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Melissa A. McCarty
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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**First Footsteps: Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage of a First Year
Special Education Teacher in an Urban Middle School.**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Education

And the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

Of The

Requirements for the Degree Master of

Arts in Secondary Education

University of Nebraska

By

Melissa A. McCarty

July 2000

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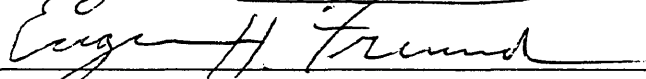
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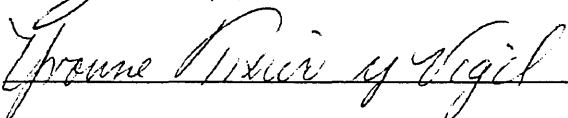
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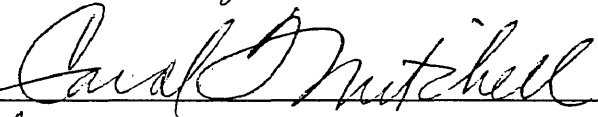
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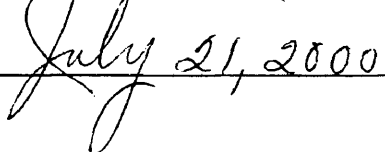
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First Footsteps: Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage as a First Year Special Education Teacher in an Urban Middle School

Melissa A. McCarty, MA
University of Nebraska, 2000

Advisor: Dr. Carol Mitchell

This thesis is part of a trilogy which examined the critical incidents and rites of passage of myself and the two other first year teachers in our respective school settings. Each of our theses is an individual work; however, we collaborated weekly about our experiences in the classroom. Our primary form of data collection was daily journaling. Our feelings, emotions, and insights were documented along with daily interactions between administration, students, and staff. That occurred during our first year of teaching.

While we collaborated about the critical incidents that occurred in our classrooms we each examined these incidents as they affected our first year of teaching. After collaborating on the many themes that emerged from our first year, we individually wrote about our experiences during the first year as teachers. In order to comprehend the complexity of these findings, we recommend that you refer to the following pieces:

Merante, C. J. (2000). *First Footsteps: Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage of a First Year First Grade Teacher in a Suburban Elementary School*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Saunders, M.C. (2000). *First Footsteps: Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage of a First Year Fourth Grade Teacher in a Suburban Elementary School*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Schmid, B. A. (2000). *First Footsteps: Perceptions of a First Year Teacher Using Non-Mimetic and Mimetic Works of Art*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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.

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

Stewart, S.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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- Dr. Gene Freund and Dr. Yvonne Tixier y Vigil for your insight, strength and inspiration. You have been a great influence on my life.
- My family, their love and encouragement has shaped who I am today.
- Duane, your support, encouragement and care have been invaluable. You never stopped believing in me even when I did.
- Kay Kaiser, for your endless source of faith and belief in me.
- The special education students this year have taught me more than I could imagine about my teaching and myself. I hope this thesis will show the emotions I had during my first year of teaching.

This thesis is dedicated to them

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Preface

The thesis process has been a life-altering journey. Along the way, I have gained a knowledge that I never could have learned in a classroom, created life long friendships, and built lasting memories. I had heard about the thesis option as an exit requirements of my masters program from Dr. Gene Freund in the summer, but the journey did not start until one fall afternoon when I sat in on the thesis meeting. I listened to Jennifer Bernard and Stacy Stewart address the group and explain their experiences writing the thesis. I had begun my masters program with the idea that I would create a portfolio, but the idea of writing the thesis captivated my attention and I decided this was the path for me. Two other members in the master's program also decided to write a thesis. We were put together in a group by Dr. Freund and found ourselves on a voyage to Okaboji, Iowa, to bond and discuss the thesis process.

We were to write a thesis as part of the First Footsteps Project similar to that which was done the previous year and discussed with Dr. Freund ideas for a research question. We were introduced to The Vulnerable Observer by Ruth Behar. Using Behar's notion enabled us to express our emotions and thoughts as we recorded our data of the daily events.

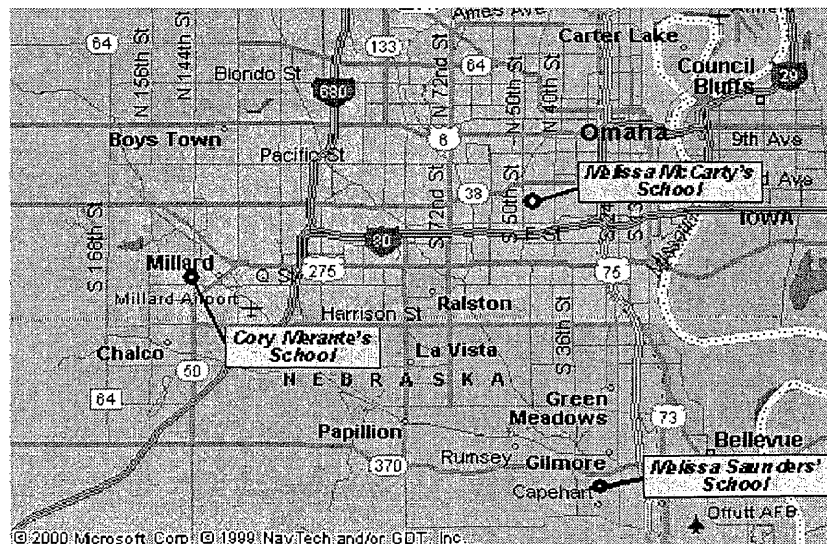
Our committee chair, Dr. Carol Mitchell, and our committee members Dr. Gene Freund, Dr. Charles Gildersleeve, and Dr. Yvonne Tixier y Vigil guided us through the journey. Through the year, I have learned more than I ever could have imagined. The vulnerability we let ourselves experience has created an awareness of ourselves as

teachers, and colleagues. The friendships I have developed this year will not end with the thesis. The experiences and emotions we have shared have created bonds that I will always cherish through my years of teaching and beyond.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine critical incidents that occurred with students in a unique school milieu during my first year as teachers. In collaboration with my fellow students, we examined and reflected upon the previous experiences and perceptions of three first year teachers who had collectively written their thesis on their first's years teaching experience. They too were involved in the CADRE (Career Advancement for Recruits and Experienced Teachers) Program, they were: Jennifer Bernard, J. P. Caruso, and Stacy Stewart. Each addressed these same issues in their First Footsteps (1999) thesis trilogy from the 1998-1999 school year. I, like the previous thesis students examined the area of anthropology; however, my review of literature includes research on first year teachers. I believe this review would help me better understand the school culture and my roles as first-year teachers.

Of the three of us who decided to write a thesis, two were teaching at the elementary level in two different districts, and I was assigned to a middle school. Below is a map which depicts my school location in the Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA).



Section A. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of critical incidents and rites of passage that occurred within the classroom and investigate the effects these critical incidents had on my rites of passage as a first year teacher. I present my perception as a vulnerable observer, a term coined by Ruth Behar (1996) who found that it is impossible if not implausible to exclude the self from any part of observational research. As a result, my investigation of critical incidents in the classroom includes my emotions, insights, expectations, and perceptions of these incidents that affected me as first year teacher.

Section B. Methodology

This is a non-hypothecated study that was conducted during the 1999-2000 school year. I used journaling as my primary form of data collection. This journaling consisted of writing down events that occurred in the classroom and in the school environment among students, parents and colleagues.

I have made every effort possible to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. Pseudonyms are used, gender is changed, and circumstances altered in an attempt to maintain anonymity. I adhered to Crane and Angrosino's (1974) statement:

ethical consideration lies in the area which recent United States publications call 'Protection of the Individual as a Research Subject.' This includes the ethnographer's duty to make and to honor promises of maintaining the anonymity

of informants and to present the material as honestly and completely as possible, bearing in mind that the informants or their children and neighbors may read the ethnography someday. It also includes the idea that the ethnographer owes the host a great debt for their [sic] cooperation and must be careful to repay it in part by, for example, not reporting on them so that punitive agencies can take action against them. Maintaining anonymity of informants includes not only cases where names must be ‘changed to protect the innocent’, but also the responsibility for not using materials that could be traced to an informant by local people and used to his or her detriment (6).

After collecting data throughout the school year, I separated it into categories. I examined the results of the critical incidents for both convergent and divergent themes that would give me insight into the experiences and perceptions of my first year as a teacher.

Section C. Definition of Terms

CADRE: According to the CADRE Project Handbook 1999-2000 (1999). “The acronym CADRE refers to the overriding goal of Career Advancement and Development for Recruits and Experienced teachers. CADRE is a project within the college of education at University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). This project attempts to pair first year teachers with experienced teachers who act as mentors to help first year teachers ease their journey into the teaching profession. Omaha is unique in that there are seven distinct school districts within the Omaha metropolitan area. All school districts help

support the CADRE Program. They come together through what is called the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC). The school districts along with UNO work together to address the educational needs of the metropolitan area.

Critical Incident: In the article, “Becoming a Doctor: Critical-Incident Reports from Third-Year Medical Students,” Branch et.al. in Henderson (1997) describe critical incidents as “short narratives of events judged to be particularly meaningful by participants in the events.” In other words, it is the participants themselves who identify what event they deem to be critical and as such react to these events. This same definition will apply to this study and my experiences in the school and classroom.

Ethical Considerations: I adhere to Crane and Angrosin’s (1974) statement that it is, “the ethnographer’s duty to make and to honor promises of maintaining the anonymity of informants and to present the material as honestly and completely as possible.”

Ethnography: Spradley (1979) defines ethnography as “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.” Spradley further states, “rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people.” In this thesis, ethnography refers to events that occur between and among students and teachers, teachers and teachers, administrators and teachers, and administrators and students within a particular school milieu.

Journaling: For purposes of this study, journaling is defined as the primary form of data collection. It consisted of daily writing in a journal about events that occurred in my school or classroom and my reflections of those events.

Milieu: The physical or social setting in which events occur or develop. For the purposes of this study, milieu includes the school to which I was assigned and its surroundings.

Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area: The Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) consists of five counties-Douglas, Sarpy, Cass and Washington in Nebraska and Pottowattamie County in Iowa. The five-county Omaha MSA has a population of 697,454 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” (54). By reflecting on my first years experience, I am acting in the role of a participant observer.

Rites of Passage: As defined by Arnold van Gennep (1960), rites of passage are, “The ways in which human beings indicate transformation from one social status to the next” (qtd. in Barfield 409). According to Keith (2000), most rites of passage occur in three stages: “First, a participant in a rite of passage is temporarily separated from the rest of society and the routine of his or her former role. During the transitional, or in-between, state, the participant learns the behavior appropriate to the new position. After the transitional period, the participant is formally incorporated, or admitted, into the new

role” [<http://www.worldbookonline.com/na/ar/fs/ar470550.htm> 15 January 2000]. For me, rite of passage refers to the transition from student to teacher.

Vulnerable Observer: For purposes of this study, the term “vulnerable observer” took the role of a traditional participant observer to a new level. Behar (1996) states, “A vulnerable observer is a participant observer whose emotions and reactions are an integral part of his or her research.” Behar emphasizes the importance of the observer’s emotions on what is observed and the influence it has on that observation. Throughout this research I was a vulnerable participant observer in that my feelings, emotions, and beliefs influence my reflections of what I observed in the school milieu.

Section D. The Problem

New teachers leave the profession at a alarming rate. This is very troubling both to our society and to individual school districts that annually face the shortage of teachers. The attrition rate of first year teachers is a major concern for school districts. Sclan et al.,(1993) suggests that forty percent of beginning teachers leave the profession within their first five years. Certain events or situations determine whether a teacher decides to continue teaching beyond the first year. This thesis uses critical incidents, as perceived by a first year teacher, to determine possible reasons why teachers stay of leave the profession.

Section E. Research Question

For a special education teacher are there particular critical incidents that are specific to school culture that affect a teacher's decision to stay in teaching or leave the profession after his/her first year in the profession.

Section F. Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to the 1999-2000 school year. This thesis contains my interpretations perceptions and reactions to events that occurred in my unique school setting.

Growing up in a rural area is a definite limitation to this study. It is reflected in the "Drive to School" section. Omaha is a big town and I was sometimes overwhelmed by the time and stops I had to make to just get to school. I lived in Omaha, but was not of Omaha. Wirth (1938) states, "The clock and the traffic signal are symbolic of the basis of my social order in the urban world" (16). Coming from a rural background can not help but influenced my perception of an urban school setting.

Chapter II – Review of the Related Literature

I entered the teaching profession with the idea that it would be a job that I would enjoy for the rest of my working life. But the reality is that beginning teachers leave the profession in such large numbers that there is a teacher shortage. This is not only true in our country but also in England. The London Times reports that "the quality and quantity of teacher recruits is most wanting," because of the low morale of those already teaching (Editorial, 1997). Some of the reasons that new teachers leave the profession in our country is because they receive little administrative support and find little professionalism or comradery among their fellow teachers (Metropolitan Life 1986; Karge 1993).

The building principal plays a large role in whether teachers are satisfied or not. This front line administrator can make things a lot easier for new teachers by effectively socializing them into the profession (Brock & Grady, 1998). This can be done by appointing mentors and having periodic orientation programs for beginning teachers. Brock & Grady (1998) also reported that teachers in their second year need the same kind of attention to keep them in the profession. Rosenholtz (1989) finds that "teachers who are formally initiated into the profession stand a better chance of enveloping norms encouraging self-perpetuating growth and are more likely to develop a greater commitment to teaching." Brock & Grady (1998) suggest that if principals are really good at giving feedback and communicating their expectations along with positive reinforcement, then the new teacher is more likely to stay in the profession

Whether teachers choose to stay or leave is also dependent upon the school work environment or put another way the cultural setting. Most researchers agree that about forty percent of beginning teachers resign in the first few years of teaching (Marlow, L. Inman, S. & Betancourt-Smith, M.). Teachers with experience report that the environment is one of their chief concerns in their decision to leave or stay at a school (Yee, 1990; Weiss, 1999). Some school districts make the situation more stressful than it should be by placing new teachers in schools that have a very difficult student population (Chapman & Green, 1986; Lortie, 1975).

When I began to think about doing a thesis during my first year of teaching, I really wondered if I would become one of those teachers that leaves the profession early. The daily task of journaling not only helped me do the research but it helped me reflect on my daily role as a teacher participant observer. *Zen and the Art of Archery* by Herrigal (1953) discusses the unique relationship between a student and a teacher. There is a tendency on the part of the student to get the lesson over quickly. The student often pays attention to details which have little effect on becoming a good archer. Both the teacher and the student must relax and allow the lesson to proceed without noticing the clock or time. The focus is on the breath which flows naturally. Only then can the student observe and hear the true lessons of the teacher and apply them to archery. This technique of relaxing, listening, and observing really helped me to understand and work with my students during this first year. I think it also allowed me to gather more meaningful information for my journal.

The science of describing a culture is called ethnography. Spradley (1979 & 1980) discusses the role of the participant observer as a skilled observer of people in a social situation and the physical surroundings in which the activity takes place. The observer also interacts with the people being observed making him or her a "participant observer" (54). In the case of the first year teacher, the goal is to try and understand what is going on from the students point of view. The same thing is true for understanding the other people who work within the school milieu such as colleagues, administrators, and supportive staff.

Ethnography is a part of anthropology which has been very helpful in studying societies other than our own. Franz Boas, an early twentieth century anthropologist was the teacher of two very important women anthropologists, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. In Bohanan's and Glaxer's (1973) discussion of anthropology, they state that Benedict thought, "every culture is an integrated whole that has its own configuration. In turn, every individual in that cultural configuration carries the characteristics of that culture and behaves according to that pattern" (176). Agreeing that we get some idea of the culture by watching how people behave, Mead (1942) felt that something was missing. She was interested in knowing why the people in that culture behaved as they did.

There were many times during this first year that I would ask myself the same question about my own students. Herbert Kohl (1994) believes that it is important for teachers to remember their own childhood experiences in school whether they were good or bad. If the teacher can recall his or her own childhood dreams for the future, then it is

easier to connect with the students and their dreams. I found that it was almost impossible not to remember my own childhood as I worked with and observed my students.

During this first year as I looked for patterns of behavior as suggested by Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, I found that it forced me to focus on the interaction of the children and people within the school. Since I participated within the school group, I built trust relationships with the children that I studied. Crane and Angrostino (1974) believe that these trust relationships can develop into lifelong friendships, and I don't think that I will ever forget these kids who were in my first class. They will always be very special to me and each student will always be unique. At first glance kids seem to dress in similar ways but if you observe them closely, they bring objects to school that are different but these objects reflect their own personality. We see this same kind of thing in the military. All soldiers wear the same uniform yet they still find ways to express their individuality. O'Brien (1990) talks about the Vietnam War and how soldiers picked certain items to carry with them. These objects were important to that individual soldier and were really an expression of his personality and his hopes and dreams. As a participant observer, I learned to be very aware of the little details and things that made each of my students unique.

Some of these same methods were used by Bernard, Caruso, and Stewart (1999) in their theses. They added two other elements to their role as participant observers. They focused their observations on critical incidents and also allowed themselves to become "vulnerable observers". The critical incident method has been used in the training of prospective doctors. Branch et. al. (1997) describe critical incident reports as open ended

short narratives that the student doctor feels is very meaningful to the people involved in that experience. One student doctor describes how he looked on while an elderly woman cried in pain. His fellow students had no interest in her cries, their focus was on their success at inserting their first IV line. The old women kept yelling stop! and moaned constantly while the young students congratulated themselves on being successful. The student doctors were happy about their success but totally unaware of the patient as a human being. The medical student who recorded this as a critical incident was sickened by the whole experience.

The second method used by Bernard et al (1999) was to allow their own emotions into the research. This idea came to them from the work done by anthropologist Ruth Behar. Two of her most famous books are *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (1993) and *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (1996). In the first book, she uses her own emotions as part of her research. She explains to the reader how she feels about her interaction with the Mexican women who becomes her close friend. In the second book, she questions the whole idea of anthropology as a cold objective science. She believes that this kind of anthropology, without the participant observers own emotions is cold and empty. She encourages the researcher to write in the first person and without shame reflect upon his/her emotions while interacting with participants in the culture. She encourages anthropologists to become "vulnerable observers." She believes that this is an honest form of witnessing at the close of the twentieth century.

I used both the critical incident technique from medical training and allowed myself to become a "vulnerable observer" in recording the day to day experiences of my first year of teaching. This made the whole research process so much more meaningful. At the end of the school year, I was able to look back through my journal and relive and write about those events that affected me emotionally. Given the time that had elapsed, I was sometimes able to laugh about the incident but the journal was proof of how truly emotional it was for me when it happened. I think that the reader of my thesis will get a more complete understanding of what it was like for me to be a first year teacher because I talk about my critical incidents without hiding my emotions.

Chapter III Personal Reflection

Section A. Childhood

I was born on May 18, 1974, in a small town in northwest Iowa. My parents, Pat and Laureen McCarty were young and starting a new chapter in their lives. I was the first of four children: Tom was born in August of 1978; Molly in October of 1983; and Ann Marie in March of 1988.

We grew up with a family structure that was typical to our rural area. My mother was able to be an at-home mom. This was common among my friends' families as well; our fathers earned the income to support the family and our mothers stayed at home.

Sheldon is a rural community in the northwest section of Iowa. My house was located about two hundred feet from Highway 18, which stretched east and west across Iowa and divided Sheldon into north and south sections. Our house was located on the north side of Sheldon which we called "the woods" as children. Our backyard was lined with bushes. We had a sandbox in our play area and a picnic table on our patio. Large ash and maple trees shaded our house from the hot summer sun and created a home for thousands of birds.

It was normal to see block parties and neighbors conversing over fences in Sheldon. My parents often had neighbors over to our house for dinner and picnics. It was also common to live in close proximity to extended family. An elderly neighbor, Dick Wassink, lived south of our house with his two sisters Gertrude and Stine. He was a philanthropist who gave a great deal of land and money to build and support a facility for people with disabilities. He also had a passion for gardening. None of the children in his

family married or had children of their own. He asked the neighborhood children to call him “Uncle Dick” so we did. He treated us like nieces and nephews, giving us cookies and lemonade and kindly reminding us not to pick his flowers.

My father and his brothers worked on my grandfather’s family century farm. My grandfather, Bill, and my great uncle, Bob, owned the farm. The farm was located two and a half miles southeast of Sheldon. They raised cattle, hogs, corn, and beans. In 1989, my father and his brother, Ron, took over the farm when my grandpa Bill and great uncle Bob decided to retire. When my family moved out to the farm, we became the 5th and 6th generations to live and work on the farm.

My grandparents retired and moved into Sheldon. Carol, Grandma McCarty, liked having the whole family together and instilled the importance of family in me. Her love of music inspired me to get involved in music. My brother and I loved spending Sundays with our grandparents as we were growing up. We often had picnics, went out to eat, played games or just sat around and talked. My grandfather taught my brother and me how to drive. He took us driving on Sundays and showed us how to blow bubbles with grape bubble gum.

My mother’s parents lived twenty-five miles north of Sheldon. Grandma Peterson would come and stay with us when my parents went on trips. She would take us to the grocery store and let us pick out anything we wanted, usually that consisted of candy, chips, and sugar cereal that my mother would not let us have. Both my Grandma and Grandpa Peterson were very supportive and told us we could do anything.

I grew up in a home with a “Leave it to Beaver” atmosphere. My mother was a great hostess and matriarch of our home. My father, the patriarch, had the ability to portray his approval or disapproval with only a “look.” My parents liked my friends and felt it was important to be involved in our lives, even when I felt they interfered in my space. Each night we ate dinner together and talked about our day. They always asked, “What did you learn today?” We always answered “Nothing,” and continued on with our dinner. This was not a satisfactory answer in our household, so we would be asked to consider our answer again.

When I was in middle school I was involved in as many school activities as I could include in my schedule. I loved being part of athletics, band, choir and student council. This was an exciting time in my life. Being involved in different activities helped me discover my strengths and weaknesses. We had a teacher who was diabetic. He called us “the gang” and had us crowd around his desk while he took his blood sugar reading. Then he would explain how everything worked and the level of his blood sugar. This was when I discovered that nursing was not the profession for me.

My friends were close, but we could also be very mean to each other. Looking back, I remember some of the cruel things we did and said to each other. For example, one of our class projects was planning a trip. We had to figure all expenses, places to stay, activities, and mode of transportation. By the end of the project we had created separate trips. One of our original group members planned a diabolical trip in which members of our group would be run over, shot accidentally, or left behind. I let the

pressures of being popular consume my life; wearing name brand clothes, having the “right” boyfriend, and being a starter for the volleyball and basketball team.

Everything and anything was embarrassing to me, especially when my mother became pregnant with my sister, Ann. My mom walked into my volleyball game when she was four months pregnant; I was embarrassed that she was expecting. A couple of my “friends” commented on how far apart in age my sister and I would be and how we would never be close. When Ann was born I was so excited and knew we would be close.

Growing up in Sheldon was what some may call living a sheltered life. This farming community consisted of approximately 5,000 people, 18 churches, six farmer owned cooperatives, two private church schools, and one public school system. I attended the public school system, which consisted of three buildings, an Elementary, a Middle School, and a High School. The students that attended school and lived in Sheldon and the surrounding communities were 98 percent Caucasian, and the staff was 100 percent Caucasian. My graduating class consisted of 94 students, three of whom were from the Muslim religion and Spanish cultural background.

Living in a small town with many different religions, most of which were Christian Reformed, caused problems. My family is Catholic. In a town of 18 churches there was only one Catholic Church. A definite line was established between the Catholics and the Reformed Churches. Both were strong in their beliefs. I never thought this was uncommon until I left Sheldon and went to college. I thought that Christian Reformed Churches (which originate from Dutch roots) were everywhere. On Sundays

in Sheldon most businesses were closed for the day of rest. People were expected to go to church, relax and spend time with their families.

When I was in high school, I took a world literature class and a section of the class was based on Catholicism. Our teacher was from the Christian Reform faith and told us he was not knowledgeable about Catholicism. We had heard from previous students that he did not care for Catholics either. As a result of the different religions representative in the classroom, we had heated discussions which were influenced by our religious beliefs. Religion played a strong role in the lives of people. Depending on the religion an individual practiced determined their beliefs and morals.

My parents have always practiced strict parenting. We were never able to go out without an agenda for the evening. We had guidelines that we were to follow. Our ears could be pierced at 10 years old, we could shave our legs at 14 years and at age 16 we were allowed to “car date.” We could not date anyone without our parents meeting the boy or girl we were going out with, and they set a strict curfew.

Section B. High School- Social Butterfly

My senior year was filled with school activities such as cross-country, intramural basketball, swing choir, band, musical, yearbook, homecoming, prom, and graduation. My social calendar was always full. Every night of the week I had a busy agenda and if I was at home, I was on the phone. My parents wondered if I would ever slow down my social calendar.

I had many teachers during my school years that shaped my education. In high school I decided I wanted to be a music teacher. One elementary teacher said, “I am trying hard to make you the best you can be.” She was my fourth grade teacher and I have never forgotten those words. Along with the good teachers, I also had a few negative ones. From those teachers I learned how I would not act as a teacher. I never wanted anyone to feel like they did not matter or what they said was not important. I realized how influential a teacher is whether they are a novice or a veteran teacher.

During my senior year, our class had to decide on a flower, color theme, and a motto. Our class wanted to be different from the previous classes. Instead of having the usual colors of green and cream, we had imperial purple and empire gray. We also chose the Calla Lily over the traditional rose for our flower. However, we were not allowed to have the motto, “If the elevator to success is broken take the stairs” which we wanted. We ended up with some long saying that I am sure no one remembers. One thing everyone in our community and surrounding communities remembers was the debate over prayer at our graduation.

Ninety percent of our class voted to have prayer at graduation. A couple of students in our class did not believe in only one God but in many gods, while others had different beliefs. Some of the class thought we should have a baccalaureate instead of a prayer at graduation. This took place at a time when the courts had ruled that school sponsored or encouraged prayer violated the separation of church and state. The local media created controversy over the school prayer in the paper. In turn, the national media picked up the controversy. When the national media began reporting about school prayer

at our graduation, the ACLU got involved and a court battle ensued. The entire community had a forum to discuss this issue. The decision was made to have an impromptu prayer at graduation. The day of graduation we had national and local news cameras watching us “pray” a non-secular and non-impromptu prayer that used “God” as the Supreme Being. This controversy tore our whole class apart; many left with ill feelings toward classmates, administrators, community members, and the school board.

Section C. College- The Awakening

After graduation, I could not wait to leave for college. I attended The University of South Dakota (USD) and started a career in music. While living in Vermillion, I made many new friends who had lived totally different lives from mine. I called this period of my life “the awakening.”

I had always been social, so the transition to college was not horrible. A couple of the people I went to high school with also went to USD. I made friends with a variety of people, experienced different classes, and took care of myself. It seems strange to say, “Took care of myself,” but when I lived at home I took for granted my mother would feed me breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

After my sophomore year, I decided to change my major from music to elementary and special education. This did not happen without a family discussion. They wanted the best for me so they became critical of my decision and pointed out potential problems that might occur, however, they always supported me. I enjoyed the college of education and met many new people.

At the University of South Dakota we proceeded through the education college in a cohort. The numbers in each cohort were limited to twenty-five or thirty students per section so students created bonds as a group and personally knew each instructor in the program. I enjoyed this cohort experience. By my senior year at USD, I began to think about my next transition into the professional world. I had a few options: first, find a teaching job; second, apply for graduate school; or third, wait and see. Many of my friends knew where they were going and what they would be doing. I did not, but I did know I wanted to continue my education.

Section D. My Path to Omaha

My student teaching consisted of two placements due to my double endorsements, one in an elementary school teaching fourth grade and the second in a middle school teaching math and language arts to sixth through eighth grade learning disabled students. Both situations were wonderful eye opening experiences. I learned a lot about myself and a lot about teaching.

The school in which I taught fourth grade was located in a rural area outside of Sioux City, Iowa. The school was located in a high socioeconomic area. The students that attended were from either upper middle class or lower middle class families. My cooperating teacher had superb organizational skills and taught me how to be efficient. The principal was friendly and made the school setting inviting. He walked around the building and came in and out of classrooms on a daily basis. He knew each student by name and made an effort to talk to each member of the faculty. The school was equipped

with the latest technology, because Gateway (a computer company across the highway) had partnered with the school to try different technology ideas. We had three computers in our room connected to the Internet, which we used for hands on activities and projects. A lab containing 30 computers was also available for classes to use. Each class had keyboarding twice a week to learn basic computer skills. The parents were very supportive and aware of the need for technology in the school.

My second student teaching experience was quite different than the first. This school was located in a lower income area of Sioux City and was considered by many to be “the ghetto school.” Most of the students came from a low socio-economical area. There were approximately 900 students in this school and a team of one head principal and one assistant principal. Several of the teachers walked into the building with the students as the bell rang. This did not bother the other teachers, who were simply happy they made it to school. Computer keyboarding was not available to all students and Internet access was also unavailable.

I taught in a portable classroom. Many of our students lived in multi family homes. Some parents worked at the local packing plant during the night, leaving their children home alone. Gangs were prevalent in the school and many of my students openly stated that they were members of the various gangs. Respect for authority was low in priority for many students. My cooperating teacher, however, had their respect. She taught me how to earn and demand the students’ respect. This was a valuable lesson to learn. Parent involvement was minimal and it was almost impossible to contact parents by telephone. By the end of my student teaching experience, it was hard to leave these

students. We had created strong bonds and today, I still wonder how they are and hope they are still in school. This was my first experience teaching students who had a different home life a I did growing up.

After I graduated from college, I decided to continue my education. USD had a program for first year teachers called the Profession Development Center (PDC), which was a graduate program. A first year teacher takes the place of a veteran teacher while both attended graduate school. The first year teacher would graduate with a masters degree and the veteran teacher would further his/her education toward a masters, specialist, or a doctoral program. I thought about applying to this program but I wanted to move to an urban area and that would not be possible in the PDC program. I started to apply for jobs while attending a job fair for teachers and found out about the CADRE Program. This program was like the PDC Program but was offered in urban school districts. I immediately applied to the program and was accepted.

I moved to Omaha, Nebraska on June 1, 1999. Moving was bittersweet. I was excited about the move and my future, but I hated leaving the good friends I had made and the comfort of the community I had lived in for five years.

Section E. Becoming A Teacher

As I look back, I think I was born to be a teacher. I have never been afraid of a challenge and I have always liked the feeling of independcncc. I have learned many valuable lessons growing up from the two people that have always been my personal teachers, my parents. My path in life was not always straight and easy; it was filled with

curves that slowed me down but it has taught me many lessons and cultivated the teacher and person I am today. Remembering the ups and downs of growing up helped me understand the feelings and situations my students are experiencing.

Being prepared is important in any occupation, but it is especially important in education. The day I stepped into my classroom for the first time before the school year started I was apprehensive. I had no idea what to expect. Many questions buzzed around in my head but I tried to concentrate on the direction I had been given by colleagues and past mentors. When I entered room 229 for the first time I was surprised to see the large size of the room. Every classroom I had taught in was small. I had been informed how to conserve space and maintain the aesthetics of a room. I also noticed that the name spelled on the furniture in the room was not mine. It was the letters J-O-N-E-S. Upon further observation, I realized that everything in the room had these same five letters. I wondered if I had the wrong room and I went back into the hallway to check the room number. I matched the numbers that had been given to me: 229.

I ventured down the hallway to a set of stairs reading “DOWN” and went to the main office. I asked the principal if he was sure I was in room 229. He asked, “why?” I explained everything in the room had cards taped to them that read “Jones.” He assured me that this was the correct room and stated, “I made sure you got a room because that is what you wanted.” At this time, I also learned that I would not have textbooks on the first day of school. He must have read my face because he said, “It will be O.K.”

I walked out to my car without any idea where to start. Should I go back to the room? I felt lost, naïve, and concerned. How would this year proceed, and would I have

support? Would I have to rely on myself all year, or would I have someone to help me through all my questions? In the period of an hour, I had felt the unbelievable emotion of actually being a real teacher and the nauseating feeling of abandonment.

Chapter IV. School Setting

Section A. Newcomers' Convention

Orientation was held for all teachers employed in my new school district. I was surprised to hear that over 500 new teachers had been hired for the upcoming school year. I had not realized the size of my school district. We were seated according to our schools. Fifteen new teachers were assigned to my school alone. I find meeting new people intriguing. Observing their actions and seeing their personalities emerge is like watching a flower bloom; some were quick to open and share themselves while others did not open or divulge any information. In addition to general orientation, I also attended our school meeting. Three days before school started the new staff and old staff met. The meeting was held in the library where the new teachers in the school were introduced to the rest of the staff. I met the Special Education Staff that morning and they informed me about my students and explained the school routine. I have to admit this was a little overwhelming.

The staff meeting was held at the church just down the hill from our school, which was nice since it had air conditioning. The minister was friendly and informed the personnel that the church would be a safe place to go to if anything should happen during the school year. This struck a nerve with me. I did not know why at first, but as I reflected back, I realized that when I went to school, we never had to worry about a “safe” place to go if an incident might occur. I looked around at the people who were

filing into the room; each came dressed in casual clothing, talking, armed with a cup of coffee and donuts. Most of them seemed excited to be back at school.

All of the teachers new to the building sat at one table, as if each had to rely on the other for support. As the seminar began, we were asked to sit with our teams. The concept of teaming was not new, but there was a new team leader this year. Each team was made up of the five core curriculum areas with a leader who facilitated the meetings. My face must have portrayed a look of confusion as this concept was being explained. I had not been assigned a team for the year. I looked around at the other special education staff and one of the assistant principals walked towards me stating, "We want you to be a part of this team." "So, am I part of this team?" I asked. She responded "No, we just want you to experience being part of a team." I sat down, even more confused.

The team I sat with had already begun brainstorming behavior modification implementations. Two of the people who were a part of this team were also new to the school like myself. Both teachers were veterans who had transferred from a middle school which was under construction. I was quickly introduced to the group and then proceeded with the itinerary.

I just listened because I did not feel comfortable suggesting any ideas to this group of veteran teachers who seemed to be organized and have a structure in place. At the end of the session we were dismissed for lunch and individual classroom work.

Through the CADRE Program I was given a mentor. She helped me set up my classroom and we discussed my feelings about my school. Katie was a veteran teacher in my school district and had received many awards for being an outstanding teacher.

Katie and I had an appointment with the principal to introduce and explain her role as my mentor in the CADRE Program. During this meeting, we talked about the CADRE Program and how things were going so far. I expressed my concern about the textbooks and my confusion about the schedule. The principal changed the classes around allowing me to teach all the seventh grade language arts classes, one seventh grade math class, and two eighth grade math classes. According to the principal, “This was done to make things easier for you.” This change meant that the seventh grade geography class would be dropped from my schedule. However, I would add one hour a day teaching in the moderate special education room. The year began. I felt as if I had a framework to begin my first school year as a teacher. I finished planning activities for the first week, mentally prepared myself for my students, and settled my belongings into the large room. The school gave me a desk, two filing cabinets, a table, a cart with an overhead, and 20 multicolored chairs. How would I set up the room? Where do I put my desk? Simple questions easily answered questions by a first year teacher? No. I stared at the room imagining what my students would look like, their personalities, what they would think of me, and how I wanted them to view me. I found these thoughts less frightening than organizing the room.

Section B. First day Questions

Standing in the front of the room wearing a dress, perspiring from the humidity, and nervous, I wondered how the first day of school would go. Would the students listen to me? How would they treat me? Did I look like a first year teacher? Did I look like a

teacher? All of these questions floated through my head as I began putting the finishing touches on my plans for the day. My mind wandered and halted on a memory of school shopping.

Our family vacation this summer had been spent at the Mall of America buying school clothes for my sisters, business attire for my brother, and “teacher clothes” for me. My sister Ann pointed out to me what type of clothes a teacher should wear. The clothes she pointed to were very busy patterns containing numbers, letters, and school buses. I responded with, “I am a different teacher and would wear more stylish clothing.” My only worry was that I did not have the same sense of style as my students.

How would they like the activities that I had planned, and how would they respond to me being a new teacher, younger, with new ideas and attitude toward classroom management? Would I change? Would my view on effective strategies change or be reinforced? All of these questions flew through my head in a matter of seconds before I was to report for outside duty the first day of school.

The bell rang and signaled the beginning of a new year. The students entered the building with excitement. As I looked around, I realized my selection of clothing would not collide with my student’s choice of wardrobe. Perhaps my look is more classic and conservative than I realized.

Section C. The School

In mid June, I had an interview at my middle school. I had no idea where it was located and quickly called my friend Molly, another CADRE teacher, who had grown up

in Omaha. She gave me simple directions and I was off to the school. I arrived early to view the community around the school. I turned off Center Street to climb a hill that was lined with homes, cars, and trees. I reached the top and I saw a clearing where the school stood. I drove slowly, circling the school, looking at the size, windows, and shape of the building. Windows lined the west and east sides of the buildings in a traditional industrial school design. The building was straight, flat, and symmetrical. The front entrance was framed by shrubs. Cars were parked in the front of the school and other cars parked on the wide sidewalk in front of the school. I was driving south on 46th street and took a left at the intersection. With the school below me, I looked down on the grounds and noticed a football stadium, soccer fields, parking lots and trees surrounding the building. The school was designed to fit into the area. The roofline of the pool and gymnasium matched the one-story bungalows that lined the street in front of the school. The trees that surround the school are consistent with the trees in the neighborhood. I took another turn and was in a neighborhood with older, well-kept houses. The homes matched those across the street from my school, single bungalows that were well maintained. An older couple sat outside and watched as I drove down the street. I soon came to another intersection; I turned and ended up on the south side of the school.

I went in through the main entrance and followed the signs to the office. I told the secretary who I was and that I had an interview. Shortly a man came out and introduced himself as Mr. Walkins. We exchanged greetings and walked down the hall to a door with a sign that read TEAM Room. The room was air conditioned and had a large conference table with ten chairs circling it. We sat on opposite sides of the table and

went through a question and answer session. During this time I was informed of the student population, my role as a special education teacher, and a little information about the staff.

I was informed that the school population was an equal mix of African American, Hispanic and Caucasian students. The special education department was split into an inclusion (students remain in their classes) and a pullout (students leave regular classes and come to the alternative learning area) program. My position would be in the pullout program. When Mr. Walkins talked about the staff he used the words “helpful and great teachers.” The next day I found out I had been hired and that I needed to call Mr. Walkins to complete all of my paperwork.

When I moved to Omaha I had had no idea where I would be teaching. My mother and I looked for a nice apartment that would fit in my CADRE budget. I ended up with an apartment a far distance from my school. I live on the 126th block of Center and my school sits south of 46th and Center. There is a direct route from my residence to my new school. One morning in late March, I wrote about the changing numbers, area and environment that I noticed each morning as I drove to school.

Section D. The Drive

The scream for me to start my day comes at 6:03 a.m. and I drag myself to the bathroom for a quick shower and survey of my wardrobe for the attire of the day. As I pack my bag with books and food, I start my journey to school.

The clock reminds me it is 6:53 a.m. as I drive out of the parking lot of my apartment complex and head north to 125th street and then to Center. My car is flooded

with sunshine as I turn the corner. I notice the street has a glare from an early morning storm as I pass Westwood Plaza. The traffic picks up at 120th street, where Krispy Kreme Doughnut sign illuminates the words Hot Doughnuts Now. People are scurrying in and out of the popular doughnut shop dressed in their work wardrobe for the day.

I proceed down the hill to the exit ramp for the interstates 680 and 80 connections. Cars start switching lanes and separate as we pass through 114th street, then under the overpass. Cars speed to keep up with the flow of traffic on the morning commute.

Streets flash by. As their numbers decrease as I become closer to my destination. Mature trees and empty bus stops line the road, protecting large homes from the noises of transportation. The trees start to thin and a clearing opens to reveal newer homes. A bridge takes me over the Papio Creek and into the second phase of the drive. The Papio Creek used to flood until a man-made lake was created for the excess water. New and old collide at this small but busy intersection of 90th and Center. A new 20th century HyVee grocery store and Walgreen's pharmacy loom over two gas stations, a putt-putt golf course, and the service garage. As the traffic proceeds through the intersection traveling east, we come upon a shopping center, smaller homes, and small businesses that line the road. There is a cemetery to the north creating a clearing to view the buildings below as I travel over the bridge, which connects me to the last leg of my journey.

I look over the community that surrounds my school. The sign for Aksarben, an old horse race track, is looking over this southern Omaha community, where houses are closer together and smaller with no fence separating them from the traffic noise. A trailer park is located south of Arksarben, which used to be a main attraction for people in and

around Omaha. Center Street was the main drag which led visitors to the racetrack. People are walking down the sidewalk. Many are waiting for their bus to arrive and others are crowding into lines at McDonalds, Burger King, and Arby's. This section of Center Street is smaller and bumpy; more cars are entering at each intersection. The street is lined with used car lots, fast food restaurants, and gas stations. The road curves around to greet an older HyVee, which has people coming in and out. As I approach the intersection, a sign reading "Elbow Room," a local bar, hovers across the street from an elementary school. More stoplights line the road with walk over sidewalks for the children to reach school safely. In the distance I see the Philips 66 gas station sign that alerts me to turn. I turn north onto 46th street and view the obstacle course that lies before me, cars parked on both sides of the road, dips in the road, and a hill to climb marked by a road sign stating "blind driveway." At the top of the hill I see a clearing, and in the valley sat my school. Grass, trees, and shrubs surround the building. I pass the west side of the building where cars are parked along the street, and I turn east into the parking lot behind the school. A few cars have filled the spaces; people are walking around the track, another person is in the soccer fields with his dogs running loose, and students line the steps and court yard of the school waiting to be let into the school. I find it surprising that they can hardly wait to enter the school building in the morning, while the rest of the day they cannot wait until the bell rings releasing them for the day.

Section E. Student Profile

My new students were a mosaic of white, black, brown, tall, short, fashionable and unfashionable, with names like Mike, John, Tunisha, Kasha, Natasha, Tyrone, Leroy, Romeo, Wauneta, Ricardo, Anna Maria, and Wendy. The first time I saw my class list I created a picture in my mind of how they might look and what type of personality they had.

When I looked at the one thousand students that attend my school, one would see a predominately Caucasian culture. The population of my Special Education Program, the Academic Achievement Center, did not represent the population of my school. Male African American and Hispanic students made up the majority of the students in this program.

Before school began, I was given a rundown of the students who would be in my classes. I listened to Mrs. Wilson describe them. Student by student I was informed of behavior, whether I could trust the student and a brief statement about the previous year. “Greg, he is a good kid but be watchful he is sneaky,” replied Mrs. Wilson. “Romeo, he steals. Wauneta, she is trustworthy and a good student. Oh, then there is Ray. He is a handful. Ray has Tourette's Syndrome and claps during class. He will drive you crazy.” With a small break she continued on, “Teri is lovely child but has an attitude. Last year she was kicked out of school for fighting.” I let the information settle to the back of my mind so I would be fair and not pass judgment before I knew each individual. This was hard; as the year went on I had conflicts with myself.

The first time I was asked to describe my students the words that came to mind were numbers. Then I was asked to look deeper. Who are my students? My thoughts changed. I used words such as: happy, angry, smart, naive, ward of the state, expelled, weapons, gangs, and drugs. The students who attended my classes were survivors. They were exposed to a world I never experienced when I was growing up. The street skills these students possessed were vital to their survival inside and outside of school. This was the first time I fully realized how different their lives are from my own.

As I looked back over my middle schools years and remembered the crisis my friends and I dealt with, they were no comparison to those of the students who walked into my room each day. Would I be able to connect with the students? Would I really understand what and where they were coming from? These questions plagued me.

Part of my position as a special education teacher was being the holder of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for each student. When I begin to create a new IEP, I look at the previous IEP located in the cumulative folder. In this folder is the history of a student's school career. I was hesitant to look through my student's folders, but as I began to read the information I looked at my students with different eyes.

I read information that surprised me. Students with no fathers listed on their birth certificates, parents who had committed suicide, students who were wards of the state, and others who were on a handful of medications. I consumed most of my plan time reading about the lives of my students and trying to understand their home life. My heart hurt for many of my students. I wanted to take them home with me. I could not

understand how people could not love the faces of my students; dirty or clean, they are still children.

Most of my students were supportive of each other and attended core classes in the Academic Achievement Center (AACII) Program. Half of my students had after-school jobs, which surprised me, because I did not have a job in middle school. Many of the students held jobs at local grocery stores or fast food restaurants. They occasionally invited me to come in while they were working so they could wait on me. For some students, the income they earned went to help their families. I was shocked. The pressures my students experienced at school did not compare to those at home. I could not imagine having to work at their age and contribute to my family's income. My students' lives are complicated by their socio-economic level and lack of family structure. They had been forced to take on adult responsibilities before they had been able to enjoy their adolescence. When I referred to my students as "young adults," I could not tell whether they liked it or not. As the year continued, they became proud of this label and responded accordingly. When the students asked what it meant, I explained that a young adult is one who is responsible. One student responded, "What does responsible mean exactly?" I answered with the question, "What do you think it means?" They started to list words and phrases like, "on time," "prepared for class," "quiet," "ask questions," "and tries." I wrote them on the board. I then asked, "Do all of these words describe the word responsible or do you think there is a better word we could use to define, "young adult?" They said, "No, we like the meaning already." I smiled and we went on with our lesson. The atmosphere of the room had changed. I felt that my

classroom had evolved from a teacher and her students into a teacher and young adults who actively made decisions in their learning.

During the first week of school, I had the students design a personal coat of arms. This was on a sheet of paper in the shape of a shield. The shield was divided into seven sections with questions about favorite food, sport, class, most memorable experience, first memory, family and friends. Each student was allowed the choice to draw or write their response. Most of the students used a combination of both to create their coat of arms. As I looked through them, I realized how important family and pets were for many of my students. The students discussed their project with the rest of the class and they were excited to share information about themselves. I felt like each had given me a piece of themselves. Facts that separated each and identified them as individuals.

Chapter V. Teacher as a Vulnerable Observer

Section A. Critical Incidents

When asked to define a critical incident, I remembered thinking, “something that affects me.” As we read *The Social Medical Journal* and the previous thesis trilogy, we found a definition for this term, critical incidents, as something the participant sees as particularly meaningful (Branch et. al., 1997).

This is a vague definition that leaves room for interpretation on the part of each individual. What makes an event critical? There are no guidelines. For me, I found that a critical incident gave me butterflies in my stomach, kept replaying in my mind, and would be the first thing I thought of as I recapped my day. I journaled my thoughts, feelings and observations when they were still fresh in my mind.

In examining the first year of teaching, the entire year can be considered critical. It is filled with many changes in environment, procedures and a role reversal from student to teacher. I felt new teachers were expected to be perfect and have everything under control, especially those in the CADRE Program who had individual mentors.

As in the previous thesis trilogy, I have divided my school year up by the natural breaks that occur in the school calendar. The incidents are in chronological order with data taken from my journal entries. The order and individuals in some events may have been changed to protect the identities of all involved. The following events reveal the positive and negative emotions I experienced during my first year of teaching. Through these incidents I describe my school year which contained bumps, potholes, construction, and smooth roads during the ride of the school year.

Labor Day to Thanksgiving

Choosing my Allegiance

The first special education meeting I had was an eye opener. Mrs. Rogers, a special education teacher, informed me of this meeting. The reason for meeting was to talk about our schedules for the school year. At this point I had had my schedule changed twice and was still not sure what subjects I would be teaching. The one thing I was sure of was that I did not have any textbooks. This was a major concern for me especially since I was a first year teacher. Before the meeting I was approached by the administrator who would also attend the meeting. He asked me to come into his office. When I arrived, he proceeded to ask what the other special education staff members had been saying to me about the schedule situation. I hesitated with my reply trying to figure out why I was being asked this question in confidence. "The only thing they are talking to me about is their idea for our schedules and information on the students starting eighth grade," I replied. He then told me that in our meeting he would probably upset the other special education staff and that I should not get worried about this. As I stood up and walked back to my room, I replayed the conversation in my mind wondering what kind of situation I was walking into that afternoon. Why would he ask me that question? Did I say something wrong? Was this a test? I was bewildered but the clock indicated that I had ten minutes before our meeting. I wondered if I was ready.

I entered the TEAM room and I noticed the air-conditioning, which felt cool against my skin. I sat down on the opposite side of the table from the other people. I was the third person to walk in and we waited for the other three while engaging in small talk

about how I ended up in Omaha. Ten minutes later all of us were in attendance and the meeting began.

The meeting was brought to order and everyone listened as the special education staff explained their idea for our schedules. They felt that we should departmentalize our classes, giving each teacher two subjects to teach. Having only a few books, this would allow each teacher to have a complete set in the room for the students to use. The administrators listened and then stated the request would be taken into consideration and decision would be given later. It was already Thursday and I wondered how long it would take to finalize the plans for the school year, which started Monday. I did not understand what made the special education teachers upset, but they left angry.

Randy

Many of my critical incidents from the year involved not the staff but my students. One particular incident occurred during third hour Math class. On this particular day, Randy decided he was not going to do any math. He had been creating problems like this for a while and we had talked about the situation privately several times. Today, Randy was preoccupied by what another student had said about his mother. I asked what had happened and he stated, "He is going to get messed up after class." I responded, "Do you think that will solve your problem?" Randy said, "Yeah, this way he will not be able to say a word about her again." Worried that I would be encouraging negative behavior among the rest of the students, I explained that violence is not the answer and we need to solve our problems by talking it out. Randy replied, "Miss, you just don't understand how things are."

The bell rang and as the students were walking out of the room I said to Randy, "Think about what the consequences will be." He looked at me and said, "I have no choice." I felt my heart sink into my stomach. Something was going to happen.

My next class was not until fifth hour. Jaime entered my room and Randy came flying in behind him. As I turned, I saw Randy swinging at Jaime. Jaime was not hitting back, but pleading for Randy to leave him alone. I yelled frantically for security and I quickly stepped between the two. Randy moved back slowly toward the sink as Jaime ran out of the room. I calmed Randy down and he said, "Ms. McCarty, I know what you have to do, I will meet you at the office." I looked at him, amazed at his sudden maturity. He started for the door as the security guard entered.

When I entered the assistant principal's office, Randy was sitting in a chair writing up what had happened. The secretary took my referral and asked who the other student was involved in the incident. I gave his name and sat down next to Randy. He had finished writing his account of what had happened. I glanced over to see what he had written. He took the blame for the fight but explained about the talk that had transpired before the confrontation about his mother.

When Randy was called into the principal's office he explained everything and was given three days of out-of-school suspension. It seemed to me almost like an honor for him to be suspended.

This was the first time I had broken up a fight. I was surprised that I had not thought twice about coming between the students. Did I feel they had enough respect for

me that they would not hit me? No. Was I strong enough to stop them? No. I knew I had to do something to break it up and I did not think about the consequences for me.

This was not the end of confrontations Randy would have in school. A few weeks later a student assistance team (SAT) meeting was scheduled for Randy. I had never sat in on a SAT meeting before and was eager to see the process. His mother was invited to the meeting along with the eighth grade assistant principal, psychologist, counselor, special education contact, and myself, Randy's IEP holder.

Randy's mother, Pam, brought her sister Penny with her to the meeting. She was afraid her ex-husband would attend and she had a restraining order out on him for being physically abusive to her. This was how the meeting was opened and how we were introduced to Randy's mom and aunt.

Lauren, the school counselor, conducted the meeting. She had known Randy since he was in seventh grade and gave a brief history on his behavior prior to this year. He had been in similar situations and was known for having an explosive emotions. The mother quickly added that he had problems with his behavior for years and she had him in counseling for a while, but then Randy decided he was not going to go anymore.

The assistant principal, Mr. Wilson, gave a brief run down of the referrals, suspensions, and in school suspension called NOC (Norris Opportunity Center) days Randy had already received. It was only a month into the school year and he had already been in suspension for more than ten days. The offenses ranged from fighting with students to yelling at teachers. Mr. Wilson also added that he had to credit Randy on his honesty, "he always told the truth and accepted the consequences for what he had done."

At this time, Mrs. Wilson, a special education teacher, spoke up and said she felt he was causing problems on purpose because he did not want to be in school. Mrs. Rogers agreed. At this time the psychologist asked how he acted when he would become upset. Mrs. Wilson said he would be fine and then would suddenly change. She would ask him to do something and he would decide he did not want to do it. Then she would ask him again. He would still be defiant and she would stand up and walk over to him. This would make him upset, and he would tip over the chairs, cuss, and leave the room.

I was then asked how he acted in my room. I replied, "Normally, he will do part of his math assignment. Some days, he will not do a thing for me. He has talked to me about some of the fights he has been in and I try to explain other options he could take instead of fighting." The meeting ended with the plan for me to create a behavior plan for Randy, explain the goals and the reward system to Randy. I had never created such a plan before and reached out for help in constructing the framework from the special education teachers. We designed a plan that reflected three goals for Randy to achieve: one, no fighting in school; two, respect for staff; and three, to attempt class work each day. This is when I realized how different my middle school years were from my students. I felt I had grown up with "Leave it to Beaver."

Fall Break to Winter Break

The Yellow Slip

The secretary's voice called out for teachers to come to the office to collect their messages as I ventured down to the office for the day's bulletin. As I entered the office, the secretaries were busy answering phones, helping substitutes, and making copies. I greeted them with a good morning and a smile; as I grabbed the items in my box. I started to look through the material and a familiar yellow strip of paper gleamed out at me. With a sigh I read the name that was printed on the slip. One of the secretaries started toward me and asked if I had a slip in my box. I replied with a "Yes," and did not say more. I felt like exploding and venting how I felt once again about covering for a teacher who was not going to be at school for the twelfth day this month.

In the CADRE Program, we are not paid for the extra duties we were asked to do. For the first semester, I had substitute for other teachers and would turn in paperwork for extra duty pay and never receive any compensation for my time. Later I found out that since I am in the CADRE Program the district does not view me as an OPS employee because I do not have an I.D. number, so they did not pay me for extra duties.

After finding out that I would not be paid for using my plan periods to cover other teacher's classes, I had to explain my situation to the lady in charge of assigning teachers as subs for an absent teacher. This was one of those situations I felt like I could not win. As I entered her office I smiled and said, "I need to talk to you when you have time." Unsure of the response I would receive, I went in headfirst and said, "I just wanted to let you know I do not get paid for subbing for other teachers since I am in the CADRE

Program.” She said, ‘Oh, you don’t.’ I said “Yes, and I was wondering if I could not be assigned to cover other teacher’s classes.” She understood and said she would not want to do it either if she was not getting paid. I had handled the problem but I felt used. I was considered to be not playing for the “team” when I explained the situation to my principal. This upset me. They had told me I was not on a team at the beginning of the year. I was made to feel a true teacher had an employee number! I did not fit this qualification.

Winter Break to Spring Break

The new year brought back some familiar faces I had not seen since the first quarter of school. Students from the first quarter decided to return to school second semester. This created a few behavior issues that I was forced to deal with, but we soon fell back into the groove of school and we began moving smoothly forward. I used a point system in my classroom. Each day students could earn three points by being on time, having a notebook and pen, and participating in class. I had candy, restroom passes (a hot commodity among middle school students) drink passes, half assignments, and cosmetics. I work as a promotional assistant for Estee Lauder and had lots of lipsticks, blushes, eye shadow, and perfumes I did not use. I brought them to school for my students to buy using their points. This motivated the students who were behavior issues in my class.

I started to feel comfortable with the procedures of the school and the special education department. The support from the staff made me feel like an important component of school milieu. The students were making progress and I felt we had created

strong bonds. I had lessons and activities planned for the last four weeks of school. Suddenly, I was told I needed to switch classrooms with another teacher.

Room Scandal

I was upset. An administrator had notified me in October that a teacher was complaining about my large room with small class sizes versus her large number of students in a small room. This was the same teacher who had her name all over everything in the room the first day I came to school. Mrs. Jones never approached me to talk about the situation and that offended me. I had hoped we were professionals and could discuss our concerns as adults. I was wrong.

I was shocked the day I was told I had to switch rooms. Mr. Wilson had asked me to stop by his office when I had a chance, so during my plan I dropped by. Many times we needed to discuss a student's behavior or an IEP. When I walked in he asked me to sit down and without a breath he said, "You need to move your room." I was stunned. There was no exchange of small talk. I sat there emotionless on the outside, boiling on the inside as he explained the situation. It was exactly as I had been warned. He stated that he "empathized" with me. I kept my composure, trying not to show a sliver of my real emotions, just a blank face. He continued on to say, "I intended to tell you before the winter break but I forgot. You will need to set up a time with the teacher and plan for the day you will be trading rooms." I kept my cool, listened and bit my tongue. I felt many words sitting on my tongue, and if I opened my mouth they would escape. Next, he told me I would be able to have my students help in the transition and he would understand giving up half a day of instruction for this inconvenience.

I started to stand up and he asked, “ Have you heard anything about next year? What are your plans? Do you plan on staying at this school?” I smiled and said, “ I plan on staying in Omaha.” Then I turned around and walked out. My face felt like it was on fire; I found an empty phone and called Katie to tell her what had happened. She was furious. I felt trapped.

As a first year teacher I did not feel I had grounds to create opposition to a decision that had already been made. I did not fight it. I reminded myself that it could be worse, but the special education department and a few other staff members could not imagine anything worse. Many were shocked by this switch in the middle of the year.

When I had first heard of the possibility that this could happen, I contacted my principal and asked for the consideration of my students. If a change would be made that it would be done over the winter break. I was assured this accommodation would be granted for having to takedown, move, and put my room back together. When he told me after break, I felt unimportant and abandoned again.

I went and talked to the teacher and we decided to move that Thursday. I went back to my room and began packing, taking down the pictures, writings, and artwork on the wall. My feelings of rage were starting to surface, so I began to journal my thoughts and feelings as follows;

“Empathized,” with me. I felt very demeaned the way he used that word, it seemed as if he was searching for the politically correct word to use. What is that about? I am amazed he asked me what my plans were for the upcoming year, he has to know that I am upset. I felt I was being treated like a misbehaved student

when I did not do anything. I was told at the beginning of the year that room was mine and I questioned the size, but I was assured this was right. Why is it my responsibility to talk to that teacher? She is the one that is causing the upset in the middle of the year. I hate the position I am in, who do I talk to? What do I do? Once again I feel abandoned and alone. Everyone is aware of this move and is saying how hard it was for her to teach a large number of students in a small room. Maybe I am being selfish, what about me? What about my students? Does any of that matter?

On Thursday we switched rooms. I was pleasant and did not let on my frustrations with this situation to anyone outside a few trusted staff members. I felt there was really no reason to be irritable, the decision had been made.

My room was relocated in one day. Katie came in and immediately put our goals back on the bulletin board. The room started coming together step-by-step, so by the end of the day it resembled a classroom once again.

The school day ended and nearby teachers came in to see me how the room fit my needs. Many commented on my professionalism in dealing with the situation. As they left my room they welcomed me to the “neighborhood.” I knew this should make me feel better but it did not. I felt upset, hurt, and powerless.

My students were not happy about the move. They did not understand why they had to give up their “good room,” for this small room. In the large room, I had allowed them to sit on the floor to work on assignments, projects, play a game or to work on pattern puzzles. The large room had enabled the students to spread out and not bother

one another while working. I explained to them how we would like the other room as well if not better. They did not believe me. A small revolt began. “We are not going to move your stuff out,” they said. I replied, “Well, then I will do it myself. Either way by this afternoon our new room will be 221.” They sighed and asked, “Is there any way we can not change rooms?” I stated, “No, a decision has been made.” After a few seconds of muttering amongst themselves, they began to help me load up two boxes I had and took down the large bulletin board. The transition had begun.

I took pictures of the move. I wanted to remember what it looked like and the transition of the room from piles of books, papers, my desk that collapsed, and then to a classroom once again. The new room was less than half the size of room 229; I measured by counting the windows. Many of the rooms had been split in half from one large room to two smaller rooms. My previous room had not been divided.

Research Approval

A few days later I received approval from my district for my thesis. The only thing I had left to do was to obtain the approval of my principal. I went and set up a time to talk to him about the research and gave him a copy of my thesis proposal. We decided to convene in a few days, but I was not able to find him. I felt like he was avoiding me, so I talked to Katie and we decided to wait for him outside his office during my plan period. At the meeting, I was asked questions about my research and had to show him the official approval letter from the district. The only item holding me back was a letter that gave his approval for my research in the school. In the meeting he commented that with the good, I would probably have to write the bad. I agreed. Then I expressed how the

purpose of the study was not to hurt anyone, it was to provide research on first year teachers. After speaking with one of my committee members, he agreed to sign the letter of approval she had written.

Taylor

Days and weeks went on. The student and myself became accustomed to our new room. One day we did an activity that talked about change. I asked the students about some experiences they had had in their lives involving change. One student blurted out, "That lady who took our room away from us." I quickly replied, "We are not blaming anyone for the room change. The decision was made and we need to continue with our school year." He replied, "Yeah, well it was a change." I said, "Yes, you are right." He smiled and I went to the next student. "Taylor, what is something that has changed in your life? "Our move from elementary school to middle school," he said. "Yes," I replied. "How has that change affected you?" Many other students started giving different scenarios and events that have affected them. I collected the papers as the students walked out the door. Taylor was the last to leave, and he hesitated not saying anything to me. Then he quickly said, "Ms. McCarty, I wrote about my dad leaving for prison, not about the move from elementary school to middle school." Then he went on to say, "I have been thinking about him." With this comment he left the room and disappeared into the mob of students trying to get to their next class. I read his paper and journaled about what it had said:

I cannot imagine having my father in jail when I was growing up. He had been in for about a year and Taylor has only seen him once. He said his dad writes him

letters and has sent him a picture so he would remember him. I want to hug him. I do not know how he can handle being 12, going to school, and knowing his father is in prison. His sentences were short and simple but filled with feeling.

Taylor has been in trouble and suspended for a week, but when he returned he was a new student. We have been talking about mainstreaming him for math. I am so proud of the work and improvement he has made. What can I do to help him? Does he want my help? Why does this have to happen to children?

The next day before class started Taylor came in and had something to show me. He said, "Ms. McCarty I just wanted to show you a picture of my dad. I thought it might help when you are reading what I write." He pulled a Polaroid picture of his father in prison. He was wearing all blue clothing, had a beard, glasses, and he is not smiling. On the bottom of the picture it read, "I love you Taylor, Dad." I thought I was going to lose it. I gave the picture back to Taylor and said, "That picture must mean a lot to you." He replied, "Yeah, I thought I had lost it but then I found it in a pair of my pants."

I never looked at Taylor the same again. I always made a conscious effort to treat all my students equally. I never wanted them to think I had favorites because they were all my favorites, even the ones that hummed as they were adding and multiplying. However, he had felt comfortable enough to share personal feeling with me and I was not going to set that aside. We had created a bond and I was determined to help him in anyway I could.

Later that month I was able to mainstream Taylor into math class. We had been working hard to prepare himself for regular education math. I talked to the teacher and

set up the transition. I asked Taylor, "Is there anything you would like to do before you leave our math class?" He replied, "I would like to teach for a day." I laughed and said, "Your wish is granted." We had been working with fractions and I pulled out an M&M activity and explained what he needed to do. Most of the activity is left up to the instructor on what fraction and rules the students would follow. As I watched Taylor teach that day, I was proud but sad. I enjoyed having him in my class and now I had to let him go. I kept him after class to tell him how I had enjoyed having him in class, how I would miss him and that he better let me know how he is doing in regular 7th grade math. He smiled and said, "Thanks for all of your help Ms. McCarty."

As he left the room my eyes became watery and blurry I grabbed a Kleenex and relaxed for a minute and recapped the class period. I felt proud, sad and hopeful at the same time. It was wonderful.

Refrigerator

My room was student centered. I had areas for students to engage in activities after they were done with their work. The different items I had at the areas were; puzzles, drawing supplies, newspapers, and the magnet station. Each station was popular but the magnet station was fought over the most.

At the magnet station students used a magnet poetry set to write stories, poems of sentences. I would only allow one to two students at a time. Usually, we would share with the class the silly poems or stories each wrote and laughed together. One day Ted was at the magnetic board at the end of class. He said he had nothing to share and seemed to be just making shapes with the words. After the bell rang and I dismissed the

class for the day I began cleaning up the room and went to the refrigerator to grab a cool beverage. I looked at the board and noticed the shape Ted had made. Then I looked closer I realized that there was a sentence above the shape which read, "I shoot my teachers." I read this sentence a number of times looking at the placement of the words and wondering if it had been a coincidence. I went to the principal's office and explained the situation and stated how I did not see Ted create the sentence, but I did know that it was not up there before class. The security guards came up to my room immediately and took pictures of the sentence. I journaled about the incident as follows:

I noticed on my magnetic station today the sentence, "I shoot my teachers." This instantly sent butterflies to my stomach. My thoughts are flying around thinking about the number of shootings that have happened in schools, I wonder if this is a cry for help? I would never suspect Ted as a student thinking about hurting anyone, was I wrong? What bothers me is that he left the message on my board. Does he feel this way about all teachers or me? I am becoming overwhelmed by my thoughts and feelings. How do I help?

The next day we talked about our feelings and dreams in class. I did not mention the sentence that was left on my board. I was told to keep this quiet and let the administration deal with the situation. I informed the special education department of what had transpired the day before. We were the main teachers he had. I felt it was my obligation. I would want to know. I noticed myself watching Ted more often analyzing his actions and words almost waiting for an answer to all of my questions. I would talk to him and ask him how his year was going and what he was doing for fun outside of

school. I found out later he had denied writing the sentence and said another student had done it. I found out through colleagues that Ted had said he did not write the sentence. That was the last I heard. A couple of weeks later Ted's transfer into a regular education language arts class was approved.

Nancy

I was informed in late March that I would be having a new student in my 6th hour math class. The class was already large but I did not say anything. I asked what the student's name was, what school she came from and if they had been informed of her ability level in math. I was given the information known at the time and went up to my room to prepare for my next class. As 6th hour rolled around, I prepared a seat, book, paper and pencil for the new student. While the class eased their way into the room, I noticed the new student and said, "Hi, I am Ms. McCarty and I will be your math teacher. I have a seat with supplies ready for you in the red chair." She replied, "My name is Nancy." I directed her to the chair. I introduced her to the class and the students each replied back with their name. She sat down and was quiet, did her work and minded her own business. A few days passed and we did not see Nancy. A week later she came back to school.

Nancy entered the room and took her seat. She was talkative and seemed not too interested in math but very concerned with calling her mother. After we finished the assignment, I let her go and call her mother. I kept busy conferencing with the students on the previous day's assignment when Brian, one of my students, approached me.

Brian asked if he could talk to me for a moment. I asked him if he could wait for two minutes while I finished with another student he agreed. Would you rather talk about this after school? He said, "Oh, no Ms. McCarty you need to know now." I replied, "Well then tell me!" He still hesitated, but then blurted, "Nancy has cigarettes." I did not think I heard him correctly and I asked him to repeat what he had just said, he did. I had heard what I thought. I asked where he thought the cigarettes were and he told me in the pictures that were on the desk. I went over and saw the package of pictures laying on top of her books. Nancy was still in the office. I asked, "Are they pictures of her with cigarettes?" Two other students chimed in and said, "No, she has two cigarettes stuck in with her pictures. She has been bragging about them since last hour." I picked up the pictures and looked inside and saw the cigarettes. Then Brian asked, "Are you going to tell her we told you?" I said, "No! I will not tell her how I found out." The bell rang and the students quickly packed up their belongings and left. I called for a security guard. Dave arrived and I filled him in on what had transpired before the discovery of the cigarettes. Nancy was still not back and I stepped toward the door when she walked in.

Dave asked Nancy how she was doing and she smiled and said, "Fine." Nancy reached her desk when she realized her pictures were moved because the cigarettes were in plain view. Dave asked her if there was anything she wanted to tell him. Nancy instantly replied, "Who has been messing with my stuff?" Again, Dave asked her calmly if there was anything she wanted to tell us. Nancy then exploded, "What the hell are you talking about, have you been going through my shit?" He replied, "No." "This is bullshit!" Nancy replied. "You do not have the right to go through it. That is invasion of

my property!” She stormed out of the room before we were able to say a word. Both of us followed her down the hall to the office. In the office she went off again, slamming her hand into the glass window in the door, yelling, and crying. The principal and security guards stood in a circle around her to calm her down, but she slipped through and took off out of the school. I was shocked and worried about her. Where was she going? I had to write up a referral and incident report. Would she return? Four weeks went by before she returned to my math class.

Spring Break to the End of the Year

My school is not air-conditioned so the sun heated up the building quickly. With the mild winter and warm spring we had many days where the thermostat read 90 degrees or more in my room. Tom, the day janitor, informed me that my room was the “hottest room in the entire school.” He gave me suggestions on how to cool it down using fans and opening the door. On days we watched a video, I closed the door so I did not bother the other teachers. After we finished watching *The Sound of Music* I smelled an odor that reminded me of burning toast trickling into our classroom. The windows faced the courtyard and I asked the students if lunch had been burned. They replied, “No.” The smell was getting stronger and I headed for the classroom door. As I started to open the door I saw a person running down the hall, which was full of smoke. I became alarmed and asked Mrs. Peters if she knew what had happened. She filled me in on the situation. Across the hall and down a few doors was a bathroom, where one of the boys had started a fire in the garbage can. The substitute teacher had opened the door because she heard a

strange noise and the smell of smoke. Then, she tried to put out the fire with her water bottle. Security was called and they put the fire out. We were then asked if any of our students had been out in the hall in the past fifteen minutes. I asked why the fire alarms did not go off? They had no idea.

The end of the year was approaching. Once again I had many questions. When do I start taking down the bulletin boards? How would I keep my students interested in learning these last hot days of May? When I was told about the Special Olympics and that they were held at our schools stadium I was excited. I could use the Olympics as a reward for the students. We could cheer on the students from our school that were participating in the events and the next day I could incorporate the events into the lesson. The days before the event went well. All of the students were excited to observe the festivities at the stadium and to have a day “off” of class. This was a bonus for me since many of the students in the moderate room participated in the Olympics.

I had learned through this year how important it is to be prepared for anything and everything because it just might happen. The day came and things started out beautifully. The students cheered, sat together, and met my expectations for behavior. I was so proud and told another teacher how I felt. Then, it happened.

The sixth hour class and myself walked out to the field to watch and cheer for the students of Norris participating in the Special Olympics. The day was warm and I let the students go by twos to get a drink of water. I did this so I could keep track of the students and to maintain order while in the stadium. Nancy did not feel the rules should apply to her. She took it upon herself to leave without my permission after I had explained my

procedures for leaving the stands. When she returned, I asked her where she had been. She replied, "I got a drink." I asked, "Did I give you permission?" She looked at me and said, "No, but you are not my boss." This really ticked me off. I was easy going. I did not enforce numerous rules, but expected students to act with respect. I asked Nancy to join me by the edge of the stands so we could talk about the situation and she said, "No! I do not want to go over there." I repeated my request and she yelled louder how she did not have to do anything. Then I did something I thought I would never do, I looked at the class and said, "We will all have to go inside." They revolted. I listened as they started to explain how unfair it was for them to suffer for what someone else did. They yelled at Nancy to go and talk to me. "Own up girl," they said. I stood and repeated that we needed to pack up and head inside. I explained that I was not mad at them but thought we needed to talk. Three students replied they would not go inside. I said, "That is your choice." After a few minutes of discussion Malcolm said, "Get up, let's go." With that the class stood up and filed back into the school. Three of my students stayed in the stands. Another special education teacher was in the stands and she motioned to me she would watch the students. Teachers had been watching me handle this situation, but not one teacher offered to help. I felt very exposed and inadequate in front of my peers. Had I failed as a teacher? This was hard to deal with. I felt I had no control or respect from my students. The only place I had control was in my classroom. I asked myself if "control" was confined in the walls and structure of the school. My self-confidence was tarnished but I could not let that surface anymore than it already had.

Section B. Rites of Passage

When I thought about “rites of passage” for the first time, I was brought back to a book that we read to my fourth grade class during my student teaching called Danny. The boy went through a series of events that one-by-one “turned” him into a man. The author did not say this was a rite of passage but as the reader we understood the meaning behind the words. During the thesis process, I researched for a definition for rites of passage. This was not an easy task. What I found was a definition by Arnold Van Gennep (1960). To him rites of passage is, “ The ways in which human beings indicate transformation from one social status to the next.” Most rites of passage occur in three stages: (1) separation from the rest of society, (2) a transitional stage in which the participant learns the behavior appropriate to the new position, and (3) incorporation into the new role.

If we look at the role reversal and status change of a first year teacher this definition fits well. As new teachers, we are placed in a school where social groups have already been established, particular rules are assumed, and teachers are the master’s of their subject. College prepared me for creating lesson plans, ideas for symmetrical bulletin boards, and behavior strategies. I was trained for this transition. I found the rites of passage I went through were sometimes critical to my first year of teaching. The following includes the rites of passage I went through during the year of teaching

Becoming a Teacher

As I walked back down the dark hallway, classroom furniture lined the hall floor that gleamed from fresh wax. I looked at the signs that were posted by each room door, Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Parker, and Ms. Malone. I wondered what they looked like. Would one of them be my building mentor? Will we talk about the students we have in common? What did the future hold for me as a new staff member in a large building on 46th street in Omaha, Nebraska? I could see someone moving around at the end of the hallway. The woman looked up and said, “You must be new.” I replied, “Yes” and extended my hand. She was a custodian in the building. After asking where my room would be, she welcomed me to the school.

It had happened, I was a teacher, I had my own room, and I would decide what activities and assignments we would do. I was anxious to see the book series that was used to begin planning activities for the school year.

Where is your allegiance?

The second event I feel was a Rite of Passage was when I had to choose between siding with the administration or with the special education teachers. I also considered this situation to be a critical incident and I included this in my critical incident. At the beginning of the year, I had been asked to reveal knowledge to my administrator about my special education colleagues. I had been in the building only one day. As a new teacher in a new building, I had no knowledge of the disagreements between the two. All

year I tried to stay out of any confrontations and just listened to what they both had to say. As the year progressed I was assumed to be a part of the special education side.

I kept my respect for both sides and believed what each said. It came as a shock when I learned that my administration could and would lie to my face. I would say, “They would not lie to me, they are an administrator.” The staff would laugh at me and say, “You will learn.” I thought they were exaggerating. I did not believe them until it started to happen to me.

Seniority versus New

In my first year as a teacher, I learned and experienced what seniority meant in my school. Seniority has great weight in my school system. Being a new teacher, I did not expect to have all new materials in my room, but I expected to have some materials. In my critical incidents, I explained how I had fought to have textbooks in my room and how I had to give up my room to another teacher. During the year, I had asked for response cards (old chalkboards cut into lap size squares) for my classroom. I was informed that a school was being renovated and had chalkboards available. I told my special education colleagues and they directed me to the administration, saying, “good luck, but only the administration had the power to get those boards for you.” I headed for the office and explained my request. The administration wrote my request down and said they let me know what they found. After a couple of weeks, I stopped in and asked how the search was for the boards and if there was anything I could do. They said, “Oh, I have not called on that yet.” I was frustrated, but understood they were busy. A couple

weeks later I asked again. I was given an irritated look and a short answer of, “No.” Still, I had a positive attitude. A month and half later, I inquired about my request and I was blown off and given the reply that they were too busy. I felt as if I did not matter.

Chapter VI. Reflections

As I look over my first year of teaching, I find it difficult to summarize my thoughts and feelings. The events that happened this year were pivotal to my future as a teacher because if I felt I was not successful, I would have to consider a new career. The growth that occurred during my first year as a teacher could never be taught in a college or explained in depth. The choice to write a thesis made me aware of my growth as a first year of teacher. The method of journaling became my own release from the thoughts and stress of the year. The students, staff and parents that I worked with will always be in my memories as I continue my career.

Writing the thesis had a great impact on my first year of teaching. I had to be conscious of myself as a teacher, student and colleague. My research focused on the rites of passage and critical incidents which happen during the first year of teaching. The hard part with this vulnerability was expressing, in words, the feelings and emotions I endured during the year. I had walked into a new culture and school which was very different from my own childhood. I had to learn new rules, customs and how to be a good teacher.

When I began the thesis process, I felt I would be aware of myself as a teacher and in the school milieu. But, I was not prepared for the emotional strains that would be connected with the awareness and honesty of how I felt. I looked over my year and came up with themes that revolved around administration, staff and students. This was not easy nor did I take it lightly.

The Idealistic teacher

When I moved to Omaha I had no idea where or what I would be teaching. I am flexible, but I was nervous about what subject I would teach. To be a good teacher, I felt I needed to have time to familiarize myself with the textbook and prepare lessons for the students. I was unable to obtain a textbook for my class until just before school started and I felt uneasy with the start of the school year. I wondered if the students could sense my emotions. I wanted to be the teacher that they would say, "I learned how to add fractions from Ms. McCarty." The teacher they knew cared and expected only their best.

Not only did I want to be the best teacher in the classroom, but I wanted to handle the paperwork involved in special education like a professional. I pushed myself to complete everything before the deadline. I always had another teacher examine my work before it was sent in to see if I had made any mistakes. Her critique of my work was wonderful. She was not bossy, but right to the point. She took me under her wing and aided my progresses through the paperwork maze with confidence and support. I was in constant competition with myself. I felt I had never done enough. Mid-year my students started voicing their opinions of my teaching and would comment on the activities or lessons saying that they liked fraction and did not want to move to the next unit. They also talked about how they were teaching their younger brother how to multiply. This gave me some inkling that I had made a little difference, and that they were learning.

My desire to create personal relationships with my students and colleagues.

I have always been social, which contributed to the desire to hear about my student's lives, what was fun to do, where they hung out and the movies they had seen. I am a movie buff, so on Mondays we would talk about the movies we had seen over the weekend. It surprised me how many students liked the same kind of movies that I liked. When we talked candidly about movies, I gained much information about my students. Many were able to be out late at night, which was a total contrast from my childhood. Many did not have curfews. Others talked about their boyfriends who were significantly older and the parties they attended. This bothered me and we would talk about possible negative situations that could arise and of which they should be aware.

I felt close to my students and I bonded with them. They trusted me enough to inform me when one of the students had cigarettes. They let me into their lives and told me about the accomplishments and concerns they dealt with daily. I let them into my life with stories from my childhood and pictures I kept up in the room. They wanted to be informed about my family, people they had never met became important in their lives.

I respected and admired many of the teachers at my school. They were dedicated and helpful to each other and to me as a first year teacher. I could not have asked to work with a friendlier staff. On the first week of school they organized a gathering at a favorite hangout and checked with me to make sure I was attending. I was able to talk to other teachers I had not met before and did not see during the school day. These outings happened often and allowed me to see the staff in a social setting outside of school.

During this year, I also created a special relationship with a particular staff member. We started dating in the first part of the school year. He had just begun his second year of teaching. We decided to keep our relationship quiet. I found talking to him about my day relieved my stress. He knew the staff, students and administration. He had already learned the hidden rules of the school and had been through his rites of passage. I respected his honesty and experience. His support helped me through my first year of teaching and the CADRE Program.

My Desire for High Expectations.

From the beginning, I emphasized to my students that I wanted them to do their best. I stood in front of the room and expressed my desire for each student to do his/her very best.

I was told by some of my colleagues that my expectations as far as behavior and student work were too high. I listened to what each had to say and replied, "I would like to try." With a smile I was on my way. I would not let another person tell me how my students would behave academically or behaviorally. Every student was given the same chance and expectations to be the best. In special education, I looked at the students individually. Each week we had at least two individual conferences during class to talk about the student's progress. This was beneficial and successful. I firmly believed my students would rise to my expectations and they did

Choose your allegiance.

Throughout the year I was faced with the issue of whom to support. Was I a snitch to the administration, or was I close with the special education department? The separation between these two departments had existed before I was hired. Both sides were strong in their beliefs and did not want to budge. I was kept on a tight rope between the two. In addition to the separation between the special education and the administration, there was also a division between some special education and regular education teachers. As a first year teacher, I was still learning the hidden rules of the school and was confronted with situation where all sides wanted to know where my loyalties were. I felt this pressure all year and believe that it was this pressure that was influential in my decision to leave my school and look for a teaching position elsewhere.

Mentoring Relationship

Through the CADRE Program we are given a mentor. My mentor was Katie and she came to my room weekly. I was new to Omaha and did not know a lot about my district. Katie was a veteran teacher in the district had wonderful resources and was a sounding board for me. I would confide in Katie about what was happening in my school, how I felt, and asked for suggestions for activities and lessons. We had great relationship. I do not know what I would have done without her advice, support and experience.

Chapter VII. Conclusions

While I along with two other CADRE Students chose to participate in the “Frist Footsteps Thesis Project,” collaboration among us about our experiences in the classroom occurred weekly. This collaboration was an important aspect because it helped me crystallize my experience and evaluate the common and divergent themes that surfaced during the year. Discussing our experiences was advantageous. It allowed us to share the challenges of our daily events and to benefit from the perspectives each of us brought to the discussion. We learned from each other by sharing our successes and failures. Because of this experience, I believe that the following reflections which are based upon the critical incidents I experienced in the classroom, may provide insight to why so many teachers leave the teaching profession after their first year.

Section A. Methodology

The methodology used to evaluate the influence of critical incidents during my first year of teaching was journaling. These incidents were then categorized into themes and evaluated on the basis of how they specifically impacted the perception of my role in the teaching profession.

Section B. Common Themes

As I examined the critical incidents of my first years teaching experience several common themes emerged

1. Administrative support influences a teachers decision to leave or stay in the same school or seek employment elsewhere.
2. Collegiality and respect among staff influences whether teachers perceive themselves to be an effective teacher.
3. Connecting with students is essential for the desire to stay in the profession or find another.

Elaboration on each of these themes follows:

1. Administrative Support

The relationships teachers have with their administration plays a critical role for first year teachers. According to Brock and Grady (1998), “Beginning teachers identify the school principal as a key source of support and guidance (182). Hope (1999) also states that, “Even though principals are busy - and [sic] expanding the orientation and induction process adds one more thing to what they already do – the amount of time and the quality of attention they invest in assisting first year teachers to grow and develop in the profession may, in the long run, change the statistics in new teachers leaving teaching (56).

I agree with Brock, Grady and Hope. Beginning teachers identify the school principal as the key source of guidance and support. As a first year teacher, I had no

knowledge of the politics of my school. While I believed my principal to be supportive, I felt there were times when he placed me in an untenable position. For example, when he asked me to keep him informed on how the other special education teachers reacted to some of his decisions, I felt as I was supposed to spy on my colleagues. As a first year teacher, it is difficult to tell the principal who has control on my continues employment that I am uncomfortable spying on other teachers. While this may not have been his intention, I was not sure what his intention was. Regardless, it placed me in a very precarious position.

New teachers are expected to become part of the “school family.” This was the impression I got as a student in education and on my first interview with the principal. I thought being part of the “school family” meant being involved in the decisions that affected me, my colleagues and my students. Consequently, I was shocked when one of the principals approached me in the hall and said, “Another teacher wants your classroom.” I was stunned by the lack of professionalism. I understand that the principal(s) have to oversee the entire school and work to make it run smoothly, but I expected more then a passing statement. This upset me and made me feel totally powerless. Even after explaining to one of my principals why I needed to stay in that room, I was told I would have to give up the room anyway.

Along with being a part of the “school family” is the concept of being a “team player.” I agree. However, when I informed one of my principals that I did not want to substitute for a teacher who had continuously been absent and for whom I had substituted numerous times, already I was told I was not being a team player. I told him I disagreed

with him because I had substituted for teachers previously and the reason I felt I did not have to do it anymore was because I was in the CADRE Program and was not paid for substituting.

While the principal may have been joking, he was my leader and I looked to him for support, guidance, and understanding. When he made this comment, I did not feel that I was a vital part of the staff.

I still agree that the principal(s) plays an important part in the lives of first year teachers. From my experience, the administration played a part in my decision to seek employment elsewhere.

2. Collegiality with staff

In our weekly meetings, my fellow thesis students and I discussed our relationships with our school staff. Some of us had good relationships and believed the staff were supportive and helpful. Several believed that some of the staff they worked with were not supportive nor were they willing to try new ideas in the classroom. As mentioned in the review of the related literature, collegiality is a major component for teacher retention (Metropolitan Life 1986; Karge 1993). Walling's article in Metropolitan Life alluded to the fact that collegiality can increase attrition rates. He states that staff "have a positive impact on the overall school culture (qtd. in Hope 55)."

I had a good relationship with the staff in my school. The special education department took me under their wing and guided me through the paper work regarding IEPs, behavior intervention plans, and updating of IEPs. The one area where I wished there had been more interaction between me and other special education teachers was in

discussing classroom strategies. I would have liked to know what they were doing in their classrooms and shared with them what I was doing.

The one concern that the staff shared with me was the minimal support they received from the administration. It may have been because of this that they tended to be so supportive of each other. It was the same support that I felt from them.

The staff not only included me in school activities, but they including me in out-of-school activities. For example, they invited to Friday night happy hours also known as FAC which stood for Friday After School Club; they had nail painting parties, movie nights, and women's tea party. If anyone made me feel a part of the school family it was the staff.

3. Students

The relationship I built throughout the year with my students was stronger then I had imagined. They were the reason I got up and wanted to go to work in the morning. They brought me great joy and they also made me cry. I knew that the students I was going to work with were going to be different from the students I had grown up with because they were urban and I was rural, but I did not realize that for some there would be such a large schism between us. I had no idea that kids in middle school were so heavily involved in gangs, drugs, and vandalism. The other thing that shocked me about some of my students was the fact that many of them worked after school jobs. By learning information about my students, I was able to shape my teaching to better fit their experiences and needs. I found that in doing so, they in turn wanted to know more about me and supported me when other students were getting out of hand or causing problems.

Respect for each other bonded us. If I were asked “What keeps me in education”, my number one answer would be the students.

In conclusion, all schools are made up of a triad, the administration, the staff and the students. If one of these are weak, it will not function properly. As a new teacher, I expected to find all three worked in harmony and was disheartened by fact this was not the case in my particular school. If there is one suggestion that I could make it would be that perspective first year teachers be given different scenarios so that they can develop different strategies to handle a weakness in anyone part of the school triad.

In my talk with the other three CADRE teachers who elected to write a thesis, one idea that continually surfaced was that of idealism. We believed that it was important for all teachers to be idealist because it was this idealism that sparked our enthusiasm and guided our interaction with students. We also believed that, first year teachers are idealist. They believed that they are going to change the world. It certainly was my belief. I still feel that idealism is an important part of the teaching profession and it is what helped me overcome some of the negative comments I heard from administration, staff and students.

How the research process effected my first year of teaching

Because this is the second year of the First Footsteps thesis project, the role of the previous First Footsteps writers (1999) and authors have affected my research process in a number of ways. The First Footsteps thesis (1999) was accessible and used as an important reference. Jennifer, Stacy and J.P made themselves available for questions,

advice and support throughout our writing process. While we worked with them, we learned the meaning of true collaboration.

I believe that the role of writing a thesis was a self-selecting and life changing process. I welcomed the academic challenge and sought to learn more about myself and the field of education and have developed a heightened awareness of myself and my role as first year teacher. I learned more about education and teaching through the thesis process than I did in graduate courses. It has made me want to further my education and explore other academic avenues.

Because of the district's concern about issues of anonymity, it was difficult for me to be completely and vulnerable as a writer. Perhaps I am a coward but it was never my intent to hurt anybody or to look for negative aspects of a school. My goal was to add to the body of research out there on first year teachers and perhaps provide insight into why so many teachers leave after their first year of teaching.

Other Critical Incidents and reactions and how they effected my first year of teaching

The CADRE Project is viewed by many as a respectable program that accepts competent and skilled teachers. As a result, I was expected to perform at a higher level at all times. The CADRE group was described as being in a "fish bowl" because our actions were closely observed. As CADRE teachers, I felt set apart from other first year teachers. Writing this thesis also set me apart from the other CADRE teachers in the program who were completing a portfolio. There were feelings of hostility from those

who chose not to write a thesis. Although we attended class together we were no a real part of the class. We never really collaborated about our experiences. Collaboration only occurred with those of us who were writing a thesis. As a result we developed a close supportive relationship with each other.

Section C. Recommendations for Further Study

Awareness of critical incidents and how they affect us as classroom teachers is a concept that needs to be expanded in educational research. Equally important is Behar's (1996) concept of the Vulnerable Observer. Combining these two ideas has great potential for helping those of us in education to better understand possible events that cause teachers in their first five years to leave the profession.

Other recommendations are as follows:

1. More research by special education teachers about the critical incidents that they experience in their classrooms is needed. We need this information across all grade levels.
2. More research by several teachers in the same school using the critical incident model would be beneficial. This would give us a broader view since one school is being looked at from the perception of three or more teachers in a school milieu. It would be interesting to find out if experienced teachers of five years or more perceive school climate differently then those who have been there less then five years.

3. There is a need to know whether critical incidents are the same or different in rural and urban schools.
4. None of the individual that have looked at critical incidents as first year teachers were minority students. Would a minority perspective be different from that of a non-minority researcher. Given the demography of schools in urban setting, research in this area is sorely needed.
5. The First Footsteps series addresses vulnerable observation by teachers who are only in the CADRE Project. Data collection from teachers who are not in the CADRE Project may yield different insights. Without the distraction of the intense coursework and the benefits of the cohort experience, I believe that a non-CADRE teacher would bring a unique outlook into this research.
6. Compare and contrast nontraditional i.e. older people entering the teacher profession with a nontraditional teacher i.e. teachers who went from high school to college to teaching.

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