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

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of Teacher Education

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

J.P. Caruso

July, 1999

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Thesis Acceptance

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Education,
University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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

J.P. Caruso, MA

University of Nebraska, 1999

Advisor: Dr. Eugene Freund

This thesis is one part of a trilogy which examined the experiences and perceptions of three first year teachers at a suburban elementary and an urban middle and urban high school. Written in the first person, the three theses are a combination of both individual research and collaborative efforts. While the bodies of each thesis were written independently, the introductory chapter and the entire concluding chapters of each were written collaboratively. The educational setting of this piece of the trilogy looks specifically at an urban high school.

The primary method of data collection was journaling by the investigator, which included documenting day-to-day events and interactions within the school and surrounding community. A second method used was informal interviewing of various individuals within the school community. In the collaborative section, the investigators shared their emotions, feelings, and perceptions of their first year of teaching, and a number of common themes emerged.

All three teachers described an "obsession" for teaching and the importance of our relationships with students as critical aspects of our first year. Other commonalities were: aspiring to be different, personal growth as a result of our relationships with students, and questioning professional roles. In order to fully comprehend the complexity of these findings we recommend that you refer to the following pieces of the trilogy.

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

Stewart, S.A. (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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PREFACE

This past year has changed my life forever. I approached the year with my eyes wide open, knowing full well that I was about to experience more fear, anxiety, self-doubt, and frustration than ever before in my life. But I also knew that if I made it through the year, I'd have a stronger sense of accomplishment and pride than ever before. What I encountered, though, was even more intense than I imagined.

I've just completed my first year as a teacher. It has been a year of successes and a year of failures, but mostly, it has been a year of learning. Learning about myself—my capacity to plan ahead yet still think on my feet in the classroom, my ability to connect with whole groups of people on an individual level or at least how far I will go to make that happen, my tolerance—or lack thereof—for the status quo. Learning about school systems from the real world perspective instead of through a textbook. Learning about a multitude of students' needs—both in and out of the classroom—and how to help motivate them to meet those needs.

Two factors are very important to understanding the first year of teaching from my unique perspective. First, at thirty-one years of age, I am somewhat older than the typical first year teacher. I believe that the few extra years I have on most first year teachers are filled with life experiences that add flavor to my teaching adventures. However, these years also add a bit of cynicism. As a lifelong believer and advocate of social justice, I have witnessed more incidents of injustice and bureaucracy based on wrongful motives than I care to remember. While I still consider myself hopeful and somewhat idealistic, my life experiences add an edge of reality to my perspective.

The second factor that effects my perspective as a teacher is my own educational history. I was, academically, an average to below average student through elementary and high school. Often on the verge of failure throughout my youth, I was never fortunate enough through all those years to have a teacher who took the extra time with me that was necessary to motivate me to do better. Consequently, as an adult without a positive academic image of myself, the momentum of my failures resulted in academic dismissal from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Fortunately, I found the wherewithal to make some positive changes that eventually led to educational success; however, I admittedly have some feelings of disappointment for an educational system that let me down when I needed it most. While, ultimately, I am responsible for the failures of my past, I believe that my experiences could have been much different with the guidance and support of even one teacher. Instead, I was reminded often by my teachers that I would not amount to anything as an adult. In One-L, a story about the first year of law school, Scott Turow (1977) spoke of going to Harvard Law School as “meeting my enemy.” In many respects, my first year of teaching has also been about meeting my enemy. In my case, however, the enemy was not a law school or lawyers, but my own fear of failure.

This thesis shares my perspective of how the social structure, values, and subcultures of the school setting interact within our educational system, and the effect those dynamics have on the first year teacher. Instead of an individual thesis, I am participating in a trilogy thesis, utilizing a collective process under the direction of Professor Eugene Freund. Through participant observation, we have compared and

contrasted each of three teachers' perspectives and reflected on the similarities and differences between two inner city schools and a suburban counterpart.

As anticipated, the collective process of developing a three-part thesis has meant a considerable amount of time working together and getting to know each other. Due to the sharing of intimate and vulnerable experiences with one another, I believe my partners and I have each benefited from the process. I would not have the product I have completed without the help of my thesis partners, Jennifer Bernard and Stacy Stewart.

This thesis is written in its entirety from my perspective. The majority of the events that appear in the document occurred in my presence, and I was able to record most conversations that are utilized herein while they took place. Though it was not possible for me to be part of every event or conversation that is included in this thesis, when possible, I have attempted to follow-up with the source to ensure that my reconstruction has been adequately *representative*. As such, any errors or omissions found within these pages are entirely my own. Also, in order to protect the privacy of those whose thoughts or stories became part of this thesis, I have changed names, teaching positions, periods of time, and other personal information that might reveal their identities. The only exception to this rule are those whose experiences are in the public domain.

Agreeing to write a thesis was one of the last things I would have imagined committing to this last year, particularly when I was feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work I had already taken on as both a teacher and a graduate student. In the end, however, I felt that writing a thesis would provide an additional academic challenge that I

needed in order to refine certain skills, and also an opportunity to chronicle the first year teaching experiences I will have just once in my life. I believe that taking the time to process these experiences and present them in a more personal and academic light will serve to help me know myself better as a teacher and, thus, be a better educator.

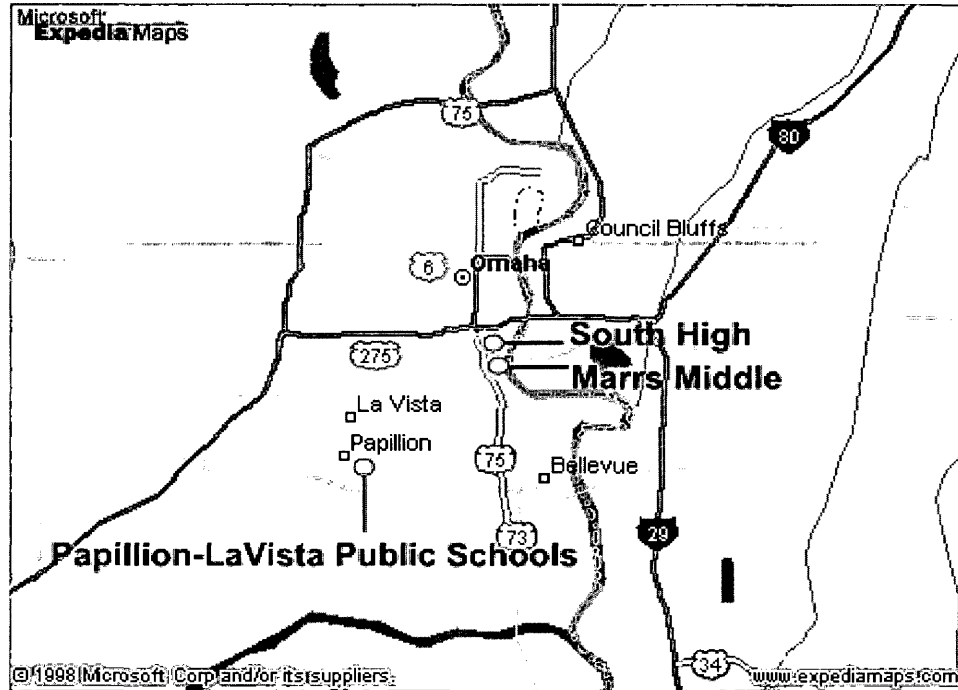
Chapter I – Introduction

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 La-Vista Public School districts. They are: Jennifer Bernard who teaches eighth grade Language Arts and Literature at Marrs Middle School, J.P. Caruso, who teaches history and economics at Omaha South High School and Stacy Stewart, who teaches 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, 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.

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.

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. A second form of data collection was the informal interviewing of selected individuals within the school community.

As the study progressed through the data collection process, the three teachers shared insights from each of their journals, and compared and contrasted the themes

which 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 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.

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.

Culture: Culture “consists of the shared beliefs, symbols, and interpretations within a human group” (Banks & 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*.” 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 that 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 that consists 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 that affect 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 another 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.

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. As the new teacher begins his or her career, he or she is often bewildered in 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 schools.

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?

Summary

Teaching offers different dilemmas for the first year teacher. Many of these dilemmas are related to the everyday struggles that beginning teachers face between the realities of teaching school and their own preconceived notions and idealism. Each of the three teachers 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 the investigators' 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.

Limitations of the Study

The studies were limited to the 1998-1999 school year and the personal perceptions, reactions, and interpretations of each teacher. The findings of this study are unique to

each of the investigators' 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 limited our research were central to why we actually did the research.

Chapter II – Review of the 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 is our first attempt at doing participant observation and ethnographic inquiry, our review of the literature includes a number of works that 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 see 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 have been naturalistic, it was important for us to think about the multiple influences and interpretations that have been derived from the literature that already exists in the field.

The starting point in our review is The Vulnerable Observer (1996) by Ruth Behar. Behar, a noted anthropologist, struggles with the idea that anthropology traditionally has not 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. Our theses have been written in the first person, to take into consideration the emotion that comes with a career in education, and 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 has 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 much 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, indeed, 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 town he called Elmtown, USA, a socially stratified Middle Western community. 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 our focus still remained 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 researchers, 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 authors' 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, spatial orientation, and 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 according to Piagetan theory. 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 to better understand who our students

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

Ogbu (1993) provides another important contribution to our work pertaining to the students we teach and the cultures from which they come. In his 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 role 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 and in our respective schools, new questions and insights developed. In other words, we were continually learning 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 few works barely break the surface of the literature we have used during the writing of these theses. They have offered, however, a solid foundation of research, and suggest that there is a need for the research we have conducted. By exploring ideas from a variety of qualitative research studies and sources, we arrived at an understanding of how our research should have been carried out and presented. Nevertheless, it was Behar's works that gave us the courage and the instinct to fully develop this project, and in the end, her literature remained a constant guide.

Chapter III – Point of Reference – Footsteps Towards a Dream

March 15, 1999

Today was a pretty rough day. In fact, it has been a pretty rough week. When the last class of students left the classroom, I kicked a box of newspapers across the room in frustration. I wondered what in the world I was doing as a teacher. My miserable week began on Tuesday, when twenty-two of the twenty-five students in my economics class did not turn in their take-home exams that were due that day. This has become quite a problem during my first year of teaching. True, there are those few students who are committed to the deadline approach and could not fathom turning something in late, but even those students don't seem to put much effort into projects or assignments. It is now mid-March and it appears to me that most of the teachers at South have resigned themselves to this fact and, consequently, seem to have structured their curriculum around busy work rather than projects that challenge all students. This is evident by a conversation I had with John Ryan, an English teacher I have developed a relationship with over the past year. To John it's a question of many teachers trying to just get through the day. He said:

“The school's literature talks about our tradition of excellence, but I don't think many of us believe it. I hate to say it, but it's because this school is a school of mediocrity. This is not, however, a reflection of their intelligence, but of their motivation. The parents of many students at South never graduated from high school and this attitude of 'just getting by' is generational. The way many faculty members teach is merely a

response to this. How many teachers thought in college that their students would be enraptured by what they were trying to convey? Most believed that their students would somehow be inspired by their words and do wonderful things in the classroom. The reality is, however, that it doesn't happen a lot and in the end I think many have given up and are just trying to get through the day."

I keep asking myself why I find this approach to teaching unacceptable. Why can't I be satisfied with just letting some students get by and allow the rest to become someone else's problem? Why can't I merely maintain the status quo like so many other teachers appear to do? In part I believe the answers to these questions are in some way related to my own past academic experiences.

Through a majority of my academic career, I was a sub-par student at best. During my initial years of elementary school I was a strong student, however, after my family moved from Rochester, New York, to Lincoln, Nebraska, (the state capital located sixty miles south west of Omaha), my grades plummeted. Junior high was a similar struggle, and high school was even worse. More often than not, my semester grade point average was well below a 2.0 on a 4.0 scale.

In preparation for my career in teaching I looked back on my academic career and wondered why I had done so poorly, particularly in high school. The reason has probably less to do with ability and more to do with a lack of motivation and maturity. Rarely, if ever, did grades become a factor when placed in a position of deciding whether or not to

complete an assignment, much less giving it 100 percent of my effort. While I put forth only a minimal effort, this not to say that I did not want to excel in school, because after each semester's report card I knew that the D's and F's listed were not reflective of my true abilities. I knew that I could do better. Apparently, though, the desire to do better was never a strong enough motivating force. I needed something more.

To a certain degree, my particular case may be an example of learned helplessness. While deep down I knew that I had as much, if not more, ability to succeed academically as my peers, I don't think I was ever given a true reason to succeed. This may be due, at least in part, to the inconsistent and unpredictable use of rewards or punishments by my teachers (Slavin, 1997; Seligman, 1975). It seemed as if I was never on a level playing field with my peers. For example, I can remember being subject to detentions often for doing something that another student had just done, and yet he or she was never cited. After some time, I began to feel as if things could never be different for me, and eventually I was caught in a circular pattern of failure. In essence, I had conditioned myself to believe that my own academic failure was the standard. I guess I thought that things would never change, so why should I work any harder. Besides, there was always the next quarter or semester to begin anew. As I look back, however, I can't help but think that my motivation—or the lack thereof—was a problem that could possibly have been addressed simply with the help of a supportive teacher.

I took this poor level of academic achievement with me to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the spring of 1987, and subsequently received a GPA below a 1.0 for two of my first three semesters. Consequently, I was academically dismissed from the

University after the spring semester in 1988 and unable to enroll in classes for a minimum of three semesters.

After my dismissal from the University, I worked at an eclectic assortment of jobs. I made burritos at a fast food restaurant, pumped gas at a service station, served as an innkeeper at a bed and breakfast inn, and even drove a dump truck for the Public Works department for the city of Lincoln. During this last job as a summer temporary worker, I was assigned to do many of the tasks that the full time employees didn't want to do. Sometimes that included cleaning out plugged up sewers, helping to lay asphalt, or using a gas powered Weed Eater to trim weeds and brush from medians and street right of ways. As the summer progressed, I began to develop an understanding of what a blue-collar manual labor job entailed. Everyday was pretty much the same as the previous day. The complaints were the same, and the guys at the shop were always talking about not having enough money to do what they really wanted to do, living from check to check, and promising each other that the future would soon be different.

One of the workers that quickly took me under his wing and became my mentor was named Henry. Soon after starting, I was teamed with Henry, a Vietnam veteran, who carried the scars of the war with him both physically as well as emotionally. Henry was a character. Rarely would a minute go by when he wasn't talking about something. He also had an opinion on everything. Whether it was a discussion on the inconsistencies in government, the weather, or health related issues of Vietnam era vets, I spent most days just listening, rarely able to get a word in edgewise.

To Henry, I was a college kid just using this job as a stopping point to something bigger and better. In fact, because of my interest in politics and the Democratic Party, he gave me the nickname “Senator.” When he asked me what going to college was like, I told him that I really didn’t know because, while I had attended the University for over a year, I had “flunked out” and hadn’t really benefited from the experience. He was the only person in our shop who I shared this with because I had a hard time accepting that my reality was so far from the expectations that my family and I had for me. From that point on, Henry continually talked of the importance of getting my act together and going back to school. “Senator,” he said, “growing up is tough, but it is something that you are eventually going to have to do.” Each day he would point out a different guy at the shop and tell me his life story, finishing with the statement “You don’t want to end up like him. You need to get it together.” Henry’s stories were beginning to convince me that perhaps the time had come to consider going back to school.

The most exciting of my “post-academic dismissal” jobs was to work on the Dukakis for President national advance team during the fall of 1988. In my free time I had become involved in the Nebraska Young Democrats, which not only led to this temporary, perhaps once in a lifetime presidential campaign experience, it also led me through the ranks of the Young Democrats of America (YDA). Eventually, I was elected to a number of positions including national vice president of YDA, the 250,000-member youth arm of the Democratic National Committee. These experiences taught me first hand the tremendous impact a career in public service could have on a person. I was beginning to feel as if the world had so many opportunities to offer me but they were

passing me by. I knew that I needed to get back into school but I was not sure if I was ready.

The final push to return to school – “the last straw” – came unexpectedly in July of 1990 when one of my closest childhood friends committed suicide. Suffering from drug and alcohol addiction, Dan was a kind and caring individual who was convinced that few people cared about him. The day my father informed me of Dan’s death, I ran to the park where he and I had spent so many summer days and I just cried. While my life was in no way comparable to Dan’s, I began to realize that life is precious and short and to a certain degree in my own control. At that point in time, I hadn’t made much of my own life and all I wanted to do was go back to school. I wanted to prove to myself that I could finish something that I had started.

In the fall of 1990, I did in fact return to the University. This time I brought with me a number of real life lessons I now knew to be true and my approach to education was going to be quite different. During my first college experience, I had a misconception of what an education could do for an individual. Looking back, I believe I truly thought that as long as I went through the motions of college, I would receive a diploma in four years. This achievement would then be followed by a job, the requisite house with a white picket fence and a BMW in the driveway, and all the eventual guaranteed happiness so often depicted on television. Of course, this could not have been further from the truth, but it took my academic dismissal and ensuing life experiences for me to realize that.

With my new beginning, as hokey as it sounds, education had become not only about receiving a degree; it was also about gaining knowledge. In a sense, what I had

finally found during my absence from the University was a respect for education and learning. I no longer worried as much about the grades I would receive as much as I worried about my level of commitment to obtaining as many experiences and as much knowledge as I possibly could. The fear of failure was still there but I approached education as if I was given a second chance—a new start—and as I look back, I feel I made the most out of the opportunities that were given to me.

The end result of my new approach to education culminated with something that had eluded me for most of my life, namely, academic success. Five years after returning to the University, I graduated in the top ten percent of my class majoring in history and political science. With a degree in hand, I had gained something valid and recognizable for all my hard work, but I also received something that was less tangible. I wanted to give something back to society. Growing up, even before I was able to work for the YDA, I had always dreamed about making a positive impact on society, to change the world in some way. I grew up in a household where giving back to the community was stressed. My father, for example, had spent his entire professional life in the field of urban development working to revitalize existing neighborhoods by providing affordable housing to low and moderate income families. This, coupled with a familial belief that government and citizen have a responsibility to help the less fortunate overcome the inequities inherent in society, further encouraged me to give something back to my community. The problem I faced, however, was that while I wanted in some way to change the world, I felt that I had lacked the tools with which to accomplish my dream. As I began to focus my efforts on learning through my undergraduate course work, I was

profoundly impacted by example after example of an ordinary person's ability to rise above their circumstances to accomplish the great things that have changed our world dramatically. My inspiration came from people like Martin Luther King, Mario Cuomo, and Mother Teresa, who, despite humble or ordinary beginnings, were able to not only endure injustices, but in some way reverse them. The hope that they provided and the experiences I continued to have allowed me to gain greater self-confidence and sharpen my oral, written and critical thinking skills. With time, I learned that my dream was, in fact, not a fantasy but within reach.

After graduation from the University, I worked in the private sector for six months at the Gallup Organization working in the field of market research. I soon became unhappy with my job and it did not take long to realize that I needed more out of work than just a paycheck. I wanted to do something more, I wanted to enjoy my work, but the question was-what or how? In my unhappiness, I began to think again of obtaining my dream of making an impact on society. Two career choices seemed to pervade my thinking — that of law or teaching. While I had previously considered both careers towards the latter end of my undergraduate career, the additional length of study required for either had been unattractive. As I pondered this issue again, however, I realized that time was no longer a barrier if it led me to a more fulfilling career. In the end, I felt as if my passion was better suited to the profession of teaching rather than law. So, in the summer of 1996, I started a new journey.

My path to a teaching career began by enrolling at UN-L in a two-year post baccalaureate teacher certification program. While excited about the prospect of teaching,

I was still somewhat fearful of my decision about going back to school. Grades were not the issue here for I was confident that I could easily handle the course material. Instead, I wondered whether going back was somewhat of an escape because I couldn't make it in the world outside of the University. This was reinforced by a number of my friends who teased me about my new goal by saying "when in doubt about what to do with your life, go back to school." I thought there might have been some truth to this statement because I remembered how happy I felt when I went back to school in 1990, and my job at Gallup certainly didn't fulfill me in the same way. Not only would the pursuit of a teaching career allow me two more years of college, but also a lifetime of exposure to schools—ironically the place I seemed to feel most comfortable in my adult life. Another reason for my fearfulness was that I was about to begin a program that would cost approximately \$12,000 and would lead to a career I was not entirely sure I would excel in or like. However, I knew I had to at least give it a try.

My trepidation gradually dissipated as my certification program progressed. I think this occurred because my course work helped me realize that teaching in a public school would allow me to utilize my passion and enthusiasm to put many of my personal, and to a lesser degree, political beliefs into practice. For example, in one of the first classes I took towards certification I read Alex Kotlowitz's (1991) "There Are No Children Here." I was incredibly moved by his account of the struggle for survival of two young boys in an inner-city Chicago neighborhood particularly when Kotlowitz quoted a conversation he had with one of the two boys. When asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, ten-year old Lafayette Rivers said, "If I grow up, I'd like to be a bus driver" (p.

x). Note, Lafayette did not state the typical “when I grow up,” instead he said “if I grow up.” For a ten-year-old boy to not only be in a position where he may not reach adulthood, but also to be conscious of that fact struck me as a sad commentary on a society as wealthy as ours. This one small quotation helped reinforce the idea that there was truly a societal purpose to my desire to teach.

Another work, from this beginning course, which had a profound impact on the development of my philosophy of teaching was Herbert Kohl’s (1994) “I Won’t Learn From You and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment.” In this piece I found confirmation in the necessity for an unending belief in hope. For Kohl, a belief in hope is more than just a romantic ideal, it really is his entire being. As he states, “Teachers in particular have an obligation to work to sustain hope and to resist giving up on young people” (p. 76).

Hope is also a strong value of mine and I believe that for one to be a good teacher one has to have a tremendous belief in hope. Teachers need a hope for a better tomorrow and a hope in people’s ability to bring it about. Too many young people have been labeled by their parents, teachers, and peers as being nothing but worthless and often times they act as such. Like Kohl, I think a good teacher has to be willing to look past labels and have faith in the idea that such an individual has a tremendous amount to offer.

As my course work progressed, I also became much more aware of how inequality was perpetuated through the American system of public education and that not only was change needed, but also that educators could help bring about that change

(Banks & Banks, 1997; Kaestle, 1983; Spring, 1996; Kotlowitz, 1991; Freedman, 1990; Sleeter & Grant, 1994).

I was finally convinced that teaching was the right career for me midway through my student teaching assignment at Lincoln High School in Lincoln, Nebraska, during the spring semester of 1998. My student teaching responsibilities included teaching two courses within the general education population and two courses within the school's Alternative Cooperative Education (ACE) Program, a supplemental educational experience for students who are struggling academically and are at risk of leaving high school without a diploma.

The ACE program taught me a lot about teaching and also about myself. The students in ACE brought with them many of the problems that previously I had only read about, such as physical and emotional abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, and despair for themselves and the society around them. The class I taught was “Citizenship Issues,” an American civics class. What proved most difficult about this class was helping the students to understand that our political system, a system which they felt had let them down, could be made to work for them.

Having entered the classroom mid-year, the students had already established a culture prior to my start, and it was something that I had to adapt to. This was not easy, because it was radically different from the kind of environment that I was used to. Having gone through eleven years of Catholic elementary and secondary schools, I was not accustomed to a student expressing to a teacher that they were “full of shit” or being told to “fuck-off.”

I was also startled by the assumptions of many of the students that I would soon give up on them. For example, on the second day of class one of the students said that she would understand if I just gave up now and quit. “Look, she said, “what makes you so sure you can get to know us? You’re a white preppy rich boy who has no idea what we have been through. Why don’t you just give up now, and go teach somewhere down the hall. Every other teacher has previously given up on us, what should make us think that you won’t?”

After that class I immediately went home and cried because I was scared that somehow I may have gotten in over my head and that I would fail at something that I really wanted to do. Ultimately, I did not give up on them and most did not give up on me. On paper my student teaching assignment was to teach about issues related to citizenship. When I first started, I was under the impression that my job was to teach about the various structures of government, the Constitution and its various amendments, landmark court cases, and other aspects of the field of political science. By the time the semester ended, the students and I did explore some of those issues, but we also explored other elements of citizenship that are often difficult to find in the plethora of standards that exist today. We explored issues relating to their role in society, and what they believed in.

My cooperating teacher gave me a lot of latitude in terms of the content of my classes, as well as how I presented the information to students. At the same time, however, she impressed upon me the need to be aware of issues of power in the classroom, as well as meeting the needs of individual students. Sometimes my ideas

failed miserably, and she expected me to figure out an alternative. Other times, it was clear that I had connected with the students. As a whole, my cooperating teacher and the students of the ACE program helped me tremendously in my development as a teacher, and I was ready to take the next step in my career.

In many respects my CADRE position and hence my living in Omaha are somewhat of a fluke. During my student teaching I was so busy trying to implement philosophy of teaching that I kept putting off my job search. In fact, I didn't really begin searching for a job until the night before a teacher job fair was held on campus in mid April of 1998. During the job fair I literally ran into a representative of the CADRE program and apologized for not watching where I was walking. I then asked this individual about the CADRE program, and he informed me it was a program that placed a first year teacher in one of the Omaha metropolitan area schools, provided them with a veteran teacher as a mentor, as well as an accelerated one year masters degree program. Interested, I asked him if it was too late to apply and he said, "No, why don't you have a seat and we can find out whether you would be a fit with the program." (This individual would end up being my department chair at South.)

As fate would have it, I was indeed a fit and within three weeks I was offered a position with the Omaha Public Schools. While finding a job is usually the hard part, making the decision whether or not to accept the position proved even more difficult. I was torn between taking this incredible opportunity—which would mean having to leave my home in Lincoln, or turning the offer down, hoping that there would be a position available in the Lincoln Public Schools. This was a difficult decision to make, because on

the one hand all I truly wanted to do was teach in the fall. On the other hand, moving away from the city that was my home, a city that had helped shape my identity as a person was going to be a change I had not anticipated. I had to decide whether to leave a place that I felt comfortable with or opt for change.

I was hesitant about moving to Omaha for a number of reasons. In addition to the fact that my family was in Lincoln, my wife Anne would have to face the prospect of commuting seventy miles to Lincoln for work everyday in a car we were not sure would last. Above all, however, I had to decide whether I was mentally and emotionally prepared to embark on a full time graduate program while at the same time beginning my first year of teaching. Taken singularly, I knew that I could handle the first year of teaching or an accelerated one-year graduate program, but I was unsure whether I could do both at the same time. Even though I had found the resources within myself to make it through my first big challenge of an undergraduate degree and teacher certification program, it seemed that my self-doubt and fear of failure still existed.

I'll admit that the prospect of having a job offer was a relief, and the idea of completing a master's program before most first year teachers even began one was also appealing. But the question remained, could I leave home? After discussing the pros and cons of the program with my wife, my parents, a few professors, and my cooperating teacher, I decided to take the plunge.

After making the decision to accept the position, I then had to decide on where I would live. Everyone that I spoke with had a different opinion. Some suggested that I remain in Lincoln and commute daily, while others thought Anne and I should live half

way between Lincoln and Omaha. In the end, I felt that I needed to live in the same neighborhood as the school. The reasoning for this is, in part, because my father has always had a strong belief in living within the neighborhood in which he was working. When my family lived in Rochester, New York, my Dad was the director of the Brown Square Development Corporation, a not-for-profit organization whose goal was to revitalize older low and middle-income areas in certain portions of the city. In his view, in order to gain the confidence of the community, he needed to live there. His rationale was that if he didn't have enough confidence to live in the neighborhood, why should others live there? I have similar views. I guess my goal was to make a statement which said I am a part of this community, this is my community. I wanted to be accepted by the neighborhood residents, my students and their parents.

After searching for a week I found an efficiency apartment right in the center of downtown South Omaha one block away from the school, and Anne continued to live in Lincoln under the assumption that she would spend one night a week in Omaha and I would go back to Lincoln on the weekends.

Chapter IV – The School Setting

Living in the same geographic setting, in fact living within two blocks, of the school has been an interesting experience, for it has enabled me to understand the environment of my school and its community. South Omaha is well known to the greater community's inhabitants, largely because of the Stockyards. Annexed by the city of Omaha in 1915, South Omaha was originally a separate city built around one single industry —meat packing. As such, it is the home of what was once the world's largest stockyard. It also was and still is the home to many of the ethnic neighborhoods housing Omaha's immigrants. South Omaha was the area where the Italians, Greeks, Poles, Czechs, Lithuanians, and many others first settled in the city. Many of these immigrant groups have now moved south or west to the city's perimeter or suburbs and have been replaced by a new influx of immigrants from Mexico, Latin America and Southeast Asia.

This new surge of Latinos has had quite an effect on the character and flavor of South Omaha and South High School. In many respects, parts of South Omaha could now be called "Little Mexico." While most of my students think that the recent wave of Mexican and Latin American immigrants is a new phenomenon, Mexican immigrants have in fact lived in South Omaha since the end of World War I (Sullenger, 1933). Initially brought in as strike breakers, immigrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America have slowly increased to the point that they are now the most noticeable group in South Omaha.

This immigrant group is noticeable in the sense that the majority of shops in the central business district of South Omaha are owned by and cater to Hispanics. For

example, within two blocks of my apartment are seven Latin American restaurants, three Latino owned jewelry stores, three Latino grocery stores, and four check cashing shops specializing in the electronic transfer of money which many immigrants send back to their families in the various countries of Latin America. Additionally, I am pleasantly reminded of the fact that I live in a Latino neighborhood by the distinctive sounds of music I hear out my window and the smells of steamed tamales and fried tortillas at the Mexican grocery store on my walk to school everyday.

The smell of tortillas, however, is not the only smell that passes through my neighborhood and school. Within approximately fifteen blocks just west of my apartment sits not only the stockyards, but also five meat packing plants, an animal rendering facility, a concrete manufacturing facility, a grain elevator, and two small rail yards. While not always noticeable, when the wind and humidity are just right, the odors from the stockyards or the meat packing plants can at times be overwhelming. I was reminded of this on my first day when I stepped outside my apartment to begin my walk to school. All of a sudden, I nearly threw up because of the stench coming from the direction of the meat packing plants. According to a few long time residents, the foul odors are not nearly as bad nor frequent as they were in the past, but every once in a while I am not so subtly made aware that the meat packing industry is still alive in the city.

Bordered on two sides by residential housing, and on the other two by a mom-and-pop grocery store specializing in Mexican foods, a dry cleaner, a Thai restaurant and various other businesses, South High School is a massive five story building which takes up two square blocks and is easily recognizable to the local community. On a walk

around the school one Saturday morning, Catherine McGuire (personal communication, May 22, 1999) an architect as well as the executive director of the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities, described the architecture of the school as resembling “an industrial-fortress like building that is solid, permanent, and enduring.” While commenting that the building was in good condition she also stated that the structure gave a “harsh, cold, and brutalist image.” She also noted that the school lacked trees and grass and thus did not have a commons area for the students or staff to gather, or hold class outside on a warm day. In addition, there also is no track, baseball diamond, or football field immediately adjacent to the school that most people take for granted when we see a typical high school campus. It should be noted, however, that there is a football practice field and track approximately a block away from the school, but it is obscured from view by a dense row of trees and brush to one not familiar with the area. The students refer to this area as “the hole” because it is a former landfill and sits well below street level. Because of this, South has an urban feel to it quite unlike its suburban counterparts.

The neighborhood, which surrounds South, is largely a working class neighborhood with small houses built on small lots.¹ It is also a neighborhood that appears to be in a transitory state because many houses seem to be in need of repair or are up for sale. The surrounding area is also plagued with gang related graffiti. Homes, businesses, and even the school are in a never ending battle in removing the graffiti of the

¹ The term working class is used throughout this thesis as a descriptive term to describe those who are on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. For further discussion on social structures see, Levine, D.U. and Levine, R.A. (1996). *Society and Education*. (9th ed). Boston: Allyn and Bacon (Pages 6-31).

two major Latino gangs in the area, Lomas and Sureños. In fact, the brick on the lower eight feet of the school has a slightly different shade of color to it because an anti-graffiti solvent was applied to it this year to make the removal of spray paint easier.

Associated with the graffiti is violence. In September, an elderly woman was murdered in her house four blocks away from the school and in October one of my students was murdered in one of many drive-by shootings occurring near the school and central business district. In fact, I am aware of five shootings and one stabbing within two blocks of my apartment since August of 1998. Unfortunately, violence in South Omaha is not new to the school's students. In a memorial piece to the slain South High student, the school's ESL students published a number of their reflection pieces in Nuestro Mundo, the local bilingual newspaper. Miriam Escobar (1998), an ESL student wrote:

Since I got here to Omaha, I hear teenagers killing themselves or are killed. When I was in 7th grade, it was a party on 24th street because it was Cinco de Mayo and two gangs started fighting and a 12-year-old boy was killed... When I was in 8th grade, a guy killed himself because he was 'playing the game.' (p.3)

Gangs and violence have also come to represent fear for a number of my students at South. In January, in a conversation with a ninth grade student in my study hall about the meaning of the graffiti on a house sitting directly across the street from my classroom he said,

"You will never really understand what it's like to be in a gang because you are not scared. You are not scared of some of the mistakes you made

when you were younger and now have to fear whether you are going to have to pay for it outside your [front] door. There are some days where I am scared to come to school because someone may come to get me, or send a message to one of my friends that I screwed up. I try to give everyone the impression that I am this tough guy. I lift weights, I sometimes carry a gun, I wear the clothes, but you'll never ever understand how scared I am."

Chapter V – The Teacher as a Vulnerable Observer: Trying to be Different

Looking back on the first year of my teaching career, I have made some mistakes and had a number of successes. One of those successes has been the establishment of a community of learners who share and grow with each other. This occurred largely because each member of my classes allowed it to happen. I may have helped it begin, but in the end the credit goes to them.

The desire to be different from many of the teachers at South, I think, related to two intertwined beliefs. One of these beliefs is, perhaps, more valid than the other. First, I had the perception that the students did not especially like a number of the teachers at South. I am not sure why I made this assumption since, prior to the start of school, I had not met a single South student to validate these beliefs. This was, in retrospect, an unfair belief about my colleagues, and in fact, I now have no doubt most students at South like many of their teachers. In exploring my reasoning behind this assumption, I believe I was transferring many of the feelings I personally had for my own teachers of the past to students that I had not even met yet.

Which brings me to the second motivating factor for wanting to be different from other teachers. As alluded to earlier, during most of my elementary and high school career, I felt that many of my teachers had given up on me. I saw this in my practicums and student teaching and I assumed that such lack of care or concern for all students also existed at South. This is where I really wanted to be different. When I started my teacher certification program I swore to myself that not a single student would leave my classroom at the end of the year thinking that I didn't care about, or given up on them.

What would this solve? Would it prevent all of the little J.P.'s from failing and giving up? While I would like to think that this was the ultimate cure to the lack of academic success so many students face, I am realistic enough to now know that there are many other factors which effect a student's academic performance (Banks & Banks, 1997; Levine & Levine, 1996; Kozol, 1995). I think what I was and, perhaps, still am attempting to do is satisfy my own needs in some way. Regardless of whether I actually was, I felt that I was abandoned by many of my teachers. As such, I had promised myself that this would be one excuse that no student in my class would be able to use when they thought of me.

The most profound incident that occurred during my own secondary education caused me so much frustration with my teacher that I took it out, not only on her, but on the class as well. The class was Algebra 3-4 and on the first day of school the teacher said to the class that she noticed a few seniors were enrolled and she encouraged us to drop the course right away because she would not be able to give us the help or attention that she presumed that we would need. (At my high school there were two sequences for students taking four years of math. For those students who excelled at math, freshmen year began with Algebra 1-2, followed by geometry, Algebra 3-4, and finally Pre-calculus. Those students who were not as successful in Algebra 1-2 were divided in half with Algebra 1 taken during the ninth grade and Algebra 2 taken during the sophomore year followed by Algebra 3-4 usually taken during the senior year.)

While this happened over 13 years ago, I still remember it as if it were yesterday. On the very first day of school, without knowing anything about me as an individual, my

teacher had given up on me. As a consequence of her statement, the few seniors in the class informally decided that if she was not going to have the time to help us learn Algebra, maybe we weren't going to let her have the time to help the other students in the class learn either. Consequently, by the end of the first semester the class was extremely behind the other classes in school. At the semester's end, she told me that she could no longer have me in her class and that I needed to drop it. My initial response was to laugh and I informed her that was not possible. She then made a deal with me and said that if I dropped the class I would receive a passing grade for the semester. After getting her to agree to also pass the other seniors in the class, I dropped the course, but I didn't drop the resentment that I had toward her and others like her. As my first year teaching experience began, then, my determination to be different was forged from my memories of unsatisfying educational experiences.

August, 1998

My beginning two weeks as a first year teacher at South High were very intense. What I most clearly remember is how terrified and confused I was. Part of this stems from the incredible amount of advice given to me which conflicted with my own views on how to start the semester. It seemed that every time I met a teacher at South, I heard suggestion after suggestion centering on how I need to be tough and firm with students. For example, one veteran teacher said, "Remember to be firm your first month or so. It's far easier to start the semester as a tough guy and then ease up than it is to start off easy and then have to resort to being tough." Another veteran teacher said, "Make sure you

have an assignment ready for the students as soon as they walk into your class. That way they know that your class means business.” Another teacher said, “The biggest mistake first year teachers make is that they become too concerned with what their students think of them. It doesn’t matter what they think of you; all that matters is that you are in control of the class.”

This was the antithesis of what I wanted for my first week. I wanted to be different from every other teacher. I wanted to put my own philosophy of teaching into practice and not the philosophy of other teachers at South, or even the teachers I had as an elementary or high school student. I was concerned with issues of power in the classroom and emphasizing that Room 460 was not my classroom, but our classroom. I wanted each student to begin to realize that we were going to take a journey where everyone had a role as both a learner as well as a teacher. In essence, I wanted to help create a community of learners. In the end, however, I think that I was scared of not being a good teacher. I was still scared of failure.

A week before school started, I had a clear idea of what I wanted to accomplish. The night before the first day of school, however, I was confused and started to become overwhelmed with all of the conflicting advice I had just received, as well as my own fears of acceptance among my colleagues and students. As my anxiety turned to panic late that night, with only several hours standing between me and the beginning of my teaching career, the phone rang. I answered it and a voice said, “How did I know you would be awake?” It was my cooperating teacher from student teaching the previous spring at Lincoln High School. We talked for a while and I expressed my apprehension

with the first day and my confusion over the conflicting advice I had received which had caused me to question my own philosophy of teaching. She responded with some of the best advice I have received about teaching. In essence, she said that if I truly believed that my own philosophy was in the best interests of my students, then I needed to follow my instincts and go with what I believed.

I took her suggestion and, contrary to the advice of many, I didn't start the year with an assignment or a tough guy image. Instead, I wanted to ease into the school year and, to some degree, use the contrast between my approach and that of many other teachers to my advantage. For example, on the second day of class, I assembled a stack of file folders cut in half and a bin filled with markers and colored pencils which the students would use in groups of three to make personalized name placards. My goal was to allow students to express themselves in a manner that, ideally was creative and not intimidating or limiting—an approach students were not as familiar with. To a large degree, I think it was successful. While there were a few students who were less than comfortable with this freedom and consequently just wrote their name, others were far more willing to share a little about who they were, as well as some of their interests.

On the third day of classes, I began something that I had wanted to do since beginning my post-baccalaureate teaching program. Each of my classes watched “The Dead Poets Society.” Prior to showing this film, I asked the class to pay particular attention to the kinds of educational approaches that were depicted. In essence, I wanted them to see that there was a difference, in terms of classroom culture, between the classroom of Robin Williams' character and that of his colleagues. After we viewed the

film, class discussion continued for two days. The discussion allowed me to get a better idea of what education meant to my students, as well as an understanding of what they expected to gain from the class. It also, however, provided me a medium with which to discuss my own philosophy of education as well as my goals and expectations for the semester. Some of the things I encouraged my students to think about were the constructive questioning of the political, social and economic status quo, the intrinsic possibilities of learning, and how much I was looking forward to the year ahead. I wanted them to think and wonder about the world in which they lived.

On the following Monday, my task was to establish classroom goals, expectations, and procedures. Unlike many teachers at South, a few of whom told me I was absolutely crazy to give students that much potential power in the classroom, I was not willing to say what was allowed and what wasn't. Instead, I encouraged the students to decide for themselves. This was accomplished through class discussions on a number of questions given to each student.² I introduced this discussion by pointing out that a number of signs on the windows of many classroom doors stated that absolutely no food, drink, or candy were allowed. I stated that the core of my philosophy of teaching was for all members of the class to decide what kind of guidelines were to be established for our class, not just me. The responses of many students to this idea were "Cool" and "Hey, this

² Some of the questions used for the basis of the class discussion are as follows: 1. For what reason(s) might a class have a policy on food and drink? What should ours be? 2. For what reason(s) might a class have a policy about late work? What should ours be? 3. On which elements do you believe a person's grade should be based? How should a person be graded? What should be taken into account? How much should different elements weigh in determining the overall grade?

class is really going to be different." This was well accepted by the members of the class and it helped in beginning to establish a certain level of rapport and trust with my students.

If I had my first week of school to do over again, I don't think I would do many things differently. Contrary to the advice of many, I didn't need to be a "tough guy" during my first week. I was able to establish order in my classroom while still conveying my desire to share responsibility with the students for maintaining order. Each of my classes has since established their own culture. Each has their similarities and differences, some are more formal and others just seem to go with the flow. Overall, there seems to be a cohesiveness that ties everyone together as a group while still allowing for individuality.

The Students

The students at South High are in many respects similar to students that can be found in most high schools in the United States. By and large, South High students come from working and lower middle class families. These students bring with them many of the same hopes, desires, and emotions that most adolescents experience during this period of their life. Some are very motivated to learn, wanting to gain as much as they possibly can. Others lack the motivation or desire to learn, viewing school as just another requirement that society has placed on them. Most, however, are probably somewhere in the middle; one day they want to learn as much as they possibly can, the next day, however, they feel as if everything about education and school is irrelevant. Above all, I suspect most of my students are unsure of what society expects of them and even less sure of where they are going.

In terms of diversity, the racial composition of the school is more diverse than the city as a whole. In the Omaha MSA the racial mix, according to information on the Omaha Chamber of Commerce web site (<http://www.accessomaha.com/Living/demographics.html>) is as follows: white 89.2%, black 8.6%, Hispanic 4.6%, Asian 1.6%, and Native American less than 1%. At South High, there is far more diversity. According to a report written by the District's research department at the beginning of the school year, 53.8% of the students are white, 22.7% are Hispanic, 20.7% are African American, 1.7% are Native American, and approximately 1% are of Asian decent.

In class discussions, I have from time to time asked my students how they would describe themselves. Some of the comments are quite interesting, for they have referred

to themselves as being diverse, cliquish, both hard working and lazy, strong willed, and often times both poor and wealthy. As one who works with these students everyday, I would tend to agree with these generalized descriptions.

The description that most heartens me is that of being hard working and lazy. Initially this may seem like a contradiction, but in reality it is quite true. A month prior to the start of school, I had the opportunity to meet Patricia Darnen, herself a product of South High as well as a twenty-seven year veteran teacher at the school. I learned that she felt that many of the kids at South did not have a strong belief in “rising above their circumstances.” In her view, the kids at South “are nice but apathetic individuals.”

J.P. – What do you mean by apathetic?

Pat - These kids are mostly concerned with putting in their four years with a minimal amount of effort and then getting on with the rest of their lives.

J.P. - How does that differ from any other high school kid?

Pat - It’s what they plan to do with their lives. Look at how many kids go on to any form of post-secondary education. Almost eighty percent of these kids will wind up in working class jobs. These are not dumb kids, but the attitude or passion to try and have a different life from their parents or grandparents is just not there for a vast majority of them. It’s not as if they are not hard working because while these kids are quite satisfied with Cs and Ds, they are also the ones who will leave school at 3:00 PM and immediately go to the Burger Lust, for instance, and work there fannies

off for eight hours and not complain one iota. They just don't see the reason to work that hard in school.

Almost all students that I have met during the past year work after school and on the weekends. In many respects, the students seem to give far more priority to their jobs than they give to their schoolwork. When asked why they work so much, many say it is so they can buy the kinds of things that their parents could not or would not buy for them. Many of these goods and services consist of clothing items such as shirts or jeans made by Tommy Hilfiger, FUBU, or the latest version of Nike's Air Jordans. Many of these same students also work to help pay for a phone or cable in their bedroom, the latest PlayStation games, or fast food. What was particularly surprising to me, however, was the number of students who worked, not because they wanted to have the latest in fashion, but because their parents or family members needed their help in putting a roof over their heads or food on the table. On a number of occasions through the course of this year, I have had students ask if they could hand in an assignment late because rent was due in a week and they had to work a few extra hours to help pay for it.

This does not occur for the vast majority of my students, but I do have at least one in every class who, if not for their help, the electricity in their home would be shut off. To be 15, 16, 17, or 18 years of age and have to contend with these kinds of issues is mind-boggling. When I was their age, my concerns were not if I was going to eat dinner, but what restaurant I was going to have it at. It was always assumed that my house was going to be warm during the winter and cool during the summer, but for many of my students this is just not the case.

While the students are quite diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics, there does not appear to be as much diversity in terms of thinking about or challenging the way things are. While South is the smallest Omaha Public Schools high school in terms of student population, it has acquired a very significant reputation that has stigmatized the school. The kids at South believe that they are viewed as a physically tough school, but academically, an easy school.

The tough image stems in large part from an incident that occurred at the school three years ago which also received national attention. This event, one of the first things I learned about South High last May when I accepted the CADRE position, was considered the impetus behind an inaccurate and unfair reputation the school has been given. According to accounts from numerous students and faculty members, two students orchestrated an attack on another student and recorded the fight on video. Copies of the video were distributed among many students and eventually an assistant principal received a copy and distributed it to the media as an example of how threatening it was to work in or attend the school. Not only did the video make it to the local television stations, but it also received national airtime on “CNN” and “Geraldo.” Because of the media attention given to this incident, South High has developed an image among OPS schools as tough and dangerous, taking the focus off of academics. This single incident has, in my view, played a detrimental role with the school, its students, faculty, and staff.

One of the other things that I have noticed throughout this semester is the lack of tolerance among almost all of the students I have come into contact with. Anyone who strays from the norm is labeled as an outcast or given some sort of derogatory name. I

cannot count how many times I have heard labels like “gay” or “fag” being attributed to someone or something that the students don’t like. For example, after handing out a take home exam, I frequently hear a comment such as “man, this is gay.” When asked what they meant, the typical response is “I don’t know.” Generally, I pursue the issue by asking if they meant that the assignment has made them happy? In response, I often receive “you know that’s not what I mean.”

Sexual orientation is not the only area in which many students are not tolerant. For example, in my Advanced Placement European History class, one day we were having a discussion on the impact French Huguenot immigrants had on Prussia when they fled the religious persecution of Louis XIV when a student remarked “You know, I wish those pieces of shit Mexican immigrants would go home.” Similarly, the day after NATO launched an attack on Serbia to restore regional autonomy for the Kosovars, one of the students in my homeroom said, while reading the front page of the newspaper, “I hope we kill all of those “A-rab ching chings.” When asked why he said that his response was “I dunno, I just..., Caruso why do you always ask me those tough questions?”

September, 1998

It’s hard not to be shaken by the harsh realities or emotional baggage that so many students bring with them to school everyday. For example, during a four-day- period this month I received two confidential notes from the counseling department on Jean, a student in one of my history classes. The counselor wrote:

September 14 - FYI...Jean has been having difficult times at home and has requested that her teachers become aware of her situation. Due to

violence in the home last year, Jean's mom decided to proceed with a divorce. Dad has not made this easy for Jean and her Mom. He has been stalking both of them this past year. There is a protection order against dad seeing either Jean or her mom. Last Wednesday Jean's Mom took an overdose and was admitted to a hospital and is now in a psychiatric facility. As you could imagine, Jean is concerned about her grades due to her many absences and would appreciate your consideration in extending any deadlines in order to allow her to complete her past due work.

September 18 – FYI... Jean was robbed at gunpoint last night in the parking lot of a grocery store. She has obviously been traumatized and is having a difficult day...

Early October, 1998

Today during my ninth grade study hall I found out that two 15-year-old girls were pregnant. Their friends in the study hall have told me that one of the students repeatedly smokes marijuana on a daily basis. According to the counseling department, this student's father is in prison and refuses to acknowledge her as his daughter, and the mother has frequently beaten her because she finds her daughter such a disappointment.

How Jean and so many others like her make it out of bed everyday, much less come to school, is beyond my comprehension. While their stories were similar to those I read during my teacher certification program (Freedman, 1991; Kozol, 1995; and

Kotlowitz, 1991), I don't believe I was prepared to accept how real they were and how difficult it was to face them.

Late October, 1998

I remember the morning very well. I generally start the morning reading the newspaper and drinking a cup of coffee at home before leaving for school. That morning, I remember reading an article about the shooting death of 18-year-old David Hernandez. While I read the article in its entirety, I didn't think much about it because I didn't know a David Hernandez. Shortly after arriving at school an ESL teacher came to my room and asked if Barik Hernandez had arrived to homeroom yet. I responded no, that I hadn't seen him since yesterday when school ended. Thinking it was odd for her to be looking for him I asked her why she was looking for him, to which she responded "I can't talk about it." I then asked if it had anything to do with the article in the morning's paper and she just looked at me and ran down the hall. While I was a little alarmed, I still didn't think much of it because Barik was not the Hernandez I had read about.

The homeroom bell rang at 7:45 A.M. and my students came in the room with no hint of the article. I asked some of them if they had seen Barik and they responded no, he usually doesn't come in until the final homeroom bell rings. When the final bell rang there was still no Barik so I went to open the door when I saw two counselors and an administrator coming to my door. It was at that point when I knew something had to be terribly wrong.

When they entered, they asked if I had seen Barik and I responded no, but that I would love to know why because the ESL teacher had been quite worried that he had not yet shown up. One of the counselors then asked if I had read the article in the paper that morning, because they thought it might have been Barik who was shot and killed. I then turned on the TV to see if the morning news had anything on it. It was at this point that a number of students began to ask why all of the administrators were sitting right outside the door. The counselor then said, "Class, there is a chance that Barik Hernandez may have been shot and killed in a drive by shooting. Sandi, a student in my homeroom asked, "Who?" Fred, pointing to Barik's seat said, "Barik, the kid that has sat over there for the past four years." Initially, the "no ways" were said and then it set in, someone who they had been with for four years was no longer there.

Another administrator then came into the room and confirmed that Barik David Hernandez was in fact murdered. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I initially just fell into a desk and just stared at the ground when I realized that I had fourteen other kids who were as confused, if not more, than I was. I looked around the room and looked at each one of them. Fred, the fearless, never-show-emotion, varsity soccer star looked at me with tears in his eyes. Brian, the star wrestler, kept saying, "There has to be a mistake, it can't be true. Barik would never hurt anyone. They had to have made a mistake." Grabbing a box of Kleenex, Brian left the room in tears. Soon thereafter, the bell rang announcing that period one would begin in four minutes.

What happened next was somewhat of a blur. I looked up in disbelief hoping that I soon would wake up from this surreal dream. I was shell-shocked. My kids in

homeroom didn't want to move while the students entering the room for period one economics were trying to figure out what was going on. I clearly didn't know what to do and desperately wanted someone such as an administrator to tell me this is what you have to do next, but no one did. My first instinct was to make sure each student knew that they did not have to go to their next class and that if they wanted they could stay in my room or I would write them a pass to see one of the school's counselors. A few took me up on the offer to go to the counselor's office while the others thought it was better to just go to their next class. With tears in my eyes I returned to a desk and stared at the floor while my remaining economics students walked into the room and took their seats.

When I gained some composure I explained to the class that Barik, a student in my homeroom and fourth period class was murdered in a drive-by-shooting last night and consequently we would be "doing little that day." I made it through the next class and during my planning period I left the school and walked around the neighborhood trying to figure out what I was supposed to say to the class which Barik was in. This was something that my pre-teaching methods courses never prepared me for and I felt at a loss for words. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that it was time for me to play the role of a teacher, because twenty-three students would need me.

I returned to my room a minute prior to the start of class when one of the school's counselors approached me and said that she would be in the classroom during period four and if I wanted her to lead a discussion for the class to sort out their feelings. Initially, I welcomed her offer, but then thought about it a little more and told her I felt more comfortable if she would just pick up where I left off.

When the bell rang I stood at the door like I always did and greeted each student as they walked in. After the final bell rang, I informed the students of the death of Barik and then said that the entire period was set aside for discussion on what happened. Sitting among the students I told them that as a first year teacher I was unsure how to proceed. I said, “I wish I had some way to explain to you why the shooting of Barik occurred. It’s insane, here was one of the nicest students in the school who sat in this room just yesterday, and now he is gone. When I first found out about it this morning,” I said, “I cried. I mean, I am so confused about why this had to happen... You know, I am confused, but I think that’s OK. I’m sure you are just as confused, if not more than I am, and that’s OK, too.”

One of the students then asked if maybe it “was better not to try to get to know people real well because when they died it would be easier to deal with.” I said:

“I can understand how something like that may sound good right now, but if all of us did that, wouldn’t we be denying ourselves some of the things that make life so wonderful? My philosophy of teaching is to build personal relationships with students in order to better understand who they are as individuals. To find out what they are interested in and find a way to somehow use it in class. One of the negatives about this kind of philosophy, however, is that when something terrible like what happened yesterday happens, it hurts. Sure it might be easier at times to not get to know your students, but in the end if I did that I would be denying the kinds of things that make teaching so wonderful. In spite of Barik’s death

I'm still glad I got to know him and I don't think I would want to change that."

When I went back to school to become a teacher I wanted to help young people. Over the past two years I have been criticized for being too idealistic and not realistic enough. I have also been accused of being naïve to think that I can save every student I come into contact with. In all honesty, I don't think I can save every student I come into contact with. Sometimes, as in the case of Barik, I will never have the chance. This does not mean, however, that I shouldn't try because trying is a part of who I really am.

Faculty and Administration

February, 1999

While the attitudes or behaviors of many of my students may frustrate me at times, they pale in comparison to the level of frustration I have with the administration at South. As a whole, I would describe my relationship with the administration as similar to most first year teachers in the building. In other words, it is a very formal relationship in which hellos are exchanged in the halls, or the occasional discussion relating to an administrative or disciplinary matter occurs. This particular day, however, I had a discussion with other teachers that really sums up the source of my frustration with school administration. As one veteran teacher told me:

Veteran teacher - The less contact you have with the administration, the better you know you are doing. If they think you are doing a good job, you won't see them. If something is wrong or they are not satisfied with your performance, you will know because they'll be around.

J.P. - But don't we want them around? How else are they going to be aware of what is happening in the classroom?

Veteran teacher - You worry about these things too much, J.P. If they really wanted to know what was going on in your classroom, don't you think they would be in the hallway of the social studies wing more than a couple of times a year?

J.P. - But what about 'dead weight,' what about the teachers who aren't creating an environment for all students to flourish?

Another teacher - But teachers want and need autonomy in the classroom. The more contact we have with them, the less autonomy we have.

To a large degree, I believe the administration at South subscribes to this philosophy. With few exceptions, administrators are rarely seen in the halls of the fourth floor where the social studies classrooms are located. In essence, contact between most teachers and administration is minimal. While I understand the need for a certain amount of autonomy, I also believe it is vital for a teacher to have the support and guidance of the school's administration--to be assured that they fit into some larger educational plan for

the school's students. I am skeptical that teachers at South believe they fit into some larger plan, and I am also skeptical that South has some larger educational plan.

I later spoke with another teacher about this idea, and she gave me an article that she believes verifies this suspicion. In the May 1994 issue of *NEA Today*, one of the administrative team members at South explains, "We have no master plan.... The changes we make are ones that individual teachers and departments can make." (Needham, 1994, p.15). While the autonomy of an individual teacher may remove barriers that might otherwise prevent them from teaching creatively, it also removes the assurance that what students learn in that teacher's classroom somehow fits into a larger educational scheme in which curricula complement each other.

From my observations, it appears that the administration at South High chooses to focus a good deal of their time on the discipline of students. In fact, if there was one overriding theme that is the embodiment of South High's administrative philosophy, it is the importance of control over students. This is one point that I do not feel I can emphasize enough. As I was told by a veteran teacher on my very first day of work at South, before I ever even met a student, "These kids at South need to be told what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. Remember, these are working class kids, and they need good solid structure from a teacher." While this comment came from a teacher, in many ways, I believe that it also reflects the views of the school's administrators. For example, while discussing the progress of a student in one of my classes, one administrator said "If she gives you any problems you be sure to let me know because she is the kind of student that needs some discipline."

I believe that the "tough school" reputation brought about by the videotaped fight incident is one of the main reasons so many of the teachers and administrators are far more concerned with gaining power or keeping power over students rather than, as I believe, they should be giving power to students. It is as if they are trying so hard to overcome the image in their minds of students running loose and beating each other up on school property that their assertion of power has allowed them to compromise the breadth and depth of relationships they could be having with students. This image, I believe, helps to explain why the students had only one pep rally, one all-school dance, and why they are required to leave the school within ten minutes of the final bell. It also suggests why the administration, at the request of several teachers, forbid all faculty members from giving any hall passes during the last two days of school even though the periods were ninety minutes long.

This need for control over students is also seen in the enormous use of the In School Suspension, (ISS). According to the student handbook, ISS is "an alternative to suspension from school." Students are assigned to the ISS room for the entire school day for the purpose of being "deprived of the sociability of their peers, but not deprived of an opportunity to continue their education." Ironically, while this "opportunity to continue their education" may work for the teacher that just assigns text readings and work sheets, I have found that it denies students from any true learning in my class, which is based largely on class discussion and group-centered activities. In fact, because I felt so strongly that, with regard to ISS, the end does not justify the means, I spent my first semester making arrangements to get my students out of ISS during the period when my

class was held. Eventually, however, the administration learned about such arrangements and informed the faculty that it must stop because it was defeating the purpose of ISS and, from my perspective, undermining their authority.

To shift the focus from administration to faculty, one attitude that I have observed to be pervasive among teachers at South is the sense of hopelessness about many of their students. Perhaps I am particularly sensitive to this attitude, having been a victim of it myself, but I have witnessed a number of instances in which teachers quite openly express their doubts about students' abilities now or in the future. For example, in the teacher's lounge or during faculty meetings, I have often overheard teachers speak of certain students as if they have no redeeming qualities whatsoever. To my surprise, many of the students that come up in these conversations are also in some of my classes. These students, at times, drive me a little crazy, but they never have struck me as being worthy of a negative label or of being considered a waste of time and effort. Is this just a reality of teaching? Is this something that inevitably happens to all teachers? Is it the norm? I don't want to believe it. Despite my generalization, I know there are teachers at South who do not share this kind of willingness to write students off. South has a number of award winning teachers but, unfortunately, my perception is that they don't seem to be in the majority and they are certainly not willing to be very vocal about it.

I do believe that most, if not all, teachers care about some of their students, but probably not all of them. For example, during third quarter progress reports, those students who were absent had their progress reports placed in a central location for teachers to come down and fill in the requisite information. While filling out the reports,

many teachers commented on how so-and-so was such a horrible student or how they couldn't figure out why so-and-so continued coming to class because there was no possible way for them to pass the semester. Listening to some of these teachers speak of their contempt for the students in their charge upset me, particularly when the same student was doing quite well in one of my classes. While I sat there filling out my portion of the progress reports I wanted to point out to these teachers that if they had given up on the student, was it not also plausible that the student had given up on them?

March, 1999

Now that students have had some time to absorb the shock of Barik's death, I asked the counselor to return to my fourth period class to be part of a follow-up discussion on students' thoughts and how they were handling their feelings. As the discussion progressed, more and more students began to talk about their feelings about how life sometimes just didn't make much sense and, in the end, I think it was one of our best classes of the semester. Not only were the students able to sort out their feelings, but I was able to help them understand that, while there are certainly risks involved with getting to know others and caring about them, that is exactly what I hoped to do in each of my classes with all of my students. I felt that every single student realized that I truly cared about each of them, and that I would be there for all of them if they needed me.

The conversation turned at that point, however, down a path I did not anticipate. Many students started to complain to the counselor about the school and its administration. For example, a student named Jennifer asked, "Why can't the other teachers at this school be like Mr. Caruso?" Chris then said, "This school sucks, we can't

do anything at this school. The administration is so concerned with the fight that was video taped that they don't give a flying whatever about us. Only J.P. and a few other teachers take the time to get to know us, but most are more concerned with leaving the school at the sound of the bell." The counselor responded by saying "Yes, Mr. Caruso is a special teacher and South is lucky to have him." Feeling uncomfortable with the tone of the discussion, particularly in light of the fact that another faculty member was present, I said "If you as students have constructive criticisms of the school, its faculty, or staff you should voice them to the Student Council and your parents. The school is here to serve you and if it's not, you and your parents should see that it does." With that, I asked the counselor if she would be available for any student to talk to during the remainder of the day or after school. After that, the bell rang and class had ended.

The criticisms by the students of the school and staff lead to a dilemma that has confronted me throughout the year. While I have strived to present myself as a teacher who was different from many at the school, I have been uncomfortable when the students make it abundantly clear that I am different by freely criticizing other faculty and staff in the presence of others. While I have often privately agreed with their assertions, I haven't wanted the notion that I was critical of some to spread around. In some respects, I think I wanted to criticize while being immune from criticism myself. I also wanted to be accepted by the other teachers, which, to some degree, is a rite of passage. In other words, it is one way a first year teacher is socialized into the teaching profession.

Chapter VI – Reflective Analysis

My “first footsteps” into the teaching profession have been filled with an incredible number of experiences and emotions that have allowed me to grow as an individual and as a teacher. In writing this thesis, I have found it difficult to convey an all encompassing image of what it is like to teach at South High School. My fear is that I have given South an image of being a violent school when, in fact, it is not. Overall, South is a school where students learn. The question, however, is what are they learning?

The teachers at South believe that they are preparing their students for the world ahead of them. Time and time again this is reinforced by the Principal who proudly proclaims that South “has the best faculty, not only in Omaha, but in the state as a whole in terms of preparing students for the challenges of tomorrow.” A number of my students, particularly the honors students, would agree with this. I, along with a few other teachers, however, don’t share this view.

According to Pat Darnen, the twenty-seven year veteran teacher, “South is an institution which perpetuates a kind of secondary citizen mentality.” I observed that many teachers at South believe that knowledge is in the attainment of skills. In a sense, their focus seems to be on the three Rs, taught through worksheets and memorization. “They give students skills without giving them any means or encouragement to think about them. Our kids are programmed not to think,” said Pat in a discussion I had with her and another student. “It’s true,” said the student. “In English we just had a test over a book and I can tell you what color the hubcaps were of the main character’s car, but I have no clue what the author was trying to say to the reader. That wasn’t on the test, so why

bother taking the time to find out.” This kind of mentality has been one of the most frustrating aspects of my teaching experience at South.

On a more personal level, my first year of teaching had a profound impact on an area of my life that I did not anticipate—my marriage. Through the course of this past year, I became so consumed with my school and how to meet the needs of my kids that I failed to give my marriage the attention it needed. In my Point of Reference piece, I mentioned that at the start of the CADRE program, my wife Anne and I decided to maintain two separate residences under the assumption that when possible, she would spend one night a week in Omaha and I would spend the weekends in Lincoln. While this initially worked, by the end of October, I was so self-absorbed that I began to find excuse after excuse to not return to Lincoln and our communication waned. Together, we realized that our relationship was suffering, so Anne decided to move to Omaha and make an hour and a half commute to work in Lincoln and back everyday.

This change was not the solution we hoped it would be, however. As the year progressed, the pressure mounted and our relationship seemed to be nearing a breaking point. Even though I was, by all accounts, doing a great job teaching, I kept putting more of myself into my work and less into my relationship, and Anne didn't know how to respond. By May, I had become increasingly unhappy with where I was teaching and our efficiency apartment was driving us both mad. Finally, Anne and I both realized that in order for us to both be happy we had to make some changes. We gradually started a process to restore our relationship which would eventually include a move back to Lincoln. Later in July, I accepted a contract for a teaching position at Lincoln High where

I student taught, which also reduced our pressure and will provide a new teaching opportunity for me. Hopefully, what I have learned about the need for balance between work and home will prevent some of the same problems from happening next year.

During the Summer Session at UNO, I was asked by my department head at South to come to a methods class he was teaching and speak about my first year of teaching. In response to a student's question about what it was really like I said, "It was the most stressful, emotional, difficult, and wonderful thing I have ever done." As I reread my journals I have found that ultimately my first year was about myself and my relationship with my students. I have cared about them, I have listened to their hopes and fears, I have attempted to empower them, and most of all I have never given up on them. They in turn, gave my crazy ideas a chance, listened to me, empowered me, and never gave up on me. I have waited most of my life to feel that I have done something well. I have met "my enemy," my fear of failure, and in the end I think I have won. For that, I owe the students and staff at South High a tremendous amount of thanks.

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 contribute 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.

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 commonalities 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.

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 a 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 the collaborative process 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.

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 that are part of writing 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, to which we responded 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. This additional pressure forced us to produce work even 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 composed 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.

Common Themes

When comparing and contrasting aspects of our first year of teaching, we found many commonalities. 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.

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 our 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 want recognition for their efforts and are dedicated 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 reinforcement 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 us 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 radically 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 as the year progressed, we found it more and more difficult to not only relate with other teachers, but also with our friends and families. We felt they could not understand the importance of the emotional relationships we strengthened each

day in our classrooms. In sum, each of us 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 for 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 worked continually to help them grow and change. Doing that caused us to rely on the emotional bond we had created.

Questioning our professional role

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 frequently 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 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 the first semester. However, we barely mentioned the program in the body 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 actually increased the amount we thought about our students and our first year experiences as we continued to work on our theses.

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 vs. 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 vs. 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 v. 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 a vulnerable observer in a research setting, would be beneficial in exploring the perceptions of experienced teachers.

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?

By the conclusion of 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 role 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.” We leave final judgement as to the distance each of us traveled in answering the research question, to the reader 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.

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. Our research process has allowed us an overwhelming realization that, despite all the roles each of us had as first year teachers and full-time graduate students, the students we taught, as well as our relationships with them, were the most important thing to us. Our perceptions and explorations as first year teachers in our individual school settings revolved around that one thing, our students. We believe this conclusion has given some insight to first year teachers in any school setting.

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval



University
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Institutional Review Board (IRB)
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April 12, 1999

J.P. Caruso
Teacher Education
UNO

IRB#: 120-99-EX

TITLE OF PROTOCOL: First Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of an Urban High 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,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "E. Prentice/jlg".

Ernest D. Prentice, PhD
Vice Chair, IRB

EDP:jlg

Appendix B: Acknowledgements

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