the success of middle school education is dependent on teachers who not only understand, but also "find the middle grade school a rewarding place to work" (p. 58). This We Believe calls for educators who make a "conscious choice to work with young adolescents" and enjoy being with them (NMSA, 1995, p. 13).

A longitudinal study, conducted collaboratively by researchers and classroom teachers, sought to determine the characteristics of exemplary middle school teachers. Students were given three evaluation instruments, and their science teachers completed two questionnaires during 2 consecutive years. Results indicate that students' knowledge of science improved when their teachers were enthusiastic about working with middle schoolers.
An enthusiastic attitude prompts teachers to design appropriate learning experiences for middle schoolers.

The middle school years are a time of tremendous growth and change in young adolescents' lives physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, and morally. An understanding and knowledge of these changes and their implications for teaching and learning are crucial for effectively teaching these students. It is also important to remember that while developmental changes are often discussed as separate categories, young adolescents are whole persons and the physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and moral aspects of their being impact each other. Maturation in one category does not necessarily indicate maturation in the other categories (Carnegie Council, 1989); they are “inexorably intertwined” (NMSA, 1995, p. 6).

Growth and change do not occur in a vacuum, but the home, school, and community environments in which young adolescents find themselves also impact their development (Dorman, 1995). Young adolescents' teachers can play a crucial role in helping them understand these changes, deal with their emotional and social implications, and make sense of this bewildering period in their lives (Carnegie Council, 1989; Merenbloom, 1991; Mueller, 1994; NMSA, 1995; Van Hoose & Strahan, 1988).

In the semi-structured interviews I conducted during the first phase of my data collection, the principals made several comments which indicate that effective middle school teachers thoroughly understand their students. In most instances they linked this understanding of middle schoolers with an ability to also relate to the students effectively. They believe teachers need theoretical knowledge of their students, but then they also need to be able to
utilize this in what Elbaz (1983) calls teachers' practical knowledge. This allows teachers to draw from theory and put it into practice.

According to the principals I interviewed, effective middle school teachers genuinely want to teach middle schoolers. These teachers are concerned about and like being with their students. This desire to be with middle schoolers also includes the ability to work with them. Teachers' commitment to students extends outside the school setting into students' extracurricular activities. The entire sphere of students' lives becomes the concern of effective middle school teachers.

Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark as veteran middle school teachers understand their students well and thoroughly enjoy being with them. They are committed to middle schoolers and have chosen to teach at this level because they find it rewarding and challenging. Table 5 records some of their comments concerning their students and decision to teach middle schoolers.

Connect With Families and Community

As their children grow older, many parents find themselves becoming less involved in their education. This is unfortunate since parental involvement is beneficial for students' achievement and positive attitudes toward school (Carnegie Council, 1989; NMSA, 1995). Middle school represents a new stage in their children's lives, and parents may find the schools' structure unfamiliar as well as feel bewildered by the changes their children experience as young adolescents. Effective middle school teachers keep parents informed of students' progress, encourage parental involvement in the classroom, and establish lines of communication with parents.

The larger community contains a wealth of services and resources...
Table 5

**Understand and Enjoy Middle Schoolers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debbie</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Renae</th>
<th>Mark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think by seventh hour when you are 12 years old and you've been going through the day, you are tired... You are kind of overwhelmed... You have a lot of things on your mind. Vol. I, p. 33</td>
<td>My kids know I drive an hour... here and an hour home [everyday]. Why do I do it? I guess I really like what I do. Vol. II, p. 37</td>
<td>If you don't give [middle schoolers] social [time], they'll take it so it's built in. Vol. III, p. 55</td>
<td>If students have an understanding that they have a part in [the classroom], it is easier to discipline than if it is seen as something I hand down. Vol. IV, p. 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[They] are just so full of energy... There are so many things they don't know and yet they're ready to learn... It's just a... fun, energetic,... quirky,.... weird group to work with. Vol. I, p. 28</td>
<td>[Kids] struggle everyday... They struggle... just like I struggle... We are all struggling people. Vol. II, p. 40</td>
<td>I try to engage [them] under three minutes. They've... helped me learn that. Vol. III, p. 55</td>
<td>As a teacher I have feet of clay... I don't know everything, but together we can find what we need to learn. Vol. IV, p. 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have to be so tolerant... They're bouncing off the walls and... can hardly contain themselves. Their little bodies are just everywhere and [their stuff is] all over the floor. Vol. I, p. 28</td>
<td>I spent six months subbing in sixth grade... I absolutely loved it. ... The age group was perfect... I actually found something that I loved. Vol. II, p. 38</td>
<td>I found out there were a lot of kids... that really needed to touch something. Vol. III, p. 159</td>
<td>I think when there's rapport with students, there's mutual respect. Vol. IV, p. 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just really enjoy the age group. Vol. I, p. 28</td>
<td>I think for a lot of these kids, clutter is their middle name. Vol. II, p. 58</td>
<td>Everything I do has the kids as the ultimate focus. Vol. III, p. 150</td>
<td>I always think about where [my students] will be, not of where they are. Vol. IV, p. 98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These kids are only 12 years old and they are going to screw up occasionally. Vol. II, p. 62</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
which middle school teachers can utilize in enriching the educational experience of their students. Middle schoolers benefit from volunteering in the community at organizations such as soup kitchens, senior citizen centers, child care centers, and parks (Carnegie Council, 1989). Establishing partnerships with community businesses and social service organizations allow middle schoolers to broaden their educational experiences to include the real world while also giving of themselves to these organizations (NMSA, 1995).

Six of the eight principals involved in my study mentioned that effective middle school teachers communicate well with the schools' stakeholders. Though both *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council, 1989) and *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1995) mention that middle schools need to work at building strong relationships with parents and communities, I was surprised by the strong emphasis principals placed on this characteristic. They used phrases such as “liked” (Vol. V, p. 35), “well-respected” (Vol. V, p. 29), and have “good rapport” (Vol. V, p. 25) when describing teachers’ relationships with stakeholders.

As I observed and listened to the four participants in my study, I noticed them repeatedly maintaining communication with students' parents and involvement in the communities. When I attempted to create a word table, however, I was unable to find many quotes regarding this theme. Had I not set aside the theoretical framework, I would have asked specific questions regarding parental and community involvement. My conclusions in this section are based strictly on observations and informal conversations instead of direct quotes from the participants.
In both Debbie's and Renae's classrooms, parents were frequent visitors, often unannounced. During my after-school visits with these two teachers, it was not unusual to be interrupted by a parent. While I seldom saw parents during my visits with Jack and Mark, both of them regularly spoke of conversations they had with students' parents. Debbie and Mark spoke of personal relationships they have developed with some of their students' parents. A number of Renae's students attend the church which sponsors her school. This places her in frequent contact with students' families in a social setting. Jack lives an hour's drive from his school community which reduces the amount of social contact he has with students' families.

Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark also involved their students in the community. Debbie regularly turned to butcher shops for donated specimens to use during dissection activities, and the entire sixth grade spent time with different businesses and organizations in the community, volunteering their time and learning about working there. A local Rotary Club sponsors an essay contest which Jack has his students enter each year. Renae works with the Society of Professional Engineers' Math Counts program which some of her students enter yearly and regularly involves her students in service opportunities in the community. A yearly fund raiser for Renae's school allows businesses to donate goods or services to benefit the school. Mark's students had an opportunity to give of themselves to the world community by collecting supplies to make refugee kits for persons displaced by a conflict in Eastern Europe.

Create a Positive Classroom Climate

*This We Believe* describes a positive school climate which is applicable
to any given classroom:

The climate . . . is safe, inviting, and caring; it promotes a sense of community and encourages learning. . . . Relationships are paramount, and all individuals are treated with dignity and respect. Students and adults recognize and accept one another’s differences; curiosity, creativity, and diversity are celebrated. Issues of gender and equity are addressed with sensitivity and fairness. The climate encourages positive risk-taking, initiative, and the building of substantive relationships. (NMSA, 1995, pp. 18-19)

A classroom with a positive climate is one where students feel accepted and where they want to be. Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark all created this type of classroom for their students. Table 6 reflects some of their ideas about their students and classroom.

During my interviews with principals, they addressed the classroom atmosphere created by effective middle school teachers. To my surprise, the most frequently mentioned aspect related to the discipline of students. The principals indicated that effective teachers establish clear, but reasonable and appropriate expectations for middle schoolers and are consistent in holding students accountable for meeting these expectations. It was also important to these principals that middle school teachers have the ability to relate to middle schoolers, establish rapport with them, and are serious about academics and genuinely care about students. One principal indicated that an ability to relate to middle schoolers is more important than teachers’ academic training. One observation made by a principal summarizes the atmosphere established by effective middle school teachers: An “environment that allows students to succeed” (Vol. V, p. 32). That is truly a positive classroom climate.
Table 6

Create a Positive Classroom Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debbie</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Renae</th>
<th>Mark</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The most important gift I can give them is . . . the gift of enjoying school and wanting to be here. Vol. I, p. 41</td>
<td>The kids like to come up and [write their sentences on the board]. It's part of feeling safe in the environment. Vol. II, p. 101</td>
<td>Each child I see is a creation of God. Each child is valuable and loved and special. Vol. III, p. 42</td>
<td>I stress the fact that we need to learn how to work with one another. Vol. IV, p. 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it's so important to have them feel like school is a safe, fun, enjoyable place. Vol. I, p. 40</td>
<td>I . . . like to give kids a second chance. Vol. II, p. 62</td>
<td>Everyone of them has something different to offer and a different strength. Vol. III, p. 56</td>
<td>I think it is important to give [students] ownership. Vol. IV, p. 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I . . . try to give them a lot of positive strokes and . . . build them up. Vol. I, p. 39</td>
<td>Kids can appreciate the fact that they really are responsible for each other regardless of ethnic background, gender differences, or whatever [differences] there may be. Vol. II, p. 34</td>
<td>You're there to protect each other. You're there to support. You are there to bring out the best in each other, and you're able to relax . . . without feeling that you're going to get judged or criticized. Vol. III, p. 153</td>
<td>I'm trying to get them more comfortable with [thinking] it's okay to be different, to try something different. Vol. IV, p. 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you touch a life, it's really important to do it in a positive way. Vol. I, p. 91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The students are really the ones that initiate some of [my curriculum changes by] the questions they ask [and] the things they want to do. Vol. IV, p. 101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Theoretical Framework

Though I was convinced prior to conducting the cross-case analysis for my research study that the four participating teachers were indeed effective middle school teachers, being able to use their own words and visually seeing how their comments and practices coincide with the ideas found in *Turning Points* and *This We Believe* was reassuring. Even though the four teachers often used different words concerning their beliefs, have different personalities, and appear unique on the surface, they hold consistent ideas about middle schoolers and how they should be taught.

Other Themes From the Cross-Case Analysis

Not only do I see my study supporting ideas presented in *Turning Points* and *This We Believe*, but I discovered other themes as I immersed myself in the data I had collected. These three themes, receptivity to growth, treasured relationships, and living intertwined professional and personal lives, reflect the participants' views toward life. Though I am choosing to break them down into three characteristics, they are interwoven and impact each other.

Receptive to Growth

In an article describing teachers who will be successful in the 21st century, Malone and Tulbert (1996) discuss "centered teachers" (p. 46). Among the qualities of centered teachers is the ability to change as students, schools, and the teaching profession change. "They participate in continuous self-improvement, are willing to break out of the comfort zone in order to make needed changes" (Malone & Tulbert, 1996, p. 46). Centered teachers’
commitment to life-long learning allows them to renew themselves, which
in turn allows them to perform more effectively in both professional and
personal arenas.

Similar thoughts are expressed by Senge (1990) when he uses the
phrase *personal mastery* to describe a characteristic achieved through “the
discipline of personal growth and learning” which includes every area of life,
both personal and professional (p. 141). Senge (1990) goes on to describe
individuals with high personal mastery: “They feel connected to others and
. Personal mastery is not something you possess. It is a process. It is a lifelong
discipline” (p. 142). These people are aware of areas in which growth is
needed.

The concepts of centered teachers and personal mastery were evident
in all four of the teachers who participated in my study. Instead of using
either of these two phrases, I prefer calling this characteristic receptivity to
growth.

I see both similarities and differences as I look at Table 7, which records
participants’ comments about learning and change that have occurred in the
course of their careers. Debbie and Renae indicate that they learned how to
teach middle schoolers effectively from their students; Debbie and Jack talk
about once having been curriculum- rather than student-centered and Mark’s
story of change centers around a workshop he attended and the various
committee appointments he held while teaching in Vermont.

All four participants spoke of the importance of relationships as part of
their growth process. Debbie spoke of the “fellow mentoring type of teachers
Table 7

Receptive to Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debbie</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Renae</th>
<th>Mark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’ve learned a lot about kids over the years. . . . If kids like you, they respect you and . . . want to please you. . . . I didn’t really care if they liked me or [not]. I was trying to teach . . . the curriculum and wasn’t extremely compassionate. Vol. I, p. 38</td>
<td>I guess the biggest difference . . . would not be the physical, it would be the attitudinal. I think I was more curriculum driven. . . . I knew kids were important, but there was a curriculum they just had to have or they would die because nobody else would give it to them. . . . I was the teacher, I was in charge, and I pretty much charged around the room doing that! Vol. II, p. 33</td>
<td>I was trying to use a lower grade teaching strategy which didn’t work. Vol. III, p. 53</td>
<td>I was teaching [math] using a textbook . . . I . . . would go through the chapters and have the students do . . . different concepts. Vol. IV, p. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[As] opportunities present themselves, I’m generally one to say, “Oh, I’ll try that and see how it goes.” . . . I love to try new things. Vol. I, p. 31</td>
<td></td>
<td>They’ve just kind of helped me learn that as I’ve gone through. They teach you if you’re willing to listen. They’re great teachers. . . . I still learn from them everyday. There’s always something to be discovered from them. Vol. III, pp. 55-56</td>
<td>I didn’t mind [going to the workshop] to brush up. . . . [By] Wednesday I . . . said, “This is just mind boggling. I’m just kind of losing it. I’m not sure if I can follow all of it.” . . . By Friday things were coming around a little bit Vol. IV, p. 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

. . . [she] could go and talk to and know that [she] could say the truth” (Vol. I, p. 84). These teachers were ones whose advice Debbie valued and trusted.

Jack’s networking came from both inside and outside of his district. An early principal and a fellow teacher taught him to be more caring about his students and to view them through a gray lens. Jack also associated with educators at the state and national levels and these “professional opportunities outside the district allowed [him] to come back and do [his] job better” (Vol. II, p. 38).

Renae had been out of the K-12 classroom for a number of years when
she began teaching middle school. She "needed a crash course" on manipulatives and decided that she was "going to figure it out" (Vol. III, p. 36). One of the things she did while trying to change her approach to teaching was contact the ISD in her county and take classes. This allowed her to network and learn from others. The ISD continues to support Renae's efforts in the classroom, and she has in turn been sharing her expertise with others.

During the week Mark was involved in the workshop which totally changed his approach to teaching math, he also began establishing relationships with other educators. This networking was "crucial for [him] to maintain . . . a very different way of teaching" (Vol. IV, p. 7). Mark not only found the support necessary, but this group of teachers was collaborating in finding open-ended tasks to assign their students. They "were piggy backing off of each other" which made it easier for everyone to implement a problem-solving approach in their math classes (Vol. IV, p. 8). These four teachers' stories underscore the value of support from peers when changing one's approach to teaching.

Treasured Relationships

Gardner (1990), a leader in business and political realms, speaks about the need for those in leadership to have "a circle of associates who are . . . supportive" (p. 135). Teachers, as leaders in the classroom, also need supportive relationships which help them combat the stresses and emotional drain of their tasks.

Using open-ended questionnaires, Pajak and Blase (1989) collected data from 200 teachers concerning the impact of their personal lives on their profession. They discovered that relationships outside of school are an
important source of support in fulfilling professional duties. When teachers spend time with family and friends, "they are more likely to return to their classrooms . . . mentally and emotionally refreshed" (Pajak & Blase, 1989, p. 307). Malone and Tulbert (1996) also emphasize that an aspect of self-renewal for teachers is developing human relationships which provide a support network and allow teachers to balance their professional and personal lives.

As I considered the lives of the four participants in my study, I observed that they all live rich lives. Part of this richness stems from the joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment they find in their careers as educators, but that constitutes only a part of their lives. Gradually I came to realize that their lives are filled with, as Jack said, "things that make richer fabric rather than more fabric" (Vol. II, p. 135). Relationships with family and friends have created a rich tapestry in these four teachers' lives which spills over into their classrooms. This rich tapestry allows these teachers to draw from their emotional wells when relating to students without depleting the supply because their wells are regularly replenished by other meaningful relationships in their lives. Table 8 displays comments made by the four participants concerning significant relationships in their lives.

Live Intertwined Professional and Personal Lives

Teaching does not occur within a vacuum, but life experiences shape who teachers are currently as well as impact their future experiences (Beattie, 1997). As I listened to the four participants in my study tell their stories and talk about their lives, I was constantly amazed at how they wove together their professional and personal lives. Each teacher specifically associated events or relationships in their personal lives with their beliefs and practices
Table 8

**Treasured Relationships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debbie</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Renae</th>
<th>Mark</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[My parents and I] are close. We're best friends. I see them all the time, almost every weekend. . . . It's nice to be able to be so close. Vol. I, p. 41-42</td>
<td>It was a decision that I made that . . . [my parents] were going to have a good end of their lives. . . . My partner, [Steve], says, &quot;You always said you didn't have a close relationship with your parents. I totally disagree.&quot; There are times when I . . . think he's probably right. Vol. II, p. 66-67</td>
<td>[My parents and I] continue to stay very close and in contact . . . every couple of days. . . . It's just really nice to touch base with them. Vol. III, p. 143</td>
<td>I [had never] been a pastor's husband . . . so I decided that I would just take a year and be with [Rochelle] . . . just to know what she's doing and support her. Vol. IV, p. 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Jim and I] share almost everything. . . . We spend a lot of time together. Vol. I, p. 44</td>
<td>No matter how tired I am on Wednesday evenings, [Steve and I] always have dinner with friends. . . . We so much enjoy making richer fabric with other people. Vol. II, p. 135</td>
<td>Both my family and Ken's . . . have a lot of things in common which makes it easy to bond and get together. Vol. III, p. 143</td>
<td>I am not an island unto myself. Vol. IV, p. 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting married to . . . Jim . . . was like finding my best friend in life. [I] feel very fortunate to know that no matter what happens in my life, Jim will be there for me. Vol. I, p. 90</td>
<td>When [my kids] come [home] and it's time for them to have a meal, I sit with them and converse with them. They talk to me the whole time. Vol. III, p. 155</td>
<td>When [my kids] come [home] and it's time for them to have a meal, I sit with them and converse with them. They talk to me the whole time. Vol. III, p. 155</td>
<td>[Mine has] been a life where I have been helped . . . There . . . need to be other people who stand alongside of you. Vol. IV, p. 98</td>
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as a teacher. Table 9 records comments made by the four teachers.

In discussing teacher development, Goodson (1992) suggests seven reasons for looking at the entirety of teachers' lives: (1) Teachers consistently talk about their own lives in the process of explaining their practices and policies; (2) life experiences and background shape individuals, and when teachers invest themselves in teaching, their past experiences and background impact their practices; (3) teachers' lifestyle in and out of school impact their views of teaching and their practices; (4) teachers' life cycles and where they are in the cycle inform the decisions they make regarding their practices; (5) teachers' career stages impact decisions they make about teaching; (6) teachers are molded by critical incidents in their lives; and (7) teachers' lives intersect with their period in history and society. It would have been impossible to focus only on what I saw in the classrooms of the four participants in my study or to listen only to their comments about their educational beliefs. These teachers naturally drew from their lives outside of the classroom to explain reasons for their practices in the classroom.

As I completed chapters 3-6, I asked each of the four teachers to read his or her chapter, using a brief questionnaire to provide me with feedback concerning what I had written. We then had a semi-structured interview to discuss their thoughts. During the interviews I had with Mark and Jack, they both expressed surprise at how interwoven their professional and personal lives are. Seeing their written stories allowed them to conclude that their professional lives are intricately connected to their personal lives and that each informs the other.

Hansen (1995) spent more than 2 years with four middle and high
Table 9

Live Intertwined Professional and Personal Lives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debbie</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Renae</th>
<th>Mark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think one thing that makes me a good teacher... is that I have a good marriage... I can come to work and I don't have any kind of personal issues... that would cause me unhappiness. Vol. I, p. 44</td>
<td>[Being in the military] opened the world. Vol. II, p. 39</td>
<td>My oldest sister was not strong in math and science. ... I would always ... help her with her math. ... I would help [my brother] too. ... I just always enjoyed helping my brother and sister [learn]. Vol. III, pp. 44-45</td>
<td>[I am] a cautious risk taker. ... My faith has enabled me to take risks. [I] do some things not knowing how they’re going to turn out, but I know God is with me. Vol. IV, p. 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably a lot of what motivates me is that I’m happy with myself. I’m happy with where I’m at in life. I’m happy with my marriage. I’m happy with my job so I have extra energy... to spread around. ... I also really appreciate life a lot because I know what it’s like to deal with illness because my husband’s diabetic. Vol. I, p. 79</td>
<td>[The military] may be what made me a liberal rather than a conservative. I really started to look at both sides of the coin. I can’t see black and white. Vol. II, p. 40</td>
<td>[Divorce] put me into therapy. ... My personality basically changed. ... It was a wretched experience but in the long run it worked out real well. Vol. II, p. 123</td>
<td>When I graduated from college, I went to this prof and said there is no way I could ever repay what he did. He said, “You don’t owe me a thing. When you get out [in the world], there are going to be a number of other people who need a helping hand and assistance. Do the same for them.” That has always been in the back of my mind. Vol. IV, p. 97</td>
</tr>
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</table>
school teachers observing classes, and participating in formal and informal meetings and one-on-one conversations while trying to understand teachers' beliefs about teaching and conceptions of themselves as teachers. He concludes that "person and practice are symbiotic" (p. 126). Aspects of each of these four teachers' childhood experiences in schools remain with them and continue to impact their lives. In relating what has shaped these teachers, Hansen says that the "teachers have been influenced by their upbringing, by their education, and by their present working conditions" (p. 129). Individuals and groups of people which influence teachers include their families, students, administrators, and colleagues.

What Hansen discovered in the lives of the teachers he followed, I also discovered in Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark. Without hesitation, my participants identified childhood experiences in and out of school which have shaped and continue to influence who they are. They all spoke of the impact of their families in molding their current thoughts and beliefs, and all four of them discussed colleagues during their teaching careers who have left and indelible mark on their lives. As Schmidt (1997) notes, the relationship between teachers' personal and professional lives and environments is "reciprocal and transactional" (p. 2).

Connelly and Clandinin (1995b) use the metaphor of a landscape in describing teachers' professional lives. They believe that the professional landscape is in "intimate interaction with what one might call landscapes of the personal, outside the professional setting" (p. 27). Teachers' professional landscapes take on a unique, particular shape as they draw from their own individual biographies, on the particular histories of the professional landscape in which they find themselves, on how they are positioned on the landscape, and on the form of everyday school life on the landscape.
Conversely, teachers' professional life on the landscape influences their personal life off the landscape. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995b, p. 27)

While using a landscape as a metaphor for teachers' lives strikes a cord in my own mind and heart, I prefer the metaphor of a house. To me a house depicts an object that is a complete unit with distinct outside boundaries. Others are free to pass by a house, to make assumptions about what occurs inside the house, to speculate concerning its decorations; however, one needs to enter and explore its rooms and furnishings to appreciate its real value. Inside the houses built by teachers' lives are separate rooms designating their personal and professional lives, but one finds easy access between the rooms. From the entryway, one can view bits and pieces of the other rooms. A general theme is prevalent in the decor of the entire house and the treasures in one room lead to and spill out into other rooms of the house. Though the appearance of individual teachers' houses varies and some appear more welcoming initially, once one enters the houses created by effective middle school teachers' lives, one finds safety, love, and acceptance.

Summary of Themes

These aspects of the four participants' lives remind me that they are whole persons, just like the young adolescents they teach. They live lives that allow them to be whole and complete. What affects them either mentally, emotionally, morally, or physically also touches the other areas. When they grow mentally, they are also touched emotionally and morally. When they feel renewed emotionally, they are also able to be more creative and give of themselves to their students (Covey, 1989).
The participants in my study fit well within the profile of effective middle school teachers as found in the existing middle school literature. Because of the last three themes I observed and found reflected in the literature of effective leaders, this study also contributes a new lens through which to view and consider effective middle school teachers. These four middle school teachers are not only effective middle school teachers, but they are also effective in their personal lives.

Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark are Real because they love and are loved. They recognize that becoming Real is sometimes a painful process, yet they open their arms to embrace the lessons of life as they continue the journey toward being Real. They learn from the others they encounter and do not rest on their laurels and accomplishments. As the participants allow their lives to touch those around them, others are invited to also become Real by embracing the process. The journey toward becoming Real leads to more joy, adventure, and fulfillment than one could ever imagine.
CHAPTER 8

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"I've brought you a new playfellow," the Fairy said. "You must be very kind to him and teach him all he needs to know in Rabbitland. . . ."

"Run and play, little Rabbit!" she said.

And he found that he actually had hind legs! . . . He gave one leap and the joy . . . was so great that he went springing about the turf . . . jumping sideways and whirling round as the [other rabbits] did.

He was a Real Rabbit at last.  

Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to understand and describe what has shaped and continues to influence effective middle school teachers to choose classroom practices that are responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents. I identified three questions to guide my research and will revisit these questions to summarize the study.

Though my study was limited to four participants, and I am asking the readers to determine whether it is applicable to their situation and lives (Eisner, 1998), I have some recommendations for middle school teachers, teacher educators, and suggestions for further study.

Summary Based on Original Research Questions

As I conducted the cross-case analysis for my study, I realized that I had
indeed answered the original questions posed in chapter 1. I would now like to restate each question followed by conclusions from my study.

Question 1

Question 1 asked: What life experiences have molded educators into effective middle school teachers?

The stories of the four effective middle school teachers shared in chapters 3-6 identify a number of experiences, both personal and professional, which the teachers observed as having shaped their lives. All of them referred to their childhood, both at home and at school; these are hardly new themes from the lives of those who have chosen to become teachers (Lortie, 1975). Debbie and Renae spoke more about their home lives as children than either Mark or Jack did; however, all four of the teachers spoke of the close relationships they have with their parents as adults. Debbie and Jack live in the same general area as their parents and have frequent contact with them; Mark and Renae maintain close, long-distance relationships with their parents.

All four participants spoke of adults who touched their lives positively and drew them toward teaching as a career. Debbie called her parents her “two main teachers” (Vol. I, p. 41) and mentioned several science teachers who “were just really dynamic and . . . fun and easy-going” (Vol. I, p. 29). Because Jack “felt that [he] never fit in” during his elementary school years (Vol. II, p. 127), the teachers he encountered in middle school who recognized his abilities and made his school experiences more positive had a tremendous impact on his success as an adult. Renae, similar to Debbie, credits her father for her passion for math and learning. Much like Jack, Mark spoke of the
impact of his formal education and teachers who touched his life and showed him how to be a compassionate teacher. This could be attributed to the fact that Mark “came from a family that was not really involved in social settings and events in school and education” (Vol. IV, p. 95).

I was fascinated to discover that none of these teachers’ parents are college graduates. For three of the four participants, however, their parents made it very clear that going to college was to be part of their children’s experiences. This message was clear to Debbie, Jack, and Renae at a young age. Mark’s experience differed, but there were other significant adults in his life who guided him into higher education.

Each of these four teachers spoke of the way they have been influenced by “the practice of teaching itself” (Hansen, 1995, p. 129). Debbie grew from contact with “fellow mentoring-type . . . teachers” (Vol. I, p. 84) and “learned a lot about kids over the years” (Vol. I, p. 38). In Jack’s story, his first principal suggested he take a look at himself as a person. He also grew professionally through his contact with educators outside of his district. When Renae came face-to-face with a classroom of seventh graders, she realized that the elementary teaching methods she had been using would not work with these students. She chose to stretch herself and learn how to teach middle schoolers effectively. Mark too continues to learn from his students. He looks to his students to keep his curriculum student-centered and openly seeks their input when planning learning activities. Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark have learned important lessons throughout their careers which impact the choices they make today.

I find it noteworthy that though each teacher values his or her
experiences in higher education, little time was spent discussing what was learned through the curriculum. The stories I heard about college centered largely around the relationships with peers, interactions with K-12 students, and the influence of specific professors who touched their lives. This causes me to conclude that much of what has shaped these effective middle school teachers to teach in developmentally responsive ways stems from life events and reflection upon these events rather than concepts and principles learned in the college classroom. These teachers became Real in the classroom of life.

Question 2

Question 2 asked: What curriculum and instruction are utilized by effective middle school teachers?

As I expected, the curriculum and instruction used by the teachers in my study is student- rather than curriculum-centered. What I find surprising and reassuring, however, is how well each of the teachers’ classroom practices fit into the theoretical framework drawn from Turning Points and This We Believe. Displaying evidence of how well these four teachers matched the ideal qualities was relatively easy though I specifically chose not to revisit the theoretical framework during data collection and analysis and while writing chapters 3-6.

Question 3

Question 3 asked: What beliefs guide the practices of effective middle school teachers?

As I mentioned earlier, I did not rely on the theoretical framework during my data collection and writing of chapters 3-6; consequently, I
identified different beliefs for each of the four participants in the study. My goal in describing Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark’s beliefs was to be as true to them and their ideas as possible, not to tailor their beliefs to fit my theoretical framework. I was successful in identifying beliefs which guide them as individuals based on the feedback given to me during member checks (Merriam, 1988). Each one of them indicated that I had indeed captured their lives and put their stories into print. I also requested and received input from the significant others in these teachers’ lives. Here again what I perceived to be the participants’ stories and beliefs was confirmed by those who know them best. In the process of striving for the goal of describing the four participants, I was also able to reach the goal of identifying beliefs which all of these teachers hold in common. Most of their beliefs have already been identified in the theoretical framework; however, I was also able to add a few additional ones as displayed in Table 10.

Recommendations

For Middle School Teachers

Having identified characteristics and beliefs of effective middle school teachers, the question concerning how to develop these characteristics and beliefs in other teachers remains. When one speaks of developing certain characteristics, one automatically addresses a continuing receptivity to growth. What supports this characteristic?

While the four teachers in my study had a keen sense that they were impacting their students positively, they also spoke of the need they had to continue learning how to improve the teaching and learning which occurred in their classrooms. Mark’s comment, “I want to stay in teaching as long as
Table 10

Beliefs of Effective Middle School Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turning Points</th>
<th>This We Believe</th>
<th>This Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create small communities for learning</td>
<td>An adult advocate</td>
<td>Build relationships with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexible organizational structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach a core academic program</td>
<td>Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory</td>
<td>Deliver a student-centered curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure success for all students</td>
<td>High expectations for all</td>
<td>Practice student-centered instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Varied teaching and learning approaches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment and evaluation that promote learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents</td>
<td>Educators committed to young adolescents</td>
<td>Understand and enjoy middle schoolers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve academic performance through fostering health and fitness</td>
<td>Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehensive guidance and support services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10—Continued.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turning Points</th>
<th>This We Believe</th>
<th>This Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reengage families in the education of young adolescents</td>
<td>Family and community partnerships</td>
<td>Connect with families and communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect schools (classrooms) with communities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A shared vision which includes all school and community stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A positive school (classroom) climate</td>
<td>Create a positive classroom climate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive to change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treasured relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live intertwined personal and professional lives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Items in italics can be implemented by individual classroom teachers.
[my growth] continues. When I begin to feel everything I’ve done I’m doing over again and there isn’t anything better to do, then it’s probably time to retire” (Vol. IV, p. 101) are sentiments echoed by the other participants. The desire for continuing growth “to make the classroom more alive” (Vol. II, p. 122) is fueled by networking with other educators and only possible when one has an adequate emotional well from which to draw. Becoming Real is a process built on one’s receptivity to growth.

Collegial Relationships

Debbie, Jack, Renae, and Mark all emphasized the value of networking in their lives. One aspect of each teaching assignment Debbie has had which she values highly is personal relationships with other teachers. She commented, “Somebody that you can vent to is really important in the teaching profession . . . even venting about things that are going on in your personal life” (Vol. I, p. 84). One of the things Debbie lamented was the loss of these relationships each time she moved to another district. During our last interview she expressed disappointment that she had not been able to develop deeper relationships with her new colleagues during this school year.

Jack was driven to reach outside of his district for professional nourishment and he sees himself as the product of associations with many other people:

I’m proud of the fact that I have been fortunate to work with so many wonderful teachers and principals and that I have been able to hear leaders in research or practice and share their knowledge, share their enthusiasm. Really, what I am is a collection of 27 years of being in teaching. . . . I really believe . . . you [do] not become the person you are unless you venture beyond your four walls. (Vol. II, pp. 129-130)

Networking with others and learning from them has been crucial in shaping
Jack into the person and professional he is today.

The opportunity to team teach with her husband, Ken, has been an asset to Renae. Their strengths complement each other and allow them to create an outstanding math and science program in their small school. Throughout the years in whatever setting Renae found herself, she was constantly looking for things she could learn through her relationships with others. When she assumed her current position, she recognized the need for changing her teaching style and turned to the ISD where she found other educators who supported her and helped her grow.

I quickly recognized how important networking and collegial relationships are to Mark. Finding support and being able to brainstorm with other educators while adopting a problem-solving approach to teaching and learning was essential in becoming comfortable with this dramatic change. When Mark came to his current school, he was delighted to have two math teachers in the high school with whom he could work in sharpening his teaching skills and learning more about mathematical concepts. Mark, similar to Jack, commented,

I cannot give enough credit to the people that helped me. . . . As I look back . . . my life . . . has been [one] where I have been helped. I’ve never gotten anywhere on my own energy . . . . There . . . need to be other people who stand alongside of you. (Vol. IV, p. 98)

Other middle school teachers would benefit from following the example of these four participants. Networking with others stimulates one’s thoughts and provides support for changes one is making. While there is risk involved in opening up one’s life to others and discomfort precedes growth, these four teachers have shown that it is profitable and worth the risk and uneasiness. Not all of these four teachers find taking risks easy; Mark and
Debbie are at very different places on the continuum. Mark identifies himself as a “cautious risk taker” (Vol. IV, p. 100) while Debbie responded with an emphatic “Oh, yeah!” (Vol. I, p. 31) to my query about being a risk taker. Colleagial relationships help make change easier since one learns from others and benefits from feeling supported.

Replenishment of Emotional Well

Effectively teaching middle school students requires a great deal of energy, time, and personal stamina (Mills, 1997). In order to meet the needs of their students, middle school teachers need to have a spring by which their emotional well is fed. Debbie alluded to this when she said, “I have a good marriage . . . [which] helps me be a more energetic and good teacher because I’m not bringing issues from home or having any kind of personal [crisis]” (Vol. I, p. 44). Some of Jack’s thoughts support what Debbie said, but they were spoken from the vantage point of recalling a time in his life when he was “in a wounded state” (Vol. II, p. 124). Jack remarked,

It’s probably good that I was out of the classroom for those few years. . . . It put me in limited contact with kids, but . . . when I did [have contact] I could be really focused for a short period of time and then go back to the paper work. (Vol. II, p. 127)

Each of the participants in my study indicated that they found emotional strength through treasured relationships in their lives. Had we continued our conversations, I may have discovered other ways they restore their souls before entering the classroom to meet its many demands. The issue at stake is that effective teachers, as Jack said, “work real hard during . . . school then . . . play real hard” (Vol. II, p. 59).
For Teacher Educators

Crucial to the effectiveness of the middle school movement is effective teachers specifically trained to meet the needs of middle schoolers. It is interesting to note that the lack of teachers specifically trained for the junior high schools resulted in the original goals never being met (Alexander et al., 1968; DeVita, Pumerantz, & Wilklow, 1970; Moss, 1969). Since its inception, leaders in the middle school movement have again been calling for teachers with special preparation in teaching young adolescents in order to sustain the movement and promote continuing growth and development (Howard & Stoumbis, 1970; Lounsbury, 1992). According to DeVita et al. (1970) and Lounsbury (1996), this requires teachers who have adopted a middle school philosophy which guides the atmosphere, curriculum, and instruction in the classroom and school.

When I looked at the suggested components of a middle school teacher preparation program, I found these aspects: A sound liberal arts education, understanding of human growth and development as it relates to young adolescents, learning theories, curriculum and instruction suitable for middle grade students, philosophy of middle school education, strong academic background in at least two content areas, ways to involve families and communities, and field experiences in exemplary middle schools with effective teachers (Harnett, 1991; McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995; Moss, 1969; Scales & McEwin, 1994; Swaim, 1993; Tibbles, Dickinson, & McEwin, 1991). While this body of knowledge is extremely important in being an effective middle school teacher, I see a lack of developing personal characteristics which enable a teacher to implement the learned knowledge.
and skills. Swaim (1993) does include a personal quality when he points out that preservice middle school teachers need to learn to work collaboratively since many middle schools expect teachers to become part of an interdisciplinary team. Is this the only personal quality effective middle school teachers need?

While I believe the results of my study confirm the importance of including the aspects mentioned above in a middle school teacher preparation program, my results also lead me to believe that middle school teacher educators need to address personal characteristics of effective middle school teachers. Knowing that a middle school teacher needs to build relationships with his or her students is different from being able to relate well and gain the trust of middle schoolers. Preservice middle school teachers should have an opportunity to explore what a positive classroom climate is and how one creates it. They need to consider questions such as how one takes advantage of learning opportunities for continued growth. The fact that teachers bring themselves and their personal lives into their professional sphere is important to recognize and explore. During their teacher training program, preservice teachers should be encouraged to pay attention to and replenish their emotional wells.

For Further Study

The middle school movement could benefit from additional studies concerning common characteristics of effective middle school teachers (NMSA, 1997) and other intangible issues connected to effective middle school teachers (Strahan, 1992). My study was limited to four teachers in the Michiana area and may or may not be typical of other effective middle school
teachers.

One of the values in narrative case studies such as mine is that middle school teachers can read about the practices of effective teachers and restory their own classroom practices. Others who read how the four participants dealt with opportunities, obstacles, and challenges in life may be motivated to look at their own lives through new eyes. Teachers learning about other teachers' successes and foibles can be a powerful tool in shaping practices. Middle school teachers would benefit from additional narrative research studies which would allow them to enter into effective middle school teachers' classrooms and lives.

As I spoke with other educators who did not share my interest in middle school education, I was repeatedly asked how effective middle school teachers differ from their counterparts in elementary and high schools. An obvious answer lies with the body of knowledge teachers assimilate as either elementary, middle, or high school teachers; however, that seems like a shallow response. These reflections caused me to ask questions beyond the scope of my study which other studies could include: Are there personal characteristics which differentiate middle school teachers from their colleagues in elementary and high schools? Are the characteristics I found running through the four participants' lives that make them Real unique to middle school teachers? If there are differing characteristics which reside in effective elementary, middle, and high school teachers, how do teacher educators identify these and encourage preservice teachers to prepare for teaching in these respective areas? If certain qualities are representative of all effective teachers, how can these be developed in preservice teachers?
Another question forced its way into my thoughts as I conducted my study. All four teachers in my study have been in education for more than 10 years and their ages range from the mid-30s to the mid-50s. Are the characteristics which make them Real the result of increased maturity or specifically cultivated qualities?

Conclusions

Becoming Real is a process that occurs over time, often in several stages. Loving and being loved are integral to this process, which only occurs to resilient people who are willing to open their lives to feeling pain and enduring discomfort. Real people know when they are needed and give unselfishly of themselves to others. Though they are already Real, they recognize that they are still in the process of becoming Real and open themselves to continue learning from those around them and from life itself.

As I spent time with the four teacher participants in my study, I could not shake the strong impression that each of these teachers is Real. This belief has only grown stronger as our relationships deepened, as I read and reread the data, and as I wrote their stories. These four teachers love and give of themselves freely and unselfishly to their students and others around them. They have opened their lives and experienced growing pains, but they allowed pain to mold and shape their lives. Students who know these teachers love them in return, enjoy being with them, and feel safe and secure in their classrooms. All four of these teachers continue to open themselves to grow both personally and professionally as they journey through life.
September 25, 1998

Dear Principal:

I am a Ph.D. student in curriculum and instruction at Andrews University. I am beginning a research study to describe and understand the attitudes and beliefs of effective middle school teachers and what has influenced them to teach the way they do. As part of the process of identifying these effective teachers, I am requesting your assistance.

I am interested in having a sample of middle school teachers from your school whom you consider especially effective complete a brief questionnaire. I am also interested in criteria you used to identify these teachers and a short synopsis of your professional background. The enclosed abstract describes my intended study in greater detail.

The information which I collect from you will be kept in strictest confidence. I will use the data gathered in writing my dissertation; however, at no time will your name, the teachers' names, or your school be identified.

I will contact you via telephone in a few days to discuss your interest in participating in my research project and to set up an appointment with you should you be so inclined. Thank you for your time and consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Rhoda C. Sommers

Enclosure
October 19, 1998

Dear Educator:

I am a Ph.D. student in curriculum and instruction at Andrews University. I am interested in studying the attitudes and beliefs of effective middle school teachers and what has influenced them to teach the way they do. Your principal has identified you as an effective middle school teacher and I am interested in having you complete a brief questionnaire concerning your beliefs and practices.

Should you choose to complete and return the questionnaire, the information will be kept in strictest confidence. I will need to use the data gathered in writing my dissertation and any additional materials written in the future for publication; however, at no time will your name or your school’s name be identified.

I am providing you with a self-addressed, stamped envelope in which to return the questionnaire. I would appreciate having the completed questionnaire returned to me by November 9, 1998.

Thank you for your time and participation in my study.

Sincerely,

Rhoda C. Sommers

Enclosure
APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORMS
Principal Consent Form

As a Ph.D. student in curriculum and instruction at Andrews University, I am conducting a study to understand and describe the beliefs and attitudes of effective middle school teachers and what has influenced them to become effective teachers. This study involves gathering data through a questionnaire, observation, interviews, and documents.

While there may be no direct benefit to you and your school at this time for participating in this study, I am optimistic that I will learn something which will assist teachers in understanding factors which have influenced them to become who they are as educators and challenge others to reflect on their practices.

All information collected will be held in strictest confidence and remain solely in my permanent file should I desire to revisit the data in the future. While this information may be published, at no time will your name or the name of your school be used. In addition, you are free to terminate this consent at any time and withdraw from this project without prejudice. If you have any questions concerning this project or this consent form, please feel free to call me, Rhoda C. Sommers at (616) 471-6942 or my dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Shirley Freed at (616) 471-6163.

I, ________________________________, hereby consent to participate in the project described above. I have read and understood this statement and have had all of my questions answered.

Date: ____________________________

Signature: ________________________

Investigator: ______________________

Witness: __________________________

Berrien Springs, Michigan 49104/(616)471-7771
Teacher Consent Form

As a Ph.D. student in curriculum and instruction at Andrews University, I am conducting a study to understand and describe the beliefs and attitudes of effective middle school teachers and what has influenced them to become effective teachers. This study involves gathering data through a questionnaire, observation, interviews, and documents.

While there may be no direct benefit to you at this time for participating in this study, I am optimistic that I will learn something which will assist teachers in understanding factors which have influenced them to become who they are as educators and challenge others to reflect on their practices.

All information collected will be held in strictest confidence and remain solely in my permanent file should I desire to revisit the data in the future. While this information may be published, at no time will your name be used. In addition, you are free to terminate this consent at any time and withdraw from this project without prejudice. If you have any questions concerning this project or this consent form, please feel free to call me, Rhoda C. Sommers at (616) 471-6942 or my dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Shirley Freed at (616) 471-6163.

I, __________________________________, hereby consent to participate in the project described above. I have read and understood this statement and have had all of my questions answered.

Date: ____________________________

Signature: __________________________

Investigator: _________________________

Witness: ____________________________

Berrien Springs, Michigan 49104/(616)471-7771
Your Opinion Please

Middle School Teachers' Beliefs, Knowledge, and Practices

The following statements will ask you to examine your beliefs, knowledge, and practices regarding early adolescents and teaching at the middle school level. It is very important that you be honest in your responses. Confidentiality will be maintained.

Directions: Please indicate your degree of agreement with the statements by writing on the blank in front of each item the number from the scale below which most closely matches your feelings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The middle schooler’s extreme need to socialize often interferes with my teaching.

2. I prefer teaching and having the school counselor deal with the personal problems of my students.

3. I think it is unrealistic to expect every student to experience success.

4. I am not comfortable with too much activity or talking in the classroom.

5. I allow my students many opportunities to socialize and relate to their peers within my classroom. [*]

6. A big barrier to my being able to teach more effectively is lack of student interest.

7. I prefer a quiet, orderly classroom with little or no talking.

8. I genuinely enjoy going to work each day. [*]

9. Although I occasionally use cooperative learning activities or strategies, I prefer having each student sit at his or her own desk and work independently.

10. To prepare young people for the twenty-first century, middle schools should concentrate more on academic education.

11. Developing and using interdisciplinary and/or integrated teaching units is both important and stimulating to me. [*]

12. I am deeply committed to the middle school concept and to the students. [*]

13. I believe that teachers should be freed up to teach and counselors should deal with student problems.

14. I am always searching for new ways to teach or present the curriculum. [*]
15. I view my main task in the classroom as teaching academic content.

16. I think "advisory" is basically a waste of time.

17. Students who can and want to learn should be separated from the non-academically oriented.

18. I usually use objective tests because they are more efficient and less time-consuming to correct.

19. I could be a better middle school teacher if I only taught in my speciality area.

20. I use cooperative learning and collaborative learning strategies almost daily. [*]

**Demographics:**

Gender: F _____ M _____

Current teaching responsibilities: ______________________________

Total number of years teaching in grades 6-8: _________

Total number of years in education: _________

A small sample (4) of respondents to this questionnaire will be solicited for follow-up interviews and classroom observations. This is optional and voluntary. If you are interested in discussing the possibility of further participation in my study, please sign below.

I am interested in further participation in this study. I recognize that more information will be provided before I sign an official consent form.

Signature __________________________ School ______________________________

[*For these items the scores need to be reversed when analyzing results of the questionnaire.]

Source:

Participant Questionnaire

The following questions are intended to stimulate your thinking as you read “your” chapter. My goal is to have your chapter reflect you as accurately as possible. I hope to use your responses to this questionnaire as part of my dissertation.

1. Comment on the accuracy of this chapter in portraying you and your life.

2. What things would you like to have added to this chapter?

3. What things would you like to have omitted from this chapter?

4. What corrections should I make?

5. What have you learned about yourself as a person and an educator as part of this study?
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

*These include scheduled interviews, informal conversations, and several telephone conversations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Debbie</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Renae</th>
<th>Mark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Childhood</strong></td>
<td>2/3/99</td>
<td>12/17/98</td>
<td>1/21/99</td>
<td>2/10/99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4/29/99</td>
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<td>3/9/99</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Experiences</strong></td>
<td>11/23/98</td>
<td>12/2/98</td>
<td>11/12/98</td>
<td>11/24/98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life Experiences</strong></td>
<td>1/12/99</td>
<td>12/2/98</td>
<td>12/10/98</td>
<td>12/17/98</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4/26/99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

*This is a partial list of questions I asked the teacher participants during the interviews. These were used as a beginning point and led to other topics relevant to the study.

1. How has your family shaped who you are today?
2. What individuals influenced you as a child?
3. What memories do you have about elementary, middle, and high school?
4. What made you decide to choose education as a career?
5. What prompted you to choose to teach in your current content area?
6. Was teaching middle schoolers your first choice for a teaching assignment?
7. Where did you earn your degrees?
8. What previous experiences have you had in education?
9. Had I observed you during your first years as a teacher, what would I have seen and heard?
10. What impressions might I have had of you as a person during your early years as a teacher?
11. What keeps you motivated to put so much time and effort into your classroom?
12. What do you see as your most important task as a teacher?
13. What goals do you have for your students?
14. How do you make decisions about the learning experiences you plan for your students?
REFERENCE LIST


252


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EDUCATION

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Mount Vernon Nazarene College
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Andrews University
Teaching/Administrative Graduate Assistant
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Lititz Area Mennonite School
Middle school coordinator and teacher
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1991-1996

Linville Hill Mennonite School
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1989-1991

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Professional Elementary Teaching Certificate - ACSI