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A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of an Urban Middle School During the First Year of Teaching

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First Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of an Urban Middle School During the First Year of Teaching

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by

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First Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of an Urban Middle School During the First Year of Teaching

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University of Nebraska, 1999

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This thesis is part of a trilogy, which examined the perceptions and explorations of myself and two other first year teachers in our particular school settings. The theses are individual works, which share common introductory and concluding chapters. Our primary form of data collection was journaling, which allowed us to share emotions, feelings, and insights, as well as document the day-to-day events that occurred during our first year of teaching. Our second form of data collection was informal interviews, which were conducted with individuals within the school community.

After comparing and contrasting the many themes that our trilogy discovered, a collaborative chapter was written to document our findings. One theme seemed to be overwhelmingly apparent. Each of us described a passion for teaching and a love for our students as being the most common theme throughout the first year of teaching. Other commonalties were: aspiring to be different, creating personal relationships with students, personal growth as a result of our relationship with students, questioning professional roles, and an "obsession" with teaching. In order to best comprehend the complexity of these findings we recommend that you refer to the following pieces of the trilogy.

Caruso, J.P. (1999). *First Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of an Urban High School During the First Year of Teaching*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Stewart, S. (1999). *First Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of a Suburban Elementary School During the First Year of Teaching*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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I would not have made it through my first year of teaching without the support of my thesis partners, Stacy Stewart and J.P. Caruso.

Dr. Gene Freund has been not only a thesis advisor, but also a friend, colleague, confidant, mentor, teacher, and inspiration to me this year.

My parents, sister, and brother have believed in me through everything, and their love makes me who I am today as a person and a teacher.

The students I taught at Marrs Middle School are my inspiration, and I hope this piece of writing makes it clear how much they impacted me during my first year of teaching. This thesis is dedicated to them.

Table of Contents

Preface

The writing of this thesis has been a journey. My journey began early this school year when I stood in the hallway after a graduate class one evening, looked at two of my peers, and made the commitment to write a thesis as the exit requirement for my masters program. None of us knew each other well, yet with the encouragement of Dr. Gene Freund, our professor and soon-to-be thesis advisor, we decided that each of us would work over the next year to write a thesis. Although I had originally been attracted to the idea of writing a thesis, the graduate program I was in was very much centered on a portfolio exit option. That fact had made me believe that writing a thesis would be nearly impossible, if not defiant. I do not think I would have done it if Stacy and J.P. hadn't been standing there as apprehensively and excitedly as I was. We were in it together.

It was in the hallway that the wheels began turning. Dr. Freund unraveled his idea of having a group of three students work together and support each other's writing and editing processes. We agreed that that would be helpful. After a road trip to Dr. Freund's cottage in Iowa a few weeks later, we made the commitment to much more than just helping each other write and edit—we decided that together we would write a thesis trilogy. When I think of trilogy, I can not help but think of Star Wars—a trilogy of books and movies that tell their own tales, but mean much more together. I can compare our trilogy to Star Wars because you will only completely understand our research experiences if you read all three of our theses.

Although none of us were experts on research, we realized from the beginning that writing three theses on what was basically the same topic would be seen as "different," or

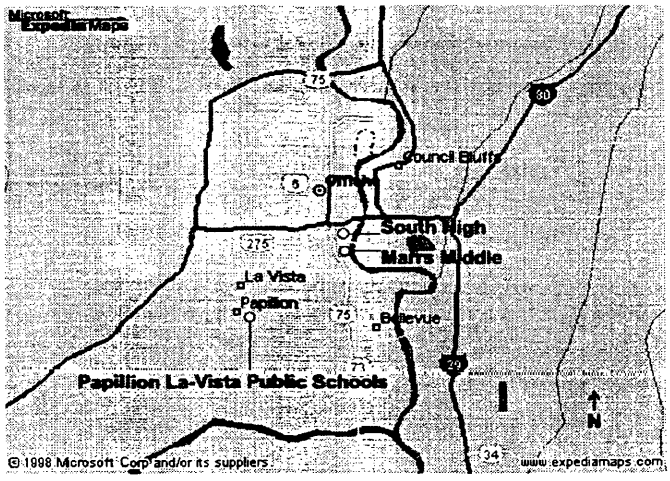
hopefully, innovative. Even more radical would be our decision to write all portions of the three theses in first person. From the very start, even as first year teachers, we recognized teaching as not "just a job" and that research in our classrooms and in our schools could never be quantitative research. When we came across noted anthropologist Ruth Behar's book, The Vulnerable Observer, we knew we had found the key to our trilogy and to each of our individual research experiences.

With the aid of Dr. Freund and our thesis committee, which consisted of Dr. Charles Gildersleeve, Dr. Carol Mitchell, and Dr. Peter Suzuki, we began our journey. We were also very lucky to receive the wise advice of Dr. Yvonne Tixier y Vigil, who helped us tremendously though she did not have to do so. The journey did not end with the close of the school year. As the three of us work and write together, we are learning more and more about who we are as teachers, colleagues, and especially as vulnerable observers.

Chapter I. Introduction

This thesis is part of a trilogy, which presents a different approach to research. Three theses were written as a combination of individual research and a collaborative effort. Three first year teachers, who were also full time graduate students in the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Career Advancement and Development for Recruits and Experienced Teachers (CADRE) project, have written their theses as a blend of individual research and collaborative reflection. Each teacher presents his or her own individual research on teaching and explores the cultural milieu of each educational setting. Each of three teachers has written the major portion of his or her own thesis, however, parts of the introductory chapter and the entire concluding chapters of each are written collaboratively.

The researchers involved in this trilogy thesis represent educators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in the Omaha Public School and Papillion-LaVista Public School districts. They are: Jennifer Bernard, who taught eighth grade Language Arts and Literature at Marrs Middle School, J.P. Caruso, who taught history and economics at Omaha South High School and Stacy Stewart, who taught first grade at Papillion-LaVista Public Schools in Papillion, Nebraska.



Geographically, all three beginning teachers teach on the south side of the Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area

(MSA). The Omaha Metropolitan area includes the suburbs of the city of Omaha and Council Bluffs, Iowa immediately across the Missouri River. While all three schools are in the same geographical area (see map on page 3), the trilogy explores the differences as well as similarities in each educational setting. Every school exists within its own unique milieu. The milieu consists of students who bring their own individual cultures and backgrounds to the classrooms, the geographical context in which these students live, and their socioeconomic background.

Each school also exists within its own educational context. The professionals within each building: administrators, classroom teachers, and building staff, contribute to the environment of the individual building. Also important to the life space of each school are the supporting agents in the community, such as church, youth organizations, area businesses, military institutions related to Offutt Air Force Base, and other community agencies.

Section A. Purpose of the Study

Behar (1996) defines a vulnerable observer as a researcher who allows his or her own reactions and emotions to enter into and become part of their research. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the total school milieu as perceived by the first year teacher in this study, who is, admittedly, a "vulnerable observer." The teachers as the primary investigators in the research share their emotions, feelings, insights, and perceptions through their own immersion in the school setting. This experience is presented in the first person as advocated by Behar (1996) in The Vulnerable Observer.

Section B. Methodology

This thesis is non-hypothecated and was conducted during the 1998-1999 school year. The primary form of data collection was journaling by the investigator. The journaling consisted of documenting day-to-day events and interactions with students, faculty, and community members that occurred not only in the classroom, but also in the school and the local community as a whole. Names of all students, as well as school and community individuals, have been changed to protect their identities. A second form of data collection was the informal talks and discussions with individuals within the school community.

As the study progressed through the data collection process, the three teachers shared insights from each of their journals, comparing and contrasting themes that emerged through their individual experiences teaching in urban and suburban schools.

After data were collected, the investigators made connections among the numerous pieces of data. The investigators then developed appropriate categories in which to place the information they collected over the school year. The data were then collated and carefully analyzed. Each of the investigators then brought together their perceptions and explorations (as recorded in their journals) with appropriate educational, sociological, and ethnographic research in order to make sense of the role they served in the school and in the school's community. An important element of this process was the alignment and synthesis of the experiences of the three individual researchers with the connections made in other research.

Section C. Definition of Terms

CADRE: The Career Advancement and Development for Recruits and Experienced Teachers (CADRE) project is a Graduate Induction Program administered by the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the school districts of the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC). Utilizing a mentor/mentee approach, CADRE teachers complete a yearlong teaching assignment while simultaneously completing a specialized master's degree program of study.

Collaboration: Friend and Cook (1996) define collaboration as a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as we work toward a common goal.

Critical Incident: In "Becoming a Doctor: Critical-Incident Reports from Third-Year Medical Students," Branch, et al. in Henderson (1997) describe critical incidents as "short narratives of events judged to be particularly meaningful by participants in the events" (p. 223). We use the same definition and apply it to our experiences in the classroom and school community.

Culture: Culture "consists of the shared beliefs, symbols, and interpretations within a human group" (Banks and Banks, 1997, p. 8).

Ethnography: As defined by Spradley (1979) is "the work of describing a culture. The essential core of this activity aims to understand another way of life from the native point of view" (p. 3). Spradley says, further, "Rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*" (p. 3). For purposes of this study these definitions will be applied

from our point of view as teachers in the center of school culture, and as new teachers at the same time.

Geographical context: Geographical context relates to the location of the school within the Omaha MSA. The location of our schools is significant because the history and socioeconomic and cultural framework our schools operate in is directly related to it.

Journaling: For purposes of this study, journaling will be defined as the primary form of data collection consisting of individual researchers' written notes about observed events, and their thoughts and reactions to those events.

Milieu: The physical or social setting in which something occurs or develops. For purposes of this study, milieu is extended to include the geographical, environmental, and cultural influences affecting something in that setting.

Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area: The Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) consists of five counties—Douglas, Sarpy, Cass and Washington counties in Nebraska and Pottawattamie County in Iowa. The five-county Omaha MSA has a population of 687,454 and is the 61st largest metropolitan statistical area in the United States.

Participant Observer: As defined by Spradley (1980), "the participant observer comes to a social situation with two purposes: (1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation" (p. 54).

Point of Reference: Ogbu (1993) refers to the "cultural frame of reference" of a learner as based on refugee, immigrant or migrant status, language, minority status, and cultural

differences. For purposes of this thesis, we have created the term "point of reference" to refer to each of our own life experiences and backgrounds.

Suburb: A suburb is an urbanized area, either incorporated or unincorporated, adjacent to a city with which it has close social and economic ties, while retaining its political independence.

Vulnerable Observer: For purposes of this study, the term "vulnerable observer" takes the role of a traditional participant observer to a new level. Behar (1996) emphasizes the importance of the emotions and reactions of the observer in the research project. Throughout our research, we have been *vulnerable* participant observers, and we believe our theses reflect this.

Section D. The Problem

As new teachers we are not only vulnerable observers, but also learners gaining new insights about schools and teaching. New teachers often struggle with the conflict between their own ideals and the realities of teaching school. New teachers who enter public school are often bewildered in their attempts to understand the school culture and the written and unwritten rules of the educational setting. Through participant observation within the school milieu, the investigators focus on, relate, and synthesize their perceptions of and reactions to the individual culture of their school.

Section E. Research Question

How do the social structure, values, and subcultures of the school setting interact within the educational system as perceived by a first year teacher?

Section F. Summary

Teaching offers different dilemmas for the first year teacher. Many of these dilemmas are related to the everyday struggles that beginning teachers face with the realities of teaching school and their own preconceived notions and ideals. Each of us offers a perspective from a first year teacher in one of three different environments. Though written as three separate theses, we share a common concluding chapter which compares and contrasts the experiences and settings of each of the investigator's respective schools and their milieus. Like Peshkin, (1982) we were uncertain about what would actually be discovered, and our study was continually evolving. We were, however, guided by the desire to learn as much as we could about our schools and their total milieu.

Section G. Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to the 1998-1999 school year and our own personal perceptions, reactions, and interpretations as first year teachers. The findings of the study are unique to our own specific school settings. Our roles as classroom teachers affect our roles as researchers, and vice versa. It should be noted, however, that these unique classrooms and research situations made it possible for us to take the role of a vulnerable observer—showing that the very things which limit our research were central to our reasons for actually doing the research.

Chapter II. Review of Related Literature

The goal of this study was to better understand the culture and milieu in each of the educational settings studied from the point of view of a first year teacher. Because this was our first attempt at doing participant observation and ethnographic inquiry, our review of the literature includes a number of works which help us better understand our roles as teachers, and as participant observers. We believe that both classrooms and schools are well suited for ethnographic inquiry, because we believe that one of the primary responsibilities of the teacher is to be an observer in his or her own classroom so as to better understand the needs of students. Additionally, Spindler (1982) emphasizes the importance for the ethnographer to build a "trust relationship" with the persons under study. This is a critical component of our own philosophy of teaching. Thus, while we are new to the field of ethnographic inquiry, building trust relationships with students is something we feel comfortable with and which influenced the decision to study our schools in this manner.

Our review of the literature also makes a point to explore other elements within the educational arena such as socioeconomic status, contextual geography, culture, school setting, and other works on participant observation and ethnographic studies. Many of the authors cited have affected our perceptions of our own research project and have aided us in further developing our understanding of the nature of qualitative research. Because our research methods were naturalistic it was important for us to think about the multiple influences and interpretations that were derived from the literature that already existed in the field.

The starting point in the review of literature is The Vulnerable Observer (1996) by Ruth Behar. Behar, a noted anthropologist, struggles with the fact that anthropology has not traditionally been written or practiced with feeling. As teachers who find it difficult to separate our emotions from our careers in education, Behar's words ring true with us. Behar leads the movement in modern anthropological research for those who allow themselves to become what she calls the "vulnerable observer," to make their own reactions and emotions become part of the research. Each thesis is written in the first person, to take into consideration the emotion that comes with a career in education, and to allow us to become an emotionally involved observer. This is key to our research and writing, because we realize that, as Behar said, "writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance, and willingness to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does writing invulnerably and distantly" (p. 13). Our vulnerability is apparent throughout our theses, and Behar's anthropological work inspired that decision.

To better understand our roles as vulnerable observers, we have looked to several works on participant observation. Spradley (1980) defines the participant observer as someone who "comes to a social situation with two purposes: (1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation" (p. 54). As classroom teachers, we are certainly participants in the culture and setting of our schools. Our goals as teachers may at times interfere with our roles as observers, but at other times our role may place us in the perfect position for being participant observers. The difference between our roles as vulnerable observers

rather than as traditional participant observers is that we understand and expect the possibility of our own emotional involvement affecting the research process.

Spradley's (1979) work on the ethnographic interview is also pertinent. "Ethnography is the work of describing a culture. The essential core of this activity aims to understand another way of life from the native point of view"(p. 3). Although we cannot be considered traditional ethnographers because of our personal involvement in our research, it is important to recognize that "instead of collecting 'data' about people, the ethnographer seeks to learn from people, to be taught by them" (p. 4). This was always on our minds as we worked with the individuals and cultures linked to the school setting.

The ability to describe situations and places with detail so that the reader may "see" our experiences was key in each of our theses. According to Abraham (as seen in Henderson et al., 1997), to accurately describe an event or culture takes skill and care. In Abraham's article "Where Crowded Humanity Suffers and Sickens," the reader experiences many of the hardships of the observed family. The article is written through the eyes of an observer who begins this research on a bus ride. The family's socioeconomic status hinders them from receiving adequate medical care in a hospital setting. This article criticizes health care as well as the direction in which it is headed through the direct interaction, and detailed descriptions of a family and their environment. The important thing we recognized and applied to our theses was that the article allows the reader to feel a sense of understanding and empathy for the family. The reader gains a clear understanding of the distress and struggles that this family endures. The writing style of this article is significant to our study because we want readers to feel

a sense of understanding with the issues that are being faced by the first year teacher every day. It is our hope that our readers will be able to develop a sense of what the first year of teaching in our specific environment entails, through the eyes of the observer.

Detailed work by participant observers has been done in the world of educational research. For an understanding of how we can be observers in our classroom, we looked to Hollingshead's (1949) Elmtown's Youth, one of the first ethnographies of American high schools, which examined young people in various cultural settings such as the high school. Hollingshead conducted his research in a socially stratified Middle Western community, which he called Elmstown, U.S.A. The town had a population of approximately 10,000 people during the 1941-1942 school year. Hypothesizing that the social behavior of adolescents is functionally related to the position their family occupies in the social structure of the community, Hollingshead found that there was, in fact, a relationship. In other words, he discovered that the way a young person behaves or with whom he or she interacts (e.g., cliques) is directly related to the socioeconomic class of their family.

Barker and Wright's (1966) One Boy's Day involves much more detailed participation. In this study, Barker and Wright meticulously documented a day in the life of a seven-year-old boy living in a town in the Midwest. Researchers followed the boy minute by minute from the time he awoke until he went to bed.

As vulnerable observers, our own thoughts and emotions undoubtedly enter into the research in a variety of ways, but one focus is to tell others' stories accurately. In Las Mujeres: Conversations from a Spanish Community (1980), the authors take care to

allow the women studied to speak to the reader. The women were selected and interviewed by the authors, but their stories are told in their own words. They relate memories of their lives, families, communities, jobs, education, and their perception of their place in society as women and as Hispanas. The voices of these women speak for them rather than do the researchers' interpretations of their voices. In each of our theses, we strive to let those we work with speak in their own words by using dialogue obtained from conversation and informal interviews.

Because the school setting is much more than people and interactions, we have looked at works that help us to understand the geographical setting of a school and its influence on school culture. The Child in the City looks at the physical and geographical significance of the place in which a child lives and his or her perception of the world. Ward (1990) explores the concept of mapping, of spatial orientation, and of the child's understanding of their own "world" and where it fits into the bigger picture. He points out that often the knowledge of children far exceeds what is normally thought possible. This book is significant for us in thinking about how our students and their families are affected by the physical area in which they live.

Similarly, Havighurst (1975) speaks of a young person's "life space" which he defines as the "...physical space and the objects contained within that space, the people who inhabit that space, and the psychological sense of freedom or constraint in exploring and expanding one's social and intellectual environment" (p. 125). For the purpose of this study we looked to the "life space" of our students in order to better understand who

students are as individuals as well as the social significance of socioeconomic class of our students.

Ogbu provides another important contribution to our work that directly pertains to students we teach and the cultures from which they come. In Ogbu's (1993) article, "Differences in Cultural Frame of Reference," Ogbu bases an understanding of the way a child learns on his or her "cultural frame of reference." This frame of reference may be based on refugee, immigrant or migrant status, language, minority status, and cultural differences. All of these things (and especially whether a person's frame of reference is voluntary or involuntary) affect a person's interactions with others, as well as their cognitive and academic performance. When working with our students and others within our school community, we recognize that each person has their own cultural frame of reference, and that the impact of these different frames of reference placed together in a school community have created a unique situation for each of us. We also explore and take into account our own cultural frames of reference as we exercise our roles as first year teachers.

Finally, it appears that one of the overriding themes found in our review of the literature is the importance of listening. As Spindler (1982) suggests, one of the main criteria for a good ethnography of schooling is that questions be allowed to emerge as the study progresses. We believe that listening is central to this principle because, as we observed and interacted with our students in our respective schools, new questions and insights developed. In other words, we were learning continually from our experiences.

This is similar to John Dewey's definition of education. Education according to Dewey (as cited in Cremin, 1964) is the "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (p. 122). In many respects, Dewey's definition of education reflects the importance of listening by the investigators. Our past and present experiences, in many respects, dictated the course of our study. As our study developed, new experiences created new questions.

These works barely break the surface of the literature we used and required during the writing of our theses. They offered, however, a solid foundation of research and suggested that there is a need for the research we have conducted. By exploring ideas from a variety of qualitative studies and sources we arrived at an understanding of how our research should have been carried out and presented. It was Behar's books that gave us the courage and the instinct to fully develop this project, and in the end her literature that remained a constant guide.

Chapter III. Point of Reference

Section A. Childhood

When I was two years old, my parents and I moved out of a trailer park in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, and into the right side of a duplex in Downingtown, Pennsylvania. I do not remember the trailer except for the faint outline I have in my head from looking at old pictures. I can see one right now, of my dad and I standing by the side of the trailer. He has a fluffy brown beard, big hair, and is wearing horrible mustard and brown and orange striped pants. I am holding my cat, Nick, who is big and black and almost too much for my little arms to hold. We moved to the duplex shortly after that. I lived in there until the day of my tenth birthday, when we packed up our house and drove from Pennsylvania to Lincoln, Nebraska, where I lived until just a year ago. When I moved to Omaha to student teach last year, my roommates and I moved into another duplex—this time on the left side—that reminded my parents so much of our old house they kept walking through the halls and exclaiming over the similarities.

My sister was born when I was two and a half, my brother when I was five. They were both born in my parents' bedroom. I have a faint memory of watching my mom lie in the bathtub while she was in labor with my sister, and then being taken next door to the neighbor's house while she delivered. When my brother was born, I was in the same room. I remember blinking just as his head showed, and when I opened my eyes, there was an entire baby in the room. I was very disappointed I had missed the big moment.

My childhood was full of neighborhood friends, night games, hopscotch, and jumprope. I went to the public school just down the street for kindergarten, and then

moved to St. Joseph's Catholic school in first grade. Almost all of my teachers were nuns from the Immaculate Heart of Mary, an order well known for its strict teachers.

One of the defining characteristics of my life was that my mom never worked outside of the home. She taught breastfeeding classes at night, and later a correspondence course while writing a book on breastfeeding. She volunteered for the Catholic parish we belonged to. She was there when I left for school, there when I got home, there when I was sick, there when I wanted to have a friend over or walk to the corner to meet my dad on his way home from work. In the summers we played outside, went to the library and checked out stacks of books, and rode bikes. We did not have a lot of money, but I do not think I noticed it until I moved to Nebraska when I was ten.

I remember my first day at St. Joseph's School in Lincoln, Nebraska. I have always seen myself as a shy person, but looking back, I realize my shyness was never overwhelming until I moved to Nebraska. My dad's new job paid better than the one in Pennsylvania, and our new house was in a nice suburban neighborhood. From that point on, I would consider my family middle-class. Ironically, it was only after this financial step up that I realized I might want something I could not have. The school and church we attended were populated with young families, many of whom were doctors and lawyers. The other students in my class were used to having the things they wanted.

I was not used to wanting anything. I had never thought about buying brand name clothes, watching popular television shows, or how nice my friend's houses were. I was in for a rude awakening. More importance was placed on my clothing and what job my father had than on what the best "night games" were or how far it was to the candy store.

Perhaps my memories are skewed as I look back, but I see my childhood separated as "before I moved from Pennsylvania" and "after I moved from Pennsylvania." The idyllic days of my childhood in Pennsylvania seemed to have been replaced with a constant struggle to fit in and be as good as or better than my new friends in Nebraska.

One of the most vivid memories I have of trying to fit in was at my first Girl Scout meeting in Nebraska. I had been in school for a few days and was starting to feel a little bit more comfortable. I can picture the scene clearly. I was standing near the edge of the Girl Scout leader's driveway, where she had a picnic table set up with three-dimensional checkers and other board games. As I interacted with the other girls in the troop, I began talking a little more than I had over the last week. I was feeling good about myself because I was making friends. I can not remember exactly what I said during the conversation, but one of my sentences included both the words "ain't" and "God." As soon as they came out of my mouth, the troop leader rushed over, and leaning down said grimly, "I don't know how they talk where *you* come from, but we don't talk like that here." I was petrified and extremely embarrassed. I did not know what she meant by "where you come from," but it stuck with me. Even now I can remember the feeling—almost fitting in, finally talking—and then having my bubble burst and replaced with confusion and embarrassment.

I made it to the end of eighth grade with a few friends and some bad memories. The end of my seventh grade year was the worst—my best friend suddenly became "popular" and I was left in the dust while she started going to parties and the mall with the popular crowd. Being left out at recess and not invited to hang out with the "popular girls" was

very difficult for me, especially when I saw my former best friend doing exactly what I was not invited to do. I think my biggest problem with the way I was treated was the fact that no one ever told me why exactly I was the one to be left out.

I remember laboring over a note one day during school. It was addressed to my parents, and it included every reason I could think of for them to allow me to transfer to public school. I had the perception, as many of my Catholic school peers did, that the public schools were like heaven. Of course I realize now that had I moved, I would have encountered the same problems with friendships at a new school. I got home from school and handed my mom the note apprehensively, and as she read it I hoped over and over again that I would be allowed to switch schools. When she said, "I don't think so," I burst into tears and ran to my room. I would have to endure another whole year of this hell!

Now, watching the eighth graders I teach, I realize there is no rhyme or reason to who is popular and who is not. Having the right things has something to do with it, but there are always exceptions to the rule. I now find some of the horror stories I endured useful. At parent-teacher conferences earlier this year, I shared one with an upset Kaela Walker. I had been sent out of a game of Spin the Bottle in eighth grade because "the ugly people aren't allowed to play." I can remember that moment so well, and years later I was able to use it to make a sad girl feel like things might start looking up someday.

One of the reasons I think I am good at teaching junior high is because I do remember what it was like to be where they are—I have had many of the same experiences my students are going through. I look at the things they deal with and realize my life was much more sheltered than theirs was, but I can still make connections. I find myself

telling stories about my own experiences in junior high and trying to use those stories to help my students make decisions. For some reason, I am drawn towards these emerging adolescents and their struggles, and see more of a connection to them than I do with high school students. I believe it was because of my own junior high experience.

The more immediate positive end of my junior high experience was that I developed a will to succeed in high school. I decided I could not let material things define who I was. Part of my attitude as I went into high school was based on my decision to break out of the shell I'd been in since moving to Nebraska. I forced myself to be outgoing and talkative with people I did not know. At Pius X High School, I found better friends, a social niche, and drive and ambition to be a leader. I started realizing I did not have to wear the designer clothes and be in the right crowd to be a good person. I was lucky to have some incredible teachers and classes that challenged me and made me think. I went on to college with a full scholarship and had more of the same kind of incredible teachers and classes. It was only then that I began recognizing how lucky I had been growing up.

In the old neighborhood in Pennsylvania, I played with all the kids. It was a very diverse area with people from many ethnic groups on either side of and across the street from us. The neighbors in the other half of our duplex were an African-American family with five children, one older boy who was a babysitter and older brother figure to us, and four younger kids who were our playmates. My most vivid memory of the Williams' is making the world's worst haunted house in their basement, complete with ketchup for blood and peeled grapes for eyeballs. There were a few Italian families in the neighborhood, and my mom still makes their best recipes for special occasions. The

Dutch family across the street was special to us, too. Their daughters were our favorite babysitters, and we could always go over and get a cookie from one of the blue and white tins that always seemed full.

I felt that this diversity almost disappeared when we moved to Lincoln, but its impact did not. In college, I came into contact with people from all over, some of whom hadn't been as lucky to have those experiences. While in class and in social situations, I found myself breaking out of my shell and speaking my mind about diversity and equality during class and in my social circles. When I discovered how to choose classes that would enrich my knowledge about those subjects, I made it a point to take them. I began to see myself as someone who would always stand up for what they believed in—a big step from the insecure junior high girl who wanted nothing more than to have the right jeans and the right group of friends.

The bare facts of my autobiography, as well as the range of emotions I have experienced, point to the possibility of becoming an English teacher. My interests and experiences offer clues ending in my choice to be an educator. My negative experience in junior high, as well as positive experience in high school and college, make me understand why I have so much drive to make school a positive place for students. The incredible teachers I had over the years showed me that teachers can and do make a difference in the life of a student. I remember in a high school literature class when I mentioned my point of view on a story, and after I finished talking, the teacher replied, "Wow. I never saw it that way." I'll never forget that feeling—knowing I had influenced my teacher's thoughts. Now, I tell my students all the time how much they affect me.

Section B. Me as a Teacher

I stand at the front of the room with my heels, pantyhose, and the black suit jacket that matches my new skirt perfectly. I've changed and grown from being the child in Pennsylvania, the timid junior high student, the high school leader, and the college success. In my thesis journal I wrote, "I've chosen this outfit today to impress the director of my graduate program, who's coming in to observe me during seventh period. I feel like I am playing dressup today, wearing this outfit and standing at the front of the room. Tomorrow I'll wear my comfiest pants and a big sweater to make up for today's 'career-girl' outfit."

I am going through an identity crisis. I am twenty-three years old and I am, as my roommate says, "teaching the children of the world." I went through college in four years, and as a result, most of my friends are still in school. They leave to go out at 10:30pm on weeknights, around the same time I am getting into bed. They nonchalantly flip through course schedules and decide if a three-hour class twice a week is better than a shorter one five times a week. They put papers off until three in the morning the night before they are due. By the time they get out of bed on a weekday, I am halfway through my twelve-hour day. They talk about literature and philosophy while playing pinball games at the bar. They discuss the meaning of life, religion, and music. I am jealous of all of those things.

On top of not knowing where I fit in between college life and the grownup world, I am also not sure who I am as a teacher. Am I the one who students want to turn to when they have problems, or am I the one they listen to because I am knowledgeable in my

field? Am I the teacher who stands up to the principal when something happens that upsets me, or do I let things roll off my back because I do not want to get in trouble? Should I follow the curriculum exactly, or forget the parts I think are silly? Do I care what other teachers think and say about me, or should I be who *I* want to be? Am I going to end up with an administration degree and spend my last days in an office cranking out curriculum, or am I going to be in the classroom forever, working with students? Should I be politically active outside of the classroom, or stay in the trenches until retirement?

Deciding those two things—who I am and where I want to take myself as a teacher—are difficult enough. I also have to place my fears, desires, needs, and crises on top of the ones my students deal with. My students are constantly changing, working to be something else, trying to be an individual while at the same time keeping up with the crowd, just as I tried to do when I was in junior high school. As much as things have changed since then, I still try to maintain a balance between my own needs and the demands of society. Really, their struggle is the same as mine. My decision to stay home and grade papers instead of going for a drink with friends is the same as their decision to pay attention in class rather than writing notes to their crush.

Some days, our struggles mesh. Sometimes my students and I can connect on things all of us are feeling at the same time. If my students are feeling silly when I am, we have a great time. But on the days when my constantly changing identity places me in grown-up mode, we clash. I find myself growing red in the face and hear students say, "Watch out! Ms. Bernard's hair is starting to stand up. She must be really mad." I have yet to find out if this is an actual physical phenomenon, but it seems to be a good signal for my

students when I am going slightly crazy. Sometimes I wonder if they look to the front of the classroom and ask themselves, "Who is this person...and where's the real Ms. Bernard?"

Section C. Struggling with my Identity

The changing image my students get of me is a good example of some of the struggles I have as I discover myself as a teacher and a person. As I write my autobiographical piece, the question that keeps coming up is "Why am I a teacher?" I asked my friend Sara, who has known everything about me since eighth grade, and she said, "Because you like reading and you like working with kids." She is right, and that is probably the same answer I'd give if pressed, but I also have to recognize that there is more than that to it. I have a devotion, a near obsession, with teaching that can not simply be defined by my general interests. I was talking with my fellow thesis writers about this, and we agreed that there is something about each of our upbringings that is relevant to who we are and why we teach, but my understandings of those things are very vague. At their suggestion, I tried to categorize things, deciding who I am in many different capacities. Who am I as a sister? I am supportive and approachable, but I do not keep in touch enough. Who am I as a friend? I am loyal, dependable, caring, concerned, and sometimes I find myself clinging to my friends and memories for support. Who am I as a daughter? I am understanding and rational. I do not take sides when my parents disagree because I have grown up to be able to understand both of their points of view. I get defensive when I feel like I might be wrong.

I can easily answer all of those questions, but I can not answer "Who am I as a teacher?" I guess it might be because I've been a sister and a friend ever since I've been alive, but I've only been a teacher for less than a year. On the other hand, maybe I have been a teacher my whole life, but have just never recognized it and tried to pin it down until now. What is it about myself and my thoughts, beliefs, and emotions that makes me a teacher? If I look at the qualities that make me a friend, sister, and daughter, I can draw connections with who I am as a teacher. I am supportive, approachable, dependable, caring, concerned, sometimes distant and defensive, but always understanding. Perhaps who I am as a teacher comes from my experience being a sister, daughter, and friend.

Last fall, during my first semester of teaching, I was asked to put together a portfolio for a graduate course. The portfolio was to show who I was as a teacher in areas such as curriculum, writing, and professionalism. I had gathered many of the suggested artifacts; some paperwork from school, articles about my graduate program, lesson plans, and some gifts and notes from my students, to which I would add reflections for the final portfolio. I sorted through the box over and over again, trying to place the objects and their reflections in a pattern had some meaning for me.

Somewhere along the way I got it in my head that if this portfolio was to be an accurate reflection of my year, it would have to be an accurate reflection of the things that were the most important to me in my first year of teaching—my students. I wanted to put things in my portfolio that really mattered. I looked at my "Standards" folder and thought, "Well, the state cares about it, but does it *really matter*?" I looked at the typed out lesson plans, the pictures of myself and fellow teachers, the quotes I had saved up

over the year, and asked myself again, "Do they *really matter*?" I looked at the articles lauding my graduate program, the certificates I had received, and the list of books I had read. I thought once again, "Do these things *really matter*?" The answer to that question, every time, was no. They don't *really matter*.

So if none of those things mattered, what did? I could not turn in a portfolio that had no meaning to me. I had to find something that *really mattered* and find a way to include it in my portfolio. As I pondered and fretted, I asked myself again and again, "What really matters?" Suddenly, the answer appeared right in front of me. I had had a roll of film developed shortly before beginning work on my portfolio. The pictures were all of my students...reading, talking, laughing, writing, working...I looked at those pictures over and over again. Suddenly, the answer to "What really matters?" popped into my head. I wanted to reach for my box of artifacts, pitch it in the trash, douse it with gasoline, and jump up on the table proclaiming "*This is what really matters!*" while waving pictures of my students in the air. The realization hit me really hard, and then I could not stop thinking about it. The thoughts just kept snowballing. "*None* of those things really matter!" I thought to myself over and over again. My students' faces flashed through my head so often that suddenly I could not conceive of putting anything else in my portfolio. I am not a teacher because I care about cute sayings or cheesy reflections, but because of living human beings—they are the only things I want in my portfolio.

Then I had a reality check. As much as those students (and therefore their pictures) mean to me, handing in a portfolio including nothing but a stack of pictures was not the best idea. Four months later, as I write my thesis, I remember the emotions I had as I tried

to decide what to do with my portfolio. I had discussed my difficulties with my peers the week before the portfolio was due, and I had cried as I discussed the strength of the emotions I felt for my students. My journal from that time period says, "I'm almost crying just thinking about it, and I know that's because my love for them is still as strong or stronger than it was that day."

That is who I am as a teacher. My friend Sara was right. I love reading and I like working with kids. But the strength of the love I feel for my students, the feeling that they are what *really matters,* for whatever reason it is there, makes me who I am as a teacher.

Chapter IV. School Setting

Section A. Description of School

The summer before my first year of teaching had arrived. I knew I would be teaching in Omaha Public Schools, but I did not know where. I had preferenced to teach at a school in a low-income area, but that could be one of many schools in town. I wanted a job at North High School, where I had student taught, but I knew that probably would not happen. That meant I would begin my first year of teaching in an unfamiliar place.

When I got a call to interview at Marrs Middle School, I was in shock. I had never heard of the school, but that was not the scariest part. I had never even considered the thought that I might be teaching middle school. My teaching certificate says "grades 7-12" on it, but all my experience and emphasis had been focused on high school. My student teaching experience had been with sophomores, and they were the youngest students I had ever worked with. Five years of volunteering and working with students had all been centered around high school aged kids. I did not know what to think.

I spoke to a few people and learned that Marrs was in South Omaha, and got the impression it was a "tough" part of town. Junior high hormones *and* a tough part of town? I did not know if I could handle that. But I decided to look into it. On the day of my interview, I arrived at Marrs about ten minutes ahead of time. It was a hot summer day, and I immediately noticed the window air conditioners at the front of the building in the office windows. That meant the classrooms did not have air conditioning. I was unsure of where to park, so I drove around the block once, and as I did so, looked at the school. It looked pretty normal. Relatively small, with a few portables in the back and

some playground equipment behind them. The grounds had just been mowed and they looked green and bright. I pulled back around to the front of the school and a man looked out the door and waved to me to show me where to park. I got out of the car and followed him to the office, weaving through the halls because the floors were being waxed near the main entrance.

As I interviewed with the principal, I found out the facts about Marrs—the number of students at the school, the courses I would teach, the classroom that would be mine. We spoke a bit about our philosophies of education and I became excited because we had similar beliefs. When I was contacted later in the week and told that she wanted me to teach at Marrs, I was excited, but also very nervous. I did not know anything about this school or what I was getting myself into. As good as my intentions were, I had to take into consideration my lack of experience and lack of knowledge about junior high curriculum. I also had to recognize the fact that I would be teaching students, 60% of whom were non-white, and nearly all of whom qualified for the free or reduced lunch program. I would be teaching students who, it seemed, I had very little in common with.

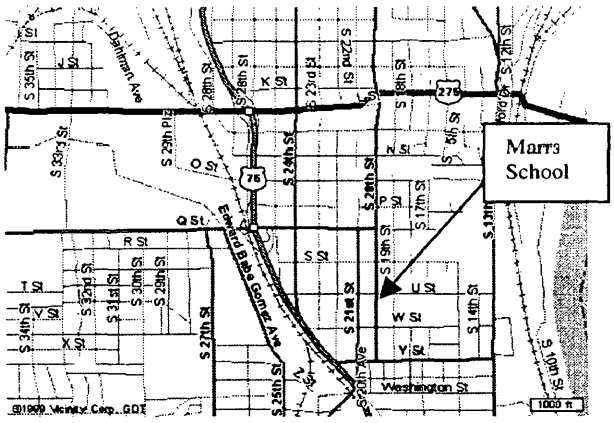
Just a few weeks into the school year, I found myself loving the school, the neighborhood, my students, and the staff at Marrs. The small numbers, three hundred and fifty middle school students and twenty-seven teachers, made the school comfortable from the start, and by mid-year I knew nearly every kid in the school. I started spending time in South Omaha after school and taking in the life and community there. The area has a large number of Mexican-American and Latino people, and the main strip, 24th Street, is teeming with life all the time. For me, the setting of Marrs extends far beyond

the grounds of the school. The setting is South Omaha, with all its good and bad. I am lucky I did not grow up in Omaha, because when I went to teach there, I did not have too many preconceived notions about what it might be like, except for what the principal had told me. When my sister told her friend, an Omaha native, where I was teaching, she gasped and said, "That's the heart of the ghetto!"

I made up my mind to experience South Omaha, which is almost always referred to as if it was a separate city. I began to spend time there. Quite often after school, I met J.P., one of the other writers in our thesis trilogy, at my new favorite restaurant, El Alamo, and we soon befriended one of the waiters there. He showed me his homework for English as a Second Language class, but spoke enough English to tease us about our frequent after-school "dates," which were really more like venting sessions to relieve the stress that comes with teaching. South Omaha became another home to me, even though I had to travel across the city to get there every day. It was like entering another world.

I live in central Omaha, which is not considered a good area of town—in fact, my roommate's parents, who are from a small town in western Nebraska, will not even come into our house. Someone looking from the outside might see central and South Omaha as similar. However, I see them as two very different worlds. We are separated geographically by the interstate system and the South Omaha Bridge, which slice east-west just south of downtown, cutting off South Omaha from the rest of the city. We are separated culturally because of the strong Chicano culture that thrives in South Omaha. The "drive to school," which I took early in December, represents my move from one world to another:

It is early, 6:15 am, when I leave my home and begin the drive to school (see map below for general vicinity of Marrs Middle School) by heading east on Dodge Street, the main street in town. It is still dark, and traffic is minimal. I turn right to go south on 24th Street towards South Omaha and Marrs Middle School. It is drizzling just a little bit, and the car windows are misted over so the lights reflect of hundreds of droplets of water on my windshield. Just south of Dodge Street on 24th are block after block of houses, set close together with a small gas station or bar every few blocks. One of the houses has a hand-lettered sign by the front door reading "sleeping rooms." 24th Street is the main north-south street in South Omaha, and I can take it from Dodge, which is the street running east-west through central Omaha, straight south for ten or fifteen minutes and be in the center of South Omaha.



Taqueria en Palenque, a restaurant whose sign reads, "Tacos Wednesday and Friday 75 cents," sits just north of the bridge into South Omaha. For me, this marks the beginning of the change to that section of the city. As I drive down 24th Street, I look to my right and left and see stores and restaurants with names such as El Vaquero and El Ranchito. The storefronts are already lit, even though it is only 6:30 in the morning. Many of the restaurants are open during odd hours to accommodate the people who work the 3rd shift in the factories, from 11pm to 7 am. South High School looms over 24th Street to my left, then Jacobo's Mexican Grocery, an empty parking lot, and an apartment

building. Many of the stores' signs are written in both Spanish and English, and some only in Spanish. The Lithuanian Bakery, Sokol Halls, and Vienna Cafe are reminders of the ethnic groups—Czechs, Greeks, Poles, Lithuanians, Italians, Irish, and many others—who used to populate South Omaha, which has in the last ten or twelve years become home to other groups of immigrants, many of whom are Latin-American and Mexican-American.

After that block, the thrift stores begin. Family Thrift, Second Time Around, Salvation Army, Junior League, V.A. Thrift store, all of them lined up on either side of the street. They occupy buildings which were expensive department stores long ago when South Omaha's successful stockyards created a booming business area. I approach Q Street as the light turns red, and I stop. I have gone exactly four miles south of my house. To my left, on the east side of the street, is a tiny Mexican restaurant called Guadalajara Restaurant and Taqueria with a bright red, yellow, and green parrot on the sign. To my right is Odd Lots, an odds-and-ends store/pawn shop where many of my students go after school to buy silly keychains, laser pointers, and other things they are not supposed to have. In the back of the same building, classes in English as a Second Language are offered on some weeknights.

Cattycorner from there, on the southeast corner of 24th and Q Streets, is a Dairy Queen. The Dairy Queen, which always makes me think of small towns—every small town has a DQ—may be part of why South Omaha is such a separate "city" to me. It seems even more separate when I do not drive down 24th Street to get there. When I am in a hurry, I take the interstate to school, where I am dumped off onto the intersection I

now sit at without driving through town. Taking the interstate to another place in the same city has always seemed strange to me, and now it just confirms that feeling of separation.

As I turn onto "Q" Street and head east, there are fewer shops and more homes. Marrs is truly a neighborhood school. However, the La Luna and Los Lobos Bars pop into my view, and across the street, a child care service with a fenced-in yard and Mickey and Minnie Mouse painted on the windows. Other than those, the buildings surrounding me are the homes of my students. I am always intrigued by the variety in the condition of the homes. Some are medium-sized homes, with wooden or plastic siding and one-car garages, and well-kept yards. Others are adorned with children's toys and trash bags on the porches, and have chipping and peeling paint. A few homes are neatly painted with expensive cars in front on the street.

I drive through the neighborhood, passing the small lot where children of all ages bring their dogs after school. I drive through the spot where, just a few days ago, I cautioned some children to keep their little brother out of the street. I drive by the childhood home of a colleague at Marrs. Then the school comes into view.
It is a flat, plain building, distinguished by the fact that it is near impossible to find the front door. The one-story building has no distinct features other than the bright red benches set in the concrete by the front sidewalk, a gift from a recent graduating class. The door I enter is on the north end of the front, the door through which only teachers may enter. It is drizzling a little, and the roof has a crack in it right by the edge of the doorway, so my hair gets dripped on as I enter.

During my research process, I made a trip to school with an architect, Catherine McGuire (personal communication, May 22, 1999), who talked with me about the appearance and architecture of Marrs. The school opened in 1962, at a time when enrollment in schools in Omaha was up. McGuire's first reaction was that the building is "as cheap as you can do it. It doesn't have [a] sense of permanence, even though it is made of brick. It has a lightness, not a weight. The fenestration [the windows in a building and how they are designed and placed] is cheap." Noting that each classroom's outer wall is made entirely of windows, she said that was probably done to keep costs down, but has a positive effect because natural ventilation is healthier.

The thing that really hit me was McGuire's reaction to the overall combination of the building, the grounds, and the portables. When we walked by the courtyard, which is in the center of the U-shaped building, she remarked that it was a great addition to the building and should be used for community gatherings, but upon noticing the locked gate at the end, recognized that it was not open for those purposes. She had seen the broken and cracked windows, cheaply constructed building, the neatly mowed but patchy lawn, the nine portables in varying shades of brown and gray with bright blue graffiti to welcome us as we came around the corner. After taking in all of those things, her reaction was, "Everything is in the name of expediency, efficiency." She did add kindly, "Museums are often minimalist so that what goes on inside is more important," but also said, "I don't know if they did it on purpose." McGuire could not define a particular architectural style, since there really was none, but called the building's structure

"...functional. It lacks symbolism. There is nothing here that makes you want to think of education. The building doesn't enhance it. It doesn't feel like an institution of learning."

Those were harsh words for me to hear as I walked around my beloved school. Our visit took place in late April, so I was feeling some end-of-the-year nostalgia already. But I had to admit, as I looked at the building from an outsider's point of view, it was pretty drab. Everything was clean and tidy, but there is major work to be done on the building before it will look inviting. The sidewalk between the portables and the back section of the U-shape, the middle school hallway, is certainly the least inviting. To one side sit the portables, "temporary" classrooms that have been there for years, which have been graffitied and patched over so many times that none of them match, and a few have multiple colors of paint on one building. On the other side of the walkway are rows and rows of windows along the outside of the building—some broken, some patched with duct tape, all with cracking caulk and rusty metal trim.

Despite the bleak outer appearance, the setting of Marrs to me means much more than the architecture and upkeep of the building. Perhaps those things affect me more than I realize, but when I look at the building I see warmth, students, and a place I can call home, even if it is in a different world.

The smell of Marrs is one I will always recognize. It is floor wax, children, rubber cement, photocopies, cafeteria food, and something else. The something else must be all the years of life and teaching and experiences the building has seen. The front hallway, the west leg of the U-shape, is crowded with office dividers, which turn a wide thoroughfare into three additional classrooms which house community programs and

resource rooms. They are probably a fire hazard, with desks and tables partially blocking the walkway, but they are necessary in order to provide our students with extra services. Just past those "classrooms" is a set of windows, with a ledge deep enough to sit on that is covered with plants. One is in a large clay pot, and the others rest in large plastic buckets that once held pickles or ketchup. Someone has taken the time to cover one of those buckets with red patterned paper, perhaps to beautify it, but the small rips in the paper give away its real identity.

Across from the window is the auditorium, where all the student performances and band classes are held. Through another doorway are tables lining the hall across from the gymnasium at which community service and peer counseling groups meet. Beyond those is the main entrance to the school. The traditional double doors under a low roof welcome students into the building each day. The main office sits in front of the main doors, and inside its large glass-paned windows is a constant flurry of activity.

One thing I notice each day when I walk into school are the signs on the doors saying, "Visitors please sign in at the office." Anyone who does not follow those directions is intercepted by one of our two security guards, whose desk is in front of the main office. It seems strange to have a building with security guards in it—neither my junior high or high school had them. They are on call at all times if they are needed to escort students from a classroom or break up a fight.

The elementary classrooms and counselor's office occupy the front half of the building, the west leg of the U. I rarely venture this way, as the middle school and elementary school teachers do not often work together. Past the library, gym, and

cafeteria is the east leg of the U, which contains the middle school classrooms. The halls are rather narrow, but not constricting, and the classrooms are a good size. Two years ago, new carpet was put in all the rooms, which makes them feel more comfortable. The tiled hallway floors are red, tan, and brown, and all the walls and lockers in the building are painted tan.

My classroom is on the left side as I walk down the hall. It is next door to the bathrooms (only one set is needed for a middle school this small) and near a door to the portables outside. The most noticeable thing about my classroom is the windows. They line the entire wall, nine full floor to ceiling panels. The shades covering the windows are probably as old as the building itself. Our head engineer once remarked that the same shades were there when he went to school at Marrs at least thirty years ago.

Three of my shades have been removed for repair, and I have two huge pieces of paper covering the tops of those windows to block out the sun that shines directly in the windows all morning. I first covered them with black paper, which made the room look ugly and unkempt. After a month or so, I realized the shades probably were not going to be repaired by the end of the year, so I tore down the black paper and replaced it with bright orange and yellow. In the mornings, the light comes through the new paper and makes the whole room glow like the sun is just rising.

I have found myself dwelling on those shades as some sort of symbol of Marrs, and of my classroom in particular. The room looked awful when the shades were broken, with slats hanging down and the pullstrings ripped so only one side of the shade would raise. First, we took them down and the room looked like it was missing something. Then, I

tried to block out the too-bright sun with black paper, but realized it was too ugly. Finally, when I was just about to give up, I switched to bright colors and the room was transformed. I could parallel it to the amazing things that happen at Marrs with little resources. There are teachers who have been teaching at Marrs for their entire careers. One woman has been there, in the same classroom, for thirty-one years. In a poor neighborhood with a difficult student population, Marrs' community has attracted bright, energetic, caring teachers who transform what could easily have been an undesirable school.

Section B. Description of Students—What's in a Name?

The method I used to write the following section was inspired by Tim O'Brien's short story, "The Things They Carried," (1990) which utilized a combination of listing and storytelling to relate a number of emotional experiences.

This summer when asked to describe the student population at my school, all I had to go on was the numbers. About 350 students. 15.4% African-American, .6% Asian American, 3.1% Native American, 40.6% White American, and 40.3% Hispanic. Nearly 20% of them are speakers of English as a Second Language. I tried to picture my students when I looked at the class lists I got on my first day. I saw names like Salgado, Rodriquez, and Montoya, as well as Jenkins, Anderson, Thompson, and Stevens. I tried guessing what my students might be like by looking at those names and imagining faces to go with them. Looking back, my early visions were less than accurate. I have learned a lot about what's in a name since then.

I learned that what I thought were "American-sounding" names like Rangel are actually Hispanic (pronounced properly with a soft *g* as *ran-hel*). I learned that students whose names sound and look "white" may actually speak Spanish as their first language. I learned that Jorge Alvarado never knew a word of Spanish until he stepped into the Spanish classroom.

I learned that Brian Petersen would much rather be Brian Karpen, but he is not yet because his family can not come up with the money for his stepfather to legally adopt. I know now that Rosa Gutierrez likes to write out her full name, Rosa Guadalupe Maestas y Gutierrez, on her most important papers. I discovered the hard way that when calling a parent, you can never assume that the parent's last name is the same as their child's. More often than not, they are different. I learned that my politically correct "Ms. Bernard" can be shortened and permanently changed to plain old "Miss" if enough students say it enough times. I do not think I will ever forget the sound of Jacob Walker's high-pitched yet gravelly voice calling "Mi*iii*iss...Mi*iii*iiss..." when he wanted my attention. Late in the year, my last name was mangled by one student, whose group of friends all caught on and began calling me "Miss Buh-nAAAaaaad." That wavering distortion of my name makes me smile, because it is my own private connection with those students.

I learned that spelling names correctly is very important. As much as I hate it when someone spells my name "Jen" instead of "Jenn," my students hate it even more when I misspell their first or last names. I also know that their nicknames, "Pumkin," "Babydoll," "Sad Eyez," "Rico," and "Gordo" tell me more about them than the ones on

their birth certificates. I know that telling them my own first name, and later in the year, the nickname my friends use, broke down walls like no classroom discussion ever could.

But what's really in a name—or for that matter, their place of residence, their parent's occupation, how much money their family has? Although I have learned time and time again that I can not use those things to determine who my students are, those facts are clues giving me insight into how their lives work.

When I try to describe my students, I can not help but see their faces pop up in my head. It is like the problem I had with putting *what really matters* in my portfolio. How can I describe Catherine's head tilted down as I ask her if the rumors of her pregnancy are true? How can I describe David's face when I tell him I know he has had a crappy life but I am not going to let him get away with using it as an excuse? How can I explain Sam's overly loud voice as it booms down the hallway on the way back from lunch? Any description I write in words cannot replace the picture I have in my head as I work with and think about these students day in and day out.

In mid-March, I went through the information file in the office. Each student has a card, blocked into squares of varying shades of red and pink, that tells us the critical information about them. First their name, then their address, then the schools they have gone to in the past. The date they arrived at Marrs and their Student ID number. Their parent or legal guardian's names, places of employment, and phone numbers. I looked at each one of my students cards, something I had not done before—the file was always a last resort if the phone number I had was incorrect. Looking through the stack was like stripping away the personal identities of my students to look at the bare facts.

The first thing I noticed was that many of the parent/guardian spaces had been edited with explanations like, "deceased," "aunt," "foster parent," "not married but living together," "do not know where father is," "he is dead," and so on. Many of my students live in two-parent homes. Many of them do not. I flipped through the cards and looked at the places of employment of my student's parents. I was surprised at how many parents are unemployed, self-employed, or work at labor intensive jobs.

Menard's, West Teleservices, Doubletree Hotel, Asbestos Company, Slosburg Company, Willsie Cap and Gown, Swanson Corporation, H & S Painting, Monroe Auto Equipment Company, Campbell's Soups, Vlasic, and Nebraska Beef were a few that stuck out as being particularly "blue collar." Other jobs caught my eye for another reason: Alegent Health, Omaha Public Schools, State of Nebraska, City of Omaha, Hoffman Realty, COX Communication, Bible Truth Ministries. Some of those first jobs would be difficult to work at all day and have to go home to a family at night. I do not know if I could do manual labor for eight hours and then find the willpower to get to school to watch the basketball game, go to parent teacher conferences, find out my child was failing, and then go home to a household with no one else to help with dinner and my children. On the other hand, sometimes I get so caught up in the difficult times my students face that I forget there are those with parents who have financially profitable jobs.

After thinking about that, I chide myself, "How shallow is it to describe my students by listing the jobs their parents hold?" How do I know that the child of an Omaha Public Schools teacher has a better home life than one whose parents work in a factory? I

remember at the first parent teacher conferences this year, when Amy's father came up to the table I was sitting at. I put out my hand to shake it and he looked down, embarrassed, because his hands were dirty after a long day working construction. He apologized for not having time to clean up before he came, and I grabbed his hand and shook it anyway. I was glad he had made the decision to come to conferences at all. I know if I were him, I would much rather have gone home to dinner and some privacy than trekked to school to talk with eight teachers who might grimace at my dirty hands and clothes. I have to remember to use facts to help understand my students if I can, but never to use them to stereotype negatively.

When you get right down to it, though, job status isn't just about stereotyping. Those things are not meaningless when a parent's employment status is the difference between having insurance and not having it, or obtaining the car that gets you to school or not having a way to get to school. Parents' jobs make a difference when they work the night shift and are woken up in the middle of the day by a teacher who wonders, "What the hell is any good parent doing sleeping at noon on a weekday?"

So, to the readers of my thesis, what do you know about my students now? You know their names and where their parents work. You know their races and the language they speak. Does that ever tell you who a child is? Here is the best description I can give of my students.

My eighth graders are intelligent, difficult, obnoxious, flirty, self-conscious, funny, kind, interesting, interested, frustrated, sad, entertaining, sweet, blond-haired, brown-haired, Spanish and English speaking, optimistic, rebellious, talented, brilliant, alive,

vocal, grownup, violent, giving, needy, comical, serious, jealous, diverse, experienced, scared, brave, excited, fun, cruel, intuitive, loving, perceptive, considerate, disrespectful, thoughtful, insightful, childlike, skilled, helpful, religious, pessimistic, honest, driven, hard-working people. They own compelling stories and have more life experience than many adults I know, and as I try so hard to describe them, all I can think to describe is how who *they* are affects who *I* am.

I have already mentioned seeing connections between their identity struggles and my own. Perhaps that is why they affect me so much. Or maybe it is because they are constantly growing and changing, making me laugh and worry and cry. They test my strengths and weaknesses every day. I can not explain how much I care about them as people. Earlier I mentioned an obsession with teaching, and I will further that by saying I have an obsession—perhaps more appropriately a deep love—for my students.

A colleague at school has often asked my why I care so much and so deeply, and as many discussions as we have, I still have not pinpointed the answer. Mr. Warren is a "school to home" paraprofessional, which means he acts as a liaison/counselor for any student who wants to work with him. One day, he and I sat across from each other at his desk in the tiny art storage closet that is his "office." Behind him on bookshelves were huge jars full of paintbrushes of all sizes, large bottles of red, white, yellow, blue, green, and black tempera paint, and stacks of boxes of colored pencils. His desk was clear except for a calendar, a post-it note, a computer, and a small bowl-shaped sculpture obviously made by a student.

It was 3:00 in the afternoon, and I had to leave in ten minutes to make it to graduate class on time, but on my way out of the building he caught me and said, "I want to talk to you. I'm intrigued by you and who you are, and why you're such a good teacher." As the junior high counselor walked by, he put his arm over my shoulder and gave me a quick squeeze, saying, "This is my favorite teacher. You know why? Because she's the students' favorite teacher." I was embarrassed at the flattery, and also a little apprehensive about hearing the phrase, "the students' favorite teacher." I am always afraid they believe that because I am too easy on them, do not write referrals when they accidentally say a bad word, or because I let them stay in my room after school and sit on my tables and gossip with each other.

We sat in his makeshift office and started talking. I felt myself getting nervous, because I knew he was going to ask me questions that were difficult to answer. Although I have had conversations with other teachers at Marrs about kids, Mr. Warren was the first person to notice and want to talk about the depth of my feelings for my students. The first question he asked me was, "So what is it about you that's different?" This made me even more nervous, and I picked up the white plaster sculpture and turned it in my hands as I thought. I did not know how to answer, so he asked me another question. "How did you decide to be a teacher?" I replied with my standard answer to that question, telling him about my love of reading, my experience volunteering at a leadership camp with high school students, and that the combination of those two interests made me decide to go into teaching. He smiled his big smile, throwing his head back a little bit, then leaned in conspiratorially. "No, I mean, why are you here right now."

After a long pause and a few deep breaths, I replied, "Because I love my students." As I said it, tears came to my eyes and faces started flashing through my head. Tony, Rose, Kenneth, Joshua, Sam...all of the students who have been such a source of frustration while at the same time holding a special place in my heart. "I think I'm drawn to the same kind of kids you are," I said, knowing his job is simply to talk with students who look like they need someone to talk to. "I guess they are the ones labeled 'at risk', the ones who seem to have no hope and no support system." He nodded, taking in my tears and my words, but somehow reading my mind at the same time.

"Why does it make you uncomfortable when I say you are the students' favorite teacher?" I confided in him the reasons it worried me, and he shrugged it off, dismissing the idea that it was because I was too lenient. "Why do I always cry when I talk to you?" I asked, thinking about the discussion we'd had earlier that day in my classroom, when he touched lightly on some of my feelings about my students.

"Maybe because you care." He was right, and as we continued talking for much longer than the ten minutes I had allotted myself, I cried even more. I told him the thing that makes me the saddest is knowing the students I really reached out to are not even at Marrs anymore—four of those five "special" ones were expelled, stopped coming to school, or changed schools. He smiled quietly and said, "But someday, you're going to be standing in line at the grocery store, and you'll see a nice-looking gentleman about 25 years old. He'll be standing with his wife and 7-year-old son, and when he sees you, his face will light up with joy. He'll grab his wife's hand, and pull her over to you and say, 'Honey, I want you to meet a very special person, someone who changed my life.' And

he'll bring her to you, and give you a big hug and tell you thank you for caring. You never know when it will happen, but it will happen, and it will be often enough to keep you going."

That image made the tears come even faster, and my heart skipped a beat thinking about the possibility that something I have done this year, or will do in the coming years, could come back to me in such an amazing way. "It's happened. More than you would think," he said, again reading my thoughts. I took a deep breath, trying to control my tears, and started to speak, but could not get any words out. I was still looking down at the sculpture as I turned it around and around in my hand.

Why do I cry every time I talk with him about my students? I think it is because he understands my feelings for them, and knows my motivations as to how I treat students. I think about them all the time. If I am in the car, I will hear a song that reminds me of them in some way, and then I do not stop thinking about them for the rest of the day. They are in everything I do—when I go to the bar with friends, inevitably I want to tell a million stories about my students. They make me laugh and cry, they scare me sometimes, and they surprise me every day. I never thought I would love them so much.

As I sit here typing, I can hear their voices, "Wassup, Miss Bernard, how ya doin'," "Hey, Miss B. Are you coming to the wrestling meet?" "Ms. Bernard, my grandma look better than you." "Thanks for talking to me today, Ms. Bernard." This is said as Joshua, who is the shortest student in eighth grade at just under five feet tall, reaches up and pats my shoulder awkwardly before sprinting out of the room to catch the bus.

The best times I have with my students come during lunch or after school, when they stay just to talk or because I have asked them to stop by. Joshua and I sat across from each other at the table in the front of the room once, eating our chicken sandwiches and discussing anger. He had been mad before lunch, and when I asked him what was wrong, he would only say, "I'm afraid I'm gonna fight, and if I do I have to go live with my dad." When I asked him more questions, he said, "Maybe I'll tell you during lunch." I replied, "That sounds like a great idea. Let's go get our lunch and come back here and talk." At lunchtime, we sat down and almost immediately, tears started rolling down his cheeks as he talked about a conflict he was having with another student. It appeared to be over something so meaningless I wanted to say, "Don't worry about it." I could not do that, though, because it was obvious he *was* worrying about it. As lunch period came to a close, he made a decision on how to face the situation, and told me he'd let me know what happened.

Alisa and Jessica are two girls I got to know rather well by sharing lunches with them. It started as a fluke—they had gotten into the habit of sitting in the back of the room and talking throughout class, and I asked them to stay and eat lunch with me so I could talk to them about it—sort of a lunch detention. Imagine my surprise when they approached me the next day and asked if they could eat with me again. After that, we had lunch together nearly every day. We had our most important talks at that table with our lunch trays between us. "I don't know, I just don't get along with white people," said Alisa, whose family is from El Salvador, one day as we discussed issues of race and prejudice. This was after a week or so of us eating lunch together, and I said a bit

hesitantly, but with a little laughter in my voice, "Alisa, I'm the whitest person I know! Why do you get along with me?" "You're different," she said. I did not press her, but my heart was doing a little dance at the knowledge that I had done something somewhere along the way to defy her stereotype.

The conclusion I can draw from my journals and conversations is that *who* my students are is the most important part of why I love them. I talk about the opposing forces working within them all the time. Eighth graders do not know who they are, and that makes them all the more lovable. The same kids who scoff at children's books and converse loudly about sex and drugs are the ones who clamor for an ink stamp of a cartoon kitten on the back of their hand and fight about who gets to hold my tiny frog-shaped stuffed animal during class each day. I'll never forget the day I walked in and noticed the frog missing from its home on my desk and caught a few of my "tough" boys arguing over who had rights to keep the frog during class. It eventually got to the point where I had to confiscate the frog to avoid further conflict. I hadn't realized how childlike the hearts of my 13 and 14-year-olds, even the boys, were until that day. The girls who wear more makeup than movie stars are the same ones who carry teddy-bear-shaped backpacks and ask *me* to ask a boy if he'll write them a note.

My students are too old to hug, but too young for me to resist wanting to gather them up in my arms every day before I send them home. Sometimes I look at them in the middle of class and have to take a deep breath before continuing what I'm doing, just so I do not cry. It is at odd moments these tears hit me—sometimes there's nothing that sets it off. I just look at them and realize they are here, and they're counting on me for

something. I am not sure exactly what it is they need. One of my favorite things is to look at a student when they walk in the room, realize they're having a bad day, and then sneak over in the middle of class and say, "Hey, are you OK?" I usually get a look of surprise and then a short response, to which I almost always reply "Well, I'm here if you need me." That look of surprise gives me the best feeling. Knowing that two sentences out of my mouth can make a kid realize someone cares is exciting to me.

Teaching eighth grade places an interesting perspective on *how* I show my love for my students. I worry that if I show too much affection, it will be taken the wrong way by my students or someone else. It scares me to be in a room alone with a student, because teachers are so vulnerable in this society. So I've had to find other ways. When I want to stop Andrew and give him a hug because I know he's scared to walk home alone for fear of being "jumped," I have to curb my instincts and just look him in the eye and tell him I am here if he needs me. When Karen tells me with tears in her eyes that her grandfather is dying, I do not wipe the tears off like I would if she were my child. Instead I crouch down close to her desk and tell her that anytime she needs to go to the bathroom and get herself together, she can just walk out and I'll understand.

On my birthday, during the most glorious surprise party ever, I gave and received the hugs I had been wanting all year. My last period students, a great combination of kids, had been planning a not-so-surprise party for weeks. I had let them get away with silly lies like "We need streamers for an...umm....science project" so I did not ruin their excitement. They shut me out of my classroom on the day of my birthday when the bell rang, and as I paced uncertainly in the hall listening to the unsupervised commotion in the

room, they moved desks and put up streamers, turning our classroom into an entirely new place. As I entered the room, I immediately burst into tears over how sweet and wonderful they were, when suddenly eighth graders wanting hugs surrounded me. It was a special occasion, and they were giving the hugs in celebration. I was returning them out of love, and because I had been waiting for the chance all year.

Despite my frustrations with showing affection for my students, they know without a doubt how much I care. Near the end of the school year, when Brian was dropping hints about suicide, I was walking down the hall after talking to him with tears in my eyes. Maricela Gallego caught up with me, saw the tears, and asked what was wrong. I replied, "Oh, you know how it is. When one of my students is having a rough time, it makes me sad." She replied with absolute conviction as she gave me a quick hug, "Oh, Ms. Bernard, you care about your students so much." Sam Wallace, who one day told me that, "Your head look like a loaf of white bread," and, "Your fingers look like they been smashed in a car door," on another day told the music teacher I was his favorite teacher "because you can tell she really cares." So, if I do not know exactly *why* I care or where it comes from, I do know how strong that love is, and more importantly, that my students know as well.

Chapter V. The Teacher As A Vulnerable Observer

Section A. Critical Incidents

If the definition of "critical incident" is that it is something the participant sees as particularly meaningful (Branch et al., 1997), sometimes it seems that nearly everything that has happened this year could be one. I have a hard time distinguishing. I journaled one day "There were so many critical incidents that happened just yesterday, so many things I had to stop and think about. I do not know exactly how to separate them, how to know which are important in the long run and which will affect me only today." I will add to that definition that a critical incident is something I can not stop thinking about, something that really matters and worries me, that I mull over and over. It is something that scares me, excites me, or makes me hurt and cry and talk. Then I can break it down and choose specific incidents to call "critical." This section is the major portion of my research. After every critical incident, I came home and wrote in my thesis journal. These stories were told for the first time just hours after they happened. It is these stories which are the research driving my conclusions.

The critical incidents are arranged in chronological order and taken directly from my journal entries. This school year had its ups and downs, and many of these critical incidents seemed to be part of a common theme. The holidays, and also, coincidentally, our days off from school, seemed to be a good way to separate these times of the year. Each section contains critical incidents that happened at that time (some of the time frames have been changed to protect the identities of the students discussed). These incidents help to define my school year. It is almost scary, the emotional roller coaster I

have been on, but like I said in my journal once, "It's also exhilarating. It feels good to be this obsessed about something, especially when I know it's something as important as my students."

Labor Day to Thanksgiving: Bright-eyed and Bushytailed

I started the school year just as every first year teacher does. I decorated my classroom, had begun poring over my curriculum, and was ready to meet my students and teach using all the skills I had learned in college. My classroom was going to be a place where literature and my students' love of it ruled, where discipline problems would not exist because everyone would be so interested in the curriculum, and where a community of learners resided.

The first three months of the school year were very difficult for me. I had not started out with a strong classroom management program; therefore I was having trouble keeping my large classes under control. When I compared my ninety-minute block class to a particular student's seven-minute attention span, which I timed one day out of curiosity's sake, I realized I was in over my head. I had not developed a strong enough relationship with my students to demand respect from them, nor had I provided myself with a system for dealing with misbehavior consistently.

I was also unprepared to deal with some of the things my students were going through. Early in the year, I asked students to make "timelines" of their lives, detailing the important incidents that had happened to them since they were born. After that, I wrote, "I took the timelines home that day to grade before hanging them on the bulletin

board. What I read there was a shock, and it made me realize how naive I am. Their timelines were full of death, suicide, divorce, multiple moves, foster homes, living with people who aren't their parents...those were their important events." I had, without realizing it, transferred my own understanding of junior high—popularity contests and owning the right clothes—to their lives. Of course they still dealt with the things I did growing up—but they also deal with much more, as their timelines proved. I also wrote, "I think I trivialized their understandings of themselves." I had not realized how cognizant my students were of the events that took place in their lives and how much those events affected each of them.

To the group I volunteer with, I wrote a letter voicing my concerns about how we attend to the needs of the students who come to our Student Council leadership camps every summer. I wanted the volunteer staff, which has a tendency to glaze over difficulties and paint a picture of a Utopian life for every teenaged leader, to understand that even the "best and brightest" kids deal with unimaginable difficulty every day. I wrote to them, "Our delegates deal with drugs, the death of friends, gangs, divorce, abuse, prejudice, self-esteem, pregnancy, hating school, being popular, wanting to make real changes in society but not knowing how...I don't think we have ever seriously considered the fact that we just may be getting in way over our heads here." The letter, addressed to my peers on the volunteer staff, was also a way for me to voice my frustration and disappointment in myself for not having foreseen these things before beginning teaching.

I was not the only one dealing with these problems. Another first year teacher at my school was struggling as well. I journaled once, "She had a rough day today. It makes me sad to see her upset and not be able to figure out why." Looking back, I think I knew why. It was because she was dealing with the same issues I was. Our college classes had never taught us how to weave that special balance of classroom control and educating on a specific subject while at the same time creating a relationship of respect and dignity between a teacher and students who were very different from one another.

Thanksgiving to Christmas: Reality Check

Those difficulties did not go away as quickly as I had hoped they would. I wished many times that I had started the year differently or chosen more useful preparatory classes in college. It had gotten to the point where the students saw my classroom as a place where they could play around and not get in trouble, where they did not have to do their best work, and where they did not care about the subjects we dealt with or the way I presented them. Most of this was my fault. Although I arrived at school an hour before duty time each day and often stayed in the building until as late as 8 o'clock at night, I still did not feel like I was getting anywhere. I was feverishly planning lessons I thought would engage and interest my students, and in doing so I strayed away from dealing with behavior problems.

In my journal I wrote:

> It's very discouraging. I came in here wanting to stir everything up. I was thinking about my [student teaching] experience at North [High School] today,

> and I really felt like I did a good job there. I made a difference to some of those students...I know I did. But to these students, I don't know how much good I'm doing. Am I really teaching them literature? Or language arts? No...I don't know what I'm teaching them. Half of me just wants to forget the curriculum and teach them how to get along with each other.

Around that time, I ran into some of the high school students I had taught during student teaching, and admitted to them that working in a middle school was much harder than I thought it would be. My supervising teacher for my student teaching semester had told me over and over again, "If you can make it through this, you can make it through anything." After the first couple months at Marrs, I started to believe that I was in the middle of the "anything" she was talking about.

One day I journaled:

> Now I think about all the crazy things that go on in my classroom, and I realize I'm not such a good teacher after all. I have such a huge problem with discipline! I just can't handle the class like I should be able to. And my planning is lacking big time...and the list goes on. I hate this! I want my confidence back...it's not fair to look at yourself and know that you could be the best teacher in the world, but also know that you're unable to be due to circumstance, the weather, who's absent, who's feeling like fighting that day...I'll say for the 50 millionth time, teaching is the hardest thing I've ever done.

The discouragement and feelings of inadequacy were getting to me, and I started realizing I would not make it through the rest of the year unless something changed.

Then, one of the critical incidents I have replayed over and over in my head happened on the last day of school before Thanksgiving Break. I stopped by the assistant principal's office to go over an observation he had done earlier in the week. I was nervous about talking to him, not because my lesson had gone badly, but because I was afraid other teachers had noticed how poorly I felt I was doing. After going over the evaluation, he pushed the pink and yellow forms aside, and said sincerely, "So, really, how are you doing?" That question opened the floodgates, and I started crying.

Later I wrote:

> Of course he caught me at the time when I was having the worst week ever, feeling like I had no control whatsoever of my classes, and I just started bawling. I kept apologizing to him...[and] in my self-inflicted paranoia, I had to ask him if he had heard from other people or if he was just wondering. He said, 'Jenn, I've seen your class lists. You've got some tough kids. I know it would be difficult to deal with some of them.' So, I took a deep breath and started talking. I told him everything was so much harder than I thought it would be, and that I was mad at myself because I did not follow the *don't smile 'til Christmas* rule.

He handled the situation superbly, and said just the right things to make me feel better without minimizing my distress. I left the room feeling better, while taking a vow to really crack down on my students' behavior after our short break.

I returned to the classroom a different woman. Since the beginning of the year, I had been worried about what my students thought of me. I wanted them to like me; I even worried that if I was too "mean" they might misbehave more. However, I realized that

there was no way for them to begin respecting me or the material we were studying if they believed there was no control in the classroom. I had talked with a few students who were frustrated with the fact that I rarely sent anyone to the office, even when they were disrupting the entire class.

Some students complained about the "new Ms. Bernard," but soon realized I was not turning into an authoritarian, I was just beginning to enforce the classroom rules we had set at the beginning of the year. This allowed for more time to interact with the students in classroom discussions, and in the end, I think it helped us to get more done during classtime.

It was between Thanksgiving and Christmas that I started to realize how much I cared about my students. From the start, I had found connections with a few specific students, and had started developing relationships with them. I ate lunch with my 5th hour class every day, and was becoming more comfortable with my role as a teacher. It made things easier in the classroom, but a personal relationship with my students made me, and them, more vulnerable.

The first critical incident involving my personal feelings for my students proved to me how little I actually knew about the dual lives many of them led. Pablo, a student who had moved to the United States at age 10, was working very hard in my class. Although reading was difficult for him, he often volunteered to read aloud, and had been working for over a month to read the young adult novel Hatchet by Gary Paulson. One day, he proudly proclaimed that he had finished and loved the book, and presented me with a book project—a drawing and piece of writing about his favorite scene in the book. I was

so excited to see the pride he took in finishing the book, and impressed by the time and effort he had taken to do it. I thought to myself that I had succeeded.

After school on the same day, I overheard a paraprofessional talking with the principal about something she had observed just after the final bell rang. My thesis journal says:

> Forgetting I was listening in on a conversation that probably wasn't meant for me, I moved closer. What I heard next made my heart sink. 'Pablo had a baseball bat, and he threw it in the bushes when he saw us come up.' Although I already knew the answer, I asked quietly, 'Pablo Benes?' I was thinking *My Pablo? Little, darling, Pablo, who just today drew me a beautiful sketch of a scene from Hatchet? The Pablo, who, just yesterday, had waved his hand eagerly to get a part in the play we were reading?* 'Yeah, Pablo Benes.' I sighed and walked away. I didn't want to hear anymore. It was the first time the reality of my students' lives really hit me. I had always known that some of them, at age 13 and 14, already had gang affiliations. I'd heard their talk in the halls about being 'jumped in' and saw their handshakes and secretly exchanged looks.

That was when I realized that my students weren't always exactly what I thought they were. They have lives outside of the ones I see them live every day. At that point, I began paying closer attention to their actions and emotions. It was this step that made me focus on how much more important the students were than anything else we were doing at school. I decided that they, as people, would become more important to me than the subjects we were studying. I would try to use the books we read as a way to get through

to them, as vehicles for them to begin to understand themselves. I started taking more time to talk with them in class, even if it meant a few minutes less to deal with the curriculum each day.

Doing that gave me an opportunity to know my students as individuals. I spoke to Jacob Walker one day when he was refusing, even more than usual, to do his work. I wrote:

> I said I would help him as much as possible. He told me he knew all the teachers hated him. He said, 'Mrs. Jones told me everyone's out to get me...that everyone thinks I'm a gangbanger. I don't care. I know you all hate me.' I tried as hard as I could to convince him it wasn't true. I asked him if I had ever done anything to make him not trust me. He couldn't come up with anything; he just kept repeating over and over again the fact that he knew all teachers were out to get him.

At that point, I realized I was going to have to earn the trust of my students, not vice versa, by proving my good intentions.

I had started to know and love them on the first day of school. Now it was my turn to allow them to know me. Circumstances in my own life made it difficult for me to hide my emotions during school. When my 16-year-old brother ran away from home, it was impossible for my students to not take notice of my red, tear-stained cheeks. When they asked what was wrong, I told them the truth—not only about the events that had taken place, but also about how I was feeling and why I was crying during school. I do not know if that is how other teachers would have handled it, but to me it was only natural to

trust them when I expected them to confide in me. That and other difficult times during the year provided a chance for me to have a give-and-take relationship with my students, rather than asking them to share their lives with me while I stayed behind a closed door.

By this time, I had had some good discussions with students and felt like I was finally making an impact. I felt a thrill of hope one day after scolding Tony and his friend in the hall for kicking a younger student in the back of the knee to throw him off balance. It was after school, and I had broken up a fight between he and another student in my last period class, so I was already frustrated with him. Despite his violent moods and his aversion to work, Tony had become one of my favorite students. I had seen his tough facade soften just often enough to show me what a wonderful person he was. On this particular day, I had already spent a good deal of time admonishing him for his behavior. When I introduced myself to his partner in crime, I was surprised to hear Tony add, "...she's cool." I wrote in my journal, "It was so nice to hear a kid say that, right when I was in the middle of reprimanding him about something I'd lectured him about time and time again. I hope to God he knows how much I care and how hard I was trying for him, and I hope he tries for himself now."

I found my heart going out to a certain type of student. Usually they were kids who had a difficult home life, did not do well in school, and did not have too many friends, but who I still saw a glimmer of hope in. I saw Tony as lazy and a bully, until the day he told me he was going to get two huge tattoos on his back—one saying "Grampa" and the other reading "Grandma." How can you not love a kid after looking at his skinny face and greasy hair and hearing that he loves his grandparents so much he wants their names

tattooed on his body? I was wrong about other students, too. I thought Carrie was a smart girl with a bad attitude until one day during homeroom she told me the saga of the custody battle between her parents, and her role in taking care of her brother's physical and emotional needs while her parents battled with each other.

When Michelle, a seventh grader, came to me after school to talk one day, I was a little leery. She was notorious for her negative attitude toward teachers. She and I had spoken a little bit after school off and on when she came in to use a computer, but I was not prepared for what happened on this particular day. She showed me a letter her sister (actually a cousin raised by her mom) had written her, then proceeded to tell me about all of the family issues and problems surrounding that sister and another sister. I was taken aback, because I did not know what to do or say, or why she had come to me. In my journal, I said:

> My reaction to all of this? Wow. I am just now thinking about what really happened, and it's kind of scary. I don't want to become a student's best friend/confidant, especially when there's a good chance I'll be her teacher next year. But I know she has gotten hurt time and time again and I know her family is definitely messed up. Is this an okay thing to be doing? Am I taking my role as teacher too far? She was in my classroom till 5 o'clock just talking and helping me clean and straighten desks and stuff, which I think is fine for once, but if it's every night I will be apprehensive as to what my role really is.

This began a relationship with Michelle that lasted through the year, and often caused me to wonder about the way I interacted with students.

Despite my concerns about what the "proper" way to handle relationships with students might be, I decided to begin trying to give them the attention and caring they craved. Learning things about certain students led me to believe that all of my students had issues to deal with, and that they should all be given the benefit of the doubt. I vowed that I wouldn't let up on the discipline, but I would have compassion for each student every day, because I never knew what he or she had to deal with when they went home. Even those students who had great parents and were good at school had their own fears and worries to deal with.

Christmas to Easter: Taking it One Day at a Time

As the school year progressed and the eighth graders got a little older, all of the emotions and issues we dealt with began to seem more pronounced. The two gangs at our school started picking fights with each other, girls and boys began to have crushes, teachers were reaching the breaking point, and we all looked eagerly to the end of the year. In January, the school district announced that a vote would be held for a new student assignment plan to redistribute students all across the district. One of the effects of the plan, if passed, was that Marrs Middle School would close and the building would be used only for elementary students the next year. This put all of the middle level teachers in a frenzy, for we did not know where we might be teaching next year. It also upset the seventh graders, who might have to separate and go to different schools for their eighth grade year. For a close-knit, neighborhood school, the idea of closing was almost debilitating.

Meanwhile, I began to do what I had set out to—build personal relationships with students. Instead of eating lunch in the cafeteria with my class, I invited one or two students a day to eat with me in my classroom. Some teachers assigned lunch detentions, but when I asked students to join me, I made it clear that it would be a positive experience. Often, I ate with Jessica and Alisa, and through our conversations I learned everything I had ever wondered, as well as some things I did not want to know, about South Omaha gangs. Jessica's insistence on the fact that she was going to drop out of school at 16 and move to Los Angeles to join a gang of girls she knew about frustrated me, but our lunches were so relaxed and comfortable that I was able to respond to her honestly, explaining why I saw her plan as a negative option, without her being afraid of losing face in front of a group of friends.

After school, another group of girls spent time in my room, and we talked about similar issues. It just so happened that girls in both of the two gangs trusted me and made me a confidant of sorts. I was careful to keep the two groups' stories and information to myself, so they would not feel I was taking sides, but all of them also knew that the moment I heard of a planned fight or disruption I would go to the principal and the security guards. Somehow, they understood that this was another role I had and did not get upset when their plans were foiled because I had warned the administration about them. It was by dealing with these two groups that I learned how they saw the Mexican-American culture working in South Omaha.

I had always believed that because many of the people in the area were of Mexican descent, they probably had the same traditions and values. One day while talking with a

few girls, they let me know, in no uncertain terms, that there was a division. One group of people, whom they referred to as "whitesicans," (a combination of the words "white" and "Mexican") or "güeros" (a Spanish slang term for "white person") were people whose parents had been born in the United States or who had a Caucasian parent or grandparent. Another group, who they called "real Mexicans," were born in Mexico or California and still had close ties and family there. These two groups of students were in different gangs and rivaled each other in and outside of school. A language division was also evident, for the "whitesicans" spoke English to each other at school, and probably at home as well, while the "real Mexicans" spoke Spanish nearly all the time. This impacted the way I saw the community, as well as the way I saw my students' interactions with each other. At that point, I became more aware of their struggles to define themselves.

Sometimes our roles were reversed, and my students learned about me and watched me struggle. The day I found out my brother had been placed in a rehabilitation center in the suicide ward, I told my classes I was not up to par because of family issues, and that they could ask me about it one-on-one if they wanted. Before I knew it, Catherine was counseling me at lunch, giving me advice on what to do and how my brother might be feeling. "Don't worry, Ms. Bernard. It might take a long time, but things will be okay," she said. I wrote in my journal, "I never came out and said, 'What should I do?' She was very quiet, calm, sure of herself, and it made me feel so much better." Who was the grown-up then? Again, I was giving my students a chance to recognize that I trusted them, so they could trust me.

That trust was not without its disadvantages, though. Building a personal relationship with students set me up for some sad times. One of the critical incidents that touched me emotionally was seeing my students leave school because they were expelled, reassigned to another school in the district, or just stopped attending. The first time it happened was particularly difficult. I wrote in my journal:

> Tony Castillo got reassigned today. I feel like a doctor who's just lost their first patient. I feel like I failed in some way, like my efforts to get him working and thinking were all in vain...I feel like I'm talking about someone who just died, and I guess in some ways I am. I will never see this kid again, will never know what happens to him—whether he makes it or whether he's dead on the street. I want so bad to think I did something or said something to make things a little better for him, but I will never know.

As the year progressed, I had more triumphs and got through to some students, but also saw many to whom I had dedicated a lot of time and love just fade away. It just so happened that the five students I worked with very closely and went out on a limb for all ended up leaving school at one time or another. That was painful, because part of teaching is that you may never see your students after the year is over.

Easter to Memorial Day: The Home Stretch

School was nearing its end, and after a much-needed spring break, I came back determined to make the best of the end of the year. I was becoming more and more attached to my students, not only to the ones who had made an effort to get to know me,

but also to the ones who could not or did not reach out. As I got closer, it got harder. One day, after hearing Alison, one of the kindest and most hardworking students I had, talk about her frustrations because her parents sold drugs, I wrote in my journal right after school, "I feel like I'm going to throw up. I always say our kids have crazy lives and have a lot to deal with, and sometimes things happen that make me realize how true those words are." I was physically sick at the thought of what she was dealing with. I was enjoying the relationships that had developed, but I also had to acknowledge the trials that would come with them.

Near the end of April, two students who attended Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, entered the school during a lunch period and used planted bombs and guns to wreak havoc on the school, killing about twenty students and teachers. The entire country flew into a panic as the press, parents, students, and teachers began realizing how volatile our schools can be. The event, although it happened hundreds of miles away, affected us every day. Bomb threats became a daily event on the news, whether they were real or just students trying to get a day off from school. Because the students who perpetrated Columbine High School were seen as outsiders in their school, and were part of a group who wore black trenchcoats and disliked "jocks," suspicion was placed on any student who seemed different from the norm. News crews began trying to sneak into schools to test the security systems. Our school revamped our crisis plan. What had already been a tension-filled end of the year was made even worse by the events happening across the nation and in our own area.

That event brought about a discussion between myself and my students that made me realize how different our views on some things are. On the day after the Columbine shootings, I journaled:

> I cussed at my students for the first time today. I was absolutely livid. I was so mad I couldn't see straight. I had been planning on talking about the Littleton thing with my students when a fight started in the hallway before 4th period. In my own head, those two acts of violence (the fight and the Columbine thing) are very closely linked. Back in the classroom, the students started talking about how kids should just be allowed to fight whenever they want to, and how each student should get a free "fighting pass" which allows them to have one fight a year and not get in trouble for it. That's when I lost it, 'You mean to tell me I should just stay in here and ignore it when there are kids in the hall beating the shit out of each other?' I was so sad because I realized they don't connect one kind of violence with another, and they don't realize that the things they do aren't so different from the things those kids did...it's just a slight difference in mindset.

On the same day, I had another rude awakening. I had begun to worry about a particular student and his inability to control his temper. This is a major critical incident in my year. My journal says:

> I pulled William Hill in from science today and talked to him about some stuff. I know he's always angry and hurting inside and I wanted to make sure to tell him how much I like him and care about him. Our conversation was good overall, it

began well and ended with, 'Why did I pull you out of class to come in here and talk?' to which he paused and answered very quietly, 'Because you care.' But the middle of the conversation was the scary part. We were talking about anger and fighting and the fact that people make fun of William a lot. I said, 'If you're standing in the hallway and someone says something mean to you, you have a couple of choices. What are some of the things you could do?'

'I could either use a pen or a chair.'

'Which one would be the better option?'

'The pen.' *Good,* thought the English teacher in me, *using writing as a way to get emotions out.*

'Why the pen?'

'Because I can stick them in the neck. And then they can't move. So then I can beat them up more.'

'William,' I said, struggling to keep my voice steady and stop tears from coming to my eyes, 'did you know if you stick someone in the neck with a pen, they can die?'

'Yeah.'

Our conversation continued with an invitation for him to come into my room and punch things and kick the walls and the floor as much as he wanted as long as he was not hurting people. He seemed glad for the invitation, but not sure he would take me up on it in a given situation.

That conversation made me think harder about who my students were than I ever had. He was so nonchalant about using weapons to kill people. It also made me realize how easy it is to talk to students one on one and find out what's really in their heads. I just had to let them know I cared. When I talked to the guidance counselor about our talk, she was so impressed that I had gotten him to "open up," but I wondered if anyone had ever tried before.

My relationship with my students and my school community extended beyond the school day. One particular critical incident happened while I was with a group of friends on a weekend night. By this time, I was completely enmeshed in the lives of my students, and felt I knew them and their society rather well. Little did I know that it would touch me in such a negative way. After it happened, I ran to my journal and vented:

> Talk about a critical incident. I don't even have to go to school for them to happen. Last night Bob, Janel, Cari, Mike, and I went to the Park Ave. bar, down on Park Ave and Leavenworth. Bob was thinking about renting some space down there and wanted to check the neighborhood out—see if we thought people would be scared to go to that area. We went to the bar and it was awesome. Just a tiny little bar with an old grumpy man and some really nice customers. We left there at around 11:30pm and decided to walk around the block, look at Bob's building, and maybe stop at a nearby grocery store. As we turned the corner to walk up the block, Mike looked over at some kids who were across the street and said, "We're gonna get mugged."

I had been very optimistic about the trip earlier in the night, and when Bob said that it was a Hispanic neighborhood, I had two reactions. First, I felt a little angry. I am getting very protective of my boys and girls, and I don't like it when people assume it's a bad neighborhood since it's a Hispanic neighborhood. The other reaction I had was that I felt just a little more comfortable going there. Maybe I have a false sense of security and understanding of Hispanic people—I probably think I know more than I really do.

So even after Mike said, "We're gonna get mugged", I was defensive. "No we're not," I said, thinking to myself *geez, they're just some kids crossing the street.* Well, as I was having those positive thoughts, they were RUNNING across the street. There were three of them. Boys, probably about 15 or 16 years old...they had baby faces and baseball hats turned backwards. One of them kind of stood back and didn't really do anything the whole time. He was just watching. The second one got in between all of us and looked menacing, but didn't throw any punches. The third was the one who wanted the action. Right when they got in between us (before I really even realized what was happening), he threw two punches at Bob, one at his mouth, and one at his jaw. He barely even finished that when he grabbed Mike and shoved him up against the wall and hit him 4 or 5 times. The whole time it was going on, it was like a dream world. I saw him hitting Mike, looked up the block and saw Bob standing there with this look of fear on his face, thinking *No, Bob, don't look scared, don't*

look scared, don't look scared of them. He did relax when the guy let go of Mike.

Then the same kid walked toward me and Cari and Janel. The whole time he was walking I was saying in the most calming, non-defensive voice I could muster up, "It's cool. It's cool. It's cool." I probably said that sentence 20 times in a row. I felt like it had a calming influence on me and my friends, I don't know if it worked on him. He put his arm around me, said, "You got a cigarette?" to Janel, and then spoke to me in Spanish. I didn't understand the first part of the sentence, but the last part was a question, "...Sureños?" My ears perked up as I heard the last word. The "Sureños" are a prominent gang in South Omaha, and many of my students are affiliated with them. I shook my head and, almost laughing a little bit at the thought that he might be asking if I was in the gang, said "No." He got the cigarette from Janel, gave his buddies a triumphant look, and they went back across the street.

I turned to see that Mike was bleeding from his ear and nose and that Bob had a fat lip. I think my exact words were, "God fucking dammit" as we got in our cars and drove home. When we got back to Mike's house, we were all angry. I think I was the angriest for a couple of reasons: first, because I feel like I should have somehow stopped or de-escalated the situation. I have done it with my kids, but I know my kids and they know me. I wish I could have used my knowledge of these kids, name-dropped someone in Sureños, answered him in Spanish, I don't know. I don't even know if those things would have made it

better or worse. All I know is that I sounded like a broken record, "It's cool, it's cool, it's cool..." I was also fuming because of the impression my friends will now have of Hispanic people. They won't walk in a Hispanic neighborhood anymore. They won't think my little stories about my kids are so cute anymore because they'll hear those kids' voices as they ran up and started punching, "Where you from?" with a thick accent and that's what they'll think of when they think Mexican. Now they will have an experience to perpetuate whatever bad stereotype they had forever.

My kids and I talk a lot about how people are prejudiced and how they don't get treated right by people, and how there are so many stereotypes about Mexicans. Well, way to go out and just prove every one of them right!! Bob, Mike, and Cari don't have contact with Hispanic people every day. So until they have a very positive experience, they are going to have this one in the back of their heads every time they hear "Mexican". I know that truly unprejudiced people would put this experience out of their mind and not stereotype other Mexicans by these kids actions, but I'm sorry—you watch your friends get punched in the face and it's not going to leave your mind for a while.

I am shaking right now. I was laying in bed thinking about who I can talk to. I want to pull Pablo aside and say, "Your buddies beat up your favorite teacher on Friday. How do you feel about that?" I want him to react, to feel bad, to go and talk to those kids...but more than likely he'll probably laugh a little bit and tell me he's sorry it happened. I would also like to talk to Jessica about it. I know for

a fact she would laugh, but her and her big mouth would probably figure out who it was and that might be good.

I feel responsible for this somehow. I don't know exactly why...something about my own affiliation with this gang. Because, no matter where the connection lies, I am affiliated with the gang. And I wish that affiliation could have helped me out a little bit more. I'm at a loss for words. I don't know what I wanted to happen. I'm having stupid little daydreams of saying something to them about Marrs or Pablo, and them just relaxing and leaving without throwing any punches. But the thing is, they didn't even let us get a word in edgewise. That kid hit Bob before we even knew they were there. They didn't want our cars, they didn't ask us for money, all they got out of it was some blood on their ring and a cigarette. Cari had her big full purse right there in the open, and she would have given them everything in it. They didn't want that. They just wanted to hit some people. I said later to Mike, "Why couldn't they find something better to do with themselves? Why can't they go to a movie or hang out at home or something? The sad thing is, this made their weekend. Now that this has happened, they've had a *good* weekend." I'm very angry, and also regretful and sad. I wish they wouldn't have proved that point to my friends last night. I've been trying to tell everyone over and over again how cute and adorable my kids are. These three could have been my students. I don't doubt they do things like that. I almost wish they would have been.

That lengthy journal entry was the culmination of a lot of fears, thoughts, and anxiety I had about my students. It was full of the fears and prejudices, as well as the love and understanding I have about my students' culture and values. It combined my concerns with my own role in my students' lives, the fears I have about how kids live today, my need for my friends to have positive thoughts about my students, and my own inability to really become part of their society. No matter how many lunches I ate with Jessica and Alisa while discussing gangs, I still was not able to stop that incident from happening. My two lives collided on that night, and I was helpless to do anything with either of them.

As the year ended, I spent more time thinking about my students and less time thinking about anything else. I journaled:

> It's getting back to the point it was at earlier this year where school consumed me and I didn't think about anything else. I had kind of forgotten what that was like. It's weird, I complain about it, but I do find it exhilarating! Being there for 13-14 hours, coming home and going to bed an hour later, I don't know exactly what it is, but I do like that devotion.

Writing one section that includes the most critical things that happened this year is difficult. In my journal, I wrote:

> Every time something happened, I wrote it down...then after a while I thought to myself, 'Come on. Everything can't be a critical incident. Critical incidents are supposed to be the things that affect you a lot, make you change or think...' but then I realized that in teaching, nearly everything is a critical incident. Maybe

> that's why I'm so tired at the end of the day—because for 8 hours straight my mind and heart have been dealing with those critical incidents.

That may have been taking it a bit too far, but at the end of the year, my love for my students had affected me so much that dealing with them in every capacity became something that affected me, changed me, and made me think.

Section C. Rites of Passage

Every time I have started a new job, I have had to learn the systems that were in place before I got there. Teaching is more than just one job. A teacher not only has to be the master in his or her subject, but also acts as secretary, counselor, advisor, friend, colleague, and confidant. Teachers represent public schools to the media and taxpayers, and each building represents a piece of its district. For me, as a first year teacher whose college education consisted mostly of writing lesson plans and studying an academic area, learning how to deal with all the arenas of teaching was difficult. In addition, learning how to get along with the politics and social complexities of a building was stressful for me. I found that going through these "rites of passage" could be divided by the parts of the school year just as my critical incidents were.

Labor Day to Thanksgiving: Culture Shock

I began the school year confident that I would get along with my colleagues and sure I would be able to handle the paperwork and planning as well as I had during my student teaching experience. As soon as the year started, however, I realized how much my cooperating teacher had helped me out during student teaching, and I started thinking about all I would have to learn. Seemingly simple tasks such as filling out grade sheets, turning in class lists, and filling out forms for IEP's (Individualized Education Plans) became difficult when I had to deal with them on top of the rigors of teaching. During my first week, I met with the Special Education teacher, the other eighth grade English teacher, the vice-principal, and the other teachers on the eighth grade team. Each of those

meetings proved to me that there was more paperwork to handle than I had realized. I checked my mailbox every day before and after school, as well as two or three times during the day, and every time I did there was something new to fill out or finish. Whether it was a request from a parent for homework for their absent child or a survey from the district, each trip to the office provided me with more work to do.

Besides learning to deal with those surprise responsibilities, I had to work on creating good relationships with my colleagues. They were very welcoming on the first teacher inservice days, appearing at my doorway to introduce themselves and offering their help. When they got busy with planning and teaching, however, it became difficult for them to check in on me and I had to swallow my pride and ask them questions when I needed advice. I was lucky to have an outstanding group of teachers in our tiny English department, which consisted of myself, Dorothy, the other eighth grade Language Arts and Literature teacher, and Dean and Jeff, the seventh grade teachers. All of them became close friends and mentors over the course of the year. I wouldn't have made it through the year if Dorothy had not opened her file cabinets and plan book to me, and Jeff and Dean provided a sounding board for my troubles and frustrations.

Thanksgiving to Christmas: Fitting In

As the year went on, I began building relationships with my colleagues as I found my own place within the building. In order to be accepted as a reputable member of the staff, I had to learn the unspoken rules of the school. After being interrupted while teaching a few times by fellow teachers who stopped by with questions or just to say hello, I

discovered that it was acceptable to pop into another teacher's room during class, which had been a big "no-no" at North, where I student taught. When I began arriving early to school each morning, I found out that it was considered common courtesy to yell a quick "Hello!" into each classroom when coming in before school. After a month or so, I realized that the elementary school teachers parked in one side of the parking lot, while the middle school teachers parked in the other. These things were never communicated verbally, but rather they were things I had to find out for myself.

I learned how to work with the secretaries in the office, how many copies I could make without being reprimanded, how many questions I could ask before I got annoying, and how to find out how things had been done in the past. I was the Student Council sponsor, and running two dances during the year enlightened me on how to go about obtaining ladders, tables, and extra trashcans. I learned a lesson after the first dance when I planned to hold it in the gym but neglected to ask the physical education teachers for permission to use their classroom. I also had to figure out how to keep the Student Council finances straight without bothering the secretary. I found out which teachers would sell candy in their classrooms to raise money, and who it would be better not to ask.

I will never forget one effort I made to fit in. On the night of parent-teacher conferences, a group of teachers headed to a pizza place that happened to be close to where I lived. I was expecting to see my closer friends, who were some of the "younger" teachers. Imagine my surprise when I walked into the pizza place, fresh from my first ever parent-teacher conferences, and saw only the three men who made up what I had

dubbed "the old boys club." These men had been friends for years, had taught at Marrs forever, and were probably making their 100th trip to that particular pizza joint together. Something that never failed to amaze me about Marrs was the number of teachers who had been there for years and years. The science teacher, who retired this year, had taught at Marrs longer than I had been alive. As a twenty-two year old woman barely out of college and younger than most of their children, sitting down at the table like an equal was daunting.

They welcomed me, poured me a beer, and continued their conversation. As the night wore on, I found myself talking more and more, and realized I was having a great time with the "old boys club." They had accepted me without question. It was my own preconceived notions that had made it difficult for me to join them. I had always believed that veteran teachers were soured, did not care about students, and were just doing their jobs so they could have summers off. Listening to them talk about students and considering their dedication to the profession taught me an important lesson that night.

I had a similar experience each day as I worked with Mr. Williams, an older man who taught the social studies class across the hall from me. I had been leery of him because of my one-sided notions about veteran teachers, and every day my understanding of them changed as I watched him come in early, stay late, change and revise lesson plans, and help students well after duty hours. Mr. Williams was an African-American man who grew up in the South, and hearing him teach about civil rights and separate but equal facilities was a lesson to me. Sometimes I think I know a good deal about my subject, but my book knowledge may never match his years of wisdom and life experience. Though

he had taught the same subject for many years, he was attentive to the changing curriculum, and worked for hours to plan a month-long unit on women in history. I found myself craning my neck to hear him teach during my planning period, and by the end of the year I was filled with respect and admiration for a man I had once judged based on my mistaken understanding of older teachers.

All of those things were a part of fitting into an environment whose traditions and customs had been standing long before I arrived. I made my best attempt to follow the unspoken rules, while still doing things the way my own experiences taught me was the best way. At the same time, I was learning life lessons from other teachers in my building, who probably thought they were only educating their students.

Christmas to Easter: Sorority Sisters

In my district, middle school teachers are divided into teams that meet during a common plan period to discuss students, lessons, school events, and administrative news. My team was made up of the eighth grade core teachers, which included the math, science, social studies, English as a Second Language, and Special Education teachers, as well as myself and the other eighth grade Language Arts and Literature teacher. We met formally once a week, and informally up to three or four times a week. Most of the people on the team were women, and as the end of the year neared, I found myself comparing our team meetings to the sorority meetings I had attended in college.

Everyone on the team was an outstanding classroom teacher. I had observed all of them interact with students at one time or another, and knew for the most part what their

teaching styles were. I admired them for their dedication to students and to the field of education in general. However, meeting as a team often brought out the stubborn streak in each of us, and team meetings sometimes turned into miniature battles.

Even in a school with only 350 students and 27 teachers, there are bound to be differences of opinion. Although I had my own opinions on everything we discussed at team meetings, I often found myself shrinking into my seat as I took minutes and watched the clock until the meeting was over. Over the course of the year, accusations flew, arguments were had, and judgements were made. Often, one or two individuals could set the stage for a negative meeting. When our principal or assistant principal attended, they seemed to find themselves in the role of peacekeeper rather than administrator.

Looking back, I realize that much of the contention and disagreement that took place during those meetings was probably due to the amount of stress we were under. The bond issue that would finance the district's student assignment plan, which could potentially close our school, was announced in January, but the issue was not voted on until mid-May. Those were long months of anticipation and frustration. When the bond issue passed and we knew for sure that the middle school would be closing, the stress level skyrocketed as we anxiously awaited the letters that would tell each of us where we would be teaching the next year. This was not only a good reminder of how volatile teachers' jobs are, but also of the politics that surround education. We were all dealing with uncertainties, and that made it difficult to get through each day. I summed it up in

my journal, saying, "It's like you put a bunch of good people together in a high pressure situation, and everything combusts, and it goes crazy."

Easter to Memorial Day: Doing My Own Thing

As I became more comfortable with myself as a teacher and my relationship with students, I was able to spend more time on my own. Because of this, and perhaps because of the confrontations I observed during and outside of team meetings, I began withdrawing more and more as the year went on. Instead of talking with other teachers before and after school, I stayed in my room and worked or talked with kids who stopped by. Although I hadn't made a conscious decision to do so, I separated myself from the staff who had a negative influence on my day, and spent time only with those who had positive attitudes each day. Rather than join other teachers for lunch, I ate on my own or with the students. I kept ties with three or four closer colleagues, but began using most of my energy on my students.

It was during this time that I really saw my relationships with students grow. I have talked about how I see teaching as much more than a profession, and my feelings about my students as a love. I could separate myself from the other teachers in the building who only saw their role as being a person to pass on knowledge. I am lucky that during my first year of teaching I had no family to take care of and no real priorities outside of teaching and going to graduate school. I would not have been able to devote myself as completely as I did if I had to go home to a family and another life, as most of my

colleagues did. In fact, I am amazed at the time and energy they spent on teaching when they had so many other things happening in their lives.

By the end of the year, I had developed good relationships with other teachers, had figured out the systems in place within the school, and had tried to define my role as a teacher. The rites of passage I went through will happen again as I enter a different building next year and have a new set of unspoken rules to uncover, lessons to learn, and colleagues to learn from.

Chapter VI. Reflections

Summarizing the events and emotions of my first year of teaching is a difficult task. The things that happened this year could not be considered just parts of a new career—they were life-changing events. The title of my thesis, First Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of an Urban Middle School During the First Year of Teaching, suggests that this is just the first leg of a long journey, but is also an experience in and of itself. My year at Marrs, especially because the middle school will not be open and therefore I will not be teaching there next year, will always stand out in my memory, as will the students and staff I came into contact with there. The year was a growth process for me, not only as a teacher, but also as a person. I believe writing my thesis, which made me look deeply into the experiences I had and my emotional reaction to them, made that growth process even more significant than it would have been if I had not written this thesis.

I am not able to sum up my experiences in terms of events, because when I think back about my year, I picture people and stories. My perceptions and explorations of my first year of teaching revolve around students, staff, and my own reaction to them. The fact that I taught at an urban school made these people touch me more they might have if I had taught at a middle class school filled with students who were just like me. I had to step into a new culture and take in everything I found there, while at the same time trying to fulfill my role as an educator.

When I began the thesis process, I was centered on the culture and values of the school community. However, after I began developing relationships with my students, I

began to focus almost exclusively on the people involved in my first year of teaching and how they affected me. When writing my "Description of Students," I found it so difficult to describe them using the facts available to me—I struggled with trying to express their personalities to the reader. In The Vulnerable Observer, Behar writes, "Nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them" (p. 5). I discovered during the writing process that I could not simply observe my students and what happened in the building and community, but that I had to explore how those things affected me, even if that meant moving away from my initial intent of concentrating on their culture and values.

Ruth Behar's creation of the term "vulnerable observer" seems to fit my experience perfectly. I can not think of a time in my life when I was more vulnerable than this year. After one of my critical incidents occurred, I wrote in my journal, "I feel like I'm going to throw up." This was a job that affected me so much it even made me physically vulnerable. In this reflection section, I attempt to make sense of my vulnerabilities and what they meant in terms of my overall experience.

Underlying my experiences this year is the knowledge that as much as I would like to have been, I was not the perfect teacher. What makes it more difficult is that even after teaching for a year, I do not know exactly what my idea of the perfect teacher is. I can list the things I believe are good for students, and things I wish were done differently, but I can not begin to describe the perfect teacher.

Teaching is a self-exploratory career, and writing a thesis about it makes me look even deeper into who I was during my first year, and who I will be as a teacher in the

future. Each time an important event happened, I was forced to write it down in my journal, and then to apply my research methods to my own personal experiences. Doing that placed me in an exposed position. Had I been simply a participant observer, doing this might have led me to make some conclusions about the subjects I was studying. However, being a vulnerable observer compelled me to draw conclusions about who I was as a person and a teacher. That was not always easy for me to do, because some of those conclusions made me acknowledge my own faults.

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have divulged many of my feelings and emotions, and what follows here will be a painfully honest evaluation of those things. There are a few themes that emerged as the most important in my perceptions of the year. These themes relate closely to my vulnerabilities as a person and as a teacher. Some of them are interesting, some exciting, and others painful for me to discuss.

My constant loyalty and defensiveness for my school, the area of town, and my students.

Almost immediately upon learning where I would teach, I found myself claiming South Omaha as my own. Although I had never known or worked with a large number of Hispanic individuals, I became obsessed with learning about their language and culture. On one hand, this was a positive thing, for I was putting aside my preconceived notions about the area of town and looking at the positive things I would find there. However, it is difficult for me to understand why I suddenly gained an interest in a culture I had never thought about before. Throughout the school year, I found myself defending the area of

town and the population that lived there. In doing that, I was also defending the students I grew to love and value so much.

My desire to know everything about my students' lives and become a part of them in some way.

As the year progressed and I felt more comfortable with my students, I began asking them questions. Once I realized they were willing to answer, I asked about nearly everything I thought I could get away with. By the end of the year, I was privy to information about my students' home lives, their friendships, and their feelings about nearly everything. Why did I have to know things that weren't necessarily my business? Why did they feel compelled to tell me? Again, I believe this trust relationship was built on the value we placed on each other. I genuinely respected my students' opinions and beliefs, and I think they respected mine as well. This respect allowed us to share things with each other that teachers and students might not usually share.

Along with this curiosity, I had a strange need to know about the things they did and the way they lived their lives, whether it involved gangs, violence, or anything else. Although I was usually shocked and disapproving of the things they told me, I often reveled in the fact that I knew the Sureños' handshake or the latest slang terms. When one of my students told me, "You're living the ghetto life, Ms. Bernard," I was excited to hear that she saw me that way. Did I feel like a part of something? I remember hearing somewhere that kids join gangs because they are a part of something, a society and culture that is all their own. Did I fall into the same trap of feeling like I belonged?

I found myself dwelling on the difficulties of my students as if they were my own crosses to bear.

One day during a graduate class, I burst into tears of frustration because I felt that my students lived such hard lives. I often thought that my colleagues who taught in the more affluent areas of the city did not have students with difficult lives, but I know that can not be completely true. Why did I dwell on my students' obstacles as if they made me more important as a teacher? Perhaps it has something to do with my own upbringing. I never had to deal with adversity, and in a society where people thrive on drama, pride themselves on having the most work to do, the toughest lives, and more challenges than anyone else, I needed to fight someone else's battles since I had never had my own. One day Alison said to me "Ms. Bernard, I bet you ain't seen half the stuff I have." I hadn't, so maybe that was part of the reason I tried to take her trials as my own.

My desire to be a part of their lives and their community outside of school.

Besides wanting to take on my students' difficulties, I became interested in the things they were interested in. I had never cared about the movie star Jennifer Lopez until I heard she was a favorite of my students. I shopped at the Mexican grocery, not because I knew anything about cooking authentic Mexican food, but because I wanted to be a part of their world. I bragged to my friends about the little Spanish I had picked up. Looking back, I realize I did not really know that much about their culture, but for some reason I wanted to be part of it. Toward the end of the year, I even separated myself from the faculty community, and devoted myself to the students'.

Being a different person in the classroom than elsewhere.

When my students walked in the door, I was confident, self-assured, and nearly always in a good mood. Of course I had my ups and downs, and there were days when I felt that I could not make it. But overall, being in the classroom was empowering. However, I was not so confident or patient in my personal life.

I realize now that being at the front of the classroom every day, regardless of how student-centered it is, makes it easy to feel more powerful than you should be. If I had a story or joke to tell, I was much more likely to tell it to my students (who were forced to listen) than to my friends. When I went out socially, I even found myself thinking that I would rather be with students than the people who had been my friends for years. Of course, hearing insults and disrespect from a student can ruin your day, but a teacher always has the fact that "the teacher is always right" to fall back on.

My inability to stop thinking about my students after leaving school each day.

This is tied in with my devotion to students and the confidence I feel when I am with them. So many things happened this year that affected me, I could not leave them at work—and I did not necessarily want to. I wrote in my journal once, "I am afraid I'm too emotionally involved with the students and not focused enough on the course content." That fear was accompanied by pride in my dedication.

At the end of the day, I often found myself coming home and having difficulty communicating with my roommates despite the fact that both of them were in their first year of teaching, too. Looking back, I realize I was self-absorbed. My roommate

commented near the end of the year, "All you ever talk about is school and your students. Sometimes I just want to come home and forget about that stuff, but I feel like that's all you think about." Hearing that from another first year teacher made me think about who I was as a teacher—was I a better teacher, or just unable to pull myself away from my job? I still struggle with knowing how far to take my love of teaching.

My desire to be the best teacher.

I wanted to be the best teacher I could for my students, and I found that my feelings were hurt when I heard a student say that their favorite teacher was someone other than myself. If I loved my students as much as I thought I did, I should have wanted them love all of their teachers. But my personal desire to prove to myself that I was a good teacher caused me to be jealous of those teachers my students favored. I believe that was because I needed constant encouragement and reassurance.

Often I felt that I was not doing a good job as a teacher. As I wrote in my journal, "I've been thinking a lot lately about why this first year of teaching has been so difficult...not only for me, but for everyone I know. I think the biggest thing I am dealing with is that I don't feel like I am a 'good teacher.' I don't even know what that word means anymore. I used to think I knew, but there are so many days I have come home and just thought 'I am not a good teacher.'" But no matter how often that happened, there was always something to prove to me that I was doing a good job.

My growing concentration on the personal and social needs of students, and consequential disdain for the curriculum and the system of education itself.

As I got to know my students better, I thought about their needs, and saw them colliding with the district standards and the eighth grade curriculum. It seemed to me that the things they needed—love, social interaction, someone to trust—were not an inherent part of the system of education, but rather something that individual teachers had to consciously make part of their classrooms. Every day after school, I grew frustrated as we kicked students out of the hallways and off the school grounds. When I allowed students to stay in my classroom after school, I felt fear of being reprimanded, because I knew they were not supposed to be there after hours. For some of those students, school was the only safe place, and we still weren't meeting their needs. I started teaching with a strong belief in the importance of literature, but decided that the students I taught, and their emotional needs, superceded my initial goals.

All of these themes come from positive things—my devotion to teaching, my love for my students, the positive relationship I had with them—but looking deeper into my own motivations and point of view makes me wonder sometimes if I am in education for myself or for them. I relied so much upon their reassurance that I sometimes felt that they were the teachers and I was the student. However, I have to believe in my heart that my actions and decisions were aimed for their best interests.

Everything I did this year as a teacher can be summed up by one journal entry I wrote:

> Everything about teaching makes me want to cry. The good things make me want to cry because I am so touched or so excited. The bad things make me want to cry because I know that as hard as I try I will never in my life be able to change the circumstances that some of my students live with. Most of all it makes me sad to know I can never change the personalities and the people they are.

The drive to succeed, the emotions I felt, and my sincere love for my students come across in that journal. Also apparent is the feeling of loss that comes with teaching, and the frustration with knowing I can never do enough.

Despite our different backgrounds, feelings about education, cultures, and even the worlds we lived in, my students and I had a relationship this year. I consider my first year of teaching a success because I know I affected at least a few students. I believe these first footsteps were even more successful, though, because of their effect on me.

Chapter VII. Collaborative Insights

An integral part of our research process is the collaborative conclusion of our theses. In comparing and contrasting our experiences and our reflections, we were able to add additional perspectives to our research. The following section is a reflective piece, which explores the implications of a number of specific issues that were particularly significant in all of our writing and research processes.

Section A. Methodology

We found that writing this collaborative section was labor intensive. After reading each other's theses and highlighting the similarities and differences, we sat down and talked with each other about the commonalties we found. One person took notes on what seemed to be the important points covered. This discussion period totaled approximately twenty-four hours over a number of days, during which we took extensive notes. Afterward, we decided as a group which of the themes and subjects we discussed should be covered in the collaborative chapter.

When a general outline emerged, one person took the collaborative notes and drafted a skeleton of the chapter. Again, we sat down and discussed the rough chapter, marking sections that we thought should stay, as well as making suggestions and changes. The resulting second draft was created, and the group repeated the discussion three times. We then asked for input from the chair of our committee, and revised once more for a final draft.

Section B. The CADRE Project

The CADRE program is an accelerated masters degree program offered by the University of Nebraska at Omaha and MOEC school districts. Utilizing a mentor/mentee approach, CADRE teachers complete a yearlong teaching assignment while simultaneously completing a specialized master's degree in Education in a fifteen-month period. The thirty teachers chosen for the program each year take all of their courses together and are considered a cohort. CADRE teachers are given the option to complete a comprehensive portfolio, comprehensive exams, or a thesis as their exit requirement. The portfolio option, however, is most often recommended by the staff involved in CADRE, and therefore preferred by most CADRE teachers.

When we decided to write theses rather than complete portfolios, we were setting ourselves apart from the group. Writing a thesis meant we would take second semester courses separately, which reduced our face to face interaction with our peers. Over the course of the year, it became clear that we seemed "different" than the rest of our class. Whether we really were, or if it was just our perception, is unclear. Each of us had realized we were part of a cohort when we entered the program, and when the thesis process separated us from the group, we instinctively pulled together as a group of three. Although that may have strained our relationships with our peers, the solidarity we had and ability to depend on one another strengthened our writing process and our personal growth.

Section C. The Collaborative Process

Writing a thesis is an undertaking in itself, and choosing to write with two other people changes the process completely. Because we shared the same committee and committee chair, we worked together closely throughout the thesis process. During the school year we met frequently, both as a group and with Dr. Gene Freund, our committee chair and thesis advisor. Often these meetings served as time for each of us to think and reflect on what was happening in our classroom, as well as to do all of the things encompassing a thesis. In addition to our intellectual connection, we became immersed in each other's personal lives and relied upon one another for support. *Depending on each other in order to complete our Masters' degrees placed us immediately in a vulnerable position, which we took advantage of by forming a strong trust relationship.* Working with Dr. Freund was instrumental to all of our thesis processes. He gave us academic direction and emotional encouragement and was as dedicated to our writing as we were. He played the pivotal role of guide through the entire process.

The most difficult part of the process was writing the collaborative chapters. After learning that each of us has different approaches to writing, our most difficult challenge was learning to communicate effectively. Our personal opinions often got in the way of the writing. There were times when we spent an inordinate amount of time debating even the most insignificant points. Ultimately, we feel that writing together strengthened our conclusions and enabled us to obtain a more comprehensive picture than one of us might have alone. The collaborative effort was an aid to all of us because we felt accountable to

our thesis partners, which encouraged us to produce work at times when it was difficult to get motivated.

As first year teachers dealing with emotional issues, we found that our thesis group became a necessary support system. The connections we made allowed us to empathize and identify with what the others were going through. All of us saw this as one of the most important advantages of working collaboratively on the thesis.

There were a few external factors that influenced our collaborative process in various ways. First, that our group was made of two females and one male. This combination of genders made us more aware of each other's sensitivities. We also agree that if the group had been three people of the same gender, a different end result would have come about. Additionally, there was a substantial gap in age and life experience. Our ages spanned from twenty-three to thirty-one years. Also, comparing and contrasting a suburban school setting with two urban settings proved interesting. Although we believed in the beginning that a difference in settings would be a major theme in our research, we found that each of our perceptions and explorations had more similarities than differences, even in such divergent geographic and socioeconomic settings. Finally, the grade levels we taught played a part in the collaborative process. Having one elementary school teacher, one middle school, and one high school teacher in our group allowed for a middle ground and a chance to explore our students and schools from the three grade-level perspectives. Storytelling enabled us to appreciate each other's grade levels, which gave us more of an understanding for each other's experiences.

Section D. Common Themes

When comparing and contrasting aspects of our first year of teaching, we found many commonalties. One of the themes was overwhelmingly apparent throughout all of our theses. It can be described as a passion for teaching and a love for our students, and we describe it below using five sub-themes. We have used italics to identify some of our strongest conclusions.

Aspiring to be Different

In our theses, each of us alluded to a belief that we were better teachers than our peers were, and made a purposeful attempt to be different from other teachers. Deciding if we really were better than others forced us to look for a definition of a "good teacher." We have come to the conclusion that there is no common definition for a "good teacher." Because of that, we have found difficulty labeling ourselves as better than or colleagues. In fact, through the journaling process, we recognized that we struggled with some of the very issues we were willing to criticize. While we believe we were better teachers than many of our colleagues because we were teaching as each of us would like to be taught, we still had reservations about sharing that belief with those who do not subscribe to our philosophies of teaching.

It seems to us that teachers we have come in contact with crave recognition for their efforts and dedication to the field of education. We value that recognition as well, and because our philosophies of education are so personal, perhaps we seek it even more. *Because we did not all obtain affirmation from our colleagues and administrators, we*

sought it from our students. Colleagues who believed in what we were doing gave each of us affirmation of some kind, but that was not enough. *Reassurance from our students carried a lot of weight for us, and could define how we felt at any given time.* Having personal relationships with students gave us multiple chances each day to be affirmed and encouraged to strive to be better.

Creating Personal Relationships With Our Students

A distinct part of each of our philosophies of teaching is the importance all of us place on creating personal relationships with our students. Taking our cues from Behar (1996), our theses are full of emotions and we feel all of our teaching experiences reflect that. *This differs from most educational research, which we believe has consciously removed emotional involvement.*

All of us found that we confided in our students, even to the point where we drew ourselves away from our colleagues at school and instead turned to our students. Fostering a give and take relationship, or trust relationship, in the classroom was a philosophical decision for each of us based on what we believe is best for students. But as the year went on, all of us found that the trust relationship affected our *own* feelings and emotions, perhaps even more than it affected our students'.

The bond each of us had with our students, as individuals and as whole classes, affected us so intensely that later in the year we found it difficult not only to relate with other teachers, but also with our friends and family, who, we felt, would not understand

the emotional relationships we strengthened each day in our classrooms. We all had difficulty relating the depth of our involvement to those we were closest to.

Personal Growth as a Result of Our Relationships With Students

The students we taught were very young or young adults ranging in age from five to nineteen, yet all three of us describe the personal growth we saw as a result of our relationship with them. As we opened ourselves up to our students, and they reciprocated, we were able to create a give and take relationship. *It seems odd that professional adults would rely on children as aids in their personal growth, but often, all of us found that our students were the best barometers of our development.*

We discussed with each other that our students were very honest with us regarding their thoughts and feelings. At times, they made us aware of our own shortcomings. For example, if a student pointed out one of our faults, it was painful—but in the end it made us better teachers. In a world where adults speak to each other with hidden meanings, and every remark may not be what it seems, we understood and benefited from the endearing honesty of our students. We do not believe this was a selfish relationship. Although they were unconsciously helping us to grow and change, we were at all times conscious of their needs, and working continually to help them grow and change. Doing that caused us to rely on the emotional bond we had created.

Questioning Our Professional Roles

Although the emotions involved in teaching have become the most important theme for all of our theses, we all experienced the feeling that perhaps having a personal relationship with students may have seemed inappropriate to others. *Our colleagues who were classroom teachers sometimes expressed disapproval when they observed our relationships with students.* Whether they believed we were being too idealistic, or too close for comfort, they let us know in no uncertain terms that they believed we were getting close to "crossing a line."

This was a constant struggle for all of us, who, as first year teachers, wanted to make a good impression on our students, and on our colleagues and administrators. We found an underlying theme in our theses that seemed to be a struggle between our own ideals as first year teachers and the attitudes we perceived our fellow staff members as having.

Obsession With Teaching

Taking into consideration all of the emotional and practical issues we dealt with each day in school, as well as our love for our students and belief in the importance of education, it is not surprising that *all of us defined ourselves at one time or another as having an "obsession" with teaching.* Based on our perceptions of conversations with our CADRE peers, we do not see this as typical for every first year teacher. We are not sure why, but we did experience this obsession, which we define as caring so much about our students that at times it was hard to think of anything else.

As mentioned above, all of us provided examples of times that we were so in touch with our students and what was happening in our classrooms, that we saw relationships outside of school falter. Also, we were taking two graduate level courses each semester through the CADRE program, which may have added to our stress levels and placed us emotionally on the edge. We spent at least six hours a week with our CADRE peers during first semester. However, we barely mentioned the program in the main sections of our theses. Disregarding a full time masters program that requires a great deal of time and effort points to just how centered on our students all of us were.

Perhaps the thesis process has added to that "obsession." While some of our colleagues went home at the end of a long school day and put aside the exhausting days they had, we convened for thesis class and discussed our days and our experiences in depth. Even when summer began, we increased the amount we thought about our students and our first year experiences as we continued to work on our theses.

Section E. Recommendations for Further Study

We believe that these theses have contributed to a better understanding of the perceptions and explorations that occur to teachers during their first year in the profession. Our study, however, has raised questions that we believe merit further study. The areas of recommendation are as follows:

1. We set out to find both similarities and differences between teaching in an urban versus suburban setting. While we discovered that these experiences were remarkably similar, we are hesitant to believe that the experiences are equally similar among all urban and suburban teachers. Thus, further exploration would be useful, particularly comparing grade levels from a suburban versus urban experience. For example, whereas we compared a suburban elementary school to an urban middle and high school, further research should look specifically at the experiences of teachers at the same grade level such as urban elementary versus suburban elementary.

2. Most of the published and unpublished research we have read over the course of this project has stressed the removal of both emotion and involvement with those under study in order to reduce bias. *We found, however, that our emotions had such a profound effect on our relationships with both our students and colleagues that it became difficult, if not impossible, to adequately explain our first year of teaching without them.* Thus, the emotions of teachers, particularly first year teachers, and the role they play in the classroom should be studied more closely.

3. Cooperative learning groups and collaboration have been continually stressed throughout each of our teacher education programs. We use these approaches extensively in our classrooms and have chosen to write our theses in the same manner. *The utilization of this approach in writing a thesis, however, appears to be unique. While we believe that it has been a successful experience for us, further research is recommended to explore its promise and value in similar projects.*

4. The geographic focus of this study was the southern portion of the metropolitan Omaha area. We believe that a similar study of a different segment of the metropolitan area, such as North Omaha, would be warranted in order to compare and contrast both the similarities and differences first year teachers might find between the two areas.

5. This study focused on the experiences of first year teachers. We believe a similar study of teachers with five to ten years of experience, acting as vulnerable observers in a research setting, would be beneficial in exploring the perceptions of experienced teachers.

Section F. Research Question

How do the social structure, values, and subcultures of the school setting interact within the educational system as perceived by a first year teacher?

During our first year of teaching, and with the aid of the thesis process, each of us came to the point where we understood a great deal about our own school and the roles we played within it. Our comprehension of the educational system may still be somewhat vague, though we certainly know more about schools as a whole than we did before we took our first professional "footsteps." Final judgement on how far each of us traveled in answering the research question is left to readers of the full trilogy. However, we believe that in collaborating we answered more components of the question than any one of us could have done individually.

Section G. Conclusion

Though we touched on hundreds of issues throughout the writing of all three theses, we were able to identify just one theme as the most meaningful. This is an overwhelming realization—that despite all the roles each of us had as first year teachers and full time graduate students, our research process has proven that the students we taught, as well as our relationship with them and subsequent personal growth, were the most important thing to us. Our perceptions and explorations as first year teachers in our individual school settings revolved around one thing—our students. We believe this conclusion has significance for first year teachers in any school setting.

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April 12, 1999

Jennifer Bernard
Teacher Education
UNO

IRB#: 119-99-EX

TITLE OF PROTOCOL: First Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of an Urban Middle School and its Community During the First Year of Teaching

The IRB has reviewed your Exemption Form for the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46:101b, category 1. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines. It is also understood that the IRB will be immediately notified of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project.

Please be advised that the IRB has a maximum protocol approval period of five years from the original date of approval and release. If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

E. Prentice/jlg

Ernest D. Prentice, PhD
Vice Chair, IRB

EDP:jlg