

Student Work

7-1-2000

Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage Within the First Year of a Fourth Grade Teacher in a Suburban Elementary School

Melissa C. Saunders
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork>
Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Saunders, Melissa C., "Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage Within the First Year of a Fourth Grade Teacher in a Suburban Elementary School" (2000). *Student Work*. 2608.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork/2608>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Work by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

First Footsteps: Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage Within the
First Year of A Fourth Grade Teacher in a Suburban Elementary 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 Elementary Education

University of Nebraska

By

Melissa C. Saunders

July 2000

UMI Number: EP74152

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP74152

Published by ProQuest LLC (2015). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code




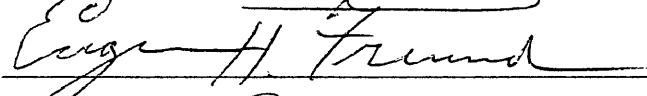
ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

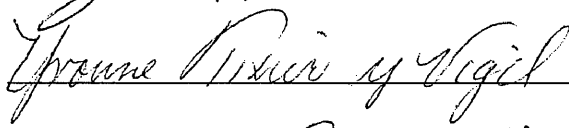
Thesis Acceptance

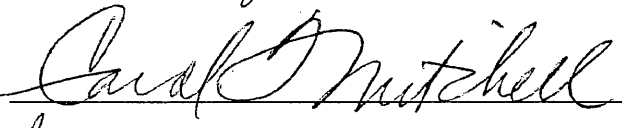
Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
Requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Education,
University of Nebraska at Omaha.

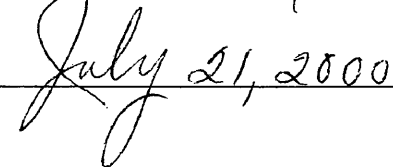
Committee







Chairperson: 

Date: 

First Footsteps: Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage Within the First Year of a Fourth Grade Teacher in a Suburban Elementary School

Melissa C. Saunders, MA
University of Nebraska, 2000

Advisor: Dr. Carol T. Mitchell

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of rites of passage, critical incidents, and the unique school milieu during my first year as a fourth grade teacher within a suburban elementary school.

There were two issues leading to this study. The first is the fact that a large number of new teachers leave the profession early in their career. There is an alarming shortage of teachers in school districts. Selen 1993; Futrell 1989; Gunderson and Karge 1992; and Haselkorn 1994; all found that “forty percent of beginning teachers resign during their first years of teaching.” (qtd. In Marlow, L. Inman, S., & Betancourt-Smith, M.). The second issue is the previous work completed by the 1999 Cadre Teachers, Jennifer Bernard, J. P. Caruso, and Stacy Stewart. These researchers addressed the same issue of rites of passage, critical incidents and school milieu in a thesis trilogy.

The ethnographic design involved classroom and school observations of student, teacher, staff, faculty, and parent interactions. Journaling was the primary source of data collection. Themes were constructed and analyzed.

The themes were (1) relationship with my administrator; (2) relationships with staff members; (3) relationships with my students; and (4) relationships with parents.

To understand the complexity of these findings, I recommend that you refer to the following work:

- Merante, C. J. (2000). *First Footsteps: Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage of a First Grade Teacher in a Suburban Elementary School*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha.
- McCarty, M. A. (2000). *First Footsteps: Exploring Critical Incidents and Rites of Passage as a First Year Special Education Teacher in an Urban Middle 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.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Carol Mitchell and Dr. Gene Freund have been critical to the completion of this thesis. They have been my guides, mentors, teachers, source of inspiration, and friends this year. They have both served as an example of the kind of teacher I hope to be someday.

Without the support, friendship, and collaboration of Melissa McCarty, Cory Merante, and Barbara Schmid my first year of teaching would have been incomplete.

The unconditional love of my brother and parents has been a constant source of strength for me. Their support and encouragement have enabled me to become the person and teacher that I am today.

My husband, Dustin, whose support and encouragement has remained steadfast through each challenge I faced. He has believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself.

Without his love and friendship I never would have survived the year.

The fourth grade students I taught this year were a source of inspiration to me and have taught me more than any teacher education course or text book. Through this thesis it is my intention to illustrate the love I had for them and the passion I have for teaching. I dedicate this thesis to the students I taught this year and the many students I will have the privilege of teaching in the future.

Table of Contents

PREFACE	2
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
SECTION A. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY.....	5
SECTION C. DEFINITION OF TERMS	6
SECTION D. THE PROBLEM.....	9
SECTION E. RESEARCH QUESTION.....	9
SECTION F. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	10
CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE.....	11
CHAPTER III. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS.....	17
SECTION A. CHILDHOOD	17
SECTION B. ADOLESCENCE	21
SECTION C. BEGINNING AN ADVENTURE IN TEACHING.....	28
CHAPTER IV. THE SCHOOL.....	30
SECTION A. THE DRIVE.....	30
SECTION B. DESCRIPTION OF MY STUDENTS.....	35
CHAPTER V. THE TEACHER AS A VULNERABLE OBSERVER	49
SECTION A. RITES OF PASSAGE.....	49
<i>Becoming a Teacher</i>	49
<i>Welcome to the School</i>	52
<i>Destination Imagination Coach</i>	54
<i>Counselor</i>	55
<i>Re-evaluating How I Teach Students</i>	57
SECTION B. CRITICAL INCIDENTS.....	59
<i>New Teacher Day</i>	59
<i>The Desk Chair</i>	61
<i>Amanda and Her Brother</i>	62
<i>Shannon and Her Mother</i>	68
<i>Daniel</i>	72
<i>Birthday Party</i>	78
CHAPTER VI. REFLECTIONS.....	81
CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSIONS	89
SECTION A. METHODOLOGY	89
SECTION B. CADRE PROGRAM	89
SECTION C. THEMES.....	90
SECTION D. CONCLUSION.....	93
SECTION E. RESEARCH QUESTION.....	94
SECTION F. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY	95
REFERENCES	97

Preface

I began my teaching career with a love for children and learning. I believed teaching to be a remarkably rewarding and esteemed profession, a career that I would have for a lifetime. I realized that many new teachers begin their careers feeling the way I did, yet, sadly, nearly half of them leave the teaching profession within the first three to five years. I wondered why some teachers stay and others leave, what are the critical factors that influence their decision?

Throughout my first year, I faced challenges that tested my philosophy of education, idealism, and belief in my own abilities. I felt overwhelmed, inadequate, and insecure. I doubted myself and my choice of profession many times this first year. Without the support and encouragement of my mentor, colleagues from the CADRE Program, school staff, principal, parents, and husband I don't know if I would have remained in the teaching profession.

It is my intention that parents, students, teachers (novice and veteran), administrators, community members and educational leaders will read my thesis and, through my words, begin to realize the many challenges that face first year teachers. Our country is facing a teacher shortage, which makes it critical that school districts retain both beginning teachers and skilled veterans. It is my hope that my insight can somehow aid in the development of support services and additional resources for beginning teachers.

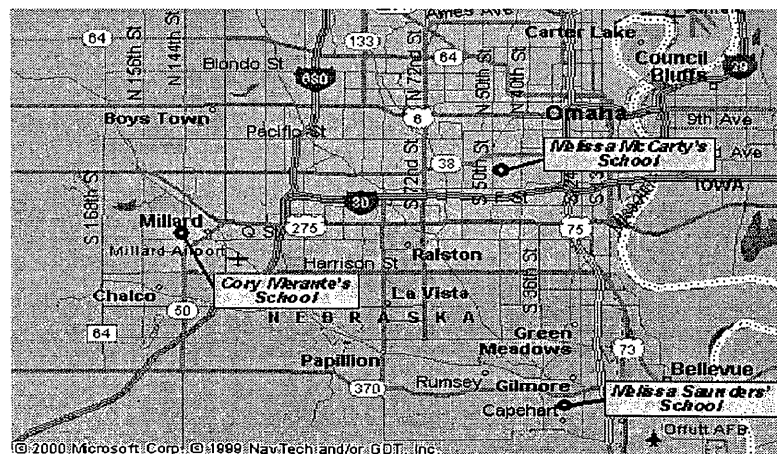
Writing a thesis has been one of the most significant educational experiences I have ever had. The opportunity to work with Dr. Gene Freund, Dr. Carol Mitchell, Dr.

Yvonne Tixier y Vigil, and Mary Knight has made my journey as a teacher and thesis writer rewarding and positive. I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to work beside Missy McCarty, Cory Merante, and Barb Schmid. The friendship I developed with them has been one of the most gratifying products of the thesis process. Together, with Jenn Bernard and Stacy Stewart, I believe I have learned the meaning of true collaboration.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The purpose of my study was to explore the influence of rites of passage, critical incidents, and the unique school milieu during my first year as a fourth grade teacher within a suburban elementary school. I examined and reflected upon the previous experiences and perceptions of three first year teachers who had undertaken this same project. These researchers, like myself, were involved in the CADRE (Career Advancement for Recruits and Experienced Teachers) Program, they were: Jennifer Bernard, J. P. Caruso, and Stacy Stewart. Each of these researchers addressed these same issues in their *First Footsteps* (1999) thesis trilogy from the 1998-1999 school year. In addition to the research our CADRE colleagues had done in the areas of anthropology, and the influence of participant observation, my review of literature includes additional readings on socio-economic influences, on the educational setting, and other qualitative research as it helps me to better understand the school culture and my role as first-year teachers.

The following map illustrated the location of my school and that of my fellow thesis writers.



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 my classroom and in my daily life and to determine how these events affected me as a first year teacher. The perceptions are from the vulnerable observer's point of view. The term, vulnerable observer was coined by Ruth Behar (1996), who found that it is impossible if not implausible to exclude the self from any part of observational research. Included are my emotions, insights, expectations and perceptions of critical incidents that affected me as first year teachers.

This is a non-hypothecated study that was conducted during the 1999-2000 school year. The primary form of data collection was daily journaling. This journaling consisted of daily events that occurred within my classroom and the school environment. I also journaled about the interactions between students and students; students and teacher; parents and students; parents and teacher; and colleagues and myself.

I made every effort possible to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. Therefore, pseudonyms are used, genders are changed, and circumstances are altered in an attempt to maintain anonymity. I carefully 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 1999-2000, school year, I separated it into categories. I examined the results of my research and analyzed the findings, looking for themes that gave insight into the experiences and perceptions I had as first year teacher.

Section C. Definition of Terms

CADRE: The CADRE Project Handbook 1999-2000 (1999) defines CADRE in the following way. “The acronym CADRE refers to the overriding goal of Career Advancement and Development for Recruits and Experienced teachers.” This is a team effort involving the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC) school districts and the University of Nebraska at Omaha. There are seven districts in the Omaha metropolitan area. Through the consortium, all seven districts work with the University of Nebraska at Omaha to examine educational concerns and place student teachers.

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.” This definition will apply to this study and my experiences in the school and the classroom.

Ethical Considerations: I followed Crane and Angrosin’s (1974) statement; “...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), defined 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.”

Journaling: Journaling in my study was the primary form of data collection. It consisted of written notes about events that occurred within my school or classroom and the thoughts, feeling and reactions to those events.

Milieu: This is the physical or social setting in which events occur or develop. For the purposes of this study, milieu is extended to include the environmental and cultural influences that affected events that occurred within that setting.

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: Spradley (1980), says “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).

Rites of Passage: Arnold van Gennep (1960), asserts that the 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].

Vulnerable Observer: “Vulnerable observer” takes 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 emotions and reactions of the observer in research. During this research, I was a vulnerable participant observer, and this is reflected throughout my thesis.

Section D. The Problem

School districts are plagued each year with the problem of not having enough teachers to assign to classrooms. The attrition rate of first year teachers significantly impacts the teacher pool of many school districts. According to research, forty percent of beginning teachers leave the profession within their first five years (Sclan et al., 1993). During the first year, events and/or situations determine whether a teacher decides to continue teaching beyond the initial year. The focus of this research is on the critical incidents, as perceived by a first year, fourth grade teacher, which may give insight into possible reasons why teachers stay or leave the teaching profession after the year one.

Section E. Research Question

How do critical incidents in the classroom, rites of passage of the first year of teaching, and the unique culture of the school shape teachers' perceptions during their first year of teaching?

Section F. Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to the 1999-2000 school year and my own personal perceptions, reactions and interpretations of events that occurred within my own unique school setting. This study was conducted in one fourth grade classroom.

Chapter II. Review of the Related Literature

In order to make sense of what I experienced as a first year teacher and categorize my journaling into usable research data I focused on critical incidents, and rites of passage within my own unique school milieu. The Critical Incident technique has been used most effectively in the training of medical school students when they first arrive in the hospital setting and are asked to begin seeing patients. In the article "Becoming a Doctor: Critical Incident Reports From Third Year Medical Students" (Branch et. al., 1997) critical incidents are "short narratives of events judged to be particularly meaningful by participants in the events...critical incident reports are open ended: students are asked to pick an event they feel is important to their learning and to write a short account of it" (223). This could be the trauma the medical student feels the first time he/she inserts an IV needle or the awkwardness in giving a physical to a member of the opposite sex. The incidents are unique to each student doctor just as each critical incidents I experienced as a new teacher were unique to me.

The training of doctors goes beyond the hospital setting. In the article, " Where Crowded Humanity Suffers and Sickens," by Abraham (as seen in Henderson et al., 1997) the writer allows us to experience what it is like to leave a loved one in the hospital and then take the bus ride home to a slum dwelling. Medical school students reading the narrative begin to understand through this first hand account, the emotions of the family and the physical surroundings of their daily lives. Just as the student physician is asked

to explore the milieu of the patient, as a new teacher I explore the unique milieu of my school.

These techniques used in medical training are borrowed from anthropology, which has a long tradition of examining the cultural milieu. One of the first anthropologists in this country to study culture was Franz Boas. Boas devoted much of his professional life to studying Native American tribes of North America. He kept close records of his observations, which helped him to understand the culture of the tribes he studied. Because of his careful attention to recording what he saw and experienced he is thought of as the father of American anthropology.

Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, two of Boas' students continued his tradition of participant observation. These women were interested in exploring the culture that influenced different societies. Bohannan and Glaxer, (1973) Benedict thought that "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).

Margaret Mead (1942) also felt that we get a true sense of the culture when we look at people who are representative of that culture. She asked why the people she was studying acted the way they did. She focused on the behavior of the people. Mead felt that if she could understand the behavior and the reasons for it she could then understand the culture. Margaret Mead not only studied the culture through observation but she often participated in the ceremonies to get a more complete understanding of the people.

Spradley's work (1980) addresses both aspects of the participant observer role. He states that the participant observer is someone that not only participates but "comes to a social situation to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation"(54). For a full school year I was the teacher/observer. I watched my students, observed their behavior and kept a record in a journal. The techniques described by Spradly in *Ethnographic Interviewing* (1979) are useful to the teacher participant observer.

"Ethnography is the science of describing a culture. The essential core of this activity aims to understand another way of life from the native point of view" (3) Although we cannot be considered traditional ethnographers because of our personal involvement in our research, it was important to recognize that "instead of collecting 'data' about people, the ethnographer seeks to learn from the people, be taught by them, just as a teacher learns from their students"(4). This was always on our minds as we worked with the individuals and cultures linked to the school setting (*First Footsteps Trilogy*, 1999).

Ruth Behar a University of Michigan Anthropologist suggests that it is impossible to be a completely objective observer of culture. She found that her own beliefs and values intruded upon her observations. In her book, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, Behar (1996), she suggests that traditional anthropology that is practiced without emotions or feelings is empty. She takes anthropology to the next step, which allows the participant observer to include his or her own emotions in the study. In doing so she states that anthropology is " the most

fascinating, bizarre, disturbing, necessary form of witnessing left to us at the end of the twentieth century" (13). A "vulnerable observer" is emotionally involved and interacts with the observations that he or she is studying. Since this is the case she urges the observer to record these emotions as they occur and reflect upon those feelings.

As a first year teacher I took Behar's advice and became a "vulnerable observer." It is impossible for a teacher not to be emotionally involved with the students he or she teaches. Understanding this, my own emotions became a part of my daily journaling and are a part of this thesis.

Herrigal (1953) discusses the relationship between the master (archery teacher) and the student in his book *Zen and the Art of Archery*. The student must be patient and observe the master and his unique archery technique at work. Only then can the student learn how to bend the bow and release the arrow with skill. During my first year of teaching I had to learn patients and become a skilled observer of my students.

Observation can be used by a researcher in many different settings. O'Brien (1990) observed the different objects carried by soldiers during the war in Vietnam. The items represented the hopes and dreams of each man and told much about his personality. Children also reveal much about themselves through their schoolwork and those things that turn them on in the classroom.

Herbert Kohl (1994) explains that teachers need to "connect their work with the children to their own personal childhood aspirations and dreams as well as their best and worst learning experiences" (82). In the teacher student relationship listening well and

carefully observing my students would often remind me of my own childhood school experiences and that fact made me a better participant observer.

Crane and Angrosino (1974) believe that "the relationships formed between an ethnographer and the people with whom he or she works can, and frequently do, develop into lifelong friendships." This is particularly true when a first year teacher works with her own class and is completely responsible for their education. I doubt that I will ever forget the names and faces of the students that I had this past school year. I know that we had a profound and lasting impact upon each other.

For some beginning teachers this connection with students is so powerful that their personal lives take a backseat to their relationship with their students. This fact was reported by former CADRE teachers Bernard, Caruso, and Stewart in their First Footsteps theses from the 1998-1999 school year. I know from my own experience this past year that time and energy given to your students often forces you to give up your own personal time at home. Unless a teacher recognizes and accepts this as part of the job this can lead to some dissatisfaction with the profession.

Dissatisfaction with the profession is a reality for many new teachers. The large number that leave the profession early in their career is alarming for many school districts that face a continuous shortage of teachers. Selen 1993; Futrell 1989; Gunderson and Karge 1992; and Haselkorn 1994; all found that "forty percent of beginning teachers resign during their first years of teaching." (qtd. In Marlow, L. Inman, S, & Betancourt-Smith, M.). One of the reasons that I was interested in doing a participant observation thesis was to see if I could begin to understand through my own critical incidents why

new teachers leave. Research indicates that some of the reasons are, "lack of professionalism, collegiality and administrative support" (Metropolitan Life, 1986; Karge 1993).

The quality and effectiveness of the school principal is a key factor in determining if a teacher stays or leaves. Principals who use orientation programs and select mentors for new teachers as a part of their socialization into the profession are less likely to have large turnover of beginning teachers in their building (Brock & Grady, 1998).

Where new teachers are placed is also a major concern. Often they are assigned to a school and classroom that is very demanding. The kids in the classroom are tough to handle and more experienced teachers shy away from these situations (Chapman & Green, 1986; Lortie, 1975.) Experienced teachers suggest that the school environment is the most important factor in their decision to stay or leave a school (Yee, 1990). Weiss (1999) found that the school environment was even more important than salary in retaining teachers. Finally, new teachers want to know what the building principal expects of them. These new professionals need mentors and feedback from the administration (Brock & Grady, 1998).

The literature that I reviewed for my thesis gave me insight into the problems of a first year teacher, but I always tried to keep my journaling notes and recorded emotions unique to my own teaching situation. I am hopeful that my research will add to an understanding of what the real life of a new teacher in the classroom is all about. If I have accomplished this in some small way then this effort will have some lasting value.

Chapter III. Personal Reflections

Section A. Childhood

My life began on a warm June day in 1975. I am the first child of David and Paula, who had been married four years earlier. My grandparents especially anticipated my arrival because I was the first grandbaby on my Mom's side of the family.

My father is a middle school guidance counselor and my mother was a "stay at home Mom." She said that it was very important to stay at home with me and that being a Mom was the most important job she would ever have. Every morning, she selected my clothes, cooked my breakfast, inspected my backpack to make sure I had everything I needed and packed a sack lunch. As a child, I was sensitive, anxious and often plagued with worries; while I was at school, I felt secure in knowing that my Mom was just down the street if I needed her.

My first teachers were my parents; I have learned countless things from them. They were, although I was unaware of it at the time, my models for understanding the dynamics of everyday life. They have played a major role in shaping me into the person that I am today, have consistently been dedicated to my learning, and have encouraged me to excel in all areas that I pursue.

My grandparents lived within bike riding distance from our house and while growing up I saw them several times a week. They have been present for all the special moments in my life as well as the ordinary ones. Grandma and Grandpa loved to listen to my jokes and stories. They have seen every report card, prom dress and haircut. They

have remembered every special occasion, come to all of my school programs, and sat through my swimming lessons. When I stayed the night, Grandma always gave me the pink satin pillowcase to sleep on and made chocolate chip pancakes the next morning. Their presence in my life has been priceless.

Our neighborhood was filled with families who had children; most of them were very close to my age. In second grade, two of my favorite things to play with my friends were restaurant and school. In our basement playroom I created a small classroom that consisted of two old student desks, a record player and small chalkboard. During the school year, I requested old ditto copies and materials from my teachers and explained that they were for “my classroom.” My second grade teacher, Miss Browning, was very eager to share with me. Upon my request, she would rummage around through her files and always turned up several treasures for me to use.

Nothing could have been more exciting for me than the first day of school. Pre-school was my first taste of school. I vividly remember a small wizard puppet that my teacher used when reading stories to us. I was completely mesmerized by it and although I knew it was only a puppet I believed that something magical happened when she placed it on her hand.

Kindergarten was an exciting and enjoyable year for me because I had an energetic, warm, and caring teacher whom I loved. Mrs. Pierce made Kindergarten an adventure. She was very skilled at building relationships with her students. The memories I have of Kindergarten are not of the curriculum or any of the academic skills I learned, they are of the relationship I shared with my teacher. At the end of the year, my

mom and I invited Mrs. Pierce to our house for lunch. After lunch, we went into the backyard and my mom took a picture of us together. I am grateful to her for making my first school experience so positive and meaningful.

During my primary elementary school years I enjoyed school very much, thanks to my many wonderful teachers. I admired my teachers and had a desire to please them; the special relationships I had with teachers were a highlight of elementary school years. School was a fun and exciting place to be. I was involved in the gifted and talented program and the subjects I especially enjoyed were reading, spelling, music and art.

I was in fourth grade when my mom was hired as a Special Education paraprofessional at a junior high, the same school where my Dad worked. Her job allowed her to continue to transport me to and from school, which was very important to her. She enjoyed her job and felt that it was very rewarding. It was important to her to make a positive impact on the lives of children, especially those with special needs.

Mrs. Donahue, my fifth grade teacher, turned me on to creative writing. It was something we did regularly and it soon became my favorite subject. Her interest in my ideas and encouraging comments gave me confidence in my writing and made it enjoyable and fun. She had a way of making me feel very special and cared for. Her humor, enthusiasm and creativity made fifth grade one of my most enjoyable and challenging years in elementary school. I hope that someday my students remember me as fondly as I remember some of my teachers.

At the beginning of sixth grade, my parents told me that my mom was pregnant; I replied in a mixture of shock and dismay, "How did this happen?!" My parents laughed

and admitted that the pregnancy was not planned; it was a surprise. I had been an only child for twelve years and now I would be a sister. This would be a life changing experience for our whole family. I was very excited to learn that my new baby brother or sister was due to be born the day before my birthday. Family and friends were afraid that I would be jealous of the new baby after being an only child for so long, but the truth was that I was just as excited as everyone else. I couldn't wait to be the big sister. I got to help choose names for the new baby, decorate the nursery, go to doctor's appointments with my mom, and I would be the head babysitter.

My mother's pregnancy was very exciting and intriguing to me. I was amazed to learn all about how the baby was growing and changing as the weeks and months of her pregnancy passed. In June of 1987, we welcomed my baby brother to the world. My brother, Matthew, has been a joy since the day he was born. His name was appropriately chosen; it means "Gift from God." I feel that my brother's birth and the relationship I have with him have given me a glimpse of the incredible kind of love that a mother feels for a child.

Socially, intermediate elementary school brought a lot of trials, especially fifth grade. Being included socially became a high stakes game. My friends took turns excluding each other from the group and, eventually, I was the one excluded. It was devastating to me. I was willing to do anything to avoid rejection. I was becoming increasingly more concerned with my peers than with academics. It was within this period of time in my life that I began to feel very different, depressed and isolated from the rest of my peers. My self-esteem plummeted and I began to dread going to school.

The problems with one particular group of girls escalated to a point that parents and teachers became involved. They became very concerned and were convinced that it was no longer just normal playground politics; it was becoming increasingly more malicious and cruel. Our teacher intervened by conducting small group discussions with the girls. This seemed to alleviate some problems for the rest of the school year.

Section B. Adolescence

During early adolescence, when peers were my whole world, to feel unaccepted was devastating. In fifth and sixth grades, I learned that school could be a horribly lonely and uncomfortable place if you did not fit in. Adolescence always brings a certain amount of turmoil to life and the group of girls who were harassing people in elementary school compounded this turmoil for me.

This began a particularly tumultuous period in my life that continued into junior high. The same group of girls from elementary school were considered the “popular group” in junior high. My junior high was a large school, where wealth and appearance were very important. The “right look” mattered and it was difficult to obtain at twelve or thirteen. Designer clothes and shoes were expensive and I did not have many of either. While walking down the hall, girls would pull the back of my shirt out to see what brand it was. Anyone who slightly deviated from what they felt was “cool” was targeted, and once you were, it was nearly impossible to escape teasing and ridicule. To cry in public or make it known that the teasing bothered me would make it even worse.

These girls seemed to delight in ridiculing others. In the hallways, they followed closely behind me and loudly criticized me by saying things like, “Can you believe how ugly she is?” Most of the boys in my class admired this influential group of girls and would carry out their “dirty work” on command. This was especially hurtful at an age when I desired positive attention from boys. Often times the boys would dump peoples’ lunch trays out of their hands, steal purses, shove people in the halls, and break into their lockers and throw away the contents.

In eighth grade Health class, one of the “popular girls” told a boy to spit on me. I sat while he spit on me repeatedly, snickering about it with his friends. I sat silently, powerless to defend myself. Tiny droplets of spit dotted my glasses and notebook. I shook with rage and humiliation as he spit on me. Tears welled up in my eyes, I wiped them away quickly. I knew which girl had instigated it; she had been my best friend in fifth grade. Through my tears I asked her to make him stop. She turned to me, laughed, and replied with bitterness and sarcasm, “Why should I?”

I was often humiliated like this in front of others. I wondered why I was being treated this way and why my teachers were not doing anything to help me. I began to feel as though I was drowning. I could not defend myself against the things that were happening at school; I did not know how to fight back. I could not play the game and felt absolutely powerless.

As my grades and interest in friends deteriorated, my parents grew increasingly more concerned. Slowly, they began to realize the complexity of the situation and, my

freshman year, sought counseling for me. I was opposed to the idea and refused to talk to the counselor or admit that there was any kind of problem.

My grades began to drop significantly; I did not want to go to school. My junior high teachers must have seen how students were treating each other, but no one did or said anything about it. I yearned for a place to fit in and tried everything I could to convince my parents to send me to another school. I cried to them and explained what was happening in school. I know now that they did not truly comprehend the situation.

My emotions became increasingly more chaotic and intense. I was withdrawn and began to experience feelings of severe rage, anxiety and depression. I began suffering from panic attacks and started pulling out my hair and eyelashes. I considered suicide often and felt worthless, hollow, and helpless.

At the beginning of my freshman year, several girls approached me, one of them in tears, and sincerely apologized for things that they had done to hurt me. They admitted that they had targeted me and did not know why. They said they just wanted to “fit in.” Well, I was in counseling because they wanted to “fit in.” I was failing school because they wanted to “fit in.” I wanted to die because they wanted to “fit in.” I wanted to tell them where they could stick their heartfelt apology.

Tenth grade, my first year in the high school building, was a fresh start for me. I made many friends and later learned that some of them had experienced similar treatment in school. I participated in vocal music, theater, and the speech team, and was extremely successful in these areas. Not only did I begin to feel a true sense of belonging, but I

began to understand what it felt like to have other people looking up to me. My self-confidence skyrocketed.

I no longer wanted to be molded to fit anyone else's ideals. Once I gained strength from my group of friends I drastically changed my appearance. I developed an attitude of indifference, dyed my hair and wore clothes from the Salvation Army.

My friends and I detested people that were considered to be in the "in crowd." I wanted to differentiate myself as much as possible from the girls in junior high, whom I perceived as being depthless and focused on external appearance. I was still enraged and could not forgive the people who had hurt me. This anger gnawed away at me and was a destructive influence in my life.

To the outside observer, I appeared to have it all; I was extremely successful and involved in school, talented, had lots of friends and a good home life. I received many awards and much recognition for my talents in the fine arts. I had lead roles in the school plays, state championships every year in speech and drama, and was on my way to college in the fall. Yet, despite all my successes, my feelings of depression, anxiety, and anger continued to haunt me; I could not make them retreat.

During my junior year, while preparing for the school musical, I had a small disagreement with two friends. I was particularly distraught by this; it felt like a cataclysmic event. In a whirlwind of anxiety and despair, I made a life threatening decision on the floor of one of the pale green school bathroom stalls. When I realized what I had done, I called my dad at work from the lobby and asked him to call an

delighted in getting a sticker on an assignment well done. They wrapped their arms around me and whispered, “I love you” without hesitation.

My student teaching experience was positive and meaningful. I treasured the relationships I had created with my students. I became very attached to them and found it difficult to leave and teach a new group of students. I hoped that my first year of teaching would be as successful and fulfilling as student teaching had been.

“So, Melissa, what grade level do you want to teach?” As my career in education began I was asked this question many times; it perplexed me. I wasn’t sure how to best answer. I knew that I would discover the positive and negative aspects of any age group. How could I know which grade I would want to teach with so little experience? After plenty of thoughtful consideration, I decided that I would feel most comfortable teaching any grade between second and fifth. I had substitute taught at all of these levels and had felt confident with the children of these ages and the challenges that the age had provided.

I was assigned to teach fourth grade and wondered what it would be like to teach “big kids.” Many teachers that I spoke with assured me that I would love teaching fourth grade and that the children are at “a fun age.” I wondered what that meant. I felt significantly uncertain and apprehensive. Would I be a good teacher? Would I like teaching fourth graders as much as I did second graders? What would my year be like? Would they like me? Have I made the right choice? I visualized myself standing in front of twenty, nine-year-olds. How would I look as a teacher? Do I look like a teacher? My eyes widened when I contemplated the fact that children were going to call me “teacher.”

The realization hit me: I would be a teacher. I would have my own teacher's desk; I would eat lunch in the teacher's lounge; and I would have my own teacher's mailbox.

Was I prepared to undertake this role?

I considered the many aspects of my new profession. I would be responsible for the learning and well-being of each child in my class. I alone would have to solve playground problems, stop children from cutting in line, soothe hurt feelings, check for head lice, mend quarrels, entertain, discipline, join committees, boost self-esteem, conference with parents, attend meetings, offer counseling, and then teach them math, spelling, social studies, science, reading, writing, history, health, social skills, responsibility, and time management. The thought of it all overwhelmed me.

I tried to visualize the faces of my students. I wondered if I would recognize any of them from the year before when I student taught and substituted. Many more questions flooded my mind: What are fourth graders like? How tall are they? Can they write in cursive? When they came to the school doors where the class lists are posted, would they be excited to see that I was their teacher? I was anxious to meet them and learn all about the special qualities that make each of them so unique.

During the summer I walked through the building and peered into the other teacher's rooms. I saw filing cabinets brimming with activities and thematic units. Shelves were loaded with games, puzzles and books. I thought of my students. How will I ever be able to teach as well as a teacher who has been collecting resources and materials for twenty years? I was concerned that I could not afford to purchase all the things I needed. I wondered if my students would be disappointed if I did not have all of

the resources that the other teachers' had. I made lists of materials that I needed to buy to start off my year and began shopping at garage sales and thrift stores for games, puzzles and chapter books.

As August drew nearer, I began to pack all the things I had purchased and been saving for the classroom. I was relieved to see that the boxes filled our family room. Looking at the stacks of boxes helped increase my feelings of preparedness. Now I felt as though I might have enough to start the year. My husband and I labeled each box and carefully loaded up both cars. As we headed for school, I looked intently out the car window and realized that this would be the trip I would make every morning.

Welcome to the School

Summer began to fade away and the beginning of school was drawing near. Children enjoyed the last carefree days of vacation by riding bikes and cooling off at the swimming pool. The August heat was stifling. Beads of sweat gathered at my temples as my husband and I strained to unload boxes and bags of classroom materials from the two cars. We piled stacks of boxes next to the front doors of the school. He took out the camera and insisted on taking pictures of me posed next to the side of the school underneath the big letters that spelled out the name of the school. It was an exhilarating moment and I was delighted that my husband was so excited for me.

An enthusiastic Southern accent welcomed us; it was Jeannine, the school secretary. She helped us find a library cart to move the boxes back to my classroom. For twenty-three years Jeannine has worked as the secretary. Limitless energy is stowed

within her petite frame. As we loaded boxes onto the cart, she chatted cheerfully about her summer vacation and whisked through the office to answer the phone.

We moved through the lobby and passed the teacher's lounge. As we rounded the corner I gazed down the quiet, dark hall toward my classroom. It was difficult to imagine that in a matter of weeks the halls would be filled with children's voices and the sounds of school.

I entered my classroom and looked at the long blank walls and empty students' desks. I questioned how I could transform a large empty room into a bright and welcoming fourth grade classroom. Inspecting my desk, I discovered a few materials that had been left by the CADRE teacher before me. My room looked so bare in comparison to the others; I only had a desk, a rolling cabinet and one small bookshelf. I noticed that I didn't have a desk chair. I began to suspect that the other teachers may have scavenged through my room and taken most of the decent furniture, including my chair. This really bothered me; I went and talked to my principal about it. He reassured me and asked me to make a list of the furniture I needed and said that he would order it.

During the weeks before school started I spent hours organizing my files, labeling drawers and cabinets, arranging and rearranging the desks and other furniture and hanging and re-hanging the bulletin boards. I wanted the "perfect classroom," one so impressively decorated and arranged that I would be the envy of all the other teachers. I wanted to consider the needs and desires of my students; this was difficult because I had not met them yet. I continually referred to it as "my classroom," but truthfully, it was the students' classroom. At that point I seriously considered waiting to decorate and arrange

the classroom until after I had met my class and then they could help me make decisions about the room, but I was so excited that I couldn't wait.

I never thought that I had enough materials to teach my students; there was always something else that I thought I needed to teach a particular concept. I didn't want my students' learning to suffer because I was new and didn't have as many resources as the other teachers. I was shocked to learn that the teachers would receive only fifty dollars per year to spend toward instructional materials. Fifty dollars does not go far; I was able to purchase two books, a poster and a set of fraction pieces for the overhead. I knew that I would be required to spend my own money to purchase things for my classroom, but I never expected to spend as much as I did. By the end of the summer I calculated that I had spent over a thousand dollars on my classroom. I discussed this with many of the teachers in my building and they all reassured me that I was plenty prepared and had more than most first year teachers. They also said that they would help me get anything I needed. I was relieved to be working with such a supportive staff.

Destination Imagination Coach

Mr. Anderson came to school and asked if I would co-coach the Destination Imagination team with him. Destination Imagination is a highly organized program that encourages creative problem solving, higher level thinking, and teamwork. The team chooses a "problem" that they must solve and present at the district competition. The program is specifically designed for students that qualify for the district's gifted and

talented program. The team consisted of third and fourth graders; five of the fourth graders were in my class; the other three girls were in various third grade classes.

Mr. Anderson said that when he asked his two girls to choose a teacher that they would like to ask to coach, they chose me. I was flattered by this and accepted the coaching position immediately. I had participated in the program during junior high and felt that I would be an asset to the team. I was excited about having the opportunity to work with such bright and talented students.

The team of girls met once a week for most of the year, and closer to competition time, we met every day. As a result, I was able to get to know each of the girls and their parents very well. I enjoyed our time together and the fun we had while sharing pizza or ice cream after our meetings. The close relationship that I developed with the girls and their parents was a pivotal experience during the year.

Counselor

My role as a teacher involved working with students and their parents. There were several situations in which I played the role of counselor to the parents of my students. James' parents kept in close contact with me regarding his anxiety issues. We conferenced many times in person and over the phone. His mother cried as she told me details of their home life and factors that she felt had influenced James' problems. She said that when he was learning to write he wrote with his left hand and his father said, "This is a right-handed world" and made James learn to write with his right hand instead. I was surprised by this archaic way of thinking, but then understood why James had such

difficulty writing. “He spends hours doing his homework,” his mother said tearfully, “yesterday it took him three hours to complete seven math problems.” She said that he stares at the wall or the clock, just as he does at school. “We just don’t know what to do,” she said.

They often became extremely frustrated with James. One day while I was helping him with his homework he said to me, “Mrs. Saunders, I’m sorry if I frustrate you.”

I looked into his eyes and told him, “You don’t frustrate me, James.”

“Well, I frustrate my mom and dad,” he said.

I understood his parents’ confusion and tried to meet it with sympathy and understanding. “What is wrong with him? How can we help him?” They asked. They valued my professional opinion and followed my advice to have him evaluated by a psychiatrist. Because of my own personal experiences, I was able to recommend the names of several doctors and explain the psychological evaluation process. I felt confident that I was doing all I could to help James and his parents deal with the situation.

Kristin’s mother was another parent that I worked with closely. Kristin’s parents’ divorce was not yet final and her father was already engaged. Her mother was devastated. She cried openly at conferences as she told me that another woman was already living in his house. The woman had a third grade son in class down the hall, and Kristin’s father would pick him up after school, then wave at Kristin and her little sister as they walked home alone. “He always wanted a boy,” she said sadly, “he was disappointed that Kristin was a girl.”

Late one evening, she called me at home to ask about Kristin's book report project. I could tell that she was upset and sensed that the book report was only part of the reason for her call. I asked if she was okay. "It's just that I'm not going to get them (Kristin and her sister) for Christmas; they are going to be with him." I heard the pain in her voice and listened patiently as she explained the situation.

Working so closely with parents was not something that I had expected when I entered teaching, but it helped me to understand my students more completely.

Re-evaluating How I Teach Students

My CADRE mentor, Mary, taught me many things about the art of teaching. Her positive attitude, innovative ideas, and child-centered philosophy were a constant source of inspiration and enlightenment for me. At the beginning of the year I listened to her ideas and philosophies on performance assessments, standardized testing, curriculum objectives, long-range planning, setting goals, modifying the curriculum, and I thought my head was going to burst. Her words lingered in my mind; I knew that I wanted to be the kind of teacher that she described, but I didn't know how. I already felt so overwhelmed that I did not think I could take on anything new.

As the year progressed and I became more comfortable in my role as a teacher, her words began to make more sense to me; the best way to describe it is that something just clicked in my brain. Suddenly I understood what she had been saying all along. I began to comprehend teaching on a deeper level. Her creative insight and innovative

perspective on teaching motivated me to become a better teacher, one that was dedicated to teaching *every* child.

May 10, 2000

Because of my conversations with Mary, I feel that I am moving over a hurdle in my teaching career. I am focusing on the future and not second-guessing my choices/judgement in the past. I think that I understand how to better accommodate my student's needs and learning styles. I'm already so excited about next year because I feel like I am starting to understand what teaching is all about. Mary helped me to understand what it means to bring a child forward and second-guess the ideas of pass and fail. I have been thinking of her words all night and all day. I wonder why I didn't see this before; maybe I wasn't ready to. After talking to Mary, I realized that I have to be a strong leader and follow my own vision of teaching and not to follow in the footsteps of others just because it's easier and more comfortable.

Section B. Critical Incidents

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.” When I reflect upon my first year of teaching, I realize that I could define hundreds of events as being “particularly meaningful.” What other terms could I use to define a “critical incident?” I identified something as being a critical incident if it stirred up my emotions or elicited a physical response. Sometimes these events played over and over in my head, kept me awake at night, made me cry, laugh, frustrated me, made my head ache, left me confused, proud, or angered me.

New Teacher Day

The day before school started was designated for orientation of all new district teachers. Principals, building mentors, and new teachers met at the district Central Office for breakfast, a meeting, and a bus tour of the district. I was excited to begin my teaching position and meet fellow colleagues. That morning the upstairs meeting room was swarming with people. Many were making polite conversation, introducing themselves, and shaking hands. I stopped to speak to several of my former teachers and people that my parents worked with, then searched the room to find the table designated for my school and sat down for the beginning of the program.

The superintendent welcomed us and each principal was asked to introduce the new teachers from their building. I was a little nervous about having to stand and be

introduced in front of a huge room full of people. I noticed that one particular elementary school principal, who is known for being very friendly and personable, walked around the table and touched each new teacher's shoulder as he introduced them. He smiled broadly and expressed his enthusiasm about the school year. I was impressed by his extra effort to make the new teachers within his building feel special, and at that moment I understood the kind of positive atmosphere that a principal could create.

When it was time for my principal to introduce the three new teachers from my school, he stood at his place, smiled nervously, and read from a piece of paper. He introduced me proudly and said that he was happy to have me as a member of his staff. Then he announced that I had just been married. "We all know her by her maiden name, Melissa Wilson; Dave Wilson's daughter." He continued to say how long my parents have both worked in the district. Oh, no, why did he say that? I thought as I smiled uncomfortably from my seat. I could feel everyone's eyes on me. I began to imagine them whispering to each other about me and how I had been introduced, as someone's daughter who had worked for the district thirty years. I was mortified. I adore my parents, but why was I always being introduced as their daughter? I am an adult beginning my career, but I felt like a little girl. I felt as if I had no identity of my own.

I turned to my building mentor, Maggie, and expressed my embarrassment. She seemed to understand and nodded sympathetically as I explained. She said, "I understand how you could feel that way, but I don't think anyone thought anything of it. Don't worry." I know that my principal had only the best intentions and that I reacted because I was anxious and insecure about beginning my first year.

The Desk Chair

Late one afternoon as my husband helped me wade through unboxed books and bulletin board sets, my principal unexpectedly stopped by. “Well, what a nice surprise! I stopped up here to check my mail and Jeannine said that you were back here,” he said with a smile. His sun-tanned face was partially hidden behind dark sunglasses and he wore a t-shirt and shorts. It seemed odd not to see him in a suit and tie. “How has your summer been?” he asked. He always made me feel welcome and accepted. I introduced him to my husband and we visited for a few minutes about the events of the summer.

He walked through my classroom and acknowledged my lack of furniture. We talked about it again and he made a list to make sure that he ordered what I needed. As he walked behind my desk, I mentioned my desk chair and asked if he knew where it had gone. He looked down where the chair should have been, placed his hands on his hips, and slowly shook his head from side to side. “Oh, I told her not to take your chair,” he said. “Maggie took it, she wanted a new desk chair. I said I’d get her a new one. I don’t know why she took yours.” Maggie was one of my teammates, my building mentor; her room is right next door. Why would she take my chair? I was not sure how to respond. “Well,” he smiled reassuringly and patted my shoulder, “I guess you’ll be the one to get a new desk chair now!”

After he left, I kept thinking about that desk chair. I questioned, why would Maggie take it? She was my building mentor; she was supposed to look out for me. What did she expect me to do, I wondered, sit on the floor? That afternoon I sat quietly

mulling over my situation. I was so nervous about being new in the building and it was a struggle for me not to dwell on it or take it personally. I told myself: it's only a chair; yet, to me, it represented much more than just a chair.

I may never know why she took my chair, so I decided to assume that it was just a misunderstanding between her and the principal. I realized that my own anxiety and insecurity about being a new teacher were coloring my reaction. I had interpreted her taking my chair as a message that I was not welcomed because my fear was that I would not be welcome. I knew that Maggie was a kind person and would not do anything purposely to make my transition into the building difficult. I am sure she would have felt terrible if she knew that it had hurt me and made me feel unwelcome. I wanted this situation to serve as a reminder to keep a positive outlook and not be hypersensitive to the actions or comments of other teachers within my building.

Amanda and Her Brother

Two weeks before school began Amanda and her family were helping her mother, who is a teacher, decorate her fifth grade classroom. After a long evening of hanging bulletin boards and unpacking boxes, they headed for home. Amanda's father drove her and her three-year old brother, Gabe, while her mom followed in the car behind them. They pulled into the steeply sloped driveway of their home in military housing and parked the car. Amanda's father got out of the car and helped her mother unload the trunk leaving Amanda to help Gabe out of his car seat. She unbuckled his seat belt and just as he was about to step out of the car, it popped out of gear and began to roll

backward. Immediately, her father ran to the vehicle and fought to reach for the brake, but accidentally hit the clutch. This caused the transmission to disengage and car to roll quickly down the driveway.

Amanda grasped frantically for Gabe's hand; he fell onto the hard cement. She tugged on his legs to move him from the path of the vehicle, but was unsuccessful in her struggle; the car's tires crushed Gabe's head and violently dragged his tiny body to the end of the driveway.

Amanda looked on in horror as her mother and father held Gabe's bleeding body, while sobbing and screaming out for help. She ran frantically to the neighbor's house and asked them to call 9-1-1 as her parents held their baby and prayed in a pool of blood at the end of the driveway. Tragically, Gabe passed away as he was being rushed by ambulance to the hospital.

I received news of Amanda's brother's death three days before school started. Luckily, I had the opportunity to mentally prepare myself and conference with our school counselor, Mrs. Gibbon. She was a very caring and perceptive woman who understood the emotional needs of children. She had a natural ability to comfort students and put them at ease; they loved her.

Many of my other students lived in military housing with Amanda and had either seen Gabe being loaded into the ambulance or heard the commotion that night. Mrs. Gibbon, our school counselor, felt that it would be beneficial to discuss the death with my class and invite the children who knew Gabe to discuss their fond memories of him. I

trusted Mrs. Gibbon and knew that she would facilitate the situation and make it a meaningful and positive experience for the students.

Amanda was so brave as Mrs. Gibbon helped her explain the details that took place that night. “The day he died was a fun day, we didn’t fight at all like we usually do.” I felt a lump rise in my throat. “I tried to pull him out, but I wasn’t strong enough and he was just too little,” she explained. Tears welled up in my eyes as she went on to say that, “the angels talked to Gabe and told him that they were going to take him, so he wasn’t afraid.” The children who knew him smiled and laughed as they reminisced about Gabe. I saw the heartache in Amanda’s eyes and cried silently from behind my desk as I tried to comprehend life without my younger brother.

Amanda and I had many after school talks about her brother’s death. “I don’t like to be home alone after school because my brother’s room is right across from mine.” She and I usually shared a snack and cleaned up the room together while she shared stories about her brother and her feelings about his death. I asked her if she talked to her Mom and Dad about Gabe, she said, “No, I don’t like to talk to them about it because it makes them too sad.” I asked how her Mom and Dad were doing and she told me that they cried and prayed together a lot. She said that her Dad lays out Gabe’s clothes and smells them before going to work. She said, “He cried yesterday because the smell of Gabe is going away.” Later she explained that she had seen her father lying on the floor of Gabe’s bedroom, crying, and holding some of his toys. I could not imagine anything more heart wrenching than losing a child.

Amanda's beautiful brown skin radiated energy. Her warm, broad smile and positive "can-do" attitude made her very popular. She was very loving and kind; her brilliant sense of humor and deep throaty laugh always kept our class in good spirits. As a result of her many positive qualities, she was voted student of the month in my class in the month of September. The student of the month for each class is recognized at an all-school assembly. Amanda's parents came and I was happy to have the opportunity to speak with them. I asked how they were doing. Her mother said, "Amanda is teaching us how to get through this, we just look to her."

I reassured them that Amanda was doing very well in school and thanked them for allowing her to stay after school with me. Her mother was a beautiful, soft-spoken woman. She held my hand gently and as she looked into my eyes, she said, "Mrs. Saunders, you are the kindest teacher Amanda has ever had and I mean that."

Amanda brought two pictures of Gabe to school. She taped one to the top of her desk and asked me to place the other in a prominent place in the classroom. I placed it on a bookshelf behind my desk where the whole class could see it. Occasionally, I leaned back and gazed at the picture. He was a beautiful child with the same soulful brown eyes and sweet broad smile as Amanda.

Over the next four months, Amanda's mother became pregnant and they decided to make a military transfer to the Pentagon to avoid the horrible memories that lingered in their home. They also wanted to be closer to their family, who lived in Virginia, where Gabe was buried. The pregnancy and relocating compounded the stress of Gabe's death.

I volunteered with Mr. Anderson, Hannah's father, to co-coach an extra-curricular activity for gifted and talented students called Destination Imagination. Amanda was invited to be a part of the group until she had to move (three months before our competition.) I invited all eight girls to spend the night at my house just before winter break.

Before the slumber party was a parent meeting at which, Amanda's mother learned that Amanda hadn't been given the paperwork for the competition. She was very upset by this and left the meeting. Mr. Anderson didn't make her copies because she would not be present for the competition; she was moving in about three weeks. An hour or so later that evening, Amanda's mother called me while my husband, the Destination Imagination girls, and I made homemade pizza at the kitchen table.

"I have something to say and I want you to listen to me carefully, do you understand? Amanda did not receive paperwork for the competition. No one leaves my child out! You will get her that paperwork NOW, do you understand me?!" Her voice was loud and furious.

I was shocked and confused by her anger, "Yes," I replied weakly.

"Don't you ever treat my child that way!"

"Mr. Anderson didn't make Amanda copies of the competition paperwork because she won't be here." My voice was meek as I fought to hold back tears in front of the girls.

"I don't care! You are her teacher, you should know better!" She angrily retorted. I turned my back to the girls, so Amanda would not see the tears rolling down my cheeks.

She continued on in this way for several minutes and ended by saying, “Do you have any questions?”

All I could choke out was, “I don’t believe so. Thank you.”

After getting off the phone, I walked into the bedroom where I sobbed out of hurt, frustration, and anger. I felt bullied by her and I was furious that I did not defend myself. I couldn’t understand why she was so outraged and irrational. I hated her and the way she made me feel; she had insulted me. I loved Amanda; didn’t she understand that? Didn’t she remember all the hugs, cards and notes, times I kept her after school to share a snack and talk? I didn’t go into this profession because I have a thoughtless and unfeeling attitude toward children. She was a teacher, and knew that this was my first year, why did she treat me this way? I remembered when she had said that I was the kindest teacher Amanda had ever had. What happened to the kind woman I had met at the beginning of the year? Should I ask her to come and get Amanda? What should I have said to her?

When I had calmed down, I called Mr. Anderson and explained what had happened; he apologized for not making copies for Amanda and said that he felt terrible about what happened. “I’m so sorry. It’s my fault,” he said. “I’ll call and get this straightened out.” He was extremely sympathetic and urged me not to take it personally. He also reminded me of all this family had been through in the last three months.

It took me a long time to come to terms with my feelings toward Amanda’s mother. My anger and resentment began to fade once I accepted that her reaction on the phone that night was a result of overwhelming stress, frustration, and grief. I imagined

that she was living in a very dark, dismal place. Each time she left the driveway I am sure she relived the night Gabe died. She had to witness the bloodstains fading on the driveway and walk by her child's empty room each morning. Every birthday and holiday would come and go without her son; she would never have the opportunity to see him mature into a man.

When I thought about the intense hurt she was feeling, I began to accept and understand her reaction and see the anger in a different way; it was not directed at me, but displaced onto me.

Shannon and Her Mother

Most of my student's parents were supportive and involved. I rarely had a negative experience with a parent, but when I did, it was usually Shannon's mother. Her mother was highly involved in the school and set very high expectations for Shannon and pressured her to excel in all she did. Shannon was involved in many extra-curricular activities and her parents believed her to be exceptionally talented and bright. Shannon was a friendly, energetic girl, but did not get along with the other students very well because she was domineering, artificial, and manipulative.

The first contact I had with Shannon's mother was within the first six weeks of school and involved her math test score. She called me at school and was furious upon seeing that Shannon had received a 60% on the test. I explained that I was equally as confused by the failing score since Shannon had received a 98%, 96%, and 100% on the

three reviews for the test. The truth was that Shannon's math homework was not being done in her handwriting and I suspected that her parents were doing it for her.

She was near tears as she ranted on irrationally about the test for over thirty minutes. "Shannon just doesn't understand it," she said. Several times I asked, "What could I do to help?" in the most cheerful voice I could muster. "I don't know," she snapped. I suggested tutoring after school, extra credit, and reviewing the test with her so that she would understand what she missed. I did not understand the point of her call; she had no suggestions or questions for me, and seemed to discourage any that I had. Shaken by her obvious anger and the demeaning way in which she spoke to me, I was silent for the majority of the phone call. When I saw her a few days later she acted as though nothing had happened.

Several days after the Student of the Month for October was announced, my principal ushered me into his office. He explained that "a certain parent" had spoken to him and was upset because her daughter had not been chosen yet. "Oh, I wonder who that could be." I said in a sarcastic tone.

"You know who I'm talking about, don't you?" he said. I nodded and rolled my eyes.

He went on to say that she is unhappy that I was letting the students nominate the Student of the Month instead of selecting one myself. She said that Amanda was only chosen out of sympathy and that Stephanie, the child who was most recently chosen, didn't deserve it because she has been tardy five times. I asked, "How did she know how many times Stephanie has been tardy?" My principal explained that Stephanie's mother

and Shannon's mother are best friends; when Shannon's mother heard that Stephanie was chosen as Student of the Month, she looked at Stephanie's report card to see her grades and how many times she had been tardy. He continued by saying that we would probably be hearing from Shannon's mother every month until she was chosen. He finished by saying that "it is impossible to make parents like that happy" and that "they always find something to complain about." I could not believe it; I had no idea that parents could be so childish.

One morning, two of the Destination Imagination girls approached me in a panic. They said that Shannon's mother had heard about the Destination Imagination slumber party and she was "really mad and going to talk to the principal about it."

"Why is she 'really mad'," I asked them.

"Because Shannon wasn't invited." They answered.

Shannon was not a member of Destination Imagination. I was extremely distraught and left the room to speak to the principal about it. I knew that he would make me feel better. "Don't worry about it," he said, "let it be my problem now. If she calls I will handle it." Then he said, "It's parents like her that make people not want to go into the field of education." I agreed whole-heartedly.

November 18, 1999

I am so mad. What is her problem? Does she sit at home all day and think up things to get mad about? Is she after me? Every time I look at Shannon I see her mother and think about how much I can't stand her. I don't want to feel that way

toward Shannon, but I know that everyday she goes home and complains to her parents about something that she perceives as being unfair. Shannon has such a bad attitude. She is always saying that something “is unfair.” Yesterday when we were lining up to go in from recess she asked if we could stay out longer. I said, “That would be fun, but we can’t do that today.” She turned around and told the kids in line that I was “so unfair.” I heard her say it and asked, “What did you say Shannon?” She turned to me and in a sickeningly sweet voice, she smiled and said, “I didn’t say anything, Mrs. Saunders.” She is so manipulative. Like mother, like daughter.

Items began disappearing from our classroom. At first I didn’t think anything of it, because children lose things all the time, but then I began to notice that every time something was missing, Shannon was the last one seen with it. Toward the end of the year, the children were insisting that they had seen Shannon taking things. A wallet disappeared, followed by a library book, diary, necklace, money, and a variety of other things. Each time I questioned Shannon she looked into my eyes and swore that she didn’t know anything about it. “I really don’t have it; you can even check my backpack,” she would say innocently.

I began trusting her less and less and grew very suspicious of her toward the end of the year. One afternoon as we were searching for a missing puzzle book, I asked her about it and she said, “I really don’t have it; you can even check my backpack.” So, I did, and there it was. She gasped dramatically and said, “I have no idea how that got there!”

I questioned her after school and she emphatically denied ever taking anything. Finally I told her that I would let her sit and think about it while I contacted her parents and the principal. She sat quietly for a few moments and admitted to taking the diary. After nearly an hour of discussion, she finally admitted to taking everything that was missing. She and I talked about it at great length, during which, she confessed that she “Can’t stop taking things or lying.” I felt badly for her and knew that she had a serious problem. She cried and told me that her New Year’s resolution was to stop taking things, but she just couldn’t stop.

I called her parents and they came to school for a conference; I described what had happened. I was extremely sympathetic and calmly explained that I felt Shannon may have a problem. They weren’t interested in hearing what I thought. Her mother said, “I don’t understand why she would take things, we buy her anything she wants.” I tried to explain that she was stealing and lying because she didn’t feel good about herself. Humiliated and furious at Shannon, they took her report card and said that they wouldn’t be sending Shannon to school the next day and left immediately. The next day was the last day of school. I felt badly that Shannon missed the school awards ceremony, field day, and the all-school picnic.

Daniel

The child whom I considered to be my greatest challenge was Daniel. Little Daniel had brown hair that looked like it was stuck to his head and freckles dotting his pale face. He was by far the smallest child in the class and the most trying of my

patience. Academically and socially, he performed at a first or second grade level. He was a source of constant frustration for me.

At the beginning of the year I immediately noticed things about him that concerned me. His drawings were extremely simple; his cursive was large, awkward, and sloppy, and he didn't seem to understand basic concepts that we discussed in class. I felt discouraged at the many things he could not do. He had extreme difficulty staying in his seat, focusing for more than a few minutes at a time, remaining on task, controlling impulse behaviors, raising his hand to talk, or relating to the other students. He would do anything possible to avoid work and was highly manipulative, which I realized later may have been a defense mechanism.

His parents agreed that they were aware of the wide discrepancy between his performance and those of his peers. His mother stated again and again that she believed him to be very capable. I doubted her words. I had not seen him perform as a capable student. I decided to look in his cumulative file to check his standardized test scores. His full scale IQ was listed as 75. When I saw that number, I understood why he was having such difficulty and began to modify his curriculum.

I recommended that he be referred to the Student Assistance Team for evaluation. They advised that Daniel be tested and felt that he may qualify for Special Education services. The testing process lasted a few weeks. Each of the four specialists who tested him noted his inability to remain still and focused. The school psychologist came to the classroom and performed several behavioral observations and then a parent meeting was

scheduled with the school psychologist, reading specialist, special education teacher, speech language pathologist, and myself.

At the meeting, the results of Daniel's testing were revealed. To my amazement, he scored at grade level in nearly every area. His IQ scored in the low-average range. The school psychologist explained to his mother that he had many characteristics of a child with Attention Deficit Disorder and that she may want to consider consulting a physician to rule out any possible health issues. Daniel's mother shared that she felt he needed to be retained and has felt that way since he was in Kindergarten. She thought he may "catch up" if he were retained a year. Mrs. Thompson, the school psychologist, said that she felt retaining Daniel would be detrimental to him socially and would not benefit him much academically. Our belief was that he was capable and intelligent enough but was not experiencing success because he could not pay attention. He put forth minimal to no effort and I had yet to discover anything that would motivate him.

His mother was very supportive of me throughout the year and kept in close contact through notes, phone calls, and personal conferences. We worked together to try to help Daniel, but she would not accept that he might have ADD. She expressed the opinion that the public schools had "an agenda to medicate children so they would be easier to teach." She refused to "put him on drugs" and said, "this is just who Daniel is. He's not an 'A' student." She said she wouldn't "put him on drugs just so he can stay in his seat and be an 'A' student." Her comments saddened and discouraged me. Couldn't she see that he had serious problems and needed help? Did she actually believe that the

public schools had an agenda to medicate children so they would be easier to teach? I was appalled by the mere suggestion of it.

January 25, 2000

Today Daniel lied to me (again) several times. He has a lot of trouble telling the truth and is in the habit of making up bizarre stories. Does he actually think I would believe them? He doesn't think before he speaks, so his stories get all twisted up. He took a test paper home when he wasn't supposed to and then lied about it. Daniel's lies become so complicated that he can't even remember where he started. I confronted him about it and took him into the hall to talk. I was so angry and irritated with him that I ripped up his paper. Afterward, I felt really bad about doing that. I just don't understand that kid; he is so weird. I can't believe anything that comes out of his mouth. I called Mom and she said that he tells stories and lies all the time at home. I feel so bad because I have no idea how to reach him. He is so hard to like.

Daniel struggled all year to remain in his seat, focus, and complete homework assignments. I used a series of behavior modifications plans with Daniel and had only partial success. The school psychologist and I became increasingly concerned about him. I knew that he could grasp most of the concepts, but did not show any effort. Why was he so unmotivated? I was puzzled at the thought of a capable child choosing not to succeed. I thought it was because it was too hard for him to concentrate, so he took the easiest route. That is when I reflected back to my own school career and the times that I

had not been motivated to learn, chosen not to be successful, and to take the easiest route. I struggled constantly to understand Daniel and find a way to teach him.

April 3, 2000

Daniel was driving me nuts today. I sent him into the hall to do his work because he wasn't doing it in the classroom and he was copying from his neighbors. I told him that I didn't want to see him back in the room until his Math assignment was complete. I guess he didn't understand that because he came back in SIX times!!! It took all I had not to raise my voice and get angry with him. I was so frustrated having to ask him to do something over and over again and he still doesn't do it. His attention span is so short. The other kids can't figure out why he can't just stay in his seat and do what he's supposed to. They are starting to really notice how different he is and give him a hard time. I hope that doesn't make things worse.

Toward the end of the year, Daniel's mother and I had frequent conversations, in which she asked me repeatedly whether I thought it would be good for him to be retained. Each time I was honest when I said that I could not recommend that for him. I told her that I thought it would isolate him from his peers, damage his self-esteem, and do little for him academically. I didn't feel that she was addressing the true issue, which was his lack of attention.

April 5, 2000

Daniel is frustrating me so much. He is copying his work from people that sit around him and has had several late assignments. He is completely satisfied to take a zero even though I have given him multiple opportunities to make up his work. We had another newspaper quiz today and he didn't even open the newspaper. He guessed on every single question, his answers didn't even make sense. I kept him in from recess and made him look up at least one answer. He looked up only one answer and got a 10%. He is failing nearly everything right now and Mom is seriously considering retaining him. I don't know what to do, I know I'm not doing the right things to help him; he wears me out every day.

Despite my professional judgement, and the recommendation of the school psychologist, Daniel's mother decided to retain him and move him to a school down the street, which is in a different school district. She felt that he would have the opportunity to catch up and mature. I know that Daniel's mother wanted what was best for him and that the decision to retain him was a difficult one for her to make. I also believe that she gave the situation careful consideration and weighed my words heavily; however, I disagreed with her and felt very upset about her decision to retain him. It upset me to know that his needs were not being met and I constantly wondered if I could have done anything more to help him.

Birthday Party

Stephanie Jones had been asking me for two months if I would come to her birthday party, she said that if I came she would even let me ride her horse. I was so flattered that she wanted me to attend. In February I received a beautifully made invitation addressed to “Mr. and Mrs. Saunders” I marked it on my calendar and hoped that my husband would want to go to a ten-year old’s birthday party.

The night of the party, when my husband and I walked in I was greeted by a mob of squealing students. “You came!” Stephanie said, beaming. I looked around the room and saw Hannah, Tyler, Paul, David, Amanda, Kristin, Cynthia, Melinda, Anne and students from the other fourth grade classes. Mrs. Jones, Stephanie’s mother, said that now the party could start because Mrs. Saunders was here; I laughed.

We stayed for pizza and while I ate, David plopped down on my lap. Oh, no! I thought, fourth graders aren’t supposed to sit on their teacher’s laps in front of other people! I was uncomfortable and looked at the adults in the room to see if they had any kind of reaction; they didn’t. Why was I so worried that Mr. and Mrs. Jones would think that this was inappropriate? How would I feel, as a parent, to see a student sit on a teacher’s lap? My emotions toward my students made me vulnerable. I longed to share affection with them and develop close relationships, yet I felt very pressured by others to remain at a comfortable distance. I did not want to be at any distance from my students!

We stayed for cake and the opening of presents; gave hundreds of good-bye hugs and headed for home. As I lay in bed that night, I thought about David sitting on my lap. I knew he loved me and I felt honored that he would sit on my lap like he would his

mother. Why would a student-teacher relationship like this be considered bad or unprofessional? My profession is children!

Recess

Winter melted away and the spring sun burned through the gray clouds. As the temperature began to rise, my class and I developed Spring Fever. We looked longingly out our classroom window as the sun shone brightly and grass turned a vivid shade of green. We have to get out of this classroom! I thought. Fourth graders were only scheduled one twenty-minute recess, but as spring grew nearer I felt that this amount of time was not enough. In the afternoons, we began taking an extra recess. I felt that my students really needed that extra time to run and play. After the first week of extra recesses, other teachers began to come out with their classes. I guess Spring Fever was affecting all the children, not just my class!

I enjoyed recess time as much as they did. It was a time for me to learn about my students. We played soccer together; I always played for the girls' team. When the boys noticed that I was playing for the girls' team some of them decided they would play for the girls' team, too. They told me that they decided "it was important to help the girls out." On days when I had forgotten my "soccer shoes" I was cheerleader on the sidelines.

They usually sidled up next to me as I sat on one of the benches surrounding the playground and bombarded me with questions and stories. "Have you and Mr. Saunders seen any movies lately?" "I like your earrings, Mrs. Saunders, they're pretty." "Did ya

get a haircut, Mrs. Saunders?” “Guess what I did this weekend!” “Did you hear our joke?” “Wanna hear about what my brother did?”

I sat in the grass with my students and we talked about movies, music, and boys. They shared with me which boy they liked and whom they thought was cute; it was usually a sixth grader, but it changed weekly or daily. It felt so good to know that they enjoyed being with me as much as I enjoyed being with them.

When other teachers were out at recess with their classes, I would visit with them about their day and then leave to join my students in a soccer game. There were two times that a particular teacher approached me, wanting to talk, and I was already talking to a group of students. This teacher would shoo the children away and say “Go play.” I wanted to say, “Can’t you see you’re interrupting my conversation with this little person?!?”

Chapter VI. Reflections

My first year of teaching was a series of powerful learning experiences. The memories I have of the events that transpired exist in a jumble of emotions that I find difficult to summarize or categorize. So often, I am unable to find the words to adequately describe the kind of love that my students evoked within me or the anxiety and insecurity that I felt about doing everything for the very first time.

As I reflect upon the events of the year, I recalled the faces of each student and hundreds of meaningful moments shared with them. I remember late nights planning, grading papers, and thinking about my students, long phone calls with parents, headaches, holding hands, colds and the stomach flu, finding my way, losing my patience, receiving hugs, and being told I was the World's Best Teacher.

Ruth Behar's term "vulnerable observer" is one that I would use to describe my first year of teaching. I felt incredibly vulnerable as I shared details about myself, loved students and created close relationships with them, and defined my role as a teacher. I believe that my vulnerabilities as a new teacher affected the way I perceived many of my experiences. I also felt that through the writing of this thesis, I developed a heightened consciousness and understanding of my personal and professional growth.

The themes that I discovered as I reflected upon my year centered upon people and relationships, and the vulnerability of my feelings and reactions toward them. The first leg of my journey into teaching left me feeling proud, worried, guilty, inadequate, alive, passionate, tired, confident, alone, excited, misunderstood, and vulnerable. I feel

that the challenges and successes that I faced my first year will remain fresh in my mind for many years.

I learned that teaching is a physically and emotionally demanding profession.

Investing time and energy into the lives of my students, our classroom, lesson planning, committee obligations, and meetings was exhausting. I soon realized that there was not enough time in the day to do everything I wanted. I felt guilty about not being able to give all my commitments one hundred percent. I learned that time management would be crucial to my success as a first year teacher.

May 8, 2000

I got home at 4:00 yesterday and went to bed an hour later; I was exhausted. It is so hard to be a teacher. My job is never done and I never feel like I'm doing all I can. There are always a hundred more things that I want to do with my students- I feel guilty if I didn't listen to every second of a student's story or give out enough hugs. I don't know if I will ever be satisfied with my performance in this job... I need a nap.

I felt vulnerable about the closeness of the relationship I shared with my students.

Three classes of fourth grade students and teachers gazed upon beautiful mosaics and busts of famous Nebraskans on our field trip to the state capitol, in April. While we listened quietly to the leader of our group, the kids laid their heads on my arm and stood

closely all around me. Many of my female students held my hand as we ascended the giant staircases. As we walked throughout the building I began to notice that the other two fourth grade teachers were not holding their students' hands or standing near them. They were not talking to their students as much as I was either. This was one of the first times that I realized the true impact of the relationship I had with my students. I wondered what the other teachers thought when they saw fourth graders holding their teacher's hand. I worried that they would not understand the depth of the relationship I had with my students. It bothered me to think that they may disapprove of that; however I also felt sad because I knew that they would never experience the feeling of a fourth grade hand resting in theirs.

I had a strong desire to seek the approval of others and avoid conflict.

I have always felt very pressured to please others and put my own needs behind the needs of others. I have compromised my own beliefs and desires, kept opinions to myself, and masked my emotions many times in order to avoid a conflict. At the beginning of the year I struggled with this, but as the year continued I began to realize that I would never be able to please everyone.

It was very difficult for me to handle conflicts with parents and not to take personally the things that people say and do. I felt that through the course of the year I became stronger and learned to handle conflict more effectively and view it in a more positive way.

I shared details about myself with my students.

I felt it was important to show my students that I was a real person who had a life outside of school. I openly talked to them about my family, hobbies, interests, thoughts, and feelings. I believed that this window into my personal life strengthened the bond that I had with my students and made them feel privileged. I was not afraid to share when I had a headache, felt stressed, or had a bad day and used it as an opportunity to be a positive role model and to teach problem solving.

An example of this would be the morning I came in late after my car had run out of gas on the highway. I was stranded for half an hour and walked through mud in my new shoes to get to a phone. When I walked into the classroom, a paraprofessional was covering for me. "I've had a bad morning" I said, "but that doesn't mean the rest of my day will be bad, right?" I went on to explain what had happened and apologized to my students for being late and causing them to worry.

In September, when my wedding pictures and album had been completed, I brought them to school to show my students; they were thrilled. They oohed and aahed at each picture and wanted to know all the details of the wedding. "Can we see the 'kiss the bride' picture?" Stephanie asked. I turned to it and they burst into a chorus of giggling. "Your husband is handsome," Shannon said.

"Thanks, I think so, too!" I replied with a smile.

My husband dropped by occasionally to visit with the class and bring them treats. During our Valentine's Day party he dropped by unexpectedly.

February 14, 2000

During our party Dusty came in with a dozen roses and a balloon for me. He also had a huge plate of heart-shaped cookies for the kids. Four mothers were in the room helping with the party and the students introduced him to the mothers. They were so excited to see him and were tickled to see that he had brought me roses. They began shouting “Kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss!” So I kissed him. They thought that was so funny! Stephanie’s mother said, “Stephanie usually gets grossed out by kissing, but she was cheering the loudest!”

My students were interested in learning about my interests and hobbies. By the end of the year I knew their favorite colors and they knew mine was red; I knew their favorite foods and they knew mine was spaghetti; I knew what they enjoyed doing over the weekends and they knew that I enjoyed watching movies, reading, and shopping. They asked about my thesis and graduate classes and I asked about their soccer tournament. The relationship that I shared with my students relied on open communication. I believed that because of this, my students trusted and respected me and understood my love for them.

Staff support was vital to the success of my first year.

Throughout the successes and trials of my first year, it was a relief to know that I had the support of the teaching staff in my building. I was by far the youngest full-time teacher in a building that was primarily veteran staff. Most of the teachers had children

close to my age and had taught for twenty years or more. I felt lucky to develop friendships with many of them and felt comfortable enough to share my feelings and frustrations about the first year of teaching. They made me feel welcome and at home in my school.

December 7, 1999

Today after school, Karen, my former cooperating teacher, and I talked about my classes. I showed her my portfolio for one of the classes and she asked me about the thesis. I explained it to her and she asked a lot of questions. She said that she was so proud of me, then she started to cry and gave me a big hug. "I feel like you're one of my own," she said. I can't describe how I felt at that moment. It is a wonderful feeling to know that someone genuinely cares for you.

At the beginning of the year, I was proud when some of the teachers came to my room and said, "Everybody is talking about how nice your room looks, so we wanted to come by and check it out." They commented on how much time I had spent on it and said that they knew the kids would love it. One afternoon, another teacher gave me a warm hug and said, "I'm so glad you're here."

November 11, 1999

Everyone is so great and supportive. They treat me like I've been here forever! What a nice feeling. They are always asking how my classes are going. It's so

nice to know that they care. Last week Linda said that she doesn't think of me as a new teacher, she said it feels like I've always been there.

When I got the stomach flu the second week of school, I was very worried and upset about having to get a substitute teacher for my class. One of the primary grade teachers put her hand on my shoulder and said not to worry that she would check in on my class and make sure that everything was running smoothly. After that many of the teachers would ask me, "Are you getting enough sleep?" "Are you taking good care of yourself?"

At lunchtime, they always greeted me enthusiastically and made sure I had a place to sit. We shared recipes, gave our own personal movie reviews, and listened to stories about grandchildren, parents, husbands, and children. When my in-laws were coming for the weekend, I was pressed for time because I had a project due for one of my graduate classes. I mentioned that I wouldn't have time to cook and didn't know what to make for dinner. At the end of the day I found recipes in my mailbox.

My principal showed me his support by coming through my room three to four times a day. Sometimes he would stand and observe, other times he would just smile as he walked through. When he saw me in the halls he would usually stop and talk. It was comforting to know that if I had a problem I could discuss it with him and that he would find a way to help me. He was accessible and let me know that he felt I was capable and talented.

My principal had a good sense of humor and I took every opportunity to tease him. When I student taught, my principal wore a black suit and pumpkin tie for Halloween. As he walked through the second grade, one of the children said to him “I think you’re getting taller!” We all had a good laugh and then my cooperating teacher and I told him, “It must be the black suit, black is slimming, you know!” From then on, whenever I saw him wearing his black suit I would say, “I think you’re getting taller!”

I felt loved and accepted as they laughed at my jokes, listened to my stories, and asked for my advice. They complimented me and made an effort to offer their assistance. The supportive nature of many of my staff members and principal gave me the confidence and strength to grow as a teacher and remain positive about my choice of profession.

Chapter VII. Conclusions

Collaboration was an important aspect of my thesis. Melissa McCarty, Cory Merante, Barbara Schmid and I examined the influence of rites of passage, and critical incidents of first year teachers. After the research at four different school sites was concluded, the four researches came together and explored common and divergent themes that surfaced from our work during the year. Collaborative working through this project was advantageous because we were able to share the challenges of our daily events and we benefited from the perspectives each of us brought to the discussion. This chapter is a reflection based upon the critical incidents and rites of passage that were particularly noteworthy during the 1999-2000 school year in my fourth grade classroom.

Section A. Methodology

After the data was collected over the 1999-2000 school year, it was classified into thematic categories. The resultant themes were analyzed. Special attention was given to how each specifically impacted my perception of my role in the teaching profession. The conclusions were then written from the analyzation.

Section B. CADRE Program

The CADRE Program is a fifteen-month specialized masters program affiliated with the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the MOEC school districts. The program was specifically designed to be completed within the first year of teaching. Applicants are selected based on a letter of recommendation, grade point average, interviews with the

university and school districts, and references. A cohort of approximately twenty-five to thirty teachers are selected and take courses together. Each teacher is assigned a mentor who is affiliated with their specific district. In partial fulfillment for graduation, CADRE teachers are offered the option to complete a portfolio, thesis, or comprehensive exam. The portfolio is the option encouraged by staff and is therefore chosen most frequently by CADRE teachers.

My decision to write a thesis set me apart from the rest of the cohort. The thesis option required course work that contributed to my separation from the rest of the cohort. By the end of the year, I felt isolated from the cohort group and didn't feel that they understood the thesis process or my decision to write one. As a result, I looked to three other CADRE students who had chosen to do a thesis for support and collegiality.

Section C. Themes

As I examined my data and compared the year's experiences, four themes emerged. As a first year teacher, I felt that certain elements played a pivotal role in my decision to remain in the profession. As in the Bernard et.al., (1999) thesis trilogy, I have also used italics to identify some of my strongest conclusions.

1. Relationship with my administrator

The relationship I had with my administrator played a critical role in the experience of my first year as a teacher. He was supportive of my work and was often present in my classroom. He talked with me regularly and made himself available for

questions. I agree with Brock and Grady in their statement, “The expectations of the beginning teachers illustrate that principals are central to the successful socialization and first-year induction of beginning teachers (180).

Brock and Grady (1998) state, “Beginning teachers identify the school principal as a key source of support and guidance” (182). Hope (1999) adds, “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). When I collaborated with the three other thesis writers, I discovered that one of the three researchers did not experience support from the principal and this influenced the decision to leave the school.

2. Relationships with staff members

Staff members offered me both personal and professional support. They were welcoming, friendly, and caring, which I believe was the main factor in my decision to stay in the teaching profession and specifically, within my same building. The staff made me immediately feel a part of “the team.” As mentioned in the review of the related literature, collegiality is a major component for teacher retention (Metropolitan Life 1986; Karge 1993). In the article, Walling alluded to the fact that collegiality can decrease attrition rates and “have a positive impact on the overall school culture (qtd. in Hope 55).” My fellow thesis writers all experienced some degree of staff support, some

more than others, and agreed that their interactions with faculty and staff dramatically influenced their feelings of whether to remain within their school building.

3. Relationships with students

The relationships I shared with my students was a critical theme throughout my thesis and those of my thesis writing colleagues. I worked diligently to create a caring classroom community and to make a personal connection with my students. I made an effort to be involved in their lives both in and out of school attending birthday parties, sponsoring extra-curricular activities, and hosting a slumber party. In our discussions, the other thesis writers and myself all agreed that the relationships we shared with our students was, by far, the most positive aspect of our first year.

4. Relationships with parents

Parents played a substantial role in my first year as a teacher. Many of my students' parents were eager to be involved in their child's education and supported my efforts in the classroom; however, when they did not, it made my job considerably more difficult.

I felt fortunate to have had the opportunity to develop positive relationships with many parents and work closely with them as partners in their child's education. I felt that the support and encouragement I received from parents was extremely valuable.

Unfortunately, two of my fellow researchers, Merante and McCarty, had little to no support from their student's parents. Most of their students' parents were uninterested in becoming involved in their child's education.

Section D. Conclusion

The 1999 thesis trilogy findings and my findings are similar. The discoveries that I made were based on a replication of that study. I felt it necessary to first state the conclusions made by Bernard et. al., (1999):

Though we touched on hundreds of issues throughout the writing of all three theses, we were able to identify just one theme as the most meaningful. Our research process has allowed us an overwhelming realization that, despite all the roles each of us had as first year teachers and full-time graduate students, the students we taught, as well as our relationships with them, were the most important things to us. Our perceptions and explorations as first year teachers in our individual school settings revolved around that one thing, our students. We believe this conclusion has given some insight to first year teachers in any school setting.

My major conclusions were that the support and encouragement of my administrator and staff were the two major factors that influenced my decision to remain at my school.

My students were a positive influence that greatly affected me and played a significant role in my teaching. The personal relationships that I shared with them was the most positive aspect of my year. I hope that the critical incidents and rites of passages I experienced can add to the understanding of the perceptions of first year teachers.

Section E. Research Question

How do critical incidents in the classroom, rites of passage of the first year of teaching and the unique culture of the school shape teachers' perceptions during their first year of teaching?

Because this is a continuation of the research done by the 1999 thesis trilogy colleagues, (Bernard, et. al. 1999) I have an interest in reading further studies of this nature. I now have a better understanding of how, along with school culture, rites of passage and critical incidents can shape a teacher's perceptions during his/her first year of teaching. However, I believe that further study into this research may provide insights into new teacher attrition as well as overall attitudes about the educational system and teaching in general.

Section F. Recommendations for Further Study

1. The First Footsteps series addresses vulnerable observation from teachers who are 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, a non-CADRE teacher could bring a unique outlook into this research.
2. Three teachers of the same grade level, with similar students, in the same district and school could engage in a similar study. The results would rely only on the perceptions of the teachers involved. Through my readings I was unable to discover any studies in which teachers were the sole variables. The First Footsteps series involved groups of teachers working with students of various ages and ability levels.
3. I believe the perception of rural teachers compared to those of urban teachers is different. Studying rural teachers might lead different conclusions about attrition. CADRE teachers are involved in MOEC which encompass urban and suburban schools only. The research found on attrition rates did not specify the population of the schools nor the districts in which teachers taught.
4. Additional questions that could add to the knowledge about first year teacher attrition are: Is orientation to the community a factor for first year teachers who are unfamiliar

to the area in which they are about to teach? What are the perceptions of teachers who understand the community compared/contrasted to teachers who do not?

5. Exploring attrition rates of first year teachers who begin their careers later in life (nontraditional) may be another area of research that could be addressed. Are these teachers more likely to leave or stay in the profession? What *reasons* for leaving or staying do nontraditional teachers and traditional teachers give? Are they comparable?

6. A comparative study between the 1999 thesis trilogy and mine may give insights to attrition. Because the two groups have given so much attention to details and data collection, one may gain conclusions as to specific reasons why teachers choose to leave or stay in the profession.

References

- Abraham, L. K. (1997). Where Crowded Humanity Suffers and Sickens: The Banes Family and their Neighborhood. In Henderson, G.H., King, N.M., Strauss, R.P., Estroff, S.E., Churchill, L.R. (Eds.), *The Social Medicine Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Banks, J.A., & Banks, C.A. (Eds.) (1997). *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*. (3rd ed.) Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Barfield. (1997). *The Dictionary of Anthropology*. New York: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Barker, R.G., & Wright, H. F. (1966). *One Boy's Day: A Specimen Record of Behavior*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books.
- Behar, R. (1996). *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- 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.
- Bohannan, P. & Glazer, M. (1973). *High Points in Anthropology*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- Branch, W., Pels, R.J., Lawrence, R.S., & Arky, R. (1997). Becoming a Doctor: Critical Incident Reports from Third-Year Medical Students. In Henderson, G.H., King, N.M., Strauss, R.P., Estroff, S.E., Churchill, L.R. (Eds.), *The Social Medicine Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Brock, B. L. & Grady, M. L. (1998, January/February). Beginning Teacher Induction Programs: The Role of the Principal. *The Clearing House*, 179-183.
- CADRE Project Handbook 1999-2000. (1999). Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska at Omaha, College of Education.
- 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.
- Crane, J.G., & Angrosino, M.V. (1974). *Field Projects in Anthropology: A Student Handbook*. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). The quality of teaching matters most. *Journal of Staff Development*, 18, 38-41.
- Elsasser, N., MacKenzie, K. and Tixier y Vigil, Y. (1980). *Las Mujeres: Conversations from a Spanish Community*. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press.
- Friend, M., & Cook, L. (1996). *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals*. (Rev. ed.). White Plains, New York: Longman Publishers.
- Gerson, M. (1997). *In the Classroom: Dispatches from an Urban Inner-City School that Works*. New York: The Free Press.
- Herrigel, E. (1953). *Zen in the Art of Archery*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Hollingshead, A.B. (1949). *Elmtown's Youth*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hope, Warren C. (1999, September/October). Principals' Orientation and Induction Activities as Factors in Teacher Retention. *The Clearing House*, 73, 54-56.
- Karge, B.D. 1993. Beginning Teachers: In danger of attrition. Paper presented at the

- annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. National Center for Education Statistics, Atlanta, Georgia.
- Keith, "Rite of passage", *World Book Online*, http://www.worldbookonline.com/na/ar/fs/ar_470550.htm (15 January 2000).
- Kidder, J.T. (1989). *Among Schoolchildren*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Kohl, H. (1994). *"I Won't Learn from You" and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment*. New York: The New Press.
- Lee, R.W. (1994, April). Perceptions of a Beginning Teacher: Exploring Subjective Reality. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. New Orleans, Louisiana. Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Marlow, L., Inman, S. & Betancourt-Smith, M. (1997, March/April). Beginning Teachers: Are They Still Leaving the Profession? *The Clearing House*, 70, 211-214.
- Mead, M. (1965). *And Keep Your Powder Dry*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
- Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary 10th Edition*. (1996). Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam Webster Inc.
- Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Survey, 1986. Former teachers in America. New York: Louis Harris and Associates.
- Mitchell, C.T. (1995). *A Portrait of Fictive Kinship of African American Students in Two Secondary Science Classrooms*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of

Nebraska-Lincoln.

O'Brien, T. (1990). *The Things They Carried*. New York: Random House.

Spindler, G.D. (1982). *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling: Educational Anthropology in Action*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Spradley, J.P. (1979). *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Spradley, J.P. (1980). *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

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.

Taylor, H., Leitman, R., Barnett, S. (1992). *The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher*. Louis Harris and Associates, Inc.

Turow, S. (1977). *One L: The Turbulent True Story of a First Year at Harvard Law School*. New York: Putnam.

Ward, C. (1990). *The Child in the City* (Rev. ed.). London: Bedford Square Press.

Weiss, M. E. (1999). Perceived workplace conditions and first-year teachers' morale, career choice commitment, and planned retention: a secondary analysis. *Teaching and teacher Education, 15*, 861-879.

Wirth (1938, July). Urbanism as a Way of Life. *American Journal of Sociology, 44*, 9. In

Smith, M. (1979). *The City and Social Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Wolcott, H.F. (1973). *The Man in the Principal's Office: An Ethnography*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.