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A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of a Suburban Elementary School During the First Year of Teaching

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by

Stacy A. Stewart

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First Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of a Suburban Elementary School During the First Year of Teaching.

Stacy A. Stewart, MA
University of Nebraska, 1999

Advisor: Dr. Eugene Freund

This thesis is part of a trilogy, which examined the perceptions, and explorations of three first year teachers. The educational setting of this piece of the trilogy looks specifically at a suburban elementary school. The primary form of data collection was journaling by the investigator. Journaling allowed the investigator to share emotion, feeling, and insight and document the day-to-day events that occurred during the first year of teaching. The second form of data collection used in this study was informal interviews. These interviews were conducted involving individuals within the school community.

After comparing and contrasting the many themes that the trilogy discovered a collaborative chapter was written to elaborate on these findings. Although there were five sub themes, one main theme seemed to be overwhelmingly apparent. All three teachers in the trilogy described a passion for teaching and a love for their students as being the most evident theme throughout their first year of teaching. Other commonalties were: aspiring to be different, creating personal relationships with students, personal growth as a result of the relationships with students, questioning professional roles, and an obsession with teaching. In order to best comprehend the complexity of these findings the investigator recommends that you refer to the following pieces of the trilogy.

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Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of an Urban Middle School During the First Year of Teaching.* Unpublished master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha.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*First Footsteps: A Teacher's Perceptions and Explorations of an Urban High School During the First Year of Teaching.* Unpublished master's thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Acknowledgements

This thesis and my first year of teaching would
not have been possible without the wisdom and guidance of
Dr. Gene Freund, my thesis advisor.

I am grateful for the support and encouragement from
my friends and partners in this trilogy
Jenn Bernard and J.P. Caruso.

My family has always given me their unconditional love and the experiences
in life that have shaped me into the person and teacher I am today.

My first classroom of students gave me the inspiration
to be the best teacher that I can be.
They will be forever in my heart.

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Preface

My first year of teaching has been a whirlwind. It seems like only yesterday I was stopping by the local teacher store to stock up on markers, crayons, and bulletin board sets. It was hard not to dream about what my classroom and students would be like. I have learned so much through this adventure of my first year of teaching. My classroom experiences, graduate studies, and the thesis process have been a tremendous growth opportunity for me.

I do not remember why or what made me walk out into the hall the afternoon the thesis process was introduced to our class. I do know my classmates thought I was "just going to the bathroom." They had no idea that I was interested in writing a thesis. I know that, like me, they had probably doubted my abilities as a writer, and this decision also took them by surprise. There was something inside of me that wanted to prove to everyone that I could do it. Most importantly, I needed to prove it to myself. It is my hope to convey to the reader the feelings and perceptions that were my guide on this emotional roller coaster through my first year of teaching.

I consider this year my "first year" of teaching. However, I had a prior teaching experience. I taught half days for a semester as a part time employee. It was in a first grade classroom. Although this time in the classroom provided me with some background into teaching, this year was really everything that my first year could be.

On the first day of school I walked into my classroom and was confronted with nineteen shining faces ready to learn, love, and experience. I knew from that moment that

we were going to go through this adventure together. After all, being first graders, it was their first time being at school all day, every day. I was learning right along with them. I believe that is one of the things that made our relationship so unique. We depended on each other from the very beginning.

Working as partners on a collaborative trilogy has allowed me to develop a meaningful relationship between my peers in this project and our professor Dr. Gene Freund. I have grown to love them as part of my family. Our experiences together have been invaluable. Each of them has helped to give me the courage to take risks, and were there to support me when I became discouraged. I also appreciate the guidance from Dr. Yvonne Tixier y Vigil as well as my CADRE mentor and friend Mary Knight. I hope I am the kind of teacher that they have been for me. Because of them, I have experienced the true meaning of learning.

The time order sequence and the identities in the following sections of this thesis have deliberately been changed to protect the individuals involved.

Chapter I. Introduction

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

The researchers involved in this trilogy thesis represent educators at the
elementary, middle, and high school levels in the Omaha Public School and Papillion-
LaVista Public School districts. They are: Jennifer Bernard who taught eighth grade
Language Arts and Literature at Marrs Middle School, J.P. Caruso, who taught history
and economics at Omaha South High School and Stacy Stewart, who taught 1st grade at
Papillion- LaVista Public Schools in Papillion, Nebraska.

Geographically, all three beginning teachers teach on the
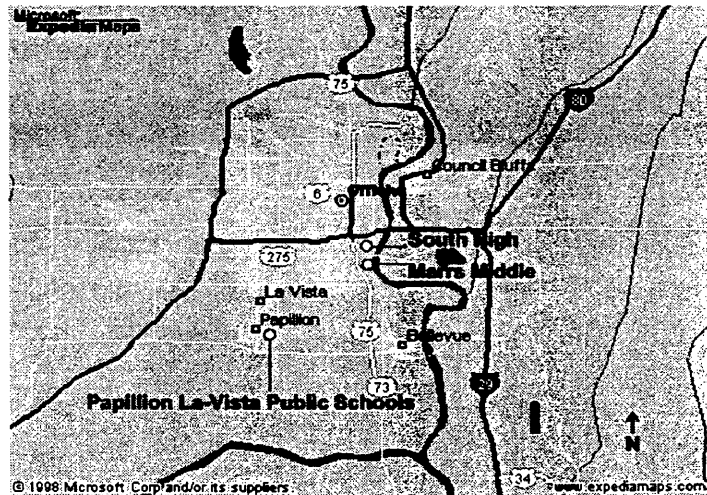
south side of the Omaha Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). The Omaha Metropolitan

area includes the suburbs of the city of Omaha and Council Bluffs, Iowa, immediately

across the Missouri River.

While all three schools are in the same geographical area, the trilogy explores the

differences as well as similarities in each educational setting. Every school exists within

its own unique milieu. The milieu consists of students who bring their own individual

cultures and backgrounds to the classrooms, the geographical context in which these

students live, and their socioeconomic background.

Each school also exists within its own educational context. The professionals

within each building: administrators, classroom teachers, and building staff, contribute to

the environment of the individual building. Also important to the life space of each

school are the supporting agents in the community, such as church, youth organizations,

area businesses, military institutions related to Offutt Air Force Base, and other

community agencies.

Section A. Purpose of the Study

Behar (1996) defines a vulnerable observer as a researcher who allows his or her

own reactions and emotions to enter into and become part of their research. Therefore,

the purpose of this study is to explore the total school milieu as perceived by the first year

teacher in this study, who is, admittedly, a "vulnerable observer." The teachers as the

primary investigators in the research share their emotions, feelings, insights, and

perceptions through their own immersion in the school setting. This experience is presented in the first person as advocated by Behar (1996) in The Vulnerable Observer.

Section B. Methodology

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

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

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

Part C. Definition of Terms

CADRE: The Career Advancement and Development for Recruits and Experienced

Teachers (CADRE) project is a Graduate Induction Program administered by the

University of Nebraska at Omaha and the school districts of the Metropolitan Omaha

Educational Consortium (MOEC). Utilizing a mentor/mentee approach, CADRE teachers

complete a yearlong teaching assignment while simultaneously completing a specialized

master's degree program of study.

Collaboration: Friend and Cook (1996) define collaboration as a style for direct

interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision

making as we work toward a common goal.

Critical Incident: In "Becoming a Doctor: Critical-Incident Reports from Third-Year

Medical Students," Branch, et al. in Henderson (1997) describe critical incidents as

"short narratives of events judged to be particularly meaningful by participants in the

events" (p. 223). We use the same definition and apply it to our experiences in the

classroom and school community.

Culture: Culture "consists of the shared beliefs, symbols, and interpretations within a

human group" (Banks & Banks, 1997, p. 8).

Ethnography: As defined by Spradley (1979) is "the work of describing a culture. The

essential core of this activity aims to understand another way of life from the native point

of view" (p. 3) Spradley says, further, "Rather than *studying people*, ethnography means

learning from people" (p. 3) For purposes of this study these definitions will be applied

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

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

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

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

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

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

Point of Reference: Ogbu (1993) refers to the "cultural frame of reference" of a learner as based on refugee, immigrant or migrant status, language, minority status, and cultural differences. For purposes of this thesis, we have created the term "point of reference" to refer to each of our own life experiences and backgrounds.

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

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

Part D. The Problem

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

Section E. Research Question

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

Section F. Summary

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

Section G. Limitations of the Study

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

showing that the very things which limit our research.were central to our reasons for

actually doing the research.

Chapter II. Review of Related Literature

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The writing style of this article is significant to our study because we want readers to feel a sense of understanding with the issues that are being faced by the first year teacher every day. It is our hope that our readers will be able to develop a sense of what the first year of teaching in our specific environment entails, through the eyes of the observer.

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

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

As vulnerable observers, our own thoughts and emotions undoubtedly enter into the research in a variety of ways, but one focus is to tell others' stories accurately. In Las

Mujeres: Conversations from a Spanish Community (1980), the authors take care to allow the women studied to speak to the reader. The women were selected and interviewed by the researchers, but their stories are told in their own words. They relate memories of their lives, families, communities, jobs, education, and their perception of their place in society as women and as Hispanas. The voices of these women speak for them rather than do the researchers' interpretations of their voices. In each of our theses, we strive to let those we work with speak in their own words by using dialogue obtained from conversation and informal interviews.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter III. Point of Reference

When I think about the person I am today and consequently the teacher that I am becoming, I am forced to consider the circumstances that have brought me to this place in my life. Newly graduated from an educational institution and thrust into "adulthood", I am now responsible for the lives of nineteen young children. This almost overwhelming adult responsibility forces me to continue to search for who I am as a person and a teacher.

I believe that I was born to be a teacher. So much of who I am personally describes the kind of teacher that I am. My parents must have also perceived that I was a natural teacher for they once inscribed in a book they gave me, "we know you'll be a gifted teacher of the young and old." I value my formal educational experiences from the university as well as my instinctual love and knowledge of children. Certainly, getting a degree in education from the university provided me with knowledge about theories of learning, child development, and methods of teaching, but that is only part of what it takes to be a good teacher. Teaching as a vocation is continuous.

On the playground, in the bathroom, sitting on the floor, waiting in line, every moment in the day is a teachable moment for me in my role as an elementary teacher. No one can teach you how to empathize with a five-year-old who tells you "my mom told me last night that she is divorcing my dad in four days," or how to clean up vomit without causing the other children to go totally ballistic. I did not learn how to handle these types of situations at the university. I know what to do in these situations because of who I am as a person and a teacher.

Section A. Childhood

As I was teaching, I often recalled images of my own childhood. I wanted to be the kind of teacher that I considered important for all children to have in their lives. A good influence who imparts the values of society; a mature adult who provides stability, respect, love, security, and kindness. I valued the personal relationships that were being fostered among the students and myself as well as the relationships between students.

My experiences are related directly to being raised in a military family. I have been called a "military brat" more than once. What does that mean? My dad was in the Air Force for six years before he went to Officer Training School. During these times, my parents pinched pennies, much like I am doing now. The difference was they had a young child to feed and my mother was not employed. The military offered good benefits and covered all medical and housing expenses. My mom was not unlike most other military spouses. It was rare that a mother worked outside of the home. I remember my mom attended socials, teas, and benefits that were hosted by the spouses' organizations along with all of the other mothers in the neighborhood, but her first priority was being at home for my sister and I.

Many of the years that my dad was on active duty in the military we lived in base housing. We did not own a house of our own until I was a junior in high school. Living on base I was always surrounded by other children whose parents were either enlisted personnel or officers and who came from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds. Because of the fact that I had grown up with people of so many diverse backgrounds, I

assumed we all lived somewhat the same lives, and shared the same values. We were all part of one big family-the military family.

Section B. Comparisons between students and myself

I know that not all of my students have been fortunate enough to have the same experiences that I have had. For example, Johnny has had a rough life. He has seen his uncle get arrested by the police on drug charges. One day he shared with the class, "My Uncle Ramon got the police called on him for pushing around my Auntie Shelly." It is incomprehensible to me that a six-year-old has seen all that he has in his short life. In conversations that I had with Johnny's mother, she expressed that she felt guilty for the negative experiences that he has had with family members. She shared, "My husband and I wanted to move to Nebraska to get away from all of the bad things that Johnny was experiencing from my family. They (family) are pretty messed up; Johnny was picking up what was going on around him. We had to get out of there before it was too late." Life was different for Johnny than it was for me. I did not even know if I could relate to him. There was something so strong inside of me that wanted to have a common bond with him. I wanted to be able to tell him that I understood and that everything would be fine. I came from a different world, yet I felt the need to have experienced his kind of pain and disappointment. I knew that all I could do was help to make him feel safe and know that while he was at school I would take care of him.

Unlike some of my students, I grew up with a sense of safety and security at home because my parents provided that for my sister and me. We were assured that our parents

would raise us to the best of their ability and we knew that our parents loved and cared for us. Finances never seemed to be a problem and I never knew what it was like to be deprived of something. This was not the case for some of my kids at school. Free lunches were provided for those children whose families fell below the federally determined poverty line. It was not uncommon to hear, "I get to eat free lunch at school." "I don't ever have to pay."

Besides that sense of financial security, a typical military neighborhood also provided me with rich cultural experiences. I remember my best friend Doug, whose mom was from Korea and married to a pilot in the Air Force. She brought over spring rolls for us to eat, or had some interesting food for me to try like kimchi, or seaweed. We also lived next door to the Goss', our English neighbors, whose dad worked on the base as part of the Royal Air Force branch of service. When we went to their home, they would share tea and cookies. Not only did I have friends and neighbors with diverse backgrounds, but I was also able to absorb some of their cultures through friendships. I attempted to expose my students to a variety of diverse experiences.

A sense of belonging to a family, both my immediate and the military family, provided me with stability. Some of the children in my class lacked stability in some way. In the classroom, it is important that I make the children feel safe and secure in their environment. I invest a great deal of time, love, and energy into my relationships with the kids and I want them to know how much they are loved, respected and cared about. When they are able to take risks in their own learning and develop positive relationships with

others through trust and good communication, I will have succeeded at my most difficult task as a teacher.

Respect, manners, and good social skills were another major part of my upbringing. Whenever I tell someone I am from a military family, they seem to automatically assume my house was like boot camp. They think that my father was the disciplinarian. They believe "yes ma'am" and "yes sir" were the first words out of my mouth. They believe I was scared of my dad. And everyone thinks he wore the pants in the family. To some degree, this is true. My dad made the major decisions in our house; most of them revolved around his career. Some of those decisions were difficult on the family. Our family's best interest took precedence, even if it meant being separated, so my sister could graduate from the only high school she knew. Decisions such as those were never made lightly. Our small family was separated by thousands of miles when my dad was assigned to a base in Greece.

We were raised with respect, guidance, and love by both of our parents. Granted, my sister and I do say ma'am and sir occasionally, and my dad still uses those terms to show respect for others, especially his elders. Manners and good social skills were taught through modeling in our home. My parents paid special attention to the way we interacted with others. We learned early to say, "excuse me", "please" and "thank-you", and we always asked to be excused from the table at dinnertime. Those are the same skills I required and modeled for my students. A parent said to me at the beginning of the year, "Miss Stewart, this class is so well mannered." I think I must have beamed with pride. I remember answering her by saying, "Most of that credit is due to their parents,

but I am proud of the way they use their manners in school. One thing that is hard for me to handle is a child who does not use their manners." I knew all along that I could not be fully responsible for instilling the importance of manners, but I felt that I nurtured the seed that had been planted and set high expectations for behavior which I believe my students respect.

Growing up in the military provided me with a wealth of different experiences. One of the most memorable is the exposure I had to foreign languages and cultures. Meeting people who spoke different languages and picking up some of those languages myself certainly influenced what I want to expose to my students.

Separation was a fact of life in the military. It was that knowledge of the feelings caused by separation that helped me relate to many of my students' feelings of loss and loneliness. When my students were having a rough week, I tried to remember to ask them about what was going on at home. I remember when my dad would leave for even short amounts of time, things were drastically different at our house. We did not follow the schedule and routine that we were familiar with on a daily basis. Our lives were changed until my dad returned. I had many conversations with Jessie about her dad going off to the desert on a military assignment. I related with her experiences. My heart went out to her when she talked to the point of tears. I saw so much of myself in her. I often wondered if she also had difficulty saying good-bye. It is not something that I do well.

Realizing how much my parents were able to do for us, I sometimes feel like a spoiled brat. I did have opportunities being a "military dependent" as we are called. I was able to travel and see other countries. I have seen the Netherlands and France by

ferryboat and visited Scotland, Wales, and most of England. I have traveled to many parts of the United States either while moving to a new home or just cross-country driving, to sightsee. We rarely had the money to go on vacations, but every couple of years we visited our grandparents.

While I appreciate the opportunities I had, I still remember all of the times that I felt cheated as a child. I thought I had been given the curse of never being able to keep friends for very long because I would just have to move. I remember coming to Omaha, when I was in the sixth grade. It was then that I had finally made contact with someone who I had been friends with when I was six years old. I can honestly say I never thought that the day would come when I would run into someone from my childhood. Long term friendships were few and far between because military families are frequently transferred and it was hard to keep in touch. It was a lot like living my life always being the "new girl." I had to develop friendships quickly, and adapt to the changes in my environment to survive.

The children at Papillion Elementary are pretty much like me. The children came to school looking like the average middle class first grader. Most of them are involved in some type of extra curricular sport and/or community activities. They shop at garage sales and live in apartments and small houses, all of which surround the neighborhood. Most of the parents of my students are just like my own parents, some are military with similar life experiences.

Section C. Education

My interests in the field of education and my own school experiences do not seem that out of the ordinary in our family. My mom and dad both went to college with the intention of becoming teachers, however, neither became educators. My mom decided during her sophomore year of college to quit and marry my dad. My dad completed his student teaching experience, but decided that kids were "just not what they used to be."

Although, they did not become teachers, both of my parents were good role models. They always stressed the importance of school and all its benefits. When I was growing up, my dad was completing college courses, and my sister and I were provided many opportunities to see him read and study for his military classes as well as his university courses so that he could receive his Masters' Degree. We also saw my mom take classes, learn to quilt, make crafts, decorate cakes, and become a Red Cross disaster volunteer. Education was valued in our home. It was nurtured through formal and informal learning experiences. My parents valued formal school learning and were always a part of our education. Whether helping me with my homework by practicing math facts or spelling lists or teaching us something new about a country we visited, my mom and dad were constantly a driving force behind my educational experiences. I remember as a kid thinking about how smart my dad was. He always had stacks of books, yellow highlighters, and a variety of legal pads with volumes of information scribbled all over them. It is no wonder that at an early age I decided I wanted to be a teacher.

I believe that teaching was my calling. I wrote as early as six years old in my

<u>All About Me</u> book, that I wanted to be a teacher. I practiced by playing school every day. I was a good student in grade school and in high school. However, I remember receiving my first sad face sticker in Kindergarten. I was devastated and sure that my parents were going to be disappointed in me. I am confident it was not meant to cause so much commotion, but it had an impact on my life, for I still remember the incident. High school was different; my social life took precedence over my studies. I still thought that grades were important, but I chose to focus on becoming captain of the cheerleaders or an officer in a school organization. I did not graduate from high school with honors; however, I was an above average student and was proud to brag of my other achievements. I attended college in Kearney, Nebraska, and got my degree in Elementary Education and Early Childhood.

Being a teacher is more than I ever thought it would be. It is exhilarating, yet exhausting and worth every minute of my time. I truly believe that I can make a difference, no matter how small. Perhaps with a word of encouragement for that student who tends to be a loner, or notes home to parents about an important achievement. Whatever it means-teaching must be my calling.

Chapter IV. School Setting

Section A. Description of Drive to School

I am usually lucky to make it out of my house on time in the morning. It never

fails. I always mean to wake up early to go to the gym, but I cannot help but hit the

snooze button when the alarm sounds at 5:30a.m. I have to give myself that pep talk in

order to make it out of bed every morning. Finally, after a stress relieving workout and a

quick shower, I am energized enough to get ready for school in about thirty minutes.

The following description was one particular drive I took to school. It is

representative of the drive I made everyday: It is now 7:15 a.m. and I still need to pack

my lunch and throw a few more items into my suitcase (the extremely heavy bag I carry

with all of the teacher paraphernalia imaginable.) I have all of the essentials in my bag.

There are magazine articles to share with my special education teaching partner and a

neon green pencil case that has a hole in the side from being crammed with pens, pencils,

markers and even a ruler and paintbrush. I also have a lesson plan book, a stack of

student journals, notes from my students, and of course some candy treats in the bottom

just in case. It is a wonder I do not have back problems from toting all of those items

back and forth from school every day.

As I leave my house, I am on autopilot. I do not hesitate on which route to take to

school. I believe I could get to the front door of my school blindfolded as a result of

driving there at least two times a day, and a minimum of once over the weekend. I take a

back route to avoid the hustle and bustle of 90th Street, the main street by my home. It is a

short drive from my apartment to Grant Street where I continue to take the unsalted, new

pavement of 115th Street. As I drive this route, I often wonder if I will ever live in a house as big as the ones on the golf course. There are many new homes in that area and also ground being broken for new ones. The area is becoming swallowed by growth west of 115th Street. The gravel road I traveled at the beginning of the year has now been paved. I am not the only driver who knows the secret to avoiding the traffic and the many red lights along 90th. I turn onto 10th Street, which winds its way up passed the Omaha Public Power District Papillion branch, and also a fairly new Super Target store. As I approach the light at 10th Street and 90th, I glance across the street to read the message on the marquis of the Catholic church on the corner. Many of my students of the Catholic faith attend that church service every Sunday as well as Sunday school classes. I make my way onto 90th Street, which soon will be turning into the main thoroughfare in Papillion.

While driving, I notice small businesses to the right and to the left. A small family-owned bakery whose sign reads "Open Saturday and Sunday only." Some of the local area businesses are located in what used to be small homes; a travel agent, a small Baptist church, and a collectibles gift shop. As I continue down the street I am careful to mind the speed limit that has drastically dropped from 40 to 25 mph. This signifies a clash between the new and the old.

The city council building is located at the top of the hill before I ascend down the street. It is the original building that was used as the courthouse. If I look carefully through the crevices between the houses and the buildings, I can see the last one room schoolhouse in Sarpy County. It was moved into town from where it used to be at 115th and Hilton. The community library is on the east side of the street. It is a modern building

that has been newly remodeled. While it is still a rather small facility, it seems to be functional for the size of the community. A fast food restaurant and a family bar and grill stand side by side. A dentist's office and the fire station are tucked behind these establishments. There are a number of other small businesses along the well-traveled road, like the hardware store where this year some local teenagers bought paraphernalia to attempt to make explosives. At one time, this main road was at the heart of the small town.

A Conoco station, a car dealership, Dairy Queen (every small Midwestern town has one), and Junior High are visible from this intersection approximately one mile from my school. There are a variety of older homes on both sides of the street. The school administrative building sits adjacent to the Junior High School. From experience, I know better than to be driving in the inside lane. The parents dropping off their junior high children are barely moving in that lane, attempting to make a left hand turn into the Junior High.

A sea of big, yellow, buses surround me as I sit stopped at the corner of 3rd Avenue and Birch. I glance at the clock on my dashboard. I am still ahead of schedule. I inch by the buses in the right hand lane, knowing I have about four more minutes to drive until I reach my school. I can see the top of the county jail building in plain view, only about one block east from the school where I teach. I turn by the Texaco station and pass an orthodontist, an insurance company, a florist, and a dry cleaning business. To my left there are apartments where a couple of my students live. On the right, Shady Pines, a retirement community that our class visited at holiday time. As I begin to signal into the

parking lot, I recognize street names as being the addresses of my kids. Many of my first graders live within walking distance to the school. I slowly approach the yellow sign that indicates school crossing and the speed limit, 15, when children are present. The playground looks lonely without the children.

It is a large playground. It is equipped with a soccer field and a baseball field as well as basketball hoops and a blacktop area. There are monkey bars, a jungle gym, swings, and two wooden play sets with slides and poles and other adaptations

It is now 7:30a.m. and parents are dropping their children near the gym door where the before and after school program is held. I am thinking at least the kids being dropped off now have had some time to sleep in; some of the children have been here since they opened the doors at 6:00 a.m. There are probably between six and ten cars already in the parking lot. The early birds have already arrived.

I pull into my "designated" parking spot with my radio blaring, singing the latest number one hit at the top of my lungs. I am dreading carrying all of my belongings into the school. I sling my purse, "teacher suitcase," and lunch over my shoulder. As I do that, I glance at my school. I notice its dark brick and lack of windows.

During my research, I had the opportunity to visit with an architect, Catherine McGuire (personal communication, May 22, 1999), who shared her expertise of the style and architectural appearance of my school. It is a flat building with a low ceiling and, according to McGuire, is difficult to classify as any particular architectural style. She said it was most representative of the International style, which is informal. In fact, even the entrance of the building is informal. There are not any specific markings that would

suggest architecturally that it is a school building other than the name on the front. The school was built in the late 1960's and was intended to be "functional." McGuire felt there was not a sense of permanence to the building even though it was built of brick. And the lack of natural light did not suggest that "it was a place of academic learning."

As I listened to her talk about the building, I was attempting to make connections between the appearance of the building and the way I believed the tone of the school related to one another. I understood what McGuire was saying when she explained there was a "lack of correlation between the outside environment and the school." It seemed as if the school existed entirely for the purpose to confine student learning within the walls. I could relate that to my own feelings of separation between the outside world and the world in which I was living inside of the school.

Section B. Description of Students

First grade was the year that I decided I wanted to be a teacher, a mother, and have long hair. It was the year that I met one of my dearest friends with whom I am still in close contact. Yet, many of my elementary school memories are faded remembrances of my childhood. I never had the chance to grow up with a particular set of friends; the kind of friends that you attend preschool through sixth grade with. I was always envious of those special friendships.

I spent the first six years of my elementary school experience attending four different schools. The friends I made while in elementary school are long lost. The

cyclical whirlwind of military life allowed me to keep in contact with only a few of those lost friends; yet, many relationships were never rekindled.

The similarities between the school community, where I worked, and my own childhood school memories were remarkable. Every morning that I walked into my building and noticed students that looked just like me at that young age. Many families carpooled with other families and trusted neighbors. The camaraderie formed between families is like a "secret club," of which members are considered to be privileged. I could relate to the students who attended my school. I understood what it was like to be the new kid on the block. I sympathized with the fact that the friendships made as a young child will most likely be long forgotten as an adult. I encouraged all of my students to make everyone feel like a valuable member of our classroom community. I stressed the importance of social skills and getting to know each other. All of these are lessons that I have learned being from a military family. I believe that they are life long lessons that are important for all children to know.

This community is mostly made up of children from families who are middle class. Most of the students live close to the school, either in apartments or houses in the neighborhood. The neighborhood houses are approximately twenty to twenty-five years old. Many families in the neighborhood own houses and there are a number of houses that are rented.

It is a community where most often, both parents are employed. There are few parents that stay at home during the day. The school has its share of military children, although, as far as district numbers go, we only rank third most populated with military

children. Most of the military dependents are from enlisted families. The majority of parents in our school community have a high school degree and many have additional college or some other educational background. In my classroom alone, I have two parents who are self-employed and/or run small businesses. With the number of working parents, the after school program has approximately seventy-five children on a daily basis, not including those children who attend when school is not in regular session. Other children attend alternative after school programs.

There are many parents in the school building on a daily basis. Often you can find volunteers in the library and in the office as well as in individual classrooms. The Parent Teacher Organization is also a strong force in including families in the school and its programs.

A large number of the families at my school are involved in the community through church, sports, and other extra curricular activities. Some families are also involved through civic organizations. The school is fortunate to have great attendance at functions and community supported events. The parents play a major role in their children's education by supporting the efforts of the school and its surrounding community.

Section C. Feelings About Students

How do I feel about my kids? I could explain it in so many ways. No matter how I am feeling about my life, college classes, building problems, or altercations with staff and administration, one thing always remains the same the strong feelings I have about my kids. I call them "my kids." Maybe it is because I get called by my name about as much

as I "accidentally" get called, "mom, mommy, and ma," which usually went unnoticed by the student and myself. I would like to classify myself as a caregiver or a parent. I am afraid to call myself "a teacher," because of the stigma that maybe "a teacher" means to impart learning through strictly academic learning. I was like a surrogate parent for my students. The parent that lived with the children eight hours a day, and then sent them home for snack, dinner, a story, and then bedtime.

Journal entry January, 1999

I refuse to say that I am a teacher because I love children. Although I really do love children the response seems so "typical," and I want to be everything except the typical teacher. Maybe I have become a teacher, not only for my interest and care for children, but to defy the typical teachers that I have had in my life. Teachers want to make a difference, and that is why they are in this profession. That statement I would like to say enough times so that I might actually believe it. I have been fortunate to have had a few rare teachers who have had some sort of impact on my life.

I want to be one of those rare teachers in my students' lives. I told my kids that one day I hoped to come visit them in high school. I reminded them not to leave me out of their graduation plans. I would like to be there. I want to cheer them on when they are in the school play, hear them play in the band, watch them carry the flag at the basketball game, or sit on the bench at the Varsity football game. I want to always be a part of their lives. Impossible—right? I believe that is what my co-workers would say if they would have overheard my secret conversations with my students. Behind closed doors, I made

promises that I believed in my heart I would one day carry through. I was the idealistic

first year teacher who believed that her class would always remember her. Although, I

live with optimism and hope for all of my children, I know that some of them will get lost

along the way. Eventually I will read of a past student's tragedy, or possibly an

altercation with the law. These situations are inevitable. Just like a parent, these fears do

not make me love them less, but even more.

How can I explain to you the way Alyssa smelled of baby shampoo and powder

when she came to school every morning—wet hair and all? Or the way that Jarred looked

at me when we both realized he had discovered a word he could not read before. I wish

you could have heard Cindy's voice when she said, "Miss Stewart, you are the best

teacher that I have ever had in four years," or "I wish you could be my teacher for second

grade too." I wish that I could have shared the two-armed bear hugs that Matthew gave

every morning and at random times during the day, (it is almost as if he knew when I

needed them the most).

I could only attempt to describe the importance of a hand half the size of my own

reaching for mine with the trust, openness, and vulnerability of a six-year-old. I have

cringed at the sight of flesh wounds, later classified as paper cuts, and smiled at the sight

of leftover lunch crusted to mouths. I have even stifled a giggle when a natural bodily

function escapes during a quiet story. Sometimes, I was the first one to see a new loose

tooth, and had the pleasure of watching it being pushed around with the tongue, making it

looser. I offered kisses on boo-boos, and words of understanding. I listened to Nate share

stories of his imaginary friend, Mortie, and inquired about his latest adventure. In my

apartment, I have laminated pictures drawn with love and care, and saved notes with my name spelled wrong. I wish you could have heard the way they said, "I love you," and I wish you could have felt the goosebumps on my arms every time it was said. I never got tired of hearing it; even if it was "disrupting" class or it was totally off task. It is difficult for me to explain the amount of exhaustion I felt at the end of a week. It was tiring to love each child with all that I could give.

I had the privilege of being a teacher, a friend, and an adult influence. But my role in these children's lives goes beyond that. I often struggle with the description of what a teacher is and should be to students. My kids learned so much more than the important academic information that they needed to know. I believe that the students in my class learned how important they were to me. I hope they learned they were unique individuals who all had something special to offer. I fostered a unique relationship with my students that I hope they are able to find again with other teachers in their lives. Do I believe that they ever will? I am not sure. Loving your students the way that I do involves so much emotional attachment. The kind of attachment that perhaps all teachers are not willing to invest. I cannot blame them for holding back. I know what it feels like to want to take one of them home. I have shared my lunch, my coat, and spent recess time talking about "the divorce." I know that Jessie's mom left her a note every day in her lunchbox, (because I ate lunch with the kids once a week), and that Johnny hated the bologna sandwich that his mom continued to pack. I could have bought a Happy Meal with all of the quarters I "loaned" for milk money. My kids would never have told my supervisor

that we secretly shared food at lunchtime even though it was against the rules. I would not have had my relationship with my kids any other way.

Sometimes I felt guilty about my relationship with my students. Why would I ever feel shameful of the love that I share with my students? Because there seemed to be a tremendous amount of pressure to have a "traditional" teacher relationship with my kids. Often the pressure was overbearing. I felt my role as a "professional" being diminished by teachers who believed that eating in the lunchroom, or playing at learning centers was not appropriate. I noticed the glances that I received from other teachers when I walked my class to the door and gave my students a hug, handshake, or a high five. Teachers seemed surprised when a student from another class would give me a hug or bring me flowers. I heard the comments teachers made when they saw one of my kids wearing my jacket, because they forgot their own at home. "It should teach them a lesson, if they don't bring a coat, they will get cold. Then I bet the next time they won't forget it." The lesson I would rather have my kids learn is that I liked to share, especially with them. I knew what it felt like to forget my coat and I did not want them to be cold. I hope that I demonstrated lessons through love and kindness. The kind of lessons first graders should experience. I wanted to teach by a different set of rules.

Teaching by a different set of rules often meant that I had to live by the notion that it was easier to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. When I noticed Jessie tired and not wanting to play at center time, I asked her how she was feeling. She usually responded "fine" but the way the corners of her tiny mouth formed a frown I could tell that something was wrong. I asked her, "Did you eat your lunch today?" I knew that she

had not been eating, and her homemade lunch went untouched. "No, but it is just that my tummy is hurting." We talked all the way down the hall, and we finally decided that we needed to have a picnic in the classroom together. I figured it would give us some time to talk and maybe I could find out what was really bothering her. On our way back to the room we took the shortcut through the paper room where the para-educators worked. One of them said, "Shame on you Miss Stewart, you are such a rule breaker." I knew I was a rule breaker because rather than spending my forty-five minute break in the lounge chatting, or grading some spelling papers, I spent some one on one time with Jessie. While we talked, she finished her entire lunch. It is easier to eat with good company. I guess I liked being a rule breaker. I definitely liked being different.

It is easy to forget the impact that I am having on these children in their development. I sometimes lessen the responsibility that a teacher has in the life of a child. It seemed like such an easy job to me, to love them all. Of course, I got frustrated and overwhelmed. I too, have days when all I did was nag at them and ask them to follow directions stop talking, or listen. However, at the end of each day I told them that I loved them. This, I believe, they already knew.

A parent once told me, "Some of the other parents and I were talking about how lucky we feel to have been able to have you for our child's teacher this year, it is so clear that you have a true love and understanding of children." The love and understanding that I had for the children in my class developed from a strong bond, which we nurtured since the beginning of the year. I opened myself up emotionally to my students. They were aware of my vulnerabilities and shared in my life too. I did not ask my students to give or

share anything with me that I was not willing to give or share with them in return. I wanted to make a difference in all of the lives of my children. Maybe having shared my enthusiasm for their successes, tears for their disappointments, and hopes for their futures, they know that a teacher can be so much more than they ever expected. I heard from colleagues and seasoned professionals, "pretty soon you will find it hard to remember names of your students, there are nineteen of them and only one of you." I hope that my students do not remember me because I was their first grade teacher, but because I was an important part of their lives. I plan on attending some of their graduation ceremonies. In my heart, I know that I developed a meaningful relationship in some form with each of them over the past year. It may never go beyond this year, but at least they know I care for them. Nineteen children hold a very dear place in my heart, and I believe they always will.

Chapter V. The Teacher as a Vulnerable Observer

Section A. Rites of Passage

As in any profession, there are many unwritten rules or rites of passage that newly inducted individuals must learn from the veterans at the workplace. Whether these rites of passage were consciously taught by other teachers or learned by my own trial and error, it is clear that in order to be socialized into the school setting, going through rites of passage is inevitable. In Scott Turow's book about his first year of law school, One L, (1977) he says, "In many walks of life, there is a similar time of trial and initiation, a period when newcomers are forced to be the victims of their own ineptness and when they must somehow master the basic skills of the profession in order to survive." In teaching, basic skills were not what I needed survive—I had to believe that what I was doing was right. I had to trust my philosophy. I learned the basic skills from my classes in teacher's college, but it did not prepare me for having to defend what I believed in.

Labor Day to Thanksgiving

I spent my whole life being able to fit in and adapt to new situations. I assumed that my first year of teaching would be the same. I thought it would be easy for me to belong. However, this was the first time I did not feel comfortable in a new setting for a number of reasons. I went to the school over my summer vacation to clean and move furniture, and I noticed that all of the cabinets in my classroom were full. There was not even one shelf that was empty—all of them were filled with manipulatives and posters. Even the bookcases were full. I had taken the place of a teacher who had worked in that

building for over twenty years. She was adored and admired by the staff in our building, and that made me feel like I had big shoes to fill. I spent most of that first day trying to figure out where I would put all of my belongings because I did not feel I could throw her things away.

Perhaps I knew from that moment that this was not going to be the place where I could be the best teacher I could be. I already felt restricted. It seemed as if the classroom environment was not going to allow for me to be independent. I could not be comfortable in my own room. It was also difficult for me to find any comfort outside of the classroom.

Communicating with my supervisor was difficult. He intimidated me from the start. Another first year teacher and myself went to his office at the beginning of the year in response to an e-mail message he had sent to us. When we told him why we were there, he said, "You girls really need to learn how to reply using e-mail." After that, every time I talked to him, I felt like I was wasting his time. I felt like I was being a bother. For the rest of the year, I did my best to avoid him unless absolutely necessary.

Thanksgiving to Christmas

Even after Thanksgiving, I felt uncomfortable in my building. In order to do my part at school, I joined a committee because I did not want to give up on trying to fit in. I volunteered for the social committee, which was responsible for planning events that would bring the staff together. It seemed like my attempts to make suggestions were always rejected because I was young and a new teacher and I did not know any better.

After suggesting a new idea, I was told, "We don't do things like that around here. This staff just isn't interested in those kind of fun things. We've tried it, and it doesn't work."

As I look back on it, I think maybe my colleagues were trying to save me from disappointment. But at the time, I was trying to live up to the expectations I had set for myself. I thought that they would embrace my new ideas, and wanted them to be excited about my suggestions, but they were not.

Christmas to Easter

Suddenly, I stopped worrying about whether others agreed with my way of doing things. I had spent the first half of the year trying not to create tension between my teaching partners and myself. We had been planning entire units as a team. When I returned from Christmas vacation, I decided that I would sit in on the team meetings and listen contently, but I would teach the curriculum my own way.

I felt that I had been selling my students and myself short by doing not what I thought was best, but instead accepting my team's decisions as my own. In a discussion with my CADRE mentor, she expressed her concern for my well being. Realizing how disappointed I was in my situation, she suggested that I needed to change something for myself because she feared that if I did not "it would be a shame to lose me from the field of education forever." When she said that, she put the responsibility back in my hands. I had yearned for independence all year. It took me a whole semester to finally see that not only was it a good thing, but it was necessary for me to survive in the school environment.

Gradually, I started to alienate myself. I blamed myself all along, thinking that I was the one who had a problem getting along with others. I finally came to the realization that problems had existed before I got there. It was not that I did not fit in, but a division already existed between staff members and that was what was affecting me. It was my job to decide if I wanted to succumb to those problems, or separate myself and attempt to follow my own philosophy.

Easter to Memorial Day

When I decided to teach the way I believed was best, I became a completely different teacher. I experienced things all year with my kids, but the relationship became more intense because I believed in what I was doing. The connection and the experiences became that much more meaningful. I discounted all of the advice I had been given all year long about developing appropriate relationships with my students.

When I went off on my own, my students saw me make mistakes and we experienced things together. Before, everything had been done for me so it was easy not to make mistakes. My students became aware of my vulnerabilities. It was important for them to see me learning. When we learned together, the connection between us became stronger. They became a fundamental part of my life. In fact, they were such a major part of my life that I sometimes felt like I could not live without them.

I made it clear to my kids that they could get in touch with me whenever they wanted. I gave them my address and my phone number if they wanted to contact me. My colleagues thought I must have been joking when they heard what I had done. I made

summer plans to go to the pool, watch fireworks, and even sit at a few baseball games with my kids.

The only thing that mattered to me was maintaining as many relationships with my students as I could. Maybe that was why I tried not to take it to heart when I was called a traitor by some of the staff at my school. I decided to accept a job in another district, and the response from a few colleagues proved to me that I was never a part of the group. My biggest fear had come true—I had been afraid I would not fit in, and at the end of the year I found out I never had. But my mentor's advice was for me to "teach where I would be the happiest, even if it meant changing schools." I took the advice and decided not to think of myself as a traitor. I decided that for once I had to do what was best for me so I could continue be a teacher like I believe I was meant to be.

Section B. Critical Incidents

Labor Day to Thanksgiving

Journal entry September 1998

My head is spinning... literally! This job is so extremely exhausting and at

9:30p.m. (when I used to just be going out for the evening) I am lying limp on the

couch. Even though my body is tired, and my brain feels fried, I cannot help

thinking about my students. They are what keep me going. I love them; they are

full of enthusiasm and as cute as can be.

In medical terminology, critical incidents are defined as "short narratives of

events judged to be particularly meaningful by participants in the events." (Branch, 1997)

Significant similarities exist between medical reports and daily events that occur in

teaching and the medical profession. As a first year teacher, I experienced many incidents

in the school setting that I considered meaningful in developing my perceptions of the

profession and my role as a teacher. However, not all of them are worthy of being called

"critical" incidents. The events that were critical for me evoked some sort of emotion that

affected my feelings and brought to the surface my innermost vulnerabilities.

As I reflect upon the critical incidents that occurred in my teaching experience

thus far, I understand how these incidents were pivotal in altering my perceptions of the

teaching profession and my role as a first-year teacher. I was a bright eyed and bushy

tailed young teacher. I was optimistic and looked at every day from the point of view that

the "sun is rising," rather than the "sun is setting," as a supervisor once told me. I was

vulnerable and impressionable. Still I remain those things, yet tainted by my experiences and perceptions. All of these revelations progressively occurred over time.

Many of my critical incidents were directly related to fitting in with the staff members in my building. While I tend to be outgoing and friendly, being a new teacher set me apart from many of the staff members who were already members of a grade level clique. There was a group of teachers who sat together every day. They planned days when they would order lunch from out of the building, while taking turns driving to the fast food establishments close to our school. I decided that by giving it some time I could find my niche and feel welcomed into the group. I had plenty of practice in making new friends and adapting to new situations, but throughout the whole year they never invited me or any others to join them in ordering lunch.

As the school year began I started to feel some apprehension regarding my relationship with my supervisor. In one of the first official staff meetings, he presented some material on discipline and I offered a comment about first graders needing consequences that were appropriate for their age level and in a gruff voice he answered, "Well what do you propose that I do?" I was not raised to question authority, but the prior discussion had been light and I believed what I had to offer was a valid statement. I felt as if I was put in my place from that very first staff meeting.

I had another critical incident with my supervisor involving the placement of my television. When he came into the classroom to discuss where the Maintenance men were going to hang the television, the media specialist, who was also in the room, told me that there were not many options for the placement of the television. I had hoped that it would

hang near the cable outlet to avoid showing wires. When they informed me of where they had planned to put it, I responded by saying that I would need to rearrange the room so that we would be able to have "circle time." The supervisor shot back, "You're not going to be the only teacher in this room. We need to consider the best place for the safety of the students." Instantly my feelings were hurt. I was offended that he insinuated that I was not interested in the well being of my students. I found myself unable to talk. It was one of the first times in my life I could not elicit a response. The media specialist looked over at me and lowered her head almost as if she were embarrassed she was in the room. At that very moment I felt there was no hope for a positive relationship with my supervisor.

Building relationships with staff in my school was difficult for me. It was the first time in my life when I did not feel successful in creating relationships with the people with whom I worked. During the year, I had many teachers in my building confront me on the choices I made in my instructional practices. A teacher at the beginning of the year asked in the paper room, "What are you going to do with all of those staplers and tape dispensers?" Enthusiastically I responded, "I am going to put them into my learning centers so that the kids have access to them." She answered, "You are going to let first graders have scotch tape? You're going to trust them with that tape? They're going to waste it. and it is awfully expensive." I knew in my heart that what I was doing was good for children in my classroom. I was confronted with how others felt about my choices for instruction and their perceptions of me as a new teacher. I cannot recall how many times I heard, "Well, that is the way you think about it and do it now, but just wait until you've

been teaching for ten years. Your outlook will change so much, and you'll do things a lot

differently."

I certainly felt different throughout my entire first year of teaching. Being

different was not so bad. I always had a smile on my face, a bounce in my step, and a

cheery tone in my voice. I would never come to school any other way. I liked coming to

school every morning with a positive attitude. My attitude helped me to deal with some

of the most pressing issues that I was confronted with over the course of the year.

When the supervisor met with the teachers on my team to tell us that we were

going to change the number of first grade classes from three to four, I automatically

became defensive. That would mean that I would lose seven of my students. I could tell

by the looks on my colleagues' faces that they were not at all bothered by the news. In

fact, they were excited about the prospect of having a fewer number of students in their

classrooms. Lower numbers are good, but I had already created a bond with my kids and

I did not want to lose any of them. I knew that the other teachers were probably relishing

the change and hoping to eliminate the "bad" kids from their rooms. I was trying to

convince myself that the situation was going to work out fine, except my stomach was in

knots. I instantly began making excuses for each student to justify why they should not

leave my class.

Journal entry September 1998

I am really uncomfortable with splitting the class up. I think in my heart and in

my mind, I know that it is the best possible situation for the kids, but I'm already

attached to them all. I do not want to give any of them up to the new teacher. I

have already begun making an attachment to each of them in some little way. I am being absolutely silly! Everyone keeps saying that kids are resilient and they will adjust to the changes with no problems at all, I am not so sure about myself.

Thanksgiving to Christmas

Students in my class learned to get along together. I had been working on building a community within my classroom, and because my kids were already well mannered and friendly, it was an easy job. In any classroom there are times when some children have a difficult time getting along with one another, ours was not any different.

One day a couple of my students came into the classroom riled up over something that had occurred at lunch. As soon as Patrick walked in the room I knew he must have been involved. Patrick was a quiet and polite boy. He never had a hard time getting along with others. In fact, he was probably one of the most popular boys in the class. He walked right up to me and said in a first grade tattling voice, "Steve said he didn't like me because I am brown like a turd." I must have looked stunned, "That was not a nice thing to say. When did he say that to you?" Patrick responded, "At lunch." Instead of being calm and patient, I felt myself becoming defensive and growing angry with the other little boy who did the name-calling.

In my family, it was understood that it was not acceptable to call anyone a derogatory name or make negative references to their skin color. I grew up with a diverse group of friends and neighbors and had never given a thought to not having friends of different ethnic backgrounds. There were even instances during my elementary school

years in which *I* was the minority in the class. Maybe I was most surprised by what Steve said because I felt like I knew his family. I did not want to think it was possible he had heard these racist comments at home. After all, his dad was a college professor and his mom was an active member in the school community.

Even before the incident with Steve, Patrick felt he was different from the rest of the group. He knew that the pigment in his skin was the darkest in our class, which was actually was more golden brown, because he was biracial. Right away I started taking Patrick's side because no one in my class was going to belittle another child for any reason. I knew what it felt like to be the "different" child. I was overweight and insecure about my own physical appearance during third, fourth, and fifth grade in elementary school. They called me "Fatty-Fatty two by four." And I still can recall the ringing of their voices in my head. Maybe as I was scolding Steve, I was attempting to punish all of the children that had belittled me as a child. I felt like it was my duty to protect Patrick from the embarrassment and shame that others were causing.

The incident with the name-calling proved to me that I was teaching in a place that was still a "small town." Even though Omaha is a diverse city with a variety of ethnic backgrounds, suburbs like Papillion still had a narrow perspective of the rest of the world. I wanted to give my students; lessons in acceptance and teach them to be good citizens; lessons that I was taught as a child of the military. No matter how much I wanted to teach my students about tolerance and give them experiences in diversity, it was clear that I had to begin within the walls of my own classroom.

Christmas to Easter

Some of my other critical incidents are about encounters with staff members. Many of these incidents relate directly to becoming a member of the staff community in the building. During parent/teacher conferences I had a break and found myself in a colleague's classroom to vent some frustrations. In talking to her she confided, "This is a mean building. I have been here for over eight years and I still do not feel like I fit in." I wanted to talk to her more about this, because it did not seem obvious to me that she was uncomfortable with the staff. I shared with her that some of the teachers made it hard to come to school every morning wearing a smile. "I do not even feel like myself around here, I am letting them suck the life out of me." She shared with me, "Don't you ever wonder why I don't eat in the teacher's lounge? It isn't because I skip lunch, but I don't like the negative company." I replied that, "I feel like I am damned if I do and damned if I don't. I think it is probably important that others know that I can be social and not snotty." I could tell by the empathetic look on her face that she understood my point.

I confided in this colleague many other times because she shared my frustrations with staff and the dilemmas of being a new teacher. I made a remark once about having to go and see our supervisor in his office, "I am not sure if I should address this issue with him in person, or just send it in an e-mail message." When I explained that I found approaching him in person a difficult task, she said that she also had confronted the supervisor with a similar problem. "I am a social person", she said. "Sometimes I just need to come and tell you things to your face. I'm a people person." From what I

understood, he was not as receptive as my peer would have liked him to be. I knew

exactly how she felt.

One day on the playground while I was on duty, a teacher confronted me about

rumors that I was not getting along with my supervisor. Mrs. King said, "I know that you

do not like our supervisor, but you do not know what it is like to have a bad one. You are

too young," she continued, "You should have been here last year. Life was unbearable

with our old supervisor. He never stood behind us on discipline issues." I just stood and

listened dumbfounded. She never once left room in the conversation for me to respond to

what she was saying. I could not help but wonder if my feelings had become so well

known to others through my attitude. I was ashamed that I felt the way I did about my

situation. I was embarrassed that others were talking about me behind my back. I felt

pressured to change my mind about my supervisor. I considered forgetting about the two

previous confrontations and blamed myself for not getting along with a person who was

liked by seasoned professionals. A colleague said to me, "C'mon Stacy don't you think a

lot of these feelings you have toward the supervisor are a fabrication in your mind. It is

really more like you do not like him and won't give him another chance." After

considering what others were saying, I thought that maybe it was coincidence and had

altercations on two of his bad days. I could be wrong. What did I know about the

appropriate relationship between a supervisor and a teacher? After all I was the "rookie."

I was perceived as the "rookie" teacher, and treated differently because of it. A

staff member asked, "What in the world is going on in your room?" "We've created

animal habitats, and you are standing in the ocean," I answered. She responded in a

cynical voice, "Oh." I felt as if I had alienated myself from the rest of my peers who did

not share my philosophy of teaching. School was a lonely place, where I felt like there

was no one else like me.

The loneliness and alienation I felt from members of my staff were a direct result

of the messages that I was receiving from them. There was an obvious struggle between

my own perceptions and the expected role of a teacher according to my coworkers. I

refused to conform to the model of the typical teacher in my building. They were telling

me that it was difficult for them to accept new ideas and changes in practices. They were

saying I was making a big deal out of the confrontations I had with my supervisor. I

heard them telling me that "It doesn't get much better than this," and, " You don't know

how appreciative you should be." As the year went on, I continued to have my feelings

lessened by other staff members in my building.

Easter to Memorial Day

Once, I had my tears diminished to, "you don't need to cry, this is so silly." Those

words were spoken to me on a Friday. Fridays were the toughest days for me. The weeks

in the spring were long, the children were often restless, and my patience was tried again

and again. At that time, I was begging, along with the kids, for just one hint of sun from

behind the rain clouds, so we could get out and breathe some fresh air. That Friday was a

day that I had planning time with the special education teachers who worked with some

of my students. During these meetings, we discussed schedules and times that she could

come into my classroom for children who may need additional help.

This particular meeting had a different agenda. One of the special education teachers wanted to discuss Robert, a student of mine. He had been recently tested and diagnosed as having a learning disability in reading and math, and he qualified for special education services in both of these areas. There was no talk about the remainder of the year and how we would work together to help Robert, but rather talk of retention or simply saying holding him back in first grade. I did not consider it a conversation, but a demand. "We need to decide what we are going to tell the parents about next year," said the special education teacher. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Well, Robert is just now a perfect beginning first grader. We need to talk to the parents about retention," she answered.

I just sat there. We had already had this conversation about retention. Once before I had told someone in the room I was not comfortable with that idea. She talked about his weaknesses and the more she said the more upset I became. I do not think that I can solve all of my kids' problems, academic or otherwise, but it was hard for me to accept that he would know failure before he was seven years old. While I sat and listened, tears came rolling down my face, and the special education teacher proceeded to say, "What's wrong? This is nothing to cry over, it isn't your fault." I replied, "You don't understand, this is how much I care about all of my kids. I have so many hopes and dreams for all of them and in some way I feel responsible for them like they are my own children." The room was quiet except for the sound of me blowing my nose. I think she uttered some words of encouragement, but I could not tell because I was overwhelmed by my

own thoughts at the time. Whatever she said was not as important as how I felt about Robert and his future.

I was so mad I could have screamed. I was sick of kids being punished because teachers and staff were not doing their jobs. Why should Robert have to suffer by repeating first grade just because we did not have teachers in the second grade who were willing to accept him at the academic and social level he was at? I believe that is a real teacher's job. The world is not made up of carbon copy kids. When my kids came to me in first grade, they were all at different levels. Robert did not even know his alphabet. At the end of the year, he recognized a few basic sight words. I added, "You know what is sick to me...that Robert has to suffer because we do not have second grade teachers who teach appropriately. Why should I tell his parents that he cannot go on to the second grade, because they (teachers) don't want a kid who does not know all of the vocabulary words in the basal reader? Sometimes I am so embarrassed to be a part of this staff."

They nodded sympathetically. I proceeded to ask them to keep what I said in confidence, and then I started to wonder if I even cared that the other teachers might find out what I had said. I knew I would be changing school districts next year, and that I would not suffer for my comments. Before I left the room, I explained, "I cannot make a recommendation to the parents that I do not agree with." I was told, "You don't need to make a recommendation to the parents, just paint a picture." I did not think that I wanted to paint the same picture as they did. I wanted to tell Robert's parents how much I have seen him progress over the year and that the school would do everything in its power to make him feel successful. The picture they wanted to paint was one that would pressure

the parents into thinking that retention was the best avenue for their child. I left the meeting exhausted

Robert was not the only child I spent hours thinking about before I could get to sleep at night. I also spent a lot of time thinking about Johnny. I worried for Johnny because he was a child that needed all of my attention and craved both the negative and positive attention he could get from me. He was such a needy child because he had a pretty rough life. His family had recently moved from California in an attempt to get away from some of the negative influences that surrounded him. Emotionally, I was on the edge.

I often wondered how I survived in that environment. One day, I was walking causally through the building enjoying my forty-five minute break while the children were at gym class, and I stopped to talk to a teacher that I thought very highly of. We had a conversation about the way things were going for me this year. I expressed that I had experienced a few rough spots. She said, "This is his world (referring to the supervisor), and you have to abide by his rules if you want to succeed." Then she added, "at least in this building you do." My response to her was, "Do you really think so? Wow, I thought school was for the kids." "Maybe ideally it's the kids world," she said, "but not realistically. No situation is perfect. You just need to take care of all of the expected business and everything else will fall into place." All I had wanted from our brief conversation was to feel better about my teaching situation and receive a bit of advice that I desperately needed to feel revived and sure of myself again. After the conversation, I realized I had gotten much more than I had bargained for because I left feeling more

confused and unsure about my role as a teacher and where I fit into the teaching community in our building.

My expectations about teaching and the professional relationships between the administration and teachers were totally shattered. I had believed everyone was in education for the children, and that a staff would work together cohesively to achieve the best possible education for students. The portrayal of "his" world made it clear that it was not the place I had been expecting to work. I wanted to work in a school where it was "their world," even if it was idealistic.

I often asked myself how to get over these incidents. I could not look at something I invested so much emotion as being an incident to overcome. However, I do try to look at those incidents as learning experiences that allow me to examine more closely what teaching really means to me. Being introspective about my feelings has helped me to gain a sense of perspective both personally and professionally.

Chapter VI. Reflections

This year I believe that I initially set out to learn as much as I could about teaching, the profession, and above all my students. Ironically, one of the most profound experiences that I had this year was learning about myself. This year was about finding my own identity and attempting to understand my role as a teacher. My students helped me to discover myself.

A Passion for Teaching and My Students

There were several factors that brought me to this place. Undoubtedly, the most significant were the children in my class. There were no emotional barriers between my students and myself. I allowed for my students to expose their vulnerabilities as I did my own. I believe that is what made my experiences with my students more meaningful than that of other teachers in my building. Sometimes, it was overwhelming to me that I was so attached to one group of students. I shared pictures and stories about each one of them, bragging as if they were my own. They became such an integral part of my life, and they were pivotal in helping me get through the year.

It sounds absolutely crazy to say that nineteen first graders gave me the strength to come to school every day, but they were my inspiration and my balance. They kept me focused on what I believed was my most important job, and that was to look out for their best interests. As I look back, I realize that nothing shaped my views on teaching and my values more than my students did. Everything else did not really matter.

Deciding Different was Good

I noticed myself becoming a different person. I made efforts not to let what others said effect me as much as they had at the beginning of the year. Mary, my CADRE mentor persuaded me to branch out and develop classroom curriculum on my own. It was her guidance and support throughout the year that gave me the courage to be my own person. She gave me a "license" to be independent from the other teachers in my building.

I was still conscious of how others perceived me, but I made the decision to deal with, rather than succumb to the pressure that I was feeling. I believe many of those pressures were brought on by my own perceptions of the things they did and said. I was surrounded by teachers supposedly teaching children for the same reasons I was, yet I felt extremely alone. My desire to be different was so strong that I purposely alienated myself from other teachers in my building.

Struggling With My Professional Role

In almost every critical incident, the underlying theme was a struggle between my ideals as a first year teacher and the attitudes I perceived my fellow staff members having. I often wondered how they felt during their first year of teaching. My perceptions of my role as a teacher and the way I perceived that my colleagues saw their roles were quite different. I liked teaching my kids what I valued in life. Along with the curriculum, I taught children what I thought was significant. I perceived myself as being a better

teacher because I was willing to sacrifice and to tackle what I believed to be more important issues. I wrote in my journal, "I think I understand better why teachers quit within the first few years. It is like beating your head up against a brick wall, and one can only take so much." I came to the realization that the road ahead was not going to be an easy one. But, that it was good to be different, as long as I was being the best teacher that I could be. In the future, I hope to keep my perspective and remember that every day, most often in the littlest way, I am affecting the lives of children.

Myself as a Writer

Lastly, I have learned about who I am as a writer. The writing process was a painstaking one for me. I now realize its tremendous growth opportunities both academically as well as personally. Dealing with my own insecurities as an academic and as a writer often caused many obstacles for me to overcome. There were times I felt paralyzed. I could not write a word. in fear that I would disappoint my peers, my thesis committee, or even worse, myself. Writing a thesis was my debut into adulthood. I have learned I can depend on myself. It has given me some of the self-confidence that I so desperately need.

Chapter VII. Collaborative Insights

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

Section A. Methodology

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

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

Section B. The CADRE Project

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

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

Section C. The Collaborative Process

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

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

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

to get motivated.

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

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

Section D. Common Themes

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

Aspiring to be Different

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

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

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

Creating Personal Relationships With Our Students

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

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

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

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

Personal Growth as a Result of Our Relationships With Students

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

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

Questioning Our Professional Roles

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

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

Obsession with Teaching

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

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

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

Recommendations for Further Study

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

1. We set out to find both similarities and differences between teaching in an urban vs. suburban setting. While we discovered that these experiences were remarkably similar, we are hesitant to believe that the experiences are equally similar among all

urban and suburban teachers. Thus, further exploration would be useful, particularly comparing grade levels from a suburban vs. urban experience. For example, whereas we compared a suburban elementary school to an urban middle and high school, further research should look specifically at the experiences of teachers at the same grade level such as urban elementary v. suburban elementary.

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

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

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

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

Research Question

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

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

Conclusion

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

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April 12, 1999

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IRB#: _118-99-EX_

TITLE OF PROTOCOL: _First Footsteps: A Teacher's Explorations and Perceptions of a Suburban Elementary School During the First Year of Teaching_

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

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

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

Sincerely,

Ernest D. Prentice, PhD
Vice Chair, IRB

EDP:jlg