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The Complexities of the Work Experiences of Urban Middle School Teachers on Interdisciplinary Teams: An In-Depth Phenomenological Interview Study

Barbara Anne Choiniere

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THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE WORK EXPERIENCES
OF URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS ON INTERDISCIPLINARY
TEAMS:
AN IN-DEPTH PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW STUDY

A Dissertation Presented
by
BARBARA A. CHOINIERE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2010

Education
THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE WORK EXPERIENCES OF URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS ON INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS: AN IN-DEPTH PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW STUDY

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BARBARA A. CHOINIERE

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Robert, who washed the pots and pans, vacuumed the carpets, raked the lawn, and shoveled the driveway while I was ensconced in my office (he would insert “lair” here) writing.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my Dissertation Committee: Dr. Irving Seidman, Dr. Judy Placek, and Dr. Elena Carbone, as well as Dr. Patt Dodds, who retired after my Comprehensive Exams, for their thoughtful feedback and years of support and guidance.

A special thank you to Dr. Dawna Jenne, a trusted colleague, who provided valuable insights into the process. I also offer my sincere gratitude to my colleagues and family who gifted me with their support during the years that I worked on this project. Your encouragement was truly appreciated.

This phenomenological research study would not have been possible without the hours selflessly given to me by my participants. I include here, not only the 15 participants from the dissertation study, but the 4 participants who contributed to the pilot study. They all shared their experiences freely and I genuinely appreciate that they let me (and my readers) into their lives.
ABSTRACT

THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE WORK EXPERIENCES OF URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS ON INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS: AN IN-DEPTH PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW STUDY

MAY 2010

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There are about 16,000 middle schools in the United States; the half million teachers who teach in them affect the academic and emotional lives of about a hundred students while working cooperatively with an array of adult personalities and endeavoring to cover the curriculum. Although research has been conducted on many components of the middle school, an in-depth look at teachers’ experiences with the concept is missing.

The purposes of this study were to explore three ideas: the complexities of the work experiences of teachers who participate on interdisciplinary teams in urban middle schools, the possible interactions of the structures and principles of the middle school philosophy with their work lives, and how the reality of interdisciplinary teams connect to the ideals in the middle school and organizational theory literature.

I conducted three in-depth phenomenological interviews with 15 urban middle school teachers. Teachers shared their teaching experiences, life histories (to put their experiences in context), and how teaching fits in with their lives. Subject matters,
ethnicities, ages, and years experience varied. They came from 9 schools in 5 school districts in the Northeast.

I include a brief history of how the junior high morphed into the middle school. The “ideal” practices, programs, and philosophy of the middle school and teaming (as defined by middle school and organizational theory literature) are explained and then contrasted with the realities.

Results indicate that the “ideal” characteristics, as described in the literature, do not exist in all urban middle schools. Teachers lamented their absence and described their frustrations with student behavior, colleagues, administrators, and state testing. They also shared the joy they find in seeing their students progress, giving back to the community, and making a difference in students’ lives. I propose that these rewards make up for the incredible difficulties they face daily.

I conclude that teachers need team planning time to implement the middle school characteristics and overcome the difficulties of teaching urban students, which include transience, absenteeism, poverty, lack of familial support, and a belief that being smart is “lame.” I also propose increasing community involvement and providing alternative schools.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this dissertation study were to explore, through in-depth phenomenological interviews, three ideas central to teaching on an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school. The first idea surrounds the complexities of the work experiences of middle school teachers who participate on interdisciplinary teams in urban middle schools. The second idea involves the possible interactions of the structures and principles of the middle school philosophy with teachers’ work lives. The third idea encompasses how the reality of interdisciplinary teams and their functioning connect to the ideals described in the middle school and organizational theory literature.

Significance of the Study

Urban middle school teachers affect the academic and emotional lives of a hundred or more students while simultaneously working cooperatively with a wide array of adult personalities and endeavoring to “get through” the curriculum. Understanding the complexities involved in this work is important for many reasons. There are about 16,000 middle schools in the United States and the number has been increasing. Between 1990 and 2000 the number of middle schools rose by 37% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002) and that number continues to increase (NCES, 2005b). Almost 80% of these middle schools are organized by team (Hackmann, Petzko, Valentine, Clark, Nori, & Lucas, 2002). Middle school teachers number over half a million (data from 2003-2004 school year), making up about 20% of the teaching population (J. Sietsema, Data Consultant for the NCES, personal communication, December 9, 2005).
Teacher turnover rates in the United States have been increasing slightly. Sixteen percent of the teacher workforce turned over in 2000 (NCES, 2005a). This figure includes all teachers who did not continue to teach in their school for any reason, but about half of these were transfers. The turnover problem is even more significant for urban schools because teachers in high poverty areas are twice as likely to transfer to another school (NCES, 2005a).

An examination of middle school teachers’ work experiences can provide information to assist districts and policy makers in learning about their teaching staffs in order to retain them. When these veteran teachers leave they are often replaced by novices. Districts are beset with the overwhelming task of training and mentoring these new teachers. Learning about urban middle school teachers’ lived experiences can assist those who mentor new teachers to guide them. What of the veteran teachers who do stay? In many states teachers need professional development to recertify every 5 years. Gaining an understanding of how interdisciplinary teaming resembles the model suggested by organizational theory literature and how it affects teachers’ work experiences may provide direction for professional development for current middle school teachers. Insights from this study may serve to validate those who have been teaching for many years and may feel that their voices have never been heard. It is also possible that these veteran teachers will reexamine and perhaps even better understand their own experiences in light of what is discovered here.

Given the nature of the middle school student, the nature of the complexities involved in teaching on an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school, and the increasing number of teachers who do leave, why do so many middle school teachers
continue to teach day in, day out for 20 or 30 years? I am amazed at their ability to come in every day with a smile, a new lesson plan, and a desire to teach. I have learned about their real lived experiences as teachers of urban middle school students and members of interdisciplinary teams. I have gained insights that I hope will contribute to the knowledge base and be useful as a guide to future middle school teachers and those who will educate them.

It has been said that “if no larger issue (societal or theoretical) can be found behind the narrative, it is a story best left untold” (Gudmundsdóttir, 2001, p. 230). Some insight, some idea needing further study, or some connection to other urban middle school teachers was gained from each participant. The unexpected consequences of teaming, which include feeling frustrated with colleagues and administrators, cause difficulties for teachers. How can these be overcome? Testing takes time away from learning and causes stress for educators. How can we prevent testing from taking over the curriculum? Schools are no longer regarded by families as part of their community. How can we bring parents back into the school and involve them in educating their children?

It seemed as though I was hoping to accomplish a great deal, but I believed that shedding light on these questions could help the half million middle school teachers in the country’s 16,000 middle schools. Before I began the study, I asked the question, “Will a thorough understanding of the experiences of urban middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams lead to better professional development, better training of middle school teachers, reform?” My answer now, as it was then, is “I can only hope so.”
Background Information

History of the Middle School

The middle school is, relatively speaking, a new concept. The one room schoolhouse flourished for many years in America’s early history before being replaced by the elementary, junior high, and high school at the beginning of the last century. In the early 1900s educational policymakers deemed it necessary to start a separate school for adolescents. Purposes of this school (the junior high) included beginning students’ high school educations earlier (Bureau of Education, 1928; National Council of Education, 1893), decreasing the high student drop out rate (McGlasson, 1973), and providing a transition between elementary and high school. Other purposes included meeting the very different needs of the adolescent (Hall, 1904) which were just beginning to be recognized and providing vocational education for students who would not be attending college (Bureau of Education).

By 1938 there were more than 2,000 junior high schools in the United States (Bossing & Cramer, 1965). By the 1950s there were almost 5,000, but criticisms began to emerge. Junior high schools were criticized for being too subject matter oriented, for having lost the idea of transition between elementary and high school, for using high school methods, for tracking students, and for housing older students (McGlasson, 1973). The characteristics designed to make junior high schools into small communities of learners with nurturing teachers, rather than miniature high schools, never took hold. One reason is that “a knowledge base was not available to sustain the uniqueness of the reform movement” (Anfara, 2001, p. ix) in the junior high at that time. The fact that
schools are large organizations that are slow to change was likely another factor in the junior high school’s inability to reform.

The criticisms, coupled with the 1957 launching of Sputnik, led to the junior high school’s demise. Sputnik was a significant factor in the decision to move from a junior high to a middle school configuration because many feared that Russia’s superiority in space proved that the United States was failing in mathematics and the sciences. In an attempt to improve students’ abilities, the ninth graders were moved out of the junior high and into the high school so they could participate in a more rigorous math and science curriculum (McGlasson, 1973).

At this time, 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act allocating millions of dollars to improve schools and fund programs. Unfortunately, even with this increased funding, physical facilities and budgetary concerns, rather than educational philosophy played roles in determining which configuration districts would accept (Beane & Brodhagen, 2001; McGlasson, 1973; Popper, 1967). Some schools retained the junior high name while using middle school methods and other schools took the middle school name while continuing to use junior high/high school methods.

Although reforms were proposed and the number of middle schools increased during the last 50 years, it has only been in the last 25 or so years that the middle school philosophy has really begun to filter down into school districts. Reformers were finally jolted into taking action after the release of *A Nation at Risk* (1984) from the National Commission on Excellence in Education put the spotlight on the quality of education in America. This happened at a time when several reports, grounded in research and promoting reforms, were issued. The National Middle School Association released *This*
We Believe (1982), the National Association of Secondary School Principals released An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level (1986), and the California Department of Education released Caught in the Middle: Educational Reform for Young Adolescents in California Public Schools (1987). By this time, the National Middle School Association, established in 1973, was no longer a fledgling organization and began to promote its philosophy more vigorously.

Finally, the philosophy began to take hold more firmly when the Carnegie Foundation got involved. The Carnegie Foundation formed a task force on the education of young adolescents, which included then-Governor of Arkansas, William Clinton; the President of the New York Times Foundation; the admiral who was appointed Secretary of Energy by President Bush; and deans and professors from Johns Hopkins University, Yale, the Howard University School of Medicine, and Stanford. Their Council on Adolescent Development included the President of Duke University; the Governors of Massachusetts and New Jersey; a State Representative from Pennsylvania; Senators from Hawaii, Vermont, and Kansas; Ted Kopple of ABC’s Nightline; the President of the New York Times Foundation; and representatives from Mount Sinai School of Medicine, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, and Harvard. The Council published Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century (1989) which was grounded in research and released with much fanfare.

The prestige of the Carnegie Foundation and the support of important figures in education and government caused the widespread acceptance of the philosophy, the “middle school philosophy,” if you will. This is how educators refer to these structures, programs, and principles, even though many of them were actually promoted for the
junior high school many years before the advent of the middle school. The fact that the Carnegie Foundation offered large grants to 27 states for middle school improvement for schools putting the theory into practice also assisted in the widespread acceptance of a philosophy that had gone mostly unnoticed for decades. The $51 million provided by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation for urban middle school reform (Bradley & Manzo, 2000) also helped.

The movement picked up momentum and new books followed: *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 1995), *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), *This We Believe…And Now We Must Act* (NMSA, 2001) and *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2003). Although these texts may be considered self-promoting, written by those who have a vested interest in keeping the middle school philosophy alive, the fact that they are accepted by middle school educators, school districts, and school committees as important works worthy of emulating cannot be denied. The proof resides in the over 30,000 members from 48 countries who belong to the National Middle School Association, the almost 10,000 who attend their annual conference (NMSA, n.d.a), the widespread use of these works by districts, and the hundreds of thousands of copies in print (J. Lounsbury, personal communication, December 5, 2005).

Middle schools are not meant to be “mini high schools,” nor large elementary schools, but schools with their own philosophies, programs, and principles. The most important characteristics of the middle school, based on thorough examinations of the above-mentioned texts, will be explained in the following section. One of the underlying
questions of this study is the relationship between these ideal characteristics of middle school and teachers’ real, lived, work experiences. This summary provides a sense of what a middle school is, or at least, what it is supposed to be to assist in understanding how these characteristics affect teachers’ work lives; it also provides background information about the middle school setting.

**Characteristics of Middle Schools**

Many of the structures, programs, and principles, which I have labeled “characteristics” and which I explain here are not new and were not new when the middle school began to take over for the junior high school. The characteristics of the ideal middle school are intended to make students feel like members of a community, promote physical and emotional health and well-being, and cultivate well-educated students. I have organized the first fifteen characteristics by their intended effect. The final two I explain separately because they have control over and shape the other fifteen.

**Characteristics designed to make students feel like members of a community**

- dividing students into smaller leaning communities
- encouraging family involvement
- promoting community involvement
- allowing students to participate in decision-making
- empowering teachers and principals to make changes
- specially designing facilities

**Characteristics intended to support students’ physical and emotional well-being**

- encouraging a positive climate
- providing extracurricular activities
- promoting healthy habits
- implementing advisory programs

**Characteristics intended to cultivate well-educated students**

- teaching in an interdisciplinary fashion
- maintaining a flexible schedule
• emphasizing methods and media
• specially preparing teachers
• providing professional development for current teachers

Characteristics affecting the implementation of each of the other characteristics

• supportive administrators
• team planning time

I do not suggest that this is the only way to organize these characteristics, nor do I suggest that each characteristic fits only into the category I have assigned it. Some of the characteristics serve more than one purpose. Specially prepared teachers, for example, should serve to make students well-educated, feel like members of the community, and promote their physical and emotional health. I do not suggest that all 17 middle school characteristics explained here are present in all middle schools, nor do I suggest that they should be. This is meant as an introduction to the “ideal” characteristics, as promoted by advocates of the middle school philosophy, to give the reader an idea of what is recommended for the ideal middle school.

**Characteristics Intended To Promote a Sense of Community**

**Small Learning Communities**

Students are divided into groups, sometimes called teams, houses, academies, or pods. A team of teachers shares each group of students. This small community of learners is supposed to make it possible for teachers to get to know students and for students to get to know each other. The “ideal” middle school team works to “create a family-like atmosphere in a day and age when fewer students know the real meaning of the word ‘family’” (Sevick, 1989, p. 26).

I have explained this concept first because it is the overarching concept of the middle school and the only characteristic that I deem absolutely necessary for a middle
school to be considered a middle school rather than a junior high school. If there is no group of students shared by a group of teachers, then I believe the school is organized as a junior high school regardless of what it is labeled.

**Family Involvement**

Increased family involvement is a desired characteristic of the middle school. Parents are expected to come into the school to chaperone dances, participate in fundraisers, join the parent teacher organization, or attend special functions. They can be recruited for the school’s decision-making team or asked to be classroom volunteers.

**Community Involvement**

Bringing the community into the school and bringing the students into the community are major aspirations for the middle school. School-community partnerships are beneficial because of the resources community groups can provide: experts, money, supplies, advocates, and mentors. These partnerships can also assist students in seeing the interconnectedness of organizations and help build a sense of belonging to the community.

**Student Participation in Decision-Making**

Encouraging and allowing students to participate in decision-making is intended to empower students and make them feel more like members of the community, give them an understanding of democratic processes, and be practice for life.

**Teachers and Principals Empowered To Make Changes**

Ideally, middle schools empower adults as well. Proponents of the middle school believe that teachers and principals should have the power to make the changes they think are best for their middle schools.
Specially Designed Facilities

Middle school students should be housed in specially designed facilities. Smaller school buildings are preferable because middle schools should house fewer students (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Team rooms should be in close proximity to one another (Butler & Liner, 1997) to promote the sense of community expected of middle schools.

Characteristics Intended To Promote Social and Emotional Well-Being

Positive Climate

Although difficult to define, the importance of having a positive climate is widely touted in the middle school literature. It “serves as a backdrop for everything else” (Beane & Lipka, 1987); “creating the ‘right’ atmosphere or environment in a school can make or break the entire school program” (Payne, 2001, p.56). Many factors affect the environment or “feeling” one gets when entering a school: the physical structure and its state of repair and cleanliness, the attitude of the students and staff one encounters, the noise level, the lighting, and the pace of the schedule.

Extracurricular Activities

Students at this level should have the opportunity to participate in activities that are extensions of their current hobbies or that provide opportunities to try out and learn about new ones. Students can become members of the school band, choral group, chess club, yearbook committee, or any number of activities, including sports teams.

Promotion of Healthy Habits

The middle school should go beyond health education to promoting healthy habits throughout the school and providing health centers on site that are easily accessed and
confidential (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Ideally, the cafeteria provides nutritious meals and offers nutritious snacks instead of junk food (NMSA, 2003).

**Advisory Programs**

Middle school adolescents are changing emotionally, socially, and physically. They need educators who are responsive to these changes (NMSA, 1995). To ensure that at least one teacher knows each student well enough to offer guidance, time can be provided in the school day for advisory programs. During this time, small groups of students meet with a staff member to share problems or get advice; values education and academic assistance can also be provided.

**Characteristics Intended To Promote a Well-Educated Student Body**

**Interdisciplinary Teaching**

Teams usually consist of one teacher from each of the major subject areas: math, English, social studies, and science. Some schools include reading or foreign language teachers. Ideally, rather than teach their own subject matter in isolation, the team works together to connect students’ experiences to help them “see the wholeness that exists in learning” (Sevick, 1989, p.19).

**Flexible Scheduling**

Flexible scheduling is intended to assist teachers in organizing their schedules to teach thematically (NMSA, 2002 September). This allows students an opportunity to do projects and hands-on activities. Changes can be made to allow time for laboratory experiments in science, poetry readings in English, or other activities that take longer than a 45-minute class period. Teachers are not rigidly tied to a “master schedule.” It also allows time for students to build relationships with teachers.
**Emphasis on Methods and Media**

Ideally, middle school teachers not only use the community and its resources to teach content, they focus on methods and media (Clark & Clark, 1997; McGlasson, 1973) to capture the imaginations and interest of the young adolescent. Middle school children learn by doing (California Department of Education, 1987). They need teachers who use a variety of techniques (George, Stevenson, Thomason, & Beane, 1992) and an array of media including televisions, computers, overhead projectors, and slide shows.

**Specially Prepared Teachers**

In the ideal middle school, teachers understand adolescent development (Beane & Brodhamen, 2001) and the very different needs of the adolescent student because their teacher education programs have specially prepared them. Middle school teachers should be trained to understand the middle school philosophy and how to work on teams (Erb & Stevenson, 1998) so they can work cooperatively with their peers and teach in an interdisciplinary fashion (NMSA, 2002, September). They need to understand how to prepare multi-media presentations, design and use alternate forms of assessment, and group students cooperatively to meet the needs of all.

**Professional Development**

Although they already have a great deal of experience on which to draw, teachers benefit from professional development activities focusing on the cognitive, social, physical, and emotional needs of adolescents. The National Middle School Association (2002, September) in their position paper on curriculum integration also recommends training for teachers so that subject matter classes are not taught as discreet disciplines.
Control of the Characteristics

Supportive Administrators

The support of administrators is important (George et al., 1992). In the ideal middle school, administrators are more than disciplinarians; they are instructional leaders offering guidance, support, resources, and assistance. They work with teachers to improve their teaching (Leithwood, 1990) and offer creative solutions to problems. They usually have the final say in how the ideals promulgated by the literature and described above turn into the reality of the middle school. Therefore, their assistance and support are necessary to make the middle school concept work.

Team Planning Time

Finally, middle schools provide teams of teachers with time during the day to meet. This instructional planning time is key (George et al., 1992). The interdisciplinary team affects and has control over many of the other characteristics. How the team organizes their planning time and the activities and concerns they decide to focus on affect the students, the curriculum, and even the environment. Ideally, the team uses this time to meet with parents and students, plan interdisciplinary units around a topic or theme, and discuss the logistics involved in organizing the learning of a group of students (including field trips, awards ceremonies, and locker times). Like the support of administrators, the activities the team chooses to focus on during their planning time exert control over how the ideals of the middle school unfold to become the reality.
Everything Old Is New Again

The characteristics which became known as “the middle school philosophy” are not new. They had been promoted for the junior high school decades before the advent of the middle school, but did not gain widespread acceptance until the mid 1980s.

The Characteristics Designed To Promote a Sense of Community Are Not New

One of the most important characteristics of the middle school, grouping students into smaller communities, was advocated for the junior high school system decades ago, as were increased family and community involvement (Bossing & Cramer, 1965). Having students participate in decision-making (Eichhorn, 1966; McGlasson, 1973), especially for their own clubs and organizations (Eichhorn) was also recommended. As early as 1922, a guide to developing a junior high school recommended self-government by students “as an aid to the development of their own moral character at the time and as preparation for a more intelligent and fair minded citizenship when they arrive at their maturity” (Van Denberg, 1922, p. 327). It was also suggested that teachers participate in school governance, which was seen as the wave of the future (Van Denberg). Special requirements for the junior high school facility were recommended: open spaces, good lighting, good ventilation, hands-on laboratory equipment, outdoor areas for physical activity, and modern technology (Bossing & Cramer).

The Characteristics Designed To Develop Students’ Physical and Emotional Well-Being Are Not New

The importance of environment was also acknowledged decades ago.

Educational climate is of vital concern since whatever philosophy is adopted will have an influence on student behavior in all facets of school life. Although the concept of environment is intangible, it has an appreciable effect on everyone within the school; it is similar to the incidental music of a well directed motion
picture whose purpose is to subtly create an appropriate mood for the audience (Eichhorn, 1966, p. 58).

The importance of extracurricular activities was stressed because of their value “in the development of mentally healthy, socially competent, and adjusted personalities” (Bossing & Cramer, 1965, p. 168). These programs were considered so beneficial it was recommended they be done during school time without cost to the students (Bossing & Cramer). The importance of health was also recognized before the onset of the middle school. As early as 1918, the NEA’s (National Education Association) Committee on the Reorganization of Secondary Education said, “To discharge the duties of life and to benefit from leisure, one must have good health. The health of the individual is essential also to the vitality of the race and to the defense of the Nation” (Bureau of Education, 1928, p. 4). It was recommended that each teacher take charge of a group of students and be responsible for their general health (Van Denberg, 1922), which is not unlike the philosophy behind the current advisory programs.

**The Characteristics Intended To Develop a Well-Educated Student Body Are Not New**

Almost 90 years ago it was suggested that teachers integrate the curriculum by teaching their skills using the subject matter of other classes (Van Denberg, 1922). Anyone familiar with the early educational system is aware that Dewey (1938; 1959) promoted a method that involved students in real, integrated learning almost a century ago. He also suggested that time schedules were unnecessary (1938), a precursor to flexible scheduling, a concept promoted again almost 50 years ago (Manlove & Beggs, 1965). Specially preparing teachers to teach adolescents was also a concern.

The failure of teacher education institutions and state departments of education to provide special programs for the adequate preparation and certification of
professional personnel to teach and guide youth during early adolescence has caused major problems in staffing junior high schools with competent principals, consultants, counselors, and teachers (Bossing & Cramer, 1965, p. 315).

Finally, teaching using a variety of methods, including organizing students into cooperative work groups and trying out their ideas in real world settings (Van Denberg), was recommended many decades ago.

The New Characteristics

The only middle school characteristics which appear to be new are having teachers utilize a variety of media to teach, supportive administrators, and team planning time. The importance of using a variety of media was likely not mentioned in the junior high school literature because there was not much media available to teachers at that time. The importance of the support of administrators did not appear in my examination of early literature either, likely because at that time, the principal was expected to be the driving force and maker of policy, rather than the instructional leader and supporter of staff innovations. Finally, the importance of team planning time was not mentioned in the early literature because, although there was mention of dividing students into smaller communities, the team concept was not yet formed so there was no need to provide time for teams to meet.

Characteristics of (Interdisciplinary) Teaming

Teaming is not only new, it is one of the most important characteristics of the middle school. Without teaming, a middle school does not exist. Without teaming, students do not have a small community of learners who are known by a small number of teachers; without teaming, the curriculum can not be integrated; and without teaming, there can be no flexibility in changing the daily schedule to meet an individual teacher’s or class’s need.
I have laid the groundwork for an understanding of the middle school by explaining what its proponents consider the “ideal” characteristics. I turn now to an explanation of the “ideal” characteristics of high functioning teams to impart an understanding of the workings of this characteristic, which is central to implementing the other characteristics of the middle school philosophy.

Teaming is difficult to do successfully, but central to turning the ideals promoted in the literature into reality. There are many characteristics and activities indicative of team success. A weakness of the important tomes of the middle school philosophy, including *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1982) and *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), is that they promote interdisciplinary teaming, but do not mention the activities necessary for successful team functioning. For an understanding of teams and organizations, group processes, and group dynamics, I had to turn to an examination of management theory. One of the purposes of this study was to gain an understanding of how the reality of interdisciplinary teams and their functioning connect to the ideals described in the middle school and organizational theory literature, so this understanding of successful team characteristics is necessary.

Middle school teams generally consist of two to six teachers all of whom teach the same students and are given time within the school day to meet. Ideally, they use this time to discuss their students, plan for interdisciplinary units, and organize the logistics associated with implementing the characteristics of middle schools explained in the preceding section. “Teaming is more than putting two to five people in adjacent classrooms and giving them a common planning time. . .High team performance requires
training, practice, and support structures” (Trimble & Irvin, 1996, p. 53). Organizational theory tells us how teams should function. Ideally, teams set goals, have decision-making mechanisms in place, communicate effectively, define roles, are carefully composed, run organized meetings, plan to improve their own practice, have administrative support, and understand the phases of teams. Each of these factors is described briefly below.

**Goal Setting**

Organizational theorists and middle school researchers (Bullock & Pedersen, 1999; Lee, 1997) recommend that teams set goals. Goal setting is important for creating high performance teams (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). Teachers on teams that set goals use classroom practices that lead to increased student achievement (Trimble & Peterson, 1999). If the members do not need to coordinate or if they have no goal, they are not a team, they are a group of individuals. Teams need to have a common purpose (Katzenback & Smith, 1993). They will be more successful if they choose this purpose consciously (Kain, 1995). The goals must be clear (Shonk, 1982) so that members can understand and follow them. Allocating the resources to meet these goals is also important (White, 1997). Teams need a mission statement (Gallagher-Polite, 1997; George et al., 1992), which they use to define their goals. Although the literature frequently mentions the importance of this shared vision, it is acknowledged that the mission statements of middle schools are usually written by a few members of the faculty, quickly accepted by all, filed away, and forgotten (Swaim, 2001).
**Decision-Making Mechanisms**

High functioning teams have decision-making mechanisms in place (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). They decide beforehand when individuals can make decisions and when team input and consensus are necessary (Raynor, 1996).

**Communication Skills**

Teams need to know how to communicate clearly and they should decide how, when, and with whom to communicate (Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Shonk, 1982). Middle school teams need to learn not only to communicate with each other, but with other teams (Kain, 1999).

**Clearly Defined Roles**

Authors of both middle school literature and management theory texts believe that teams need clearly defined roles (Gallagher-Polite, 1997), though how those roles are determined does not appear to be significant. Team members can decide to share roles or choose the roles they feel most comfortable fulfilling (Kain, 1999). They can even rotate roles periodically (Bowen, Rogers, & Hainline, 1997). Rotating roles is especially helpful because of the time commitment required from the leader (Ehman, 1995).

Members must be held accountable for their actions and it should be clearly stated who will do what by when (Raynor, 1996). Members need to know which tasks they are responsible for performing (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993), the limits of their roles, and the ways in which their roles complement and conflict with their teammates’ roles (Shonk, 1982). Members must be sure to fulfill their responsibilities because problems arise when team members do not feel that others are pulling their own weight (White, 1997).
The role of leader is most widely discussed in the literature. Both middle school researchers and authors of management theory texts recommend that there be a team leader. Seventy-one percent of middle school teams have team leaders (Hackmann et al., 2002). The leader’s job is to establish a vision, create change, and unleash talent (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). Group effectiveness can be hampered by inability to accept a leader (Crow & Pounder, 2000). Real teams, though, do not necessarily need a single leader (Katzenbach, 1998).

**Careful Composition**

Thought should be put into the composition of teams (Laron & LaFasto, 1989). Composition affects the team’s ability to integrate the curriculum (Schumacher, 1995), make decisions, run parent conferences, and allocate duties. Complementary skills are important (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993); each member should have strengths they can contribute to assist the group in performing its functions. Team members’ philosophical and attitudinal differences also affect their ability to function (Bowen et al., 1997). Membership should be homogenous enough for the group to get along together, but not so much alike that they have the same views and ideas (Hackman, 1983). On the other hand, some research has shown that more homogenous groups work better together (Crow & Pounder, 2000).

**Organized Team Meetings**

High functioning teams run organized meetings. They meet regularly (Bullock & Pedersen, 1999; Shonk, 1982) and have effective interaction habits (Smith, 1992; Raynor, 1996). They prepare an agenda (Raynor; Rottier, 2000) and stick to it. They have a plan
for problem solving: they analyze problems, collect data, develop solutions, implement solutions, and then evaluate the solutions (Rottier).

**Plans for Improving**

Effective teams work on improving their performance: “the team that began great didn’t start off great--it learned how to produce extraordinary results” (Senge, 1990, p. 4). Teams do this by focusing on improving their work methods and processes and by learning from their experiences (Raynor, 1996). They need to reflect on how they are performing (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Groups almost never reflect (Hackman, 1983; Smith, 1992), but when they do, their performance improves (McGrath, 1984). Other methods for improving performance are participating in team-building activities or conducting inter-group confrontation meetings (Daft, 1983). Making teams aware of the obstacles to growth: isolation, competition with other teams, and loss of objectivity (K. M. Brown, 2001) can also assist them in growing.

**Administrative Support**

Teams work best when they have administrative support (Raynor, 1996). Ideally, administrators provide resources and training (Hackman, 1983), as well as information and rewards (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). They also are able and willing to step in and assist when conflicts arise (Burkhardt, 1997). Administrative support is the only characteristic that is both a characteristic of the ideal middle school and a characteristic of high performance teams. This makes sense because the support of those in power is undoubtedly helpful in most aspects of life.
**Knowledge of Team Phases**

Teams should be taught that there are phases through which they progress (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Pickler, 1992; Smith, 1992). The process of going from working independently to working as a team takes time and effort (Pickler). It may help teams to know there is a process and they are not expected to achieve results immediately. It takes about 3 years for teams to become satisfied with their approach (Lee, 1997). It is important to allow teams this time to mature (White, 1997).

**The Reality of Interdisciplinary Teaming**

Before I began this dissertation study, I knew, based on the pilot study and my experiences as a member of a middle school team, that the reality does not always align with the ideal. This may be due to a lack of understanding of team processes and group dynamics or lack of time. I thought it unlikely that all the ideal characteristics of teaming would be present in any one teaching team, but in a study of interdisciplinary team teachers, it is important to have an understanding of ideal team functioning.

**Characteristics of Urban Settings**

The characteristics of the “ideal” middle school and the recommendations for “ideal” team functioning, which have been described in previous sections, do not take place in a vacuum. The context in which the middle school operates has an effect. The complexities of the urban setting impact the students, the teachers, and the school. **Difficulties of Urban Settings**

Although the term “urban” has been used as a code word for a particular population rather than a geographic area (Noguera, 2003), when it is used in this study to
describe schools, it simply denotes school districts in densely populated areas which must provide services to a large number of students. Of course, substance abuse, poverty, low self-esteem, disabilities, depression, illiteracy, unemployed parents, child abuse, and sexual activity (DeYoung, 1993) are often present in densely populated areas, as are high crime, parent apathy, and child neglect. These factors, as well as political corruption, instability in leadership, and administrative interference (Noguera) affect the urban school’s ability to function. New immigrants, neighborhood instability, housing affordability, accessibility of healthcare, and welfare reform (Noguera) are also factors. Macroeconomic policies, which regulate the minimum wage, job availability, tax rates, federal transportation, and affordable housing create conditions in cities that affect education as well (Anyon, 2005). Although many of these are external factors, they cannot be ignored because they have an impact on not only the school system, but the classroom, the students, their teachers, and the middle school itself.

Urban schools often have insufficient funding, too few qualified teachers, low academic achievement, buildings in disrepair, outdated technology, and large classes (Anyon, 2005). Inadequate teacher education has also been pinpointed as a problem in inner city schools, as has the fact that research is not used in teacher education programs (Smylie & Kahne, 1997). Schools in poverty-stricken areas teach a captured population—they can not go elsewhere for better services because of lack of funds or transportation (Noguera, 2003). Parents are unable to force those who oversee these poverty-stricken schools to improve them because poor people have not only less economic capital, but less social capital, which affects their ability to influence those in power (Noguera). New urban teachers encounter isolation, being hired late, last minute changes in teaching
assignments, and placement outside of their experience (Freiberg, Zbikowski, & Ganser, 1994).

**Suggestions for Teachers in Urban Settings**

One author, writing in the National Education Association paper, stated his belief that the problems of education are really the problems of poverty and that society needs to tackle those problems if real changes are to occur in the classroom (Berliner, 2006). Still, other authors offer recommendations. Teachers in multicultural classrooms should learn their students’ language, do field experiences in multicultural classrooms, take multicultural courses, be open-minded, and learn about students’ families (Fuller, 1994). They should also take students’ cultural backgrounds into consideration (Bowers, 2000).

Schools should recruit teachers of color (Boyer & Baptiste, 1996; Fuller, 1994), or at least culturally sensitive teachers (Haberman, 1996). This is important because minority students’ individual identities are interwoven with their cultural identities (Cohen, 1993); they need schools genial to this development. Hiring teachers of color may assist parents in trusting the school. One study found that parents of color from all socioeconomic backgrounds distrusted the school, but upper class parents volunteered at the school to keep an eye on what was happening (Lareau, 1992). This interaction with the school was viewed positively by the teachers (who were unaware of why the parents volunteered). Recruiting ethnically diverse teachers may be difficult to do given that teachers of color said they encountered racism in their teacher education programs (Delpit, 1995).

Students whose first language is not English are either empowered or disempowered by their interactions with the educators in their school (Cummins, 1993).
These interactions are affected by how the minority students’ language and culture are integrated into the curriculum, how welcome the participation of the minority community is within the school, how students are motivated to use language to generate knowledge, and how educators become advocates for minority students (Cummins). There is concern, though, that teachers have become so focused on empowering students that they have shied away from expressing their own power and sharing their knowledge with students (Delpit, 1993). One way to empower students of color is to teach them the power code, which includes linguistic rules, ways of dressing, and presentation of self (Delpit, 1993). Other recommendations include exploring “the vast differences in interests, needs, desires, and identity that separate different minority groups from each other and from majority whites in educational settings” (McCarthy, 1993, p. 337).

Other strategies for assisting students from urban schools to become successful include involving students in problem solving, helping students to learn concepts rather than isolated facts, using technology to conduct research, and setting goals for behavior (Bowers, 2000). These last, of course, are strategies that would benefit students in suburban areas, as well. Perhaps most importantly, it is recommended that urban schools celebrate diversity, not simply tolerate it (Delpit, 1995). How much of this do our urban teachers understand? What is the reality of their classrooms?

**The Reality of the Urban Setting and This Study**

Although I have not focused on the benefits of urban living, it is only fair to note that the urban setting can have advantages. It can foster community because neighbors are so close. It can be rich in diversity and offers a variety of cultural experiences, including access to museums, libraries, and art galleries. Neither all of the problems
presented as hallmarks of urban life, nor all of the suggestions for its improvement were expected to be present in all participants’ middle schools. It is important, though, for the reader to have an understanding of the possible array of complexities involved in teaching in an urban middle school.

**Characteristics of Adolescents**

It is also important for the reader to have an understanding of the persons who attend these urban middle schools; adolescence is a unique period of life. The middle school student is generally in the midst of puberty, which is a time of rapid physical growth and changes, affecting each student at different times. The student is growing cognitively, as well. The authors of *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (NMSA, 1995) point out that middle school students have a wide range of intellectual development, are intensely curious, prefer active learning, are self-conscious, still rely on their parents for major decisions, and experience mood swings. They need physical activity, proper nutrition, and positive role models. They seek acceptance and independence. They experience hormonal changes causing restlessness and fatigue.

Finally, the environment of the middle school student at the beginning of this century is likely very different from the environment of previous generations of youth. Middle school students are being raised in the midst of “a society that at once denounces and glorifies sexual promiscuity and the use of illicit drugs” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). They are more likely than students of the past to be raised by someone other than a parent, or by a parent who is ill equipped to care for them.
In addition, they are bombarded by inappropriate mass media campaigns (NMSA, 1995) because of their spending power.

Students’ behaviors, wants, and needs are important to the work experiences of urban middle school teachers. Teachers explored, through the phenomenological interviews, how adolescents affect their work experiences.

**Contemporary Issues Facing the Urban Middle School Teacher on an Interdisciplinary Team**

I have explained the “ideal” characteristics of middle schools and the “ideal” characteristics of high functioning interdisciplinary teams, as well as the less than ideal characteristics that denote urban settings. When the “ideal” meets reality, conflicts can arise.

Middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams must contend with working with other teachers. Although the literature paints a picture of middle school teachers working cooperatively with each other to plan interdisciplinary units, the reality is often that personality conflicts and time constraints get in the way. Middle school teachers often have not been taught conflict resolution, team building, consensus making, or how to design the interdisciplinary units that they are expected to teach. Yet, they are put on teams and told to work together for the betterment of the students.

Although the middle school literature recommends that teachers encourage parental involvement, there are difficulties involved in dealing with families. Parents are sometimes incapable of taking care of themselves, never mind their children. Families with low incomes often have no mode of transportation to get to the school. Families dealing with substance abuse issues or child neglect issues often do not want to.
Other issues have to do with budgetary concerns. Funds are often not available to build special facilities or provide the clean, spacious, well-maintained environment that assists in building a positive climate. Health centers are often an unattainable ideal in middle schools. Funds to provide teachers the professional development necessary to learn how to incorporate a variety of methods and media into their lesson plans, not to mention the funds for the technology, are often not present. Although the ideal middle school offers a wide variety of extracurricular activities, these programs are generally the first to go when budget cuts are necessary. How do these realities affect the work experiences of urban middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams?

Finally, middle school literature advocates teachers and principals having the power to make changes; the reality is that many districts do not give power to their principals. Principals who do have power are often unwilling to give up some of their authority to allow teachers to participate in the decision-making process. In addition, they are often not the nurturers of their teaching staff that middle school proponents envision.

I have examined the ideal characteristics of the middle school as promoted by middle school advocates, the ideal characteristics of teaming as determined by organizational theory literature, the sometimes unstable conditions of the urban environment, the characteristics of the middle school adolescent, and how these ideals can interact with reality to create issues for urban middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams. Now I turn to an examination of the empirical research on the ideal characteristics of the middle school philosophy.
CHAPTER II
THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose of the Literature Review

The main purpose of the literature review was to see what conclusions researchers have drawn about middle school characteristics so I have organized this chapter of the literature review around them. In the following chapter I offer an explanation of the other purposes of the literature review which include how these research studies influenced my methodology and analysis.

Review of Research on the Characteristics of Middle Schools

Much research has been conducted in the middle school in the last 25 years. Most of this research can be organized under the umbrella of one of three categories: studies of particular student populations, studies of particular programs, or studies of one of the characteristics of middle schools introduced in the previous chapter. Because I have organized my studies around the characteristics of middle schools, this review will focus on this third category of the research. The review goes on to explore the benefits and drawbacks of these characteristics on teachers’ lives. It should be noted beforehand, that proponents of the middle school have been so successful in imprinting their model that they have even been successful in conceptualizing what the research should be.

Research on Small Learning Communities

A basic characteristic of middle schools is the dividing of students into small learning communities to “break up large bureaucratic school organizations into smaller more personable learning environments” (Erb & Stevenson, 1999, p. 49). Research supports the many benefits of doing so. Students in smaller learning communities have
increased academic engagement according to an analysis of data from 8,845 students in 377 middle schools participating in the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) (Lee & Smith, 1993). This study also found “a more equitable distribution of achievement” (p. 164) than in schools with larger student bodies. Another benefit, reported in a study of teams in their second year, is the reduction in difficulties involved in organizing a large group of students (Crow & Pounder, 2000).

Research identifying several factors impacting “how teachers function and regard the quality of their work lives” (Erb & Stevenson, 1999, p. 47), discovered that as the number of students on a team increases, the positive outcomes (parent contact, contact with resource staff, and coordination of assignments) decrease. Smaller learning communities are beneficial to teachers as well; results of surveys from 252 middle school teachers from 60 middle schools indicated that job satisfaction is related to student body size (Pook, 1981).

Placing students in smaller learning communities is not a uniquely American idea. A 6 month ethnographic study of a British middle school revealed that smaller student bodies allowed teachers to get to know all students, not just their own, better (Scheirer, 1981). Most studies do not indicate an exact “ideal” number, but the results of a 3 year longitudinal study of 97 middle schools in the process of restructuring (using the Turning Points philosophy) indicated that fewer than 120 students would be best (Felner et al., 1997).

The research for smaller learning communities is overwhelmingly positive and not dependent upon methodology or sample size. The studies explained here were survey studies with large groups of students (8845 for the Lee & Smith study in 1993) or
teachers (252 for the Pook study in 1981), as well as case studies of individual schools (Scheirer, 1981), and interviews and observations of 4 teams (Crow & Pounder, 2000). Each extolled the benefits of small learning communities.

**Research on Family Involvement**

Middle schools try to build strong relationships with families. Bringing parents into the school is intended to strengthen the school/home connection and help students realize that their families value education. Surveys of 661 fifth to eighth grade students and 501 parents from 10 schools in suburban areas found that home/school relationships deteriorate at the secondary level, and this may negatively impact student behavior (Thompson, 1981). The author concluded that some schools are not creating environments that welcome parent involvement, but that increased parental involvement is linked to improved student behavior. Although this study suggested that the schools are not welcoming, surveys of teachers in North Carolina indicated that the teachers perceived that parents felt welcomed in the school (Cobb, 1996). This could indicate that parents in this area of the country do feel welcome or it could indicate that the teachers’ perceptions do not match the parents’ perceptions.

Family involvement increases with teaming (Erb, 1992; Crow & Pounder, 2000) as do parental contacts (Thompson, Harper, King, Smith, & Strothbhn, 1997). An interview study with 200 teachers found that teachers on teams communicate more with parents (Erb). This finding was echoed in an analysis of surveys of 60 middle school teachers in teamed and nonteam schools, 30 middle school teachers and 30 junior high school teachers (Pounder, 1999). Teamed teachers knew more about their students’ academic and personal lives and communicated more frequently with parents.
Surveys of teachers and principals in Maine indicated that they want more parental involvement in decision-making (Brown, Perry, & McIntire, 1994); this includes decisions about the school’s mission, the curriculum, and community communications. Teachers may say they want more parental involvement and proponents of the middle school may encourage it, but a case study of a middle school in its first year of teaming revealed that when parents criticize the team, their involvement is seen as interference (Ehman, 1995). Parents do not feel middle schools are responsive to families’ needs according to a survey study with 4200 parents and community members (Williamson & Johnston, 1999). Studies of smaller populations, though, have found that parents are satisfied with the amount of communication from their children’s middle schools (Thompson et al., 1997).

The research, then, is inconclusive. Research conducted with teachers on middle school teams indicated that teachers communicate more with parents, research with parents echoed this, but other research conducted with parents indicated that schools still are not responsive to them. This could indicate that teachers are communicating more frequently to fulfill the principles of the middle school philosophy, but not about what parents want to hear.

**Research on Community Involvement**

Middle school advocates recommend involving students in the community and involving the community with the schools. Community Service Learning Projects (projects in which students perform a meaningful service for the community while engaged in learning) benefit students in a variety of ways (Beane & Lipka, 1984, 1987; Boyer, 1995). These projects give them an opportunity to work with people of many
ages and increase their self-esteem (Beane & Lipka, 1984). Community involvement can assist students in seeing the interconnectedness of community organizations and help build a sense of belonging to their entire community. Community engagement is academically important as well. According to a study of 49 middle schools in Virginia, schools in which teachers perceived that community engagement was high, student achievement in math was also high, as measured by the Virginia Standards of Learning Math Test (Parish, 2002).

Teachers and principals support community involvement, according to surveys of 152 teachers and 223 principals in Maine in which respondents indicated that they desire greater community involvement (Brown et al., 1994). An examination of schools in San Diego County found that community involvement can include partnerships with outside philanthropic agencies to provide workshops for parents, provision of space within schools so service agencies can provide counseling or health services to families, and use of college students as tutors (Chrispeels, 1993). This study also found that teachers can become involved in donating household items, clothing, and food to families in crisis and that strong ties to police and welfare departments assist families. Novel ideas for bringing the community and school together were shared during 22 interviews of teachers, administrators, and parent volunteers (Sanders & Epstein, 1998): The new principal of a middle school hosted get acquainted tea parties at outreach centers in the community and another school worked with a national volunteer organization to remodel a room within the school building for parent volunteers to relax and get a cup of coffee.

As with most of the research on the ideal characteristics of the middle school, the research on involving the community appears to be positive. One study, however, did
include a school whose efforts to involve the parents and community worked so well the advocacy group became strong and made demands on the school staff (Chrispeels, 1993).

**Research on Student Participation in Decision-Making**

Involving students in decision-making assists in establishing a sense of community. Many middle schools have a representative from the student body serving on the school’s management group which makes decisions regarding scheduling, the budget, and the myriad decisions that were once the sole purview of the principal. Students who have proven themselves responsible can serve on this body or be classroom representatives for the student council. Allowing students to vote for these representatives gives them an opportunity to have their voices heard. This is valuable practice for life, especially at a time when many adults are not exercising their right to vote. Surveys of 152 teachers and 223 principals in Maine indicated that they want students to participate in decisions about the school’s mission and goals, communicating with the community, and school-wide communication (Brown et al., 1994). The study also revealed, however, that teachers are not as supportive about student involvement in decisions about the curriculum. Student choice promotes student learning and motivation according to results of interviews and surveys with 36 teachers (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). This study described some of the choices teachers offer students: topics to study, reading material, assessments, activities, social arrangements, and procedures. Surveys of 1000 U.S. principals revealed that 37% of middle schools use a student advisory board to give feedback on the school’s meal program (Celebuski & Farris, 1996).

Teaching students how to make decisions is also important. This is particularly critical given that a study of 217 at-risk African American boys found that they often had
faulty decision-making abilities (Okwumabua, 1999). The faculty must also teach students how to use their power and understand that with empowerment comes responsibility, which some may not want or be ready for (McQuillan, 1995). Too much choice may overwhelm them, especially those who are not skilled in decision-making, or it “may allow unmotivated students to take the path of least resistance” (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000, p. 641) and choose the easiest assignments or classes, rather than challenge themselves. Teachers can also encourage students to become leaders. It is especially important to help minority students become classroom leaders (Bowers, 2000).

Most of the research on student empowerment focuses on student choice in the curriculum, rather than on student participation in school-wide decision-making. The dearth of research on a topic that is presented as so important in the middle school literature is disconcerting.

**Research on Teacher and Principal Empowerment**

Middle school advocates recommend that teachers and principals be given both the responsibility and the power to make the changes they feel are necessary to improve their schools. Researchers who used data from the Center for Prevention Research and Development Self-Study of 2,000 teachers and 23,000 students in 70 middle schools in Michigan concur: “it is the implementation of programs and practices at the classroom level that is most critical for improving student success” (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000a, p. 52). Therefore, teachers should be involved in decisions that affect curriculum and their classroom practices because they will have to implement the changes. Both teachers and administrators participating in an interview study of 200 staff members felt that better decisions were being made when teachers were given the authority to make
them (Erb, 1992). Positive results were also found after an examination of questionnaires from 2,741 middle school teachers in New Jersey, which revealed that teacher empowerment increased teachers’ perceptions of effectiveness (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). This study also found that reading and math achievement were related to empowerment.

Job satisfaction is related to teachers’ decision-making condition, meaning they have the authority to make the decisions they want to make (Thierback, 1981). Allowing teachers to make decisions may help sustain changes, as indicated by the results of a case study of 2 schools undergoing the transition from junior high schools to middle schools (Polite, 1995). This study revealed that changes are more likely to last if teachers participate in the decision-making. These results were similar to an in-depth interview study of 5 teachers which indicated that teachers’ uncertainty during the change process was due to their lack of participation in the decision-making process (Meister & Nolan, 2001). These results were also born out by a case study of a successful change process that included teachers in the decision-making process (Lundt & Vanderpan, 1995).

Organizational theorists, however, warn that if teachers are going to be allowed to make decisions, then district level personnel must step back and let them. If organizations (schools) are going to hand over control to managers (administrators and teachers) and expect them to take risks (make changes) then they must be willing to forgive and forget when errors are made (Senge, 1990). Otherwise, people will become unwilling to take risks. An author who examined teachers’ work in an historical context warned that input from teachers should only be sought if it is truly going to be considered (Spencer, 2001). When teachers are given the opportunity to provide input, which is then not considered, “they can become disenchanted and may begin to wonder whether their
voices are truly heard and, if heard, whether their voices really have the power to influence policy” (Spencer, p. 823).

All of the research examined, whether gathered through teacher interviews, case studies, or questionnaires, indicated that giving teachers and principals the power to make changes is important because teachers were more likely to implement changes they had a hand in establishing and they were happier in their work when they were allowed to participate in decision-making. The reality is that it does not always occur. Fewer than half of the seventh and eighth grade middle school teachers surveyed in North Carolina felt that they had input in making decisions (Cobb, 1996). Some administrators are not happy about having to share their power. At decision-making meetings teachers and principals share power and their votes have equal weight, but principals can use their power to “get back” at teachers who do not follow their lead when casting their votes.

Research on Specially Designed Facilities

Advocates believe middle schools should have more open spaces, hands-on laboratory equipment, and outdoor areas for physical activity. Schools should be fully equipped with modern technology so that students can make media presentations. Teaming is supported when teams are assigned their own space (Kruse & Louis, 1995), whereas teams that do not have their own spaces do not get close enough to bond (K. M. Brown, 2001). A recent survey of 14,107 middle school principals, however, indicated that only 26% of teams have rooms that are adjacent (Hackmann et al., 2002).

Given the fact that the middle school literature frequently recommends specially designed facilities, it is interesting to note that there is not much research indicating its significance. A case study in Virginia, however, did discover that students’ achievement
scores and attendance improved after renovations (Tuttle, 2002). According to results of the surveys and interviews, teachers’ job satisfaction and morale also improved, as did student perceptions of social relationships.

**Research on Establishing a Positive Climate**

I think most people would agree that a positive climate is important in any environment, but how does middle school literature define this intangible quality? School climate was defined in a dissertation examining the affects of school climate on student achievement (based on the Virginia State Test) as the teachers’ perceptions of collegial leadership, teacher professionalism, academic press, and community involvement (Parish, 2002). This correlational study found a significant relationship between school climate and achievement on standardized tests in English and math. Climate has also been defined as spoken and unspoken presses in the environment: press toward parent involvement, press toward parent knowledge of school, press toward parent power and influence at school, actual parent involvement, and parent/student commitment to school policies (Thompson, 1981).

However climate is defined, it is probably understood that students need to feel safe in their school, safe from violence and from accidents caused by the deteriorating condition of the school building. Surveys of middle school teachers in North Carolina found that more than 60% felt that their school was a safe place (Cobb, 1996). Unfortunately, the reality is that buildings are often neither safe, nor in good condition. Another survey, this one of 2,227 middle school students, also in North Carolina, found that 20% of students have taken a weapon to school, 3% have taken a gun, and 66% have been in a physical fight (North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 1996).
Another safety concern is that many school buildings are old and in need of repair. School-site safety surveys of 27 schools in Georgia discovered that a significant relationship existed between a building’s age and its safety (Chan & Morgan, 1996). A study of a program designed to improve school climate revealed that it is possible to improve school climate (Kenney & Butler, 1993). It is, however, a long-term process.

**Research on Involvement in Extracurricular Activities**

The ideal middle school provides students opportunities to participate in activity programs, clubs, and associations. These activities, and sports teams too, assist students in learning how to be part of a team, how to get along with different personalities, and how to create a vision and make it become a reality. These personal qualities will be beneficial to them, not just in their middle school years, but throughout their lives.

In their position paper on physical education for children, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2001, July) espoused their belief that “physical education plays a critical role in educating the whole student” because it helps the student understand the importance of an active lifestyle, being more physically fit, being alert, developing motor skills, learning life-time leisure activities, and being motivated academically. Physical education can also help students learn how to cooperate, become more social, develop a positive self-image, and solve problems. There are physical benefits as well: prevention of disease, improved mental health, and longer life (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2001, July). These benefits are important enough that at least one researcher has suggested that physical education should be incorporated into the core interdisciplinary classes (Placek, 1992).
The National Association of Secondary School Principals (1975) is another organization that expresses the belief that activity programs are an important part of students’ experiences because they give students opportunities to organize and plan, take on leadership roles, get recognition, and recreate. The Association does not believe that student participation in these programs should be tied to classroom performance, but to attendance and behavior because they are separate from the classroom and important in their own right. These beliefs are not shared by all administrators. The American Association of School Administrators (1985) surveyed 1,500 (400 responded) administrators and discovered that the majority believe that the way to raise standards in schools is to restrict extracurricular activities to nonclassroom time or limit them to students with high grade point averages.

Encouraging students to participate in extracurricular activities was one of the components of a program examined during a 6 month case study with a middle school characterized by violence and a bad reputation (Malloy & Rayle, 2000). It was discovered that student discipline problems decreased and parental involvement increased after the program was implemented. There are other benefits to after school programs. According to a survey study of 125 African American students in Chicago: “Students in all programs reported preferring the affective context in after-school programs to the affective context experienced during the school day” (Kahne, Nagaoka, Brown, O’Brien, Quinn, & Thiede, 2001, p. 11). However, the study also found that programs varied in the level of support they provided for student development. Some programs are fun and enjoyable for students, but do not provide the development and opportunities for teamwork desired for extracurricular activities.
It should be noted that although the research regarding the benefits of extracurricular activities is positive, budgetary concerns often mean that they do not exist. The reality is that these programs are often the first to go when cuts must be made. And, as one study pointed out, these programs do not affect a large percentage of students. According to research examining 24 middle schools in California only about 5.5% of a school’s population participated in them and they were offered an average of three times a week for about 75 minutes (Powers, Conway, McKenzie, Sallis, & Marshall, 2002).

**Research on the Promotion of Healthy Habits**

The National Middle School Association (1995) deems assisting students to be healthy one of the purposes of schooling. The importance of the connection between health and education is promoted by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) as well:

> Teachers find that many of their students are inattentive and disengaged from the learning process. Although good health does not guarantee that students will be interested in learning, ample evidence suggests that the absence of good health lowers students’ academic performance (p. 61).

In short, students who are not in good health do not learn well and poor health practices cost money, which decreases the money available for education (Schultz, 2001). If students are healthy, they are less likely to be absent which also affects learning.

Health education should include the importance of abstaining from risky behaviors. A survey of 2,227 students in North Carolina middle schools discovered that 59% have imbibed alcohol, 19% have sniffed glue or paint to get high, 3% have used cocaine, and 53% have smoked cigarettes (North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 1996). Students should be educated about nutrition (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 1975; Manning, 2001), their bodies, exercise,
sexually transmitted diseases (Manning), and that their choices affect their health (Schultz, 2001). This education is necessary because survey research revealed that although 25% of students consider themselves overweight, 40% are dieting and 7%, predominantly girls, have used laxatives or vomiting as a way to control their weight (North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 1996).

Other surveys indicated that schools do provide this education. Ninety-nine percent of schools provide students with nutrition education, 97% cover the relationship between diet and health, 96% cover choosing healthy foods, 94% cover reading food labels, 93% cover the link between diet and disease, and 89% cover eating disorders (Celebuski & Farris, 1996). There is, however, only so much education a school can do to help promote good health habits. A Norwegian study (Bere, Veierød, Bjelland, & Klepp, 2006) discovered that providing students with free fruits and vegetables at school increased their intake of these foods throughout the day. This same study found, however, that an educational program did not affect students’ choices of healthier foods. This is not surprising given that a recent review of research on young people’s healthy eating habits discovered that teachers were not usually considered as sources of information regarding eating habits (Shepherd, Harden, Rees, Brunton, Garcia, Oliver, & Oakley, 2006). The influence of the home environment is likely more important.

Middle schools should also promote safety (Manning, 2001; NMSA, 1995) because surveys of 2,227 middle school students indicated that they do not practice safe behaviors: 11% of students in a North Carolina survey rarely or never wear their seatbelts, 40% have ridden in a car driven by someone drinking alcohol, and 75% do not wear their bicycle helmets (North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 1996).
Again, because of budgetary concerns, lack of space, or lack of personnel, the ideals recommended by middle school proponents and researchers often do not exist.

**Research on Advisory Programs**

Adolescence is a unique period; middle school students are changing emotionally, socially, and physically. They need educators who are responsive to these changes (NMSA, 1995) and able to guide them. They need moral values included in their school education (California Department of Education, 1987; NMSA, 1995) because they have less supervision at home and fewer role models than students of the past.

The formation of advisory groups has been recommended to assist students. Groups should contain 10 to 12 students (MacLaury & Gratz, 2002) and one staff member, which can include teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, or other adult members of the school community. Survey research comparing students in advisory groups to those who were not indicated that there were at least two important benefits: Students who participated in advisory groups were more likely to communicate with a teacher about their feelings and seek help when they needed it (MacLaury & Gratz). Students also perceived that their school behavior had improved, which is important because this affects not only their current behavior, but their future behavior. After their case study of 6 middle schools’ advisory programs, researchers found that advisory programs provided “the sense of community and care that changes the school climate” (Anfara & Brown, 2001, 16). These authors recommended that programs have goals, staff be provided with training, time to meet be built into the schedule, everyone be involved in planning, and students’ right to privacy be respected.
Authors of middle school guides suggest that there are six foci advisory programs can take: advocacy, communication, skills, invigoration, academic, or administrative (Knowles & Brown, 2000). Programs can also be directed at improving interpersonal communication, building self-assessment skills, teaching decision-making techniques, or developing problem solving (MacLaury & Gratz, 2002). Enhancing students’ self-esteem is often an important component of these programs (Beane & Lipka, 1987), as well.

Although middle school advocates have been recommending advisory programs for many years and many schools have instituted these kinds of programs, research indicated that parents still did not feel that their children were well known by a faculty member (Williamson & Johnston, 1999). This problem may be due to the fact that many advisory programs are not run as recommended, they simply function as a homeroom (Anfara & Brown, 2001) or a study hall. The research on the effects of well-run advisory programs is positive; however, because of the difficulty with implementation, it appears that these programs are not always run as designed.

**Research on Interdisciplinary Teaching**

Interdisciplinary teaching is an important component of the middle school concept designed to assist students in seeing the connections that exist in learning. Teachers on interdisciplinary teams collaborate with each other (Powell & Mills, 1995) to design thematic or interdisciplinary units. Interdisciplinary teaching and integrated curriculum can be viewed along a continuum (Applebee, Burroughs, & Cruz, 2000) and teams of teachers may fall anywhere along the continuum.

There are benefits for both teachers and students with interdisciplinary teaming. One benefit for students is increased learning. In an interview study in South Dakota,
teachers indicated that they believed students learned more and knew the goals and objectives better when they were taught thematically; interviews of the students indicated that they believed they should always be taught thematically (Lee, 1997). A benefit for teachers is the collaboration (Erb, 1992) and the opportunity to try out new ideas on colleagues (Clark & Clark, 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1997). Working collaboratively with colleagues reinvigorates their thinking (Ehman, 1995). One researcher found in his examination of an interdisciplinary team that during these moments of collaboration and collegiality teachers shared powerful stories of student success (Dorsch, 1996).

Teaching in an interdisciplinary fashion is not easy. A field study conducted with 23 K-12 teachers working on 7 teams in 6 schools in Virginia indicated that for teachers to teach in an interdisciplinary fashion many conditions were necessary (Hange & Rolfe, 1995). These findings were echoed in a case study of a sixth grade team (Martin, 1999). There must be visible administrative support, release time, and teams should be made up of volunteers (Hange & Rolfe; Martin). Another study, conducted in Florida as part of a practicum, included observations, interviews, and surveys on team effectiveness, agreed that teachers need administrative support to teach in an interdisciplinary fashion and added time and an awareness of other’s subject matters (Sevick, 1989) as important conditions. It is easier for teachers on the team to make connections if they are aware of what is happening in the classrooms of other teachers. Therefore, Sevick suggested that teams use a grid of subject matter content to assist teachers in determining where connections can be made. She suggested that teachers reinforce the skills taught in other classrooms and make casual references to the content of other classes. To assist in making these connections, a sixth grade team from Kansas that chronicled their progress
recommended that teachers keep in their classroom, and periodically review, the district guidelines for their teammates’ subjects (Bowen et al., 1997). Another way to facilitate interdisciplinary teaching and to decrease the amount of time teachers spend planning, is to use a school-wide team planning form (Trimble & Peterson, 1999). Teachers are then not responsible for individual lesson plans. Another tactic for overcoming lack of time is for teachers to design and share prepackaged units (Rye, Campbell, & Bardwell, 1999) which address their state standards (Rottier, 2000).

In addition, authors recommended that the interdisciplinary units start small and be focused on goals so that they do not become just a collection of activities (Hange & Rolfe, 1995). This is facilitated if teachers have an understanding of and have been trained in more than one subject matter (Hargreaves, 1986). For teams to be successful at integrating the curriculum, teachers should focus on student learning, accept the philosophy that all children can learn, collaborate, and publicly discuss what they do in their classrooms (Kruse & Louis, 1995). Researchers who studied a middle school in its second year of teaming (Crow and Pounder, 2000) also recommended continuing professional development for team members. Individual student progress should be monitored and alternative assignments offered to increase motivation and provide opportunities for student creativity (Hange & Rolfe).

Teaching this way can not be rushed. According to results from a case study involving 80 staff members during their first year of teaming in a Midwestern middle school (Ehman, 1995), interdisciplinary teaching is unlikely to happen in the first year because teachers are so busy with other business. The teachers felt, however, that they would develop interdisciplinary units in time.
Although advocates of the middle school extol the virtues of interdisciplinary teaching, it is frequently not occurring in middle schools. An examination of data from the Center for Prevention Research and Development School Improvement Self-Study found that interdisciplinary teaching, which was referred to as “essential to middle grades instruction” (Flowers et al., 2000a, p. 54), occurred less than monthly in the 70 schools examined. In addition, a recent survey of 14,107 middle school principals reported that curriculum integration was practiced about 14% of the time, although thematic approaches were used 21% of the time (Hackmann et al., 2002). These results were similar to a multi-site qualitative case study of 3 middle schools in Philadelphia, which discovered that interdisciplinary teaching did not occur frequently (K. M. Brown, 2001).

Interdisciplinary teaching is not happening for many reasons. The risk of one subject becoming subservient to another (Hammerness & Moffett, 2000; Palmer, 1995) keeps many educators from trying it, as does the fear of teaching the unknown (Palmer). There is also concern about the lack of research examining how student achievement is affected by interdisciplinary teaching (Wineburg & Grossman, 2000). Books on the subject do not describe actual lessons or what actually should be occurring in the classroom (Wineburg & Grossman) which may also keep educators from attempting it. Other difficulties associated with interdisciplinary teaching include: administrative expectations that a specific curriculum will be taught, teachers who are unfamiliar with alternative methods, and teachers not trained to teach in an interdisciplinary fashion (Rye et al., 1999). The fact that these complexities are often not recognized (California Department of Education, 1987) by administration may also be a factor. Of course, another factor keeping many from even trying it is that it is not easy to do (Palmer).
Middle school advocates want topics that meet state requirements, include important skills, and interest students to be developed (Vars, 1997). An examination of Internet messages on web pages designed to promote dialog between teachers planning interdisciplinary units revealed that teachers’ main concerns were where and how to make connections because they were being asked to make these changes without support (Siskin, 2000). Part of the problem may also be that teams devote so much time to parent conferences and logistics that there is no time left to plan these units (Ehman, 1995).

The studies cited to support the importance of interdisciplinary teaching included observations, personal reflections, case studies, self-studies, interviews, and surveys; they were conducted in Kansas, Florida, Philadelphia, Virginia, and South Dakota; they were conducted in high schools and middle schools. Despite these differences, they all indicated the importance of connecting the curriculum and pointed out the difficulties involved in doing so. This is one area in which the literature addressed the difficulties and did not simply paint an idealistic picture that does not compare to the reality.

**Research on Flexible Scheduling**

A key component of teaming is flexible scheduling so that teams do not have to divide the day into 45-minute subject matter blocks. Research revealed several benefits to block scheduling. An interview study of teachers from 2 middle schools indicated that teachers perceived that block scheduling positively affected student learning (D. F. Brown, 2001). That block scheduling is important and its absence detrimental to teams was revealed in interviews and observations of 4 teams: “Lack of complete block scheduling repeatedly hampered the coordination efforts, planning and decision options, and effectiveness of the teams” (Crow & Pounder, 2000, p. 244). Results were similar
Flexible scheduling often leads to block scheduling which means much longer (usually double length) class periods. At least one group of teachers did not find this beneficial. These teachers did not perceive that students learned twice as much even though their class periods were twice as long (Hammerness & Moffett, 2000). Evidence from another study also indicated that flexible scheduling may not be advantageous. An analysis of 1988 NELS data on 12,410 students found that flexible scheduling had a negative impact on math achievement (Shouse, 1998). The effects were worse for students in urban schools.

The findings, then, for flexible scheduling are mixed. How does one decide if flexible scheduling is truly beneficial? How does one compare the negative findings of the Shouse (1998) study which included data from 12,410 students to the interviews of 10 teachers from 2 middle schools in the D. F. Brown (2001) study or the observations of 1 middle school in the Thomas (1997)? Perhaps the best idea is to let each school’s own management team make the decision (Craig, 1995).

**Research on Using a Variety of Methods and Media**

Middle school proponents recommend less emphasis on content and more emphasis on methods and media. They want students to be taught in mixed-ability groups. They want teachers to learn new teaching techniques, lecture less and instead use cooperative activities and pose problems in such a way that students are excited and motivated to discover the answers on their own to assist them in becoming life-long
learners. They want students involved in “authentic teaching and learning practices” (Lewis, 2000, K6), conducting investigations, and applying problem solving techniques.

Students have access to a wider variety of media than ever before in their home lives, so multi-media presentations in school are more likely to hold their interest and attention. Therefore, middle school teachers should teach using all of the media available to them, as well as a variety of teaching methods and assessments. Some of these methods are intended to allow student choice, give adolescents a sense of being in charge of their own educations, and provide a feeling of empowerment. Middle school advocates recommend that assessment go beyond paper and pencil tests to projects, video presentations, performances, portfolios, and assignments designed by the students themselves. Other alternative assessments include products, performance tasks, personal communications, observations (Hange & Rolfe, 1995), debates, authentic writing, and mapping (Knowles & Brown, 2000). Research with teams indicated that when new methods of evaluating students were incorporated into the curriculum they increased student creativity and motivation, as reported by both students and teachers in follow-up interviews (Hange & Rolfe). One strategy teachers can use is teaching students to use graphic organizers. Teachers believe that graphic organizers make them more organized and facilitate student learning (Culbert, Flood, Windler, & Work, 1998).

Although using a variety of media is encouraged, difficulties exist for teachers and technology, which does not always work and is not available in all schools. Research suggested, at least in relation to interactive television, that teachers needed technical support to implement the technology and hands-on training with the equipment (Schnabel, 1992). Lack of technology or technological expertise is not the only problem
facing teachers who wish to be on the cutting edge of methods and media. There is conflicting evidence in the area of teaching strategies and methods. Most authors in favor of the middle school philosophy are against ability grouping, but the results of a research study using the NELS data from 12,410 students, indicated that it increased achievement in math, especially in urban settings (Shouse, 1998). A case study of a first year team discovered that although teachers agreed with detracking in principle, by the end of the year they had regrouped students by ability for instruction (Ehman, 1995).

Cooperative learning, another strategy promoted by middle school advocates, has also been shown to have a negative impact on achievement (Shouse).

Of course, there are no teaching methods, strategies, or technologies that can make up for a poor curriculum. At least one group of authors believes that the middle school curriculum is not challenging. They blame this on the fact that middle schools have implemented the characteristics that improve character and social-emotional growth, rather than the ones that promote academic rigor (Williamson & Johnston, 1999).

The research on teaching using a variety of media consistently indicated that it is beneficial to students, although problems with technology sometimes exist. The research on ability grouping is mixed.

**Research on Specially Prepared Teachers**

Many authors agree that middle school teachers should be specially prepared, as should their principals. The National Middle School Association (n.d.b) states in their position statement on the preparation of middle school teachers, “significant numbers of teacher preparation institutions, state departments of education, licensure agencies, and others have chosen to ignore the need for these teachers and have promoted the
widespread idea that . . . ‘no specialized preparation’” is necessary. Therefore, students are being taught by teachers who are unprepared to teach them. The National Middle School Association (n.d.b) blames the negative image of middle level students, the lack of advocates in teacher education programs, a “desire for flexibility in assignment of middle level teachers,” the lack of understanding on the part of the general public about appropriate middle level education, the lack of teacher educators with an understanding of what is required of middle level teachers, and the failure of states to require special licensing for middle level teachers for the problem.

A half century ago, reforms in teacher education were proposed. A former President of Harvard University, James B. Conant, was a proponent for changes in teacher preparation. In 1959, he undertook a junior high school study and visited 72 institutions in 22 states and state education departments in 16. He visited classrooms and talked with teachers, students, and administrators. After this, he recommended changes in schools of education. He believed that clinical professors should be responsible for both methods and supervising student teachers. He wanted more competency exams to replace courses and credits, he felt that student teaching was critical, and he wanted teachers recruited from the top 30% of high school classes (NASSP, 1977). Some would say that not much has changed in the half century since he proposed these changes.

Many recommendations have been made to improve teacher education; some very similar to those proposed 50 years ago. Collaboration between schools of education and middle schools was one suggestion from a researcher who conducted a case study with a middle school team in Georgia (Thomas, 1997). Another recommended that school of education faculty join content and methods in their teaching (Marks, 1990). Having pre-
service teachers keep portfolios has been proven successful (Dollase, 1996). It is one method to assess what new teachers have learned, but research indicated that faculty and student teachers need training, student teachers need feedback, and they need to feel ownership of the portfolio (Carroll, Potthoff, & Huber, 1996). Research has been done with hypermedia video techniques which have been shown to improve education students’ lessons (Goldman & Baron, 1990). Similarly, research has been positive for computer programs that allow student teachers to watch and then discuss video clips of classroom lessons (Daniel, 1996).

Student teachers are taught to examine their lessons and the reasons behind their success and failure (Ellwein, Graue, & Comfort, 1990). This reflection is important not just to improve instruction, but for team development. One group of 7 college professors at the East Carolina University believed that specially preparing their 40 students to become teachers on interdisciplinary teams was so important they undertook an informal study in their teacher preparation program (Bullock & Pedersen, 1999). Teams of teachers in the education department taught students in an interdisciplinary fashion to model the concept for students who would become members of middle school teams.

Field experiences are becoming a larger part of teacher education programs. It is important, however, to train pre-service teachers before they begin observations in field settings because research with student teachers suggested that teachers do not learn anything from observations unless they know what they are looking for (Munby & Russell, 1994). They need to spend this time in the middle school to gain an understanding of what it is truly like and what to expect. That this is necessary was indicated by a California survey study with 272 pre-service teachers and 159 teachers
which revealed pre-service teachers expect better teacher morale and better student
discipline than teachers actually report that they experience (Young, 1995). During the
field experience, student teachers should begin to take on the roles and responsibilities of
interdisciplinary team members and visit other teams to gain experience in participating
in team meetings. They should also be trained in developing interdisciplinary units. The
National Middle School Association offered advice to student teachers in “Student
Teaching at the Middle Level” (n.d.d). They suggest following a middle school student
for a day and recording impressions, interviewing faculty and other school staff members,
conferencing with the cooperating teacher to determine goals and responsibilities, and
keeping a reflective journal. Advocates want teachers to be taught to reflect and analyze
their own beliefs. A survey study conducted with faculty of education teachers and their
students found that school of education faculty spend time covering beliefs that their
students already hold, rather than challenging their beliefs or presenting both sides of an
issue so that students can form their own beliefs (Brousseau & Freeman, 1988).

Middle school teachers need to have an understanding of many subjects. One
middle school teacher who was interviewed during a case study of middle schools in
England expressed the dilemma which is also relevant to the American educational
system: High school teachers often have a great deal of knowledge that they could be
teaching, but they can not teach it because they are subject matter specialized; elementary
school teachers, on the other hand, are required to teach every subject, even though they
may know very little about them (Hargreaves, 1986). Middle school teachers teaching in
an interdisciplinary fashion may have the best of both worlds.
In conjunction with the content knowledge, the methods knowledge, and the knowledge of adolescent development, middle school teachers are expected to know, do, and be much more. According to an interview study of 4 principals, 16 middle school teachers, and 12 students, effective middle school teachers need to understand the transition of young adolescents, care about their students, know themselves, be patient, have a sense of humor, enjoy life, develop relationships with their colleagues, be flexible, manage a classroom, and work well with families and the community (Roney, 2001).

Much research is available on teacher education programs including interviews, case studies, and surveys and middle school advocates promote their belief that middle school teachers should be specially prepared. There does not, however, appear to have been much progress in establishing special programs for middle level educators.

**Research on Professional Development for Middle School Teachers**

Studies have shown that even recently educated new teachers need professional development. Surveys, which included 1088 Likert-type items, of 102 first year teachers and their 25 principals in California indicated that first year teachers were not prepared to teach their subject matter (except in math), but their overall preparation was good and their procedural skills were high (Baker & Grayson, 1994). This finding was similar to interviews (15 to 30 minute) of 60 new teachers in Philadelphia, which found that teachers were not prepared for their middle school placement (Useem, 2001). In another study, teacher education students underestimated the problems that they would encounter in their first year of teaching (Weinstein, 1988).

In-service training was often cited as a necessary change for raising standards in schools in surveys of administrators by the American Association of School
Administrators (1985). This is a particular concern at this level because, as mentioned, most schools of education have not offered a middle school pre-service program so most of the current middle school teaching staff have not been specially prepared. This absence of special preparation for middle school teachers is not an entirely American phenomenon; it is a common problem with the English middle school (Hargreaves & Tickle, 1980).

Lack of teacher training may be the reason many middle schools operate like junior high schools (Dickinson & Butler, 2001); teachers are organized by department, rather than team-based and students are not members of smaller learning communities. Therefore, it has been suggested that training teachers during the transition from junior high to middle school is important (Gallagher-Polite, 1997; Meister & Nolan, 2001). As one pair of researchers stated, “a strong, positive relationship exists between a school district’s commitment to staff development and successful implementation of the middle school concept” (Irvin & Shockley, 1993, p. 130). Teachers need training to develop as a team (Crow & Pounder, 2000; Thomas, 1997). Therefore, professional development specifically targeted for teams has been recommended (Golner & Powell, 1992). Teams need professional development in teaching thematically and working together as a team (Anglin, 1997). They also need instruction in instructional planning (Shaw, 1993), according to an observational study of 20 teachers on 4 teams. This type of professional development promotes team success with curricular integration (Schumacher, 1995). Teams also need professional development on expectations, components of teaming, and its rationale (Smith, 1992). Lack of knowledge of group dynamics was cited as a problem for teachers in an observation and interview study (Crow & Pounder). Teams
need to be taught how to work together because teachers have a tendency to compromise rather than continue a discussion that could lead to a serious disagreement (Kruse & Louis 1995, 1997). When making decisions, teachers must learn to “play the role of the ‘devil’s advocate’ rather than always agree and avoid conflict” (Golner & Powell, p. 32).

Working on a middle school team requires not only a great deal of training, but a great deal of commitment in terms of time and effort, therefore, middle school researchers recommend that teachers volunteer to join teams (Hange & Rolfe, 1995; Martin, 1999). It is likely that teachers will be more committed to working together if they are allowed to choose team membership rather than have the administration impose team membership upon them.

Follow-up to professional development is needed (Sevick, 1989). Teachers need opportunities to try out the skills they have learned, reflect upon them, discuss them with their colleagues, and then adapt them and try them out again. Professional development does not only include formally planned activities. Informal opportunities for professional development can be taken advantage of, for example, conversations with staff and site visits to other middle schools with exceptional programs (Scheirer, 1981). Experts also recommend that teachers be exposed to current literature, time with experts, and time to discuss what they have learned (Smith, 1992).

It is difficult for districts to find time for professional development. An interview study discovered that teachers did not have opportunities to share with their colleagues; they wanted to observe and learn from their colleagues, but there was not enough time (Collinson & Cook, 2000). Although observing peers is widely recommended in the literature, this study also found that teachers felt uncomfortable interrupting their
colleagues’ classes. Suggestions for finding the time for professional development include weekends, vacations, after school, during the summer, and on teacher workdays when students do not have to attend school (Feist, 2003). This, of course, would not free them up to observe their peers, but would be valuable for the other activities suggested.

Care must be taken when providing professional development to teachers. One study found that teachers can be hostile toward professional development when it is determined by the district, rather than by the teachers what is useful (Knight, 2000). In their position paper on the middle level curriculum, the National Middle School Association (n.d.c) recommended that teachers participate in planning these professional development activities. Schools also need to recognize that “real growth is a choice,” (Gallagher-Polite, 2001, p. 25) so it can not be forced upon teachers who are unwilling to learn. Although teachers may be hostile toward forced professional development, it is important to note that most teachers want to learn. A case study of 4 teams in their second year of teaming revealed that teachers needed and wanted training (Crow & Pounder, 2000).

Middle school advocates believe that middle schools also need specially trained administrators. Unfortunately, the reality is that principals and assistant principals are often biding their time in the middle school awaiting a position at the high school (George, 2000/2001). This is often the case with teachers, as well. Middle schools often get teachers who have left their previous schools for reasons other than their desire to teach at the middle school level (Hargreaves, 1986).

The studies examined here run the gamut from 90 minute interviews with 10 teachers to self reports of 1088 Likert-type items by 102 beginning teachers to
observations of 4 teams; researchers spent from 1 week to 6 months conducting their studies; they were conducted in England, Virginia, California, and spots in between. They all came to the conclusion that teachers need professional development. Though it should be noted that, as important as professional development is, one middle school advocate (Doda, 1992) cautioned, professional development can not prepare one to be a middle school teacher; one has to live it.

**Research on Supportive Administrators**

Researchers, middle school advocates, and organizational theorists agree that administrative support is crucial for team success. Administrators have the final say in scheduling of students and team planning times, team composition, curriculum, extracurricular activities, involving parents, community partnership activities, advisory programs, and use of personnel. Therefore, their assistance and support are necessary to make the middle school concept work.

Supportive administrators, according to research examining how team processes affect student learning, lead to improved classroom practices, which in turn lead to improved student outcomes (Trimble & Peterson, 1999). As 1 case study of several teams discovered, the support of the administration is also necessary for curricular integration (Schumacher, 1992). These results were similar to those of a study of 23 teachers on 7 teams in Virginia, which also discovered that administrative support is important to the success of an interdisciplinary curriculum (Hange & Rolfe, 1995).

If the administration makes a commitment and offers support, it can influence the change process (Lundt & Vanderpan, 1995). The results of a study of 2 Canadian schools undergoing change indicated that schools cannot sustain change without
administrative support, which should be visible (Hargreaves & Fink, 2000). These findings have been echoed in other case studies (Martin, 1999; Thomas, 1997) and an interview study (Useem, 2001). A study of a team undergoing the change process has also shown that lack of administrative support is a problem (Meister & Nolan, 2001).

Administrative support can take the form of classrooms, money, equipment, and autonomy (Beane & Brodhagen, 2001). It can include funds for field trips and professional development, as well as support of discipline policies and written feedback (Trimble & Peterson, 1999). Other supportive administrative practices include training (Crow & Pounder, 2000; Dorsch, 1996; Raynor, 1996) and consultant assistance. Time, space, and materials (Martin, 1999) are valuable resources, as well. Administrative support also includes rewards; teachers can be rewarded by administration for successfully implementing team activities. They can be given extra release time, opportunities to attend conferences, and notes of encouragement (Smith, 1992). Information is another resource that can be provided to teams. In one school, the principal attended team meetings to discuss important issues so teachers would feel better-informed (Erb, 1992). Research indicated that principal support leads to empowerment (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), which is related to professionalism, respect for colleagues, friendship, and engagement in teaching. According to this survey study of 2,741 teachers from 86 New Jersey middle schools, teacher empowerment also leads to reading and math achievement for students.

Administrative support can also include fostering teacher development (Leithwood, 1990). In the new millennium middle school proponents expect principals to be the instructional leaders of their schools. This means they must provide teachers with
opportunities to improve their teaching, but it has been pointed out that often principals do not want to be instructional leaders; they may not feel qualified to be (Leithwood). This is not surprising given that there is no special training for middle level administrators. Special training may not have an impact anyway, according to the results of a study of effective leadership (Anfara, Brown, Mills, Hartman, & Mahar, 2001). The study asked middle school principals in Pennsylvania and New Jersey about the skills necessary for effective middle level leadership in the 21st century. Responses indicated that the necessary skills did not come from their administrative preparation programs.

Along with support, research with teams indicated that the administration must offer staff a guarantee that the reform efforts will last (Meister & Nolan, 2001). Authors of a case study of a middle school in Montana, suggested that many teachers, especially those who have been in the system for a long time, have seen so many reform efforts come and go (Lundt & Vanderpan, 1995) that they are unwilling to expend the time and energy to learn about and support the team concept because they do not feel it will last.

The research studies on administrative support were conducted in locations as diverse as New Jersey, Virginia, Montana, and Canada; they included case studies of a single team, surveys, interviews, and observations. They all came to the same conclusion: Administrative support is important.

**Research on Team Planning Time**

I have left until last the characteristic that, in my estimation, is one of the most important for the middle school: interdisciplinary team planning time. This element is key because the team affects, and often has control over, the other characteristics. How the team organizes their team planning times and the activities and concerns they decide
to focus on affect the students, the curriculum, and even the environment. The team often decides how much families will be involved, whether community partnerships will be fostered, which methods and media to use, how individualized instruction will work, how to promote good health habits, how the students will be grouped, and what happens at team meetings.

The importance of team meeting time is stressed throughout both the literature disseminated by proponents of middle school and those conducting research on it. After interviews of almost 200 teachers and other school personnel from 12 schools, researchers suggested that the planning time and shared students are essential elements: “without them interdisciplinary teams do not exist” (Erb, 1992, p. 8). A study of 155 schools participating in the Middle Start Initiative in Michigan concluded that “common planning time is a critical component of interdisciplinary teaming” (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999, p. 57). Results of a 3 year observational and survey study of 97 middle schools undergoing reform in Illinois also indicated that planning time is an important element (Felner et al., 1997).

Team planning time has many benefits. A study of the Middle Start Initiative data discovered that students’ self-esteem improves most in schools where teams have more common planning time (Lewis, 2000). Other researchers reported that teams with more planning time had more positive outcomes, including higher scores on math and reading achievement tests (Flowers et al., 1999, 2000a; Lewis). Teams from schools with more planning time participated in more team activities (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000b). These teams also engaged in more positive classroom practices which included small-group instruction, interdisciplinary teaching, authentic instruction, authentic
assessment, critical thinking, reading skills, writing skills, and mathematical skills. These results were similar to a study with the Project on High Performance Learning Communities, which indicated that there was a correlation between the amount of time students spent with their team during the school day and more positive teaching practices (Erb & Stevenson, 1999). This study included contact with resource staff, coordination of student assignments, parent contact, and curriculum integration as positive practices.

A research study of 60 teachers on 12 teams discovered through interviews, questionnaires, and examinations of report cards and lesson plans that “team planning impacted class performance” (Trimble & Peterson, 1999, p. 7).

Teachers on teams with more team planning time communicate more with other school personnel, parents, and each other (Erb, 1992) and they have a more positive attitude toward teaming (Erb & Stevenson, 1999). Their schools have more advisory programs, which assist students at this time of adolescence. Students on middle school teams have “higher levels of social bonding with peers, teachers, and their school” (Pounder, 1999, p. 323). They feel less isolated, more safe, more satisfied with discipline and have better self-concepts (Pounder). They also receive assistance from teaching staff sooner when they have difficulties because teamed teachers have time to discuss them and provide assistance or contact support staff for assistance (Haschak, 1992).

An important use of team planning time is designing interdisciplinary units (Ehman, 1995; Hange & Rolfe, 1995; Sevick, 1989). “Common team planning time is essential to interdisciplinary teaming” (Lewis, 2000, p. K7) and curriculum integration (Schumacher, 1992). More team planning time leads to more curriculum integration and more interdisciplinary units (Erb & Stevenson, 1999). Teachers need this time to design
their interdisciplinary units (Anglin, 1997). The more team planning time teachers have, the more time they spend planning for interdisciplinary and thematic units, and the more interdisciplinary practices occur in the classroom (Flowers et al., 2000a).

Team planning time is also used to review logistics or team management issues (Ehman, 1995; Huley, 2002). This gives teachers time to plan field trips, assemblies, upcoming events, or changes in scheduling. Proponents of the middle school recommend that the sense of belonging to a community be fostered by the team during this meeting time (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Kruse & Louis, 1995).

Planning time is essential to team effectiveness; the longer teams have been together the more time they spend on instruction (Shaw, 1993). One study comparing teamed schools with planning time, teamed schools without planning time, and nonteamed schools indicated that the more planning time teams had, the more student commitment to work was evident and the higher their perceptions of the environment (Warren & Muth, 1995). Teachers can also use this time to get assistance or training. According to teachers from 15 schools participating in a doctoral dissertation study, this training had the greatest impact on school outcomes (Huley, 2002).

The amount of planning time given to teams varies, but in a longitudinal study of middle schools in the process of restructuring (using the Turning Points philosophy) it was determined that four or more common planning times per week was the ideal (Felner et al., 1997). Teams that meet daily or almost daily for 45 minutes per week are more successful than those that meet less frequently (Erb & Stevenson, 1999). Lack of planning time was regarded as an impediment in one study (Bullock & Pedersen, 1999).
The importance of team meeting time is clear. Whether case studies, self-studies, interviews, surveys, or observations, the research indicates that team planning time is essential in the middle school.

The middle school characteristics defined and examined for this study are not necessarily separate and distinct. Throughout this literature review instances of overlap have been apparent. For example, advisory programs provide “the sense of community and care that changes the school climate” (Anfara & Brown, 2001, p. 16) and they need the support of the principal to succeed. I now move on to an examination of the rewards and drawbacks of teaming for middle school teachers, as described in the literature.

**The Rewards and Drawbacks of Teaming for Teachers**

Because the focus of this study is middle school teachers and the meanings they make of their lived experiences as interdisciplinary team members in urban schools, an examination of the rewards and drawbacks, for teachers, of interdisciplinary teaming is important.

According to research, there are many benefits to being a member of an interdisciplinary team. Middle school teachers on teams receive the support of their colleagues (Ehman, 1995). They appreciate both the emotional support (Kruse & Louis, 1997; Trimble & Peterson, 1999) and their assistance with classroom management (Erb, 1992). Erb found that the psychological rewards of teaming included camaraderie, less isolation, and support of team members during parent conferences. Teachers in teamed schools also perceived that the school climate was improved and they viewed their schools more positively (Flowers et al., 1999). Teachers feel more empowered in team...
situations because they have control and students are better disciplined because expectations are consistent among team teachers (Quinn, 1997).

A study using questionnaires to compare 29 middle school teachers to 20 junior high school teachers in a small southeastern town uncovered the fact that middle school teachers were more likely to choose teaching again as a career and they were more satisfied with teaching (Ashton, Doda, Webb, Olejnik, & McAuliffe, 1981). They were, however, also more likely to report difficulties with their colleagues. Although much of the research regarding teams is positive, this difficulty with colleagues is not the only problem encountered in schools where interdisciplinary teaching and teaming are practiced. Teams become so focused on their teams that they become isolated from the rest of the school (Crow & Pounder, 2000). This team focus interferes with the ability to run the entire school (Kruse & Louis, 1995). Teaming also leads to less departmental affiliation as teachers identify more with their teams than their departments (Ehman, 1995). Another difficulty with teaming is the decrease in autonomy teachers feel because they must share decision-making (Crow & Pounder). Teams also may go through a phase early in the process in which they are jealous of each other, unwilling to share, and compete rather than cooperate (K. M. Brown, 2001).

In this chapter, I examined the empirical research on the characteristics of the middle school. In the next chapter, I explain the other ways in which the literature review informed my study.
What was Learned About Methodology and Style From the Literature Review?

The purposes of the review of literature went beyond gaining an understanding of the conclusions drawn by others, which were shared in the previous chapter. A second purpose was to see if my study had already been conducted by others; if it has, I could not find it. A third purpose was to discover if there were studies I could build my study upon. I see my study as adding to others, rather than building upon them; although I have noted instances in which others have indicated a need for a more in-depth study. The fourth purpose was to examine the strengths and weaknesses of others’ methodologies to endeavor to improve the methodology for this study. A fifth purpose was to examine others’ studies for issues of style and organization, and in the case of the interview studies, to examine how the participants’ words were incorporated into the sharing of the findings. Finally, I wanted to gain an understanding of how researchers confronted issues of validity and dependability, as well as how they analyzed their interview data for themes.

How Did Researchers Explain Their Methodologies?

In their study of the importance of time in teaching and learning, a pair of researchers explained in detail how their data was collected (Collinson & Cook, 2000). They explained the pre-interview surveys, the one and a half hour semi-structured interviews, and the post-interview surveys. Others conducting structured interviews about in-school suspension programs (Siskind et al., 1993) included the 39 question protocol in an appendix so the reader would know exactly what questions were asked of
respondents. The author of an 18 month case study of mentor teachers thoroughly explained the methodology as well as the selection process for the participants (Silva, 2000). Explanations of their methodologies were strengths of most of the research I examined. There were, though, studies that I felt would have been better had the researcher provided more information. For instance, in one study the author did not mention the length of the semi-structured interviews and did not give any examples of the types of guiding questions that would be asked of the participants (K. M. Brown, 2001).

**How Did Researchers Handle Issues of Validity?**

The authors of a study on instructional choice gave a detailed explanation of how they ensured validity (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). The data were triangulated by comparing results from the pilot study with results from the later interviews. Written responses and oral responses from participants were compared and were consistent. Participants’ words were used liberally to explicate themes and researcher interpretations were confirmed by participants. One of the two researchers conducted an audit by examining field notes, reviewing the written responses, and listening to a sample of interview tapes to make a separate determination of themes. They also discussed the data until consensus was met. Finally, member checks with teachers not participating in the study were conducted.

One researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, analyzed documents, and took field notes to gain an understanding of “participants’ perspectives of teaming” and how it affects the sense of community (K. M. Brown, 2001, p. 54). For this study, the theoretical concept was the relationship between care and the community so questions focused on the structure and organization of the interdisciplinary team and the
relationships between teachers and students, teachers and teachers, and students and students. This author used a reflexive journal. I thought the explanation of the journal was especially well done and it offered me another possible source to review.

A group of researchers read and reread the transcripts in search of themes, they then “met to discuss and debate their individual interpretations of the data” (Anfara et al., 2001, p. 191). For internal validity or dependability, they relied on triangulation of interview and survey data, use of verbatim quotes, multiple researchers, audit trails, and member checks by one third of the participants. Finally, the author of one study interviewed until saturation (Roney, 2001).

**How Did Researchers Analyze Their Data?**

Although the study of teachers’ interpretations of time in school change (Collinson & Cook, 2000) is unlike my study because the researchers conducted a single interview with each participant, their explanation of their data analysis was especially well written and informed my own. They coded and categorized with the first transcripts and then continued to code and categorize as they collected data.

Much was learned from the research of middle level principals (Anfara et al., 2001) beyond the subject under study. The researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to identify the themes. This constant comparative method was also used to discover categories in a study of effective middle school teachers (Roney, 2001). One researcher examining interdisciplinary teaming (K. M. Brown, 2001) provided a brief explanation of the constant comparative method for data analysis, which I think could be helpful to readers: “as data were coded, the responses were compared within categories and between categories…this process aided in identifying patterns, coding data, and
categorizing findings” (K. M. Brown, p. 55). This author chose to use the words and phrases of participants as the coding categories. Other researchers did not do a thorough job of explaining how interviews were analyzed. One simply said, “The interview results were analyze [sic] and compared with the overall findings from the surveys. Also, commonalities were noted and recorded” (Culbert et al., 1998, p. 10).

**How Did Researchers Introduce and Use Participants’ Words?**

Researchers introduced participants and used their words in a variety of ways. One author conducting an interview study on empowerment at a high school, used quotes from students liberally throughout the report (McQuillan, 1995). They were included to add weight to the themes as they were presented, but the author did not introduce the participants and only their gender was identified, no other demographic information was given. Although I appreciated the extensive use of quotations I believe that more background information could have been included to put the participants’ lives in context for the reader.

Another study (Tuttle, 2002) included excerpts of interviews from students, teachers, and other stakeholders in the renovation process of a middle school, but the quotes were not part of the text, they were located in the margins. I found this somewhat distracting and did not feel they were incorporated into the analysis well. Several authors used coding systems to identify participants to protect their anonymity. One author’s (K. M. Brown, 2001) codes included the school, the participant’s position, number, gender, race, grade level, years of experience, and certification. This was very similar to the code used by a group of researchers who interviewed principals (Anfara et al., 2001). These authors assigned each participant a code based on their interview number and
demographic characteristics. Although they did not introduce or describe participants personally so that the reader could put their experiences in the context of their lives, these authors liberally used their participants’ words throughout the study, which helped explicate their themes. Like these authors, another (Roney, 2001) used participants’ own words to exemplify the themes discovered during the interview study and also assigned codes to the participants, rather than using their names. I appreciated the ability to get the demographic information immediately when reading the codes after the quotes, but I missed the more personal information and “feeling” that would be gleaned from an introduction and the use of a pseudonym.

In another study, teachers were not introduced and even coding information was not included so it was impossible to tell which quotes came from which teachers (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). An appendix at the end did list teachers’ grade levels, genders, degrees held, subjects taught, and school information, but only in the aggregate so it was impossible to tell, for example, how many of the females taught at each grade level and subject. I was reminded again, of the importance of giving complete information about participants before their words are shared. These were not the only authors to do this. A researcher who interviewed first year teachers did not include any individual demographic information for participants, but included only aggregate data (Useem, 2001). This researcher conducted very brief 15 to 30 minute interviews with participants. She chose not to use quotes from the participants, but instead shared information almost as if it were survey data; for example, “A quarter of the new teachers (26%) said the change in the residency requirement was very important….Another 14% said it was somewhat important and 60% said it was not important” (p. 149). Although
this type of quantitative data may add to a phenomenological interview study, the meanings participants make of their experiences and their understandings are the goal, so I was disappointed that participants’ words were not shared in the study.

**Other Researchers’ Literature Reviews**

The review of literature gave me an opportunity to examine how other researchers handled their literature reviews. One of the interview studies was very unlike mine because the researchers designed a survey that they distributed to 107 teachers; they then interviewed 6 teachers using questions taken directly from the survey (Culbert et al., 1998). Although my study was quite different due to the open-ended nature of the questions asked and the amount of time spent interviewing participants, the authors of this study did a particularly good job of explaining the weaknesses of previous studies and where gaps in the literature exist. These were also strengths of another study in which the authors carefully explained the gaps in the literature and what their study would add that others had not (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). The study on the use of interactive television did an especially fine job connecting the literature review to the study (Schnabel, 1992). This is something I have struggled with in my writing and this study proved helpful.

**Need for the Study: What This Study Will Add to the Knowledge Base**

Although much of the research previously examined has been of import to those involved in middle schools, it is certainly not complete. My pilot study revealed many interesting facets of teaching in an urban middle school, as well as the complexities involved in being a member of an interdisciplinary team. It also offered both possible causes for the changes which have taken place in urban middle school education and
suggestions for improvement. Given the pilot study, I wanted to ask urban middle school teachers teaching on an interdisciplinary team the question, “What does it mean to be a middle school teacher?” I did this using in-depth phenomenological interviews because I believe a great deal can be learned about teachers by listening to them. A deeper, more complex look at urban middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams was needed and I think this was, for me, the best way to get it.

I could find no phenomenological research studies examining what it means to be a member of an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school. I did find many studies conducted within the middle school. Most were surveys or case studies of the implementation of specific programs or characteristics of the middle school philosophy, generally those programs and characteristics discussed in previous sections of this paper, which were recommended by *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) and the National Middle School Association, which have been quite successful in guiding the research. Partly due, I would think, to their funding of much of it.

Many of the studies conducted with the middle school, including some cited in this examination of the research, have been surveys of student and teacher populations. These studies are important to get an understanding of what a large number of people think about the topic being studied, but they often do not allow the respondent the freedom to really contribute their beliefs about the subject. Generally, respondents are asked a limited number of questions and are given a limited number of choices for responses, often using a Likert-type scale. Surveys that do allow respondents to answer
open-ended questions may get more information; however, these depend on respondents’ writing abilities and effort and do not allow for further probing (Patton, 1980).

Other studies have been case studies of a single team, usually during or immediately following the change process. These studies are beneficial to assist the reader in gaining an understanding of what a team has gone through. Unfortunately, many of these studies are brief in nature and do not delve deeply into what the process means to the individual teacher. There were also interview studies. Generally, the researcher conducted one 1 hour interview or used a protocol with a limited number of questions; one researcher (Useem, 2001) conducted 15 to 30 minute interviews. Although important information may have been discovered, these seemed to me to be superficial because the researcher did not spend much time with the participant or put the experiences within the context of the participants’ lives.

My study is based on the theoretical principles of in-depth phenomenological interviewing as conceptualized by Mishler (1979, 1986), Moustakas (1994), and Seidman (1998); therefore, time was taken to get to know the participants to put their experiences as urban middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams into the context of their lives. The open-ended nature of the prompts also allowed the participants to explore topics most meaningful to their lived experiences. The length of time I spent with participants, hopefully, allowed them to trust me enough to open up about the complexities involved in their lives as middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams in urban middle schools.

Although much of the research has been well done and contributed to the knowledge base, I did not feel it encompassed the complexities involved in the day-to-
day lived experiences of the urban middle school teacher teaching on an interdisciplinary team. I have conducted a pilot study, am a middle school teacher in an urban middle school, and have been a member of an interdisciplinary team. All of these experiences led me to believe that the realities of being a middle school interdisciplinary team teacher in an urban setting were more complex than the research to date had shown. I believe that this study provides a deeper, more complex look at urban middle school interdisciplinary team teachers and the meanings they make of their experiences, which is missing in the current literature. As Beane and Brodhagen (2001) pointed out in the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, it is time for research to progress beyond “superficial studies of implementation issues” (p. 1170). Gayle Davis, co-author of *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) has also pointed out that the focus of research has been on the parts of the middle school philosophy, rather than the whole (Davis, 2001). It is time for a comprehensive examination of what it means to be a teacher teaching on an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school.

This research takes place in an era when some have started to ask, “Is the middle school concept working?” Like the junior high school, criticisms of the middle school have surfaced. This is partly a result of low student achievement on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Bradley & Manzo, 2000). Two articles in *Education Week*, “Muddle in the Middle” (Bradley, 1998) and “The Weak Link” (Bradley & Manzo), question the implementation of the principles of the middle school: whether too much focus has been put on the social and emotional aspects of the middle school philosophy and not enough on the academic rigor. Other criticisms
involve not properly preparing teachers and lack of leadership. Some proponents call for more fully implementing the current middle school philosophy, others for a new model. Middle school proponents, most notably John Lounsbury, have acknowledged these criticisms and begun to address them (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003).

In the first three chapters, the reader was given an introduction to both the theoretical literature and the empirical research of the middle school characteristics and organizational theory as it relates to the team concept. In the next chapter, I explain the methodology I used to examine, through a phenomenological approach to interviewing, the complexities involved in being a member of an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school, how these “ideal” middle school characteristics “play out” in the real lived experiences of teachers, and how the reality of interdisciplinary teams connects to the ideals of the literature.
CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation study was to explore, through in-depth phenomenological interviews, three ideas central to teaching on an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school. The first idea surrounds the complexities of the work experiences of middle school teachers who participate on interdisciplinary teams in urban middle schools. The second idea involves the possible interactions of the structures and principles of the middle school philosophy with teachers’ work lives. The third idea encompasses how the reality of interdisciplinary teams and their functioning connect to the ideals described in the middle school and organizational theory literature.

Methodology

In this section I explain my rationale for using phenomenological interviewing, how I gained access to the participants, how I conducted the interviews, and the transcription process. My bias, how data was analyzed and reported, and the aspects of the pilot study that informed this project are also explained.

Phenomenological Interviewing

The three-part phenomenological interview process (Seidman, 1998) is an important method within human science research. It assists the researcher in getting at the heart of “human phenomena” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 4). I have chosen to discover the answer to my research question, “What are the complexities involved in being a middle school teacher on an interdisciplinary team in an urban setting?,” using this interview process because I have come to understand its usefulness in getting at middle school
teachers’ real lived experiences and the meanings they make of them. Meaning is “contextually grounded” (Mishler, 1986, p. 117); therefore, the only way I can understand the meaning people (in this case teachers) make of their experiences is to take the time to interview them about their lives so as to place their experiences as urban middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams in the context of their lives. Meanings of experiences are best explained by the people who have experienced them (Denzin, 1989). Therefore, I took the time to schedule three 90 minute interviews with each participant.

Interviewing is a time-tested method for learning about human beings. “Recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience” (Seidman, 1998, p. 2). Much of what we know about life, what we have learned and what we “understand as personhood, identity, intimacy, secrecy, experience, belief, history, and common sense turns on the exchange of stories between people” (Narayan & George, 2002, p. 829). This sharing of stories “is at the heart of social and cultural life” (Narayan & George, p. 829) and helped me learn about the complexities involved in being an urban middle school teacher working on an interdisciplinary team. “We think in story form, speak in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through stories” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 121), so it makes sense that we would try to learn about teachers’ experiences through their stories. “Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2) and are “at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 4).
The Topic of Study

Why did I choose to study the middle school? Many reasons. First and foremost I am “passionate” about this grade level and I believed I should “choose a subject for research that is of great interest” (Yow, 1994, p. 32). This, I thought, would help me be committed to the project and better able to endure any setbacks. Selecting a topic of interest to the researcher is recommended by authors with experience (Isaac & Michael, 1997). It has been said, “if our interest is limited, so also is our understanding” (Dilthey, 1972, p. 232); I believe my interest in the subject has assisted in my understanding. I have devoted the whole of my teaching career to this grade level and I have spent a good portion of my academic career at the university studying the middle school concept. I believe that the middle school structure and principles, or characteristics, as I have chosen to call them, influence the teaching and experiences of teachers. I was interested in discovering the effects of the middle school philosophy.

This leads me to the second reason. I believed my knowledge of the middle school would assist me during the interviews with middle school teachers. I was aware that interviewing subjects about a new phenomenon also has benefits. The researcher has a natural curiosity to learn about the subject and fewer preconceived notions, but I believe, as Kvale (1996) states when explaining the complexities of interpretation, that “conducting a qualitative research interview requires an extensive knowledge of the theme so that the interviewer may be sensitive to the nuances of meanings expressed and the different contexts into which the meanings may enter” (p. 49). It was expected that my 17 years of experience would assist me in this endeavor and I believe it did. I also
hoped that, as Anderson (2002) states, research from an insider perspective is more compelling, especially to other insiders.

Third, students at this grade level face many challenges: the onset of puberty and peer pressure to use drugs and alcohol, have sex, participate in violence, and eschew school. They are going through emotional, social, physical, and cognitive changes (Knowles & Brown, 2000; NMSA, 1995). They are concerned with their appearance and undergoing growth spurts of the skeletal and muscular systems, which are often not at the same rate, causing clumsiness and insecurities. “Middle grade students are unique. No other grade span encompasses such a wide range of intellectual, physical, psychological, and social development, and educators must be sensitive to the entire spectrum of these young people’s capabilities” (California Department of Education, 1987, p. v). The interactions of these complex changes and challenges and my belief in the importance of the teachers in their lives trying to make an effort to understand their students may be why I am so passionate about this grade level.

Which leads to another question: Why urban, rather than suburban, or rural middle schools? Again, I would have to say, many reasons. I have devoted 17 years of my life to working in an urban middle school. I care about the students who are struggling to “survive” in school and the teachers who are assisting them to do so. Teachers must react to and address the challenges facing urban students: gang violence; teen pregnancy; coming to school hungry, tired, neglected, or abused; language barriers; parent apathy and even anger; and poverty. Although it could be argued that some of these issues are also present in the suburban and rural school systems, I think it is safe to say, not to the same degree, nor in the same context.
These challenges are further complicated by the lack of parental involvement and poverty that are marks of urban life. I am interested in how middle school teachers handle students who are struggling with these challenges in their daily lives. Middle schools need teachers who are “devoted to teaching young adolescents” (George, et al., 1992, p. 5) and these urban middle school teachers’ needs should be understood and addressed as well. I am concerned because these young people are our future. If they do not overcome these challenges and become educated, productive citizens, where will the nation be a generation from now? If their teachers do not figure out how to help them and thus enjoy the intrinsic rewards that are sometimes lacking in teaching now (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984), what will keep them in the profession?

It should be understood that along with the many challenges encountered in working with middle school students in urban settings, there are also many rewards. I have not focused on those here because it is the challenges, rather than the rewards, that compel me to delve into the realities of urban middle school teachers’ lives.

**A Three Part Phenomenological Interview Process**

In the first interview of this three-interview process, the participant was asked to tell “as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time” (Seidman, 1998, p. 11) to put the participant’s experiences in context. Therefore, during the first interview, I asked participants to tell me about their life histories especially, but not exclusively, in relation to their schooling. The purpose of the second interview was to get participants to discuss their present experiences in light of the study, so I asked participants who are members of interdisciplinary teams in urban middle schools to answer the question “What is it like to be a middle school teacher?” I prepared prompts
for participants who had difficulty beginning. These prompts assisted the participants in reconstructing their experiences in the urban middle school. Examples of such prompts include “Walk me through a typical day/your best day/your worst day of teaching in the middle school.” During the third interview, I asked participants what meaning they make of these experiences and how teaching fits in with their lives.

I encouraged participants to share critical incidents (Fennell, 1999). To encourage them to speak, I took the advice of experts. Rosenblatt (2002) recommends that participants be asked to talk from other perspectives, for example asking them what their younger self would think or how another person would feel about the topic. I also followed Seidman’s (1998) advice and asked them to speak to me as if I were someone else to get them to open up more freely. I repeated questions with different words or from different angles (Rosenblatt) to assist in getting at contradictions within participants’ stories or to get confirmation. It is important to explore tensions and contradictions within people’s stories (Smith, 2002). I also directed participants to examine patterns of similar episodes at different times and to make comparisons and value judgments (Tagg, 1985). I asked participants to “tell me more about that.” Finally, I repeated the last word or sentence or simply was silent to encourage participants to continue or go into more depth (Van Manen, 1990). These techniques were not all employed with each participant, instead I chose the method that best fit the situation.

I was attentive to participants’ nods, pauses, and body language, and tried to notice facial expressions and intonations that may have indicated complex topics important to the participants so I could ask them to elaborate further (Kvale, 1996). I was careful to listen actively to what my participants said because I wanted to be sure that I
would be telling their stories. I focused all of my attention on what my participant was saying, I nodded when appropriate to show that I was really hearing what they were saying, and I took careful notes. As one author in the *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method* (Johnson, 2002) has pointed out, interviewers often do not hear what is said, instead they hear what their research and preparation have prepared them to hear. There are many topics that I expected the participants to discuss and some that I asked them about directly, but I waited until the end of the interviews so that I could get the participants’ own spontaneous comments first (Kvale).

I intended to space the interviews a few days to a week apart (Seidman, 1998), but as always in conducting fieldwork with human participants, I had to be flexible. Due to an illness in the family of one of the participants, our second and third interviews were five weeks apart and due to the busy schedule of another, our first and second interviews were only a day apart. It is difficult to say how this may have affected the depth or quality of the data collected. I do not believe, though, that it had an impact.

I scheduled the interviews at times and places that were convenient for the participants. I conducted interviews in coffee houses, book stores, participants’ classrooms, and my own classroom. I conducted them during school hours when teachers had their preparation and duty time together, after school, during school vacations, on weekends, and over the summer. I am aware that the content of the interview is affected by the setting (i.e. different information is shared when participants are in their offices than in their homes) (Yow, 1994), but I am not certain how the interviews were affected by the locations. The participants seemed to be willing to share in all of the locations. I tried always to remember something I gleaned from Terkel’s
(1972) 3 year interview study. He said that he found himself neglecting the normal
amenities because he was so focused on the information he was getting from his
participants and to moving on to the next participant. I endeavored always to remember
to appreciate my participants and their sharing of their stories; sometimes this meant
staying to “chat” after the interviews, sometimes this meant acknowledging they had
other commitments and not taking more of their time than necessary.

Because interviews were scheduled at participants’ convenience, I did not conduct
all three interviews with one participant before moving on to the next, nor did I conduct
all first interviews before moving on to the second.

**Demographic Factors That Can Influence Participant Interviews**

Gender, age, race, nationality, sexual orientation, and ethnicity have all received
attention in the interview literature (Warren, 2002) as factors that may influence or inhibit
participants. Given the fact that all interviewers must deal with these issues I will not
dwell on them, but I took the advice of authors who recommend methods for minimizing
their effect.

According to authorities on the subject, in interviewing men it is important to
remember that they often need to feel that they are in control. To gain control of the
interview, the male participant may test, sexualize, or minimize (Schwalbe & Wolkomir,
2002). Schwalbe and Wolkomir offer advice for overcoming these attempts to take
control. To help the participant feel in control, the interviewer can allow symbolic
expressions of control (if the interview spot is unacceptable, ask if the participant knows
a more acceptable place; let the participant ask the first few questions; let the participant
take charge as an expert, ask him to explain something; when probing sensitive topics,
say “since you brought it up I wonder if I might ask more”). To overcome sexualizing, the interviewer should dress in a professional manner; reward on task behavior with interest while ignoring off task remarks; and interview in quiet, business-like settings. Minimizing can be due to the subject’s unwillingness to reveal too much about himself. To overcome this, the interviewer can circle back (ask questions about what has already been said); say what other men have said which may lead him to compete to offer as much information or can make it seem less risky if other men have discussed it; and stop taking notes if the tape recorder is running because the notepad may be intimidating.

In interviewing women, it is important to remember that throughout much of research women were not considered important enough to study (Reinharz & Chase, 2002) so the interview may mean a lot to a female participant, especially if she has felt powerless in her position. Powerful women, on the other hand, may treat the interview as an inconvenience (Reinharz & Chase).

It is recommended that the researcher take into account how race factors mediate the meaning of questions and their answers (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002). It is also suggested that the interviewer share of herself, rather than just take from the interview process, because people of color tend to view outsiders suspiciously (Dunbar et al.). I have at all times done my best to put participants at ease and treat them with dignity and respect.

**Participants**

One decision that was to be made before the execution of this study was what to call the people who would give so much of their time and themselves to be interviewed. In the proposal for the pilot study I indicated that I would try out many terms and decide
what felt right. Seidman (1998) has chosen to call the people he interviews participants because “that word seems to capture both the sense of active involvement that occurs in an in-depth interview and the sense of equity that we try to build in our interviewing relationships” (p. 8). For these reasons I have decided to do the same. I tried other terms: “subject” sounded like I was going to “experiment on” them; “interviewee” and “respondent” did not seem to capture the co-constructedness of the interview process, but “co-researcher” seemed to imply that the participants were involved in the development of the study. I do believe that “interviews are conversations where the outcome is a coproduction of the interviewer and the subject” (Kvale, 1996, p. xvii) and I especially appreciate what Lincoln and Guba (1985) wrote about the process: “investigator and respondent together create the data of the research. Each influences the other” (p. 100). “Participant” seems to capture this, therefore, “participants” it is!

I interviewed until saturation (Bertaux, 1981) rather than choose an arbitrary number. The Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method (Johnson, 2002) cites authors who recommend interviewing as few as 6 participants and as many as 30 for 1 hour. Kvale (1996) recommends interviewing enough participants to learn what you want to learn; if there are too few, the study will not be generalizable and if there are too many, there will be too much information to interpret. The number ranges from 5 to 25, he says. Therefore, I conducted interviews with urban middle school teachers who were members of interdisciplinary teams until I felt that I was not gaining new insights.

I was also interested in getting the maximum variation possible. Maximum variation sampling is an attempt to increase the diversity in the sample population (Patton, 1980). I attempted to get as wide a range demographically as was feasible for a
phenomenological interview study of this type; I wanted to have a cross section of the teaching population. Ideally, I wanted to interview at least 2 male and 2 female teachers from each of the following core subject matters: English, math, science, and social studies. I also wanted to include teachers from other subject matters and special education teachers who were members of interdisciplinary teams.

I planned to vary the following demographic characteristics as well: age, teaching experience, and ethnicity. I wanted participants who had at least 3 years teaching experience at the middle school level. This was a step towards ensuring that they had an array of experiences on which to draw and that they had likely overcome the challenges that face most beginning teachers. I interviewed teachers at different stages of their careers because human beings at different stages of life have different needs and which stage they are in when they are interviewed makes a difference (Yow, 1994). Because only 4 teachers were interviewed for the pilot study, care was not taken to see that they came from different stages of their career and coincidentally, they were all in the latter stages. This was not the case for the dissertation.

My goal was to interview a minimum of 3 teachers with 5 to 10 years experience, 3 with 11 to 16 years experience, and 3 with 17 to 22 years experience. Although age is frequently tied to teaching experience, because so many have come to teaching as a second career, I examined this variable separately. I planned to interview a minimum of 2 teachers in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. Finally, my goal was to vary the ethnicities of my participants. I wanted to interview at least 2 African-American teachers, 2 Caucasian teachers, and 2 Hispanic teachers.
I solicited participants through my own contacts in teaching, through the Internet, and through faculty room bulletin boards. I did not solicit participants through their administrators or subordinates, but through their peers (Seidman, 1998). I had those who had been interviewed suggest other teacher participants who then suggested others. Although this snowballing technique (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) can be useful, it has its flaws, as well: the sample can be biased if all of the participants are connected. Because I also used several other methods to locate participants, it is not a weakness of this study.

To obtain the first round of participants I talked to and sent out e-mail requests to both current and former colleagues and to urban middle school teachers I located via Internet searches. A “Sample E-Mail to Potential Participants” (Appendix A) is included in the appendices. This letter was sometimes slightly modified to fit my audience. For example, when the request was sent through contacts in the local teachers’ union, I included my union affiliations. I also posted requests for participants (Appendix B) on bulletin boards in faculty rooms of urban middle schools.

To find urban districts, I searched demographic information with the United States Census Bureau to find cities in the northeast portion of the United States that had population densities over 4000 per square mile. I used a more limited definition than the U.S. Census Bureau which defines urban areas as those “places of 2,500 or more persons” (U.S. Census Bureau, 1995) because I wanted to be certain that the districts chosen would clearly be considered urban by the reader. I then examined the economic characteristics of the cities. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.) website indicate that 9.8% of U.S. families are below the poverty level. I chose cities with 14 to 25% of families living below the poverty level. This means, though, that the number of students
living below the poverty level is 66% to 80%. The data from the site also indicate that 19.5% of people in the United States speak a language other than English at home. I chose cities that had between 30 and 50% of the population speaking a language other than English at home. Choosing cities that had far more families living in poverty and speaking a language other than English was another step toward ensuring that the cities I chose would be considered truly urban. It is also true that urban cities tend to have more families in poverty and more families whose first language is not English than the U.S. average.

I then searched the U.S. Department of Education web site, specifically the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) database, for a list of schools within those districts and narrowed it down to middle schools with an ethnically diverse population and high rate of free or reduced lunch (as indicated by low income statistics). I then went to those schools’ web sites and accessed a list of teacher e-mail addresses. I chose five to seven teachers to e-mail; I did not want to blanket the entire teaching staff because I was hoping for two or three responses per school.

This combination of snowballing, saturation, and maximum variation sampling led to a cross section of the teaching population and interview participants with a variety of experiences to share.

Sites

I also planned to interview participants from a variety of urban middle school sites. My plan was to interview teachers from at least 3 urban school districts and from at least 2 middle schools within each district. This was a minimum of 6 different sites,
which was intended to ensure that the information I gathered was not idiosyncratic to a particular district or middle school. Care has been taken to examine and share with the reader the demographic information of the districts chosen.

**Tape Recording and Note Taking During Interviews**

In determining whether to tape record the interviews or take notes while conducting them, I examined information from a wide variety of sources. I carefully considered the advantages and disadvantages of tape recording, as well of those of note taking.

**Tape Recording**

Although tape recording of oral histories began in 1948 (Yow, 1994), some authors recommend that interviews not be tape recorded (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They point to the tape recorder inhibiting participants’ responses because of their fear of saying something “on the record.” I had found during the pilot study, though, that Seidman’s (1998) declaration that the participant would soon forget the presence of the tape recorder so it would not be inhibiting accurate. I did consider the idea that tape recording the interview changes it, but I felt the benefits outweighed whatever might be lost.

I tape recorded the interviews because the participants’ “words are important, what the interviewee says” (Sanger, 1996, p. 66) is important and it can be replayed verbatim later and be useful as “an independent and undeniable resource” (Sanger, p. 67). One author considers tape recording essential because the memory does not remember exactly what it sees or hears, but organizes it to fit with previous experiences; therefore, “it is essential that interviewers tape-record in-depth interviews to obtain verbatim records of those interviews” (Johnson, 2002, p. 111). Tape recording also let me
concentrate on the interview rather than note taking (Sanger). I indicated on the informed consent form (Appendix C) that the interviews would be tape recorded, thereby gaining participants’ permission.

**Note Taking**

I did, however, also want to take notes for several reasons. First, I wanted to stay focused on what participants were saying and not interrupt (Seidman, 1998). Second, I wanted a back up record in case the recordings were somehow unusable or destroyed in transport. Third, I wanted to be able to jot down notes that came to me during the interviews. Fourth, I wanted to make notes of follow-up questions to ask at a later point in the interview without interrupting my participants. Fifth, I agree with Sanger that “note taking is already the groundwork of theory building” (1996, p. 69).

On the other hand, there were several reasons that I did not want to rely entirely on note taking. First, I wanted the verbal aspects (tone, pitch, and volume) that I could not get from note taking. Second, I could not take notes fast enough to keep up with the participants and I did not want to lose valuable information or make them speak slower (Sanger, 1996) or leave out parts of their narratives in an attempt to help me keep up. Third, notes would be subject to my interpretation (Sanger) at the time of the interview. I decided to tape record and take notes.

**The IC Recorder**

To aid in tape recording and transcribing the interviews I utilized a digital IC (Integrated Circuit) recorder instead of a tape recorder, as I did for many of the interviews in the pilot study. This unit is much smaller than a normal tape recorder (4” x 1” x 1”), about the size of a penknife, and it records on a small chip instead of a standard size or
micro cassette. Although it is small, it is of excellent quality and picked up the participants’ voices very well. Further, its size made it less conspicuous to participants. Another benefit of this type of recorder is that the interview can be uploaded onto the computer’s hard drive and then saved on a Compact Disc (CD). One CD can hold several interviews so storage is much easier than with traditional cassette tapes.

Although putting the tape recorder out of the direct line of sight of the participant has been recommended (Sanger, 1996) and it makes sense, I seemed, in the pilot study, always to place it in plain sight directly between my participant and myself. I did not find that this interfered with their ability to share their stories. This placement maximized the sound quality of the recording and allowed participants easy access if they felt it necessary to stop the recording at any time. I continued this practice for the dissertation study.

One drawback I did encounter in using the IC recorder was that it is difficult to tell when it has reached its capacity. I learned how to overcome this: It was necessary before conducting an interview to delete all previous interviews from the recorder so there would be space available. Also, it is impossible to pause the recording and continue; the recording can, however, be stopped and a new recording on another “file” started.

**Explanation of the Transcription Process**

To save time some researchers preview the tapes and transcribe only the segments of the interviews that seem to be important (Poland, 2002). I, however, transcribed the interviews in their entirety (as I did for the pilot study) because I agree with Seidman that
not transcribing the entire interview “imposes the researcher’s frame of reference on the interview data one step too early in the winnowing process” (1998, p. 98).

Transcribing most of the interviews myself helped me get to know the data better (Seidman, 1998) and prevented the loss of intimacy with the data (Poland, 2002), which can happen if transcribers are involved in the research project. I used suggestions from two researchers (Mishler, 1986; Poland) to develop a simple notation system for transcribing (Appendix D) to indicate who was speaking, coughs, laughs, deep sighs, hesitations, inaudible words, and when an interruption occurred. I included on the transcript numbers indicating how many minutes and seconds into the CD the excerpts in the transcript could be found, which made locating information on the CD very simple. I used this process for the pilot study and continued it with the dissertation study, but I had to be open-minded about using a transcriber when time constraints became a consideration. I hired transcribers for some of the final transcripts. The time savings was important and I do not feel I lost “intimacy” with the data because I had to review and revise the transcripts; I listened and relistened to the audio to match it more closely with the transcript. Although in most cases the transcribers did a good job, there were terms idiosyncratic to teaching that were completely misunderstood and I had to spend a good deal of time revising the transcripts I sent out. Every hesitation, cough, repetition, etc., was transcribed in the original transcripts. However, in instances where quotations are used in the final report I have edited out the idiosyncrasies of oral speech.

Transcribing the tape recordings and CDs was a time-consuming process. I used the same method I used during the pilot study. I listened and relistened to the CD during the transcription process and then as a final check listened to the IC recorder again to be
certain there were no errors in transcribing. Replaying and listening to each section repeatedly to be sure nothing was overlooked or misunderstood was a tedious task, but working with the interview material was satisfying. I enjoyed listening to the tapes and rereading the transcripts to choose the words that were most compelling to share, although it was incredibly difficult for me to decide which information to include and which to “let go.”

**My Bias**

In discussing her bias, Marshall (1981) says that

my bias is something I appreciate, it’s part of me as a researcher. And while it is important for me and for others to recognize my bias, it really is what I can give as a researcher, it is my contribution, and it’s coherent and it’s felt and it has all these other qualities which make me value it more than a detached attempt to be objective (p. 399).

Although I do not feel as Marshall does, that my biases are part of my contribution to the research, I do believe it is important for the reader to know that I have acknowledged them (Bouchard, 1976; Johnson, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Van Manen, 1990). I certainly can not assert that I have no biases concerning urban middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams and their lives because I do not believe that it is possible to be completely unbiased about something I have spent most of my adult life living. I do, however, believe it is important to acknowledge my biases and be conscious of them to try to minimize their affect on the research project. In order to do so and to respect the reader’s right to know, I think it is best to acknowledge them publicly.

On three separate occasions (so that I was more certain that my list was inclusive and not subject to my feelings on one particular occasion) I made a list of my beliefs about urban middle school teachers and their lives and I share those here. I believe that
the teaching profession is undervalued by society; teachers are underpaid; middle school teachers have a tremendous impact on students’ lives; ineffective teachers remain in the profession because their union protects them; parents need to support the school in disciplining their children and in making children believe that education is important; the general public does not understand what middle school teachers do; and perhaps most relevant to this study, middle school teachers have not been trained to be middle school teachers.

I am aware that although I have acknowledged my bias and have done my best to be certain it did not affect the research project, the researcher forms the questions and interprets the data, so some bias is inevitable (Yow, 1994). I did my best at all times to listen to the participants and not impose my beliefs on them, but I am aware that the researcher plays a role in shaping the data collected (Dey, 1993).

**Analysis**

I did some coding and categorizing while collecting data, but decided to wait until the end to do a complete analysis. Although I did not want the results of earlier interviews to influence future interviews and I did not want to have to revise the categories continually as new interviews were conducted, I decided to do some coding and categorizing as I went along. I decided that I would add categories without revision at that time. I did not want to waste time at that juncture collapsing categories and renaming them, but I did not want to lose insights that came to me while checking my notes after interviewing or during transcribing. Because I transcribed the majority of the recordings myself, this was the beginning of my thematic analysis.
I transcribed and coded the interviews so that access to excerpts was facilitated. I examined the transcripts for important units of meaning, also known as “chunks” (Tagg, 1985), “databits” (Dey, 1993), or “horizons” (Moustakas, 1994) by other researchers, and categorized or classified them into themes as they emerged during the study and analysis of the interview tapes and transcripts. I read and reread hard copies of the transcripts highlighting compelling information. I sometimes read the transcripts on the computer monitor and highlighted and copied segments of the transcripts to computer files that were labeled with the emerging themes or topics. I also listened to the CDs again because I wanted to “hear” my participants’ voices when I reread the transcripts, which have been described as “flat, written copy” (Marshall, 1981, p. 396). And although I like using the printed word, I see the value in actually hearing participants’ voices.

I kept notes and memos of ideas and parts of the transcripts that interested me in a notebook and on a computer disc as they occurred to me, as I did during the pilot study. I did not realize in the early stages that this was the beginning of my themal analysis and that many other researchers (Charmaz, 2002; Dey, 1993; Marshall, 1981) begin their theory building by doing the same, simply jotting down notes as they come. This seemed to work for me. Many of the themes began as categories that were later fleshed out as the participants’ words within the category were examined. Keeping track of these notes and the decisions I made along the way created an audit trail (Dey).

I am aware that some researchers do not believe that themes “emerge” from the data, rather they are created and meanings are given to them by the researcher who embraces a particular analytical preference (Constas, 1992). Although I would agree that different researchers could find within the same data different themes which they could
consider more important than others or more worthy of sharing, I also believe that a careful analysis of the data and participant verification ensure that the themes are actually within the data rather than the researcher. I believe that the researcher extracts the themes from the data with care after repeated engagement with it. I understand, though, that the codes also reflect the researcher’s interest and perspective, as well as what the data say (Charmaz, 2002).

**Reporting**

In labeling the themes I endeavored to use the participants’ own terms in cases where their terms were more descriptive or powerful than my own. Authors who write about qualitative interviewing recommend these *in vivo* codes, as well as weaving the categories together and making their connections explicit rather than treating them as separate (Charmaz, 1983; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the pilot study I considered labeling themes or topics with the terms the participants themselves used (Dey, 1993), but there were no phrases that struck me as especially powerful or inclusive for the themes that emerged, so I opted for symmetry using the term “disappointments.” The themes were disappointments with administration, disappointments with families, and disappointments with colleagues. I could just as easily have substituted the term “frustrations” for “disappointments,” as I did in the larger study. Other themes were the stress of testing and the high points of teaching. For the dissertation there were more terms from which to choose, so I used the participants’ own words in many cases, although I begin the results section with an examination of teachers’ experiences with the middle school characteristics as explained in the introduction and literature review.
Although it may appear that I simply analyzed the participant interviews based on the results of the literature, I want to make it clear that I did not simply overlay the characteristics of the middle school on my results. I set aside my research on the middle school when I began to analyze the transcripts and tapes of the participant interviews. I coded and categorized significant excerpts. It was not until I began the arduous task of reviewing the categories to find not only significant themes, but a way to connect them that I realized that so much of what my participants thought was important was organized around the characteristics of the middle school. This was not evident early in the process, likely because I had not used the terms from the literature to categorize the themes. For example, I realized during the analysis that in the category I had labeled “use of time” teachers were actually lamenting the lack of “flexible scheduling.” The category I had labeled “lack of space/resources” included how poorly buildings were maintained and the lack of technology; during my analysis I subdivided this category into “specially designed facilities” and “use of methods and media.” I had not treated as significant in my initial analysis information participants shared about the importance of involving the community, student empowerment, or the promotion of healthy habits. However, when I decided to organize one of the results chapters around the ideal characteristics of the middle school, I reviewed the transcripts again to pull out significant excerpts to explicate these three themes. I found that many participants had thoughts on the subjects, even though I had not included them in the original analysis. Because the other 14 characteristics of a middle school were present in my original analysis, though not labeled that way, I decided that it made sense to organize the first results chapter around the participants’ experiences with the ideal characteristics of the middle school.
It is also possible to isolate themes within interviews (Fennell, 1999). In instances where the themes within an interview were strong and relevant to the study as a whole, I include them in the introduction to the participants or in their portraits. Besides the thematic analysis, I examined the transcripts and constructed portraits of 2 participants. I use the participants’ words freely, including lengthy quotes to explicate the themes; I am, after all, trying to tell their stories. I think the portraits are a good addition to the themes because they give the reader an opportunity for an up-close look at 2 participants, their life histories, and their experiences as middle school teachers in urban settings. I think Lawrence-Lightfoot explained it best in her opening chapter of *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997): “A persistent irony--recognized and celebrated by novelists, poets, playwrights--is that as one moves closer to the unique characteristics of a person or a place, one discovers the universal” (p. 14).

I have focused on using participants’ words liberally throughout my study and have set up and discussed their excerpts. I assigned the participants pseudonyms, but I also appreciate that codes assist the reader in determining at a glance the demographic information related to the participant whose quote is being read. I have, then, done both: introduced the participant and their background, but also assigned them a code to follow the excerpts of their words so the reader can access demographic information more quickly without referring back to the introduction of the participants or to an appendix. I have included the information I think most relevant: the participant’s school district and school, the first two letters of the subject they teach, the grade levels they teach, the first two letters of their ethnicity, their gender, their age, and their years of experience in middle school. There are five ethnic codes: CA for Caucasian, AA for African-
American, HI for Hispanic, IR for Iranian, and AS for Asian. There are five subject matter codes: MU for music, MA for math, EN for English, SS for social studies, and SC for science. I have used M for male and F for female. So the participant who teaches in District 3 at school A, is a teacher of music for seventh and eighth grade students, and is a Caucasian female who is 35 years old with 12 years of teaching experience is coded as: 3A/MU78/CAF3512. A table in the following chapter lists each participant, their demographic information, and their code.

I have called my examination of the data an analysis, although I understand that it has been called an explication by others (Groenwald, 2004). I appreciate the subtle differences in their definitions, a clarification or illumination rather than an examination or investigation, yet I have chosen to use the more familiar term, analysis.

My ideas about the interview being a joint product of the interviewee and interviewer (Mishler, 1986) have led me to decide to share the CDs, transcripts, and final product with the participants at their request. Only 1 participant, Ms. Eastmont, requested a copy of her transcript, but several are interested in the final product.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative studies are judged differently from quantitative studies. Many qualitative researchers have offered criteria for proving the accuracy of their findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to replace internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity to support the trustworthiness of a study. These can be established through peer debriefing and member checking (Lincoln & Guba). These authors also talk about fidelity, the researcher’s ability to reproduce the data later, which can be done with recordings or field
notes. These authors also recommend peer debriefings and reflexive journals to safeguard against bias. I have used a “critical friend” (a colleague who asks probing questions or offers feedback) to get input on which themes and interview excerpts are most compelling. I conducted member checks with both participants and nonparticipants, made taped recordings of interviews, took field notes, and kept a reflexive journal as part of my research process.

Other authors suggest apparency, verisimilitude, and transferability to replace validity, reliability, and generalizability (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These authors also state that the “particular” rather than the general will move the audience and give authenticity to the study and that the story should be plausible, it should ring true to the audience. Another has said that verification is required rather than validity (Creswell, 1998). This is proven by time spent in the field, thick descriptions, the closeness of the participants to the study, peer reviews and debriefing, clarification of the author’s bias, and member checks (Creswell). This author also recommends trustworthiness and authenticity. I used many of these methods in my study to support the accuracy of my findings. As previously indicated, I shared the “particular” in the form of my participants’ own words, and tried to write stories that would “ring true” to the audience. I spent many months in the field conducting interviews and I have provided “thick” descriptions. I have already indicated that I used member checks. I connected with both participants and nonparticipants to inquire if the themes I chose to share rang true. Their agreement indicated that I was in fact, letting the themes emerge from the data rather than imposing my own views. I have also explained how I came to the topic and the care I took to bracket my biases, as well as an explanation of the constant comparative method.
used to examine the data, which I think assist in assuring the audience of my trustworthiness.

I also used the reflections, questions, and diaries explained in the Analysis section to help prove the “trustworthiness” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of my study. These field notes created an important audit trail. Researchers suggest that there are four types of field notes: observational, including what happened; theoretical, including meaning gained during reflection; methodological, including reminders about the process; and analytical, including a review of the day’s progress (Groenwald, 2004). I have included each of these types of field notes within my journal at one time or another.

Credibility has been defined as “the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are believable and trustworthy” (Lather, 2001, p. 244) and reliability as the fit between what happens and what is reported. This can be established through participant confirmation, use of participant quotes, and mechanized recordings (Lather). Internal validity has been defined as the match between the categories and interpretations established by the researcher and what is actually true; one of the ways it can be gained is by giving the audience a thorough explanation of the research process (Lather). I have gained participant confirmation through member checks, verbatim quotes from participants, and recorded interviews to ensure credibility and reliability. I have constructed an audit trail and kept a journal to give the audience a complete explanation of the research process.

Although the states, districts, and schools remain unnamed, I endeavor to give enough demographic information about my participants’ settings that the reader can
determine if the results of the study are generalizable (Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or transferable to their own or other settings.

**Participant Information Form**

To assist me in keeping track of the participants, I designed a participant information form (Seidman, 1998) (Appendix E). The form included participants’ pseudonyms, contact information, who referred them, demographic information, and columns to check off the following activities as they were completed: initial contact; interviews one, two, and three; thank you letters; and consent forms. Although this instrument was not critical to keep track of information for the pilot study of 4 participants, it was certainly necessary for the dissertation--practice with it during the pilot study was intended to assist me in making modifications for the dissertation stage. Being organized when dealing with so many participants is key (Yow, 1994) and this form proved up to the task.

**Informed Consent Form**

I also designed a consent form (Appendix C) using suggestions from the literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seidman, 1998) and the University of Massachusetts Amherst (2003). This form respected the participants’ right to withdraw without penalty and to have copies of the transcripts provided to them. It requested their permission for me to tape record them and take notes. It also protected my right to use the information in other formats after the conclusion of the current study. Participants were asked to sign two copies before the completion of the interview process and I also signed both copies (one for participants and one for my records).
Full Circle: The Purposes

The purpose of this dissertation study was to explore, through in-depth phenomenological interviews, three ideas central to teaching on an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school. The first idea surrounds the complexities of the work experiences of middle school teachers who participate on interdisciplinary teams in urban middle schools. The second idea involves the possible interactions of the structures and principles of the middle school philosophy with teachers’ work lives. The third idea encompasses how the reality of interdisciplinary teams and their functioning connect to the ideals described in the middle school and organizational theory literature.

Although I conducted a pilot study, which uncovered interesting themes, I was open to the themes which emerged during the dissertation and I was flexible enough to let these new themes supplant the old when an analysis of the interview transcripts warranted it. My goal was the goal of qualitative researchers: to tell “a tale that does justice to the subjects’ stories of their lived world and that conveys new and valid knowledge and insights to the listeners and the readers of the tale” (Kvale, 1996, p. 80).
Introduction to the Participants

I interviewed 15 teachers from 9 middle schools in 5 districts in the northeastern United States. I have already explained the process I used to choose districts so the reader has some ideas about the demographics of the communities involved. I will now introduce each district and share relevant information about the student body without compromising the locations. All of the demographic information was gathered from government web sites, most frequently the United States Census Bureau (n.d.). I have not cited every page I accessed or table I constructed in gathering the data as that would include the names of the districts and could lead to my participants’ identities being revealed. I have not used the exact figures, as this could also lead to identifying my districts; instead, for example, if the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.) reports that 24.6% of students live in poverty, I report that about one quarter or 25% of students live in poverty. For easy reference Table 1 includes the information I share in detail in the following section.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>City Population</th>
<th>City Area/square miles</th>
<th>Population Density</th>
<th>Students Living in Poverty</th>
<th>Students: English not Primary Language</th>
<th>Students: Caucasian</th>
<th>Students: African-American</th>
<th>Students: Hispanic</th>
<th>Students: Asian</th>
<th>Students: Other</th>
<th># Teachers Interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>175,000</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4400</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>125,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7000</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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I have labeled the districts 1 through 5 rather than making up names for the reader to try to keep track of and I have labeled the first school I visited in each district A and the second school B. In this section, I describe the districts and introduce the participants individually so the reader will get a more personal “feel” for them. I share demographic information about each participant and then to help the reader get to know them, I share the excerpt or two from our time together that explains how they became a teacher or that seems to me to encapsulate the underlying theme of their interviews.

I explained in the previous chapter how I intended to vary the demographic characteristics of my participants to get a cross-section of the teaching population. I was able to interview teachers from all of the core subject areas and one exploratory: 4 math teachers (3 males and 1 female); 4 science teachers (3 males and 1 female); 3 English teachers (1 male and 2 females); 3 social studies teachers (1 male and 2 females) and 1 music teacher (female). These teachers also had a wide variety of middle school teaching experience: 4 teachers with between 3 and 5 years experience, 4 teachers with between 6 and 10 years experience, 2 teachers with between 11 and 16 years experience, 3 teachers with between 17 and 22 years experience, and 2 teachers with more than 23 years experience. The teachers were also of various ages: 3 teachers in their 20s, 2 teachers in their 30s, 4 teachers in their 40s, 5 teachers in their 50s, and 1 teacher in his 60s. Finally, their ethnicities varied: 10 Caucasian participants, 2 Hispanic participants, 1 African-American participant, 1 Asian participant, and 1 Iranian participant. Table 2 displays the demographic information and quotation code for each participant for easy reference.
Table 2: Demographic Information of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>School / Subject</th>
<th>Grade / Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years in MS</th>
<th>QUOTATION CODE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Katz</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>A MU</td>
<td>78 CA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3A/MU78/CAF3512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Nowak</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A MA</td>
<td>6 CA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2A/MA6/CAF5610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Breton</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A EN</td>
<td>8 CA</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2A/EN8/CAM5909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Eastmont</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>B SS</td>
<td>7 CA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3B/SS7/CAF4117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber Henderson</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>A SS</td>
<td>8 CA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>4A/SS8/CAF3303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Wills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A MA</td>
<td>8 CA</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1A/MA8/CAM6442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Faulkner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A EN</td>
<td>8 AA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>1A/EN8/AAF4908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Hasse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A MA</td>
<td>8 IR</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>2A/MA8/IRM2504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Delgado</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>A SC</td>
<td>7 HI</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5A/SC7/HIM4811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brighton</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>A SC</td>
<td>8 CA</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>5A/SC8/CAM2603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Oliver</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>B SC</td>
<td>78 CA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5B/SC78/CAF5521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Sang</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A EN</td>
<td>78 AS</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2A/EN78/ASF5722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Vargas</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A MA</td>
<td>7 HI</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>1A/MA7/HIM2803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. King</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B SC</td>
<td>6 CA</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1B/SC6/CAM5534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Daniels</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>B SS</td>
<td>6 CA</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>4B/SS6/CAM4907</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants were accessed in a variety of ways. Asking colleagues to recommend participants accounted for 6 of the participants, having participants recommend participants accounted for 2 participants, and 7 participants came from the e-mail requests. No responses were received from the signs placed in faculty rooms.

I have, as mentioned previously, quoted participants liberally as I am trying to share their stories. I have, however, used more quotations from some participants than others. This was due to the fact that some of the participants seem to have a gift for saying with clarity and style that which others have also said. The average number of quoted excerpts shared (excluding the portraits) is about 20; most of the 15 participants hovered around this average, though 3 had far fewer (about 11) and 2 had far more (about
40). In instances where the experience is that of only 1 participant, I have indicated this. In instances where many participants have had the same or similar experiences, I have chosen the excerpts that best represented those of the group. The fact that 2 participants are quoted more frequently is not an indication that this dissertation represents more fully their experiences, rather it is an indicator that their turn of a phrase or story-telling ability is to be appreciated.

As previously mentioned, each quote taken directly from a participant’s interview includes a code after it which indicates the participant’s district, school, subject, grade level, ethnicity, gender, age, and years experience teaching middle school. The reader can then tell, without referring back to the table of participants, the demographic information for the speaker of each quote and can easily check to see if clustered quotes are from participants of the same gender, age, subject matter, district, or school.

I have edited out (with participants’ permission) the idiosyncrasies of oral speech: the “ums”, “ahs”, and repetitions. The interviewer’s questions and comments have been deleted, as have hesitations, except in cases where I think they signify the participant’s inner conflict. When participants hesitated I represent a one second hesitation with an asterisk (*); again, these have been deleted except in instances where I felt it was important for the reader to know that the participant seemed to be searching for the right word or struggling to put words to the emotion. These changes both improve clarity for the reader and protect the dignity of the participants. I have not, though, removed every idiosyncrasy because I wanted to keep the “flavor” of the participants’ oral speech; I am sharing their “voices,” rather than written essays of their experiences.
I have put in parenthesis participants’ laughs, chuckles, and sighs to give the reader a sense of the participants’ emotions. When a word or two is omitted from the participant’s quote (often to protect the anonymity of their colleagues or students) I indicate this with three spaced ellipsis points; when more than a sentence is omitted I indicate this with four spaced ellipsis points. In cases where participants stress a word or phrase, I use italics. When information has been added to clarify a participant’s point or when a school or district name is changed to a general term, I indicate this by enclosing the word or phrase in brackets.

I have given each participant a pseudonym (in one case chosen by the participant herself) and have also given pseudonyms to every colleague, student, and former teacher mentioned in quoted excerpts. I have changed demographic information in a very few cases to protect participants’ anonymity. Most of the participants were not concerned about protecting their identities, but in cases where participants’ experiences cast their administration in a bad light, they were somewhat more concerned. I have not changed participants’ ethnicities or genders because I believe those characteristics are so much a part of a person. Rather, I have shaved a few years off their ages (or maybe added a few), I have modified their subject matter (reading or English, does it really matter?), I have given or taken away a year or two of teaching experience or changed their grade level. None of the demographic information modified changes their stories or the insights we can gain from them; it was done to protect them.

As indicated when explaining the methodology, I spent the first interview learning about my participants’ lives up until the time they became middle school teachers so that I could put their middle school teaching experiences in the context of their lives. Space is
not available here to share all that was shared with me, but along with the demographic information (subject matter, grade level, ethnicity, gender, age, and number of years teaching middle school), I share information the reader may find useful: when the participant went into teaching, any previous careers, their marital status, and a quote that reveals something about how they became a teacher or one of their core beliefs about middle school education. I now introduce those 15 teachers who were so willing to give of their time and themselves to assist us in learning what it means to be an urban middle school teacher teaching on an interdisciplinary team.

**District 1**

District 1 has a population of over 150,000 and is about 30 square miles, giving it a population density of 5,000 people per square mile. About 75% of the students in this district live below the poverty level. Approximately one quarter of the families speak a language other than English as their primary language. Half of the students in this district are Hispanic, one quarter are African-American, one fifth are Caucasian, and the remaining are Asian or other. My 4 participants are drawn from 2 of the districts’ 6 middle schools.

Mr. John Wills, a soft-spoken Caucasian male, is the oldest participant at 64 years of age. He had actually retired from teaching, but never really stopped teaching. He is not ready for retirement; his wife is a kindergarten teacher in his district and his school is in need of his services as an eighth grade math teacher, so he continues to teach; he loves it, even after 42 years. He believes that effort is important.

I’ve learned over the years that if a child is trying today, and keeps trying, they will catch on, sooner or later, you catch on. If they stop trying, they’ll never learn. So I try to reward the child who’s trying. I do give passing grades to kids who should be failing, **if** they’re trying. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)
Ms. Faulkner is a slightly beleaguered, eager to share, African-American eighth grade English teacher who has spent 8 of her 49 years teaching middle school. She came into teaching after a decade as a speech and language therapist because she saw that many of her clients were children who had reading difficulties. Two factors played a role in her decision to become a teacher: having an opportunity to teach at a young age and her desire to give kids the opportunity to try (her family was very protective of this youngest of seven who had had a stroke paralyzing her right side when she was just 1 year old).

While I was growing up my mom used to take in foster kids, and at one point we had a child that came in * he was un mentally retarded, borderline. Beau was his name, is his name (chuckle). He’s still around. He and I, we just kind of clicked and I would be working with him; he had memory problems and he went to special classes. He was in special ed and I would be working with him, you know, with his homework and maybe that’s what kind of sparked me to want to go into education. Yeah, I think that’s what it was really. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

When I was growing up I was always told I can’t. “You can’t, you can’t, you can’t. You can’t do this, you can’t do that because of your disability.” Just give a person a chance, work with the person. I think that’s kind of what geared me to becoming a teacher. A lot of times kids say, “I can’t do this.” And I’m like, “I’m here; I’m willing to work with you. You have to put forth some effort, of course, and if you do that, you don’t know you can until you try.” And I think growing up I wasn’t really given an opportunity a lot to try; I was just told, I can’t. * My parents being protective, brothers and sisters being protective, they didn’t allow me to and I think a child needs to sometimes get pushed, “You can.” You can at least try and see what you’re capable of doing, you never know until you try. ** And I think that’s what’s kind of been in the back of my mind all along. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

The third participant from this district is Mr. Vargas, an unassuming, quiet, 28-year-old Hispanic (born in Puerto Rico) math teacher who has been teaching seventh grade for 3 years. He is also an amateur boxer and is disappointed to find that he gets more respect as a boxer than as a teacher.
I think a lot of people don’t find it as **** respectable as it is, you know? As rewarding as it is. Yesterday [I was] telling people that I’m teaching and they’re like, “Oh, okay.” And I tell them I’m boxing, “Wow, oh wow, you box?” [They] get all excited about that. They don’t see, (sigh) it’s frustrating because they don’t see it like something that’s at the level where it should be. Teaching should be one of the top things, I mean, we’re teaching kids. And it’s not. For society, it’s another job I guess, it’s what I feel like. *** (Sigh) Frustrating. You don’t get the credit that you deserve. (1A/MA7/HIM2803)

He is committed to assisting children beyond the classroom. He teaches boxing to high school age youth. As a single man with few expenses, he feels like he can use his salary to provide the equipment, space, and travel expenses for his young, amateur boxers. He began his working life with an insurance company and hated it because “it seemed like there was no purpose. . . .I was actually working in claims so it was sort of a stressful, stressful environment.” (1A/MA7/HIM2803) His friend was an assistant principal and suggested he try teaching math. He was unsure the first few months, but ended up loving it.

Mr. King is a 55-year-old, no nonsense, take charge, Caucasian sixth grade science teacher who has been teaching middle school (or junior high) in the same district for 34 years. Perhaps because he was a very active student in high school: playing hockey, baseball, football, and being sports editor for his yearbook, he lamented the lack of activities available to students in his district’s middle schools.

In the fall, we used to have two sports every season; two sports for boys and two sports for girls. We would have football and soccer for boys; we would have field hockey and soccer for girls. In the winter, we had basketball for each of them, or swimming for each of them. In the spring, we’d have baseball, softball or track for each of them. ***** Those were important things. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

Before cutbacks, he had been an active teacher, as well: planning dances, advising the Student Council, and organizing field trips. He is also active in his local union, as is his wife who teaches elementary school in his district.
District 2

District 2 is very similar in size (about 30 square miles) and population (about 150,000) to District 1, but demographically slightly different. More than one third of the students are African-American, one third are Hispanic, one fifth are Caucasian, and about one tenth are Asian. About 80% of students live below the poverty level and 20% come from homes where English is not the primary language. Four of my participants come from District 2.

Mrs. Nowak, is a direct, open, 56-year-old Caucasian woman who has taught middle school math for 10 years after 20 years in elementary school. Her husband, who is older, has already been retired for a number of years, so she does not plan to teach beyond the next 3 years. When I met her, she was considering leaving the classroom to take a leadership position. She is conflicted because she still enjoys her sixth grade classroom, but because she is nearing retirement, she could use the salary increase. Negotiations were ongoing as to whether or not the position would really include a salary increase.

Number one, I love what I do, I love what I do. I love where I’m doing it. It would be very difficult for me to walk away, especially in the middle of a year. ** I have put in an e-mail to [the superintendent] a couple days ago and I have not heard a response yet about my concerns before I take it. My number one concern is, unfortunately, financial; * that will be the reason. That will be my determination if I leave the classroom (clear throat) because it does not make, as I put it in my letter, economic sense for me to leave this to do something that’s going to cause me stress, that’s going to give me more work for the same amount of money. (2A/MA6/CAF5610)

Mr. Breton, is a funny, direct, 59-year-old Caucasian man who had spent the majority of his working life (25 years) as a middle manager of a Fortune 500 company. He lost his job due to corporate downsizing. When the closest comparable positions
available were 50 to 70 miles away, his wife, a teacher, suggested that he substitute teach while searching for a position. He enjoyed it and that is how he went into teaching eighth grade English 9 years ago at age 50. He is happy with his choice and would not want to move to the high school.

I think you concentrate so much on your subject area in high school. I think in middle school the way we have things set up here, you know, we’ve got teams. We really do try to deal with the whole kid. There’s a lot of socialization that we do. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

Mr. Hasse, is the youngest participant at 25 and the only Iranian male interviewed. He is high energy, but lacks confidence in his teaching ability. He is unmarried and had been teaching 4 years when he shared his experiences as an eighth grade math teacher with me. Like Mr. Vargas, he had worked for a large insurance company before becoming a teacher. He worked four 10 hour days a week; he began substitute teaching on Fridays and enjoyed it so much he quit the insurance company and went into teaching full time. He is very concerned that after 4 years he still feels like a novice, but that in his school he is considered a veteran because there are so many new teachers.

[Having a mentor] would be priceless to me right now. I’m coming up on my fourth full year of teaching, and I feel like, man if I was anywhere else, I mean, if I was an electrician, if I was a plumber, if I was in any trade, in my fourth year I’d feel like I have it down. After all that, I’d feel like I had it all down. (2A/MA8/IRM2504)

Mrs. Sang is a fit, dynamic 57-year-old, seventh and eighth grade English teacher of 22 years who was born and raised in Hong Kong. She explained the very strict Hong Kong school:

Basically, pretty much the teachers lecture, we listen, do the homework, no questions asked, you do what the teachers ask you. And they’re very strict, you
don’t talk. You do your homework; you don’t do your homework, you get punished. (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

She received her teaching degree in Hong Kong and taught English, physical education, and science there. She came to the United States 24 years ago, attended college, earned her teaching degree, got married, and has been teaching English to middle school students ever since, although her time was shared with the high school her first 2 years. She feels that her students are being asked to test too much between the state mandated testing and the district tests designed to see if the students are ready for the state mandated tests.

All the tests, almost every other month they have a test. It’s very discouraging for them to say, “Oh I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to do that.” And every month you remind them, “Hey you don’t know how to do this, hey you don’t know how to do that.” (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

district 3

District 3 is larger in size (about 40 square miles) and population (about 175,000) than Districts 1 and 2 and has a population density of about 4,400. Sixty-six percent of the students in this district live below the poverty level and 38% come from homes where English is not the primary language. District 3 has the highest percentage of Caucasian students (40%); 33% of students are Hispanic, 15% are African-American, and 10% are Asian. Two of my participants hail from District 3.

Mrs. Victoria Katz is an energetic, friendly, 35-year-old Caucasian woman who has taught seventh and eighth grade middle school music for 12 years. She knew her whole life she was going to be a teacher.

I always knew I was going to be a teacher. I don’t know why, but I always knew. I used to play teacher on the playground. We’d take out our little workbooks and the teacher would give us extra books and we’d go and play. So I always knew. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)
Ms. Eastmont is a 41-year-old, award-winning, Caucasian seventh grade social studies teacher of 17 years who enjoys traveling to bring relics and photographs back to her students to make history come alive. She had been a teacher her whole life, but did not realize it: teaching friends to sail and ski and teaching swimming lessons at the local YMCA. When she was conflicted about her career options in college, friends encouraged her to try teaching. She was glad that she began her teaching career in an urban district.

[My district] gets a lot more money through grants than a lot of the towns do, so that we’ve got some special things. . . .The opportunities. I would not be the teacher that I am if I wasn’t working in [this district] because of all the curriculum development. Working with the [museums] and all those places has offered me so many opportunities and my students so many opportunities. I was able to get grants and take them on field trips and work with different groups and I love taking my students outside of [the district]. (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

District 4

District 4 is much smaller than the others introduced so far (about 18 square miles), but has a large population (125,000) and therefore, a large population density (almost 7,000). Almost half of the students in District 4 come from homes where the primary language is not English and two thirds of students live in poverty. Fifty-nine percent of students are African-American, 28% are Hispanic, and 12% are Caucasian. The demographics in School A in District 4 are so different that I will note it here. There are no Caucasian students at School A; 80% of the student body is African-American, 20% is Hispanic. Two participants teach in District 4.

Mrs. Amber Henderson is a calm, Caucasian woman, and at 33 years old had only been teaching 3 years when I interviewed her. She came into teaching eighth grade social studies later in life after years in the private sector as an office manager of a veterinary clinic, a job she came to despise. She chose to teach in an urban area because she
believes she can make a connection with the children having faced some of their same
problems as a child herself.

I have a lot of kids who are missing a parent or are living with a grandparent *
who really need, * they need to make an emotional connection with a solid adult
who’s not going to let them down. And that calls to me, whether it’s because I
have a son of my own or maybe because, you know * as a * young * well, young
child, young teenager I needed to make connections with a lot of older adults
since my own parents were busy with their divorces and their financial problems.
Some would connect to me because in this community you’ll see a lot of kids
living with grandparents. And unfortunately, my brother and I had to live with
our grandmother. She was paying a lot of the * mortgage basically (laugh) after
my mother’s, depends which divorce, but * you know, she was doing a bit of a
caretaking role. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Mr. Daniels is a 49-year-old serene and unhurried Caucasian sixth grade social
studies teacher who has been teaching middle school for 7 years after 4 years in
elementary school. He came to teaching later in life after a successful career as a
designer and crafter of sailboats.

I had a lot of time. . .It was really, really an ideal existence in a lot of ways, but I
felt like there was really something in my life that was missing and I felt like it
was time to look for a new career. Teaching, as I told you before, wasn’t my first
instinct. I approached it with a view, “Well let’s just kind of take a look at this
and see.” I had a friend that I went to college with who was also getting certified
to teach at the same time who lived in the same town I did. So, I kind of visited
some classes with her and I had this girlfriend that was encouraging me and once
I got somewhat open minded to the teaching, I pretty quickly decided urban
education was where I wanted to go and I think that was a really very wise
decision for me. (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

He also felt that, as a single man in his 40s, he was unlikely to have children and came to
realize that teaching could fill a void in his life.

**District 5**

District 5 is the smallest of the districts both in size (15 square miles) and
population (75,000), but it has similar population density (5000) and demographics. Two
thirds of the children in this district live below the poverty level and half come from
families whose first language is not English. Sixty-one percent of the students are Hispanic, 20% are Caucasian, 18% are African-American, and 1% are Asian. Two of my participants teach in this district.

Mr. Delgado is a reserved, 48-year-old, Hispanic, seventh grade science teacher who has been at the middle school level for 11 years. Married with two young children at home, he still finds time to work after school with adult students and has for 20 years. He also spent a few years teaching English as a Second Language classes in the high school. He believes that teaching is important.

You know, *without teachers, there’s nothing. Teachers teach everything.* Whether it’s to become a doctor, whether it’s to become a musician, *whether it’s to become a chef, there’s always some teacher for that, and you’ve got to learn from some teacher somewhere. Everybody gets taught by a teacher.* (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

Mr. Brighton is an energetic, Caucasian, 26-year-old male eighth grade science teacher of 3 years who is very interested in giving back to his community. He wanted to be a teacher, but was talked out of it; in the end he got his degree in education. He felt encouraged by his fiancé who was studying to be a teacher at the time.

I really wanted to be a teacher when I was in my senior year of high school. I had a great science teacher. He was the best guy who I ever met in my life; I keep in contact with him today. . . . In the senior year book we had to quote our ambition. I put “teacher” in there. Everybody, all my friends, were like, “You’re so silly. You need to go make some money; teachers don’t get paid anything.” So my first few years of college I was actually an engineering major. After the end of my sophomore year, I had an interview with a biotechnology company and I worked from the middle of May until the middle of August at a lab bench, by myself, for the whole summer indoors, doing my experiments and making solutions, and doing other lab stuff, only reporting my findings to the boss, or only talking to the few other people who worked in the lab. And at the end of the summer, I just said to myself, “I can’t do it. I can’t do it.” So I had kind of this rebirth of like, wanting to go into education. (5A/SC8/CAM2603)
He realized teaching was for him so he scrambled to get the paperwork together to enroll in the education program. He began teaching on a team in the middle school and feels like he could not handle the difficulties involved in his position if not for his team.

I couldn’t * I couldn’t be at this middle school without the team. Our math teacher has a good saying, and you can quote me on this one, actually, you can quote him on this one. One day he was up doing something and I was going down to the copy machine and he asked me, “Hey B, can you make some copies of this one?” I said, “No problem, man.” He just looked at me, he said, “You know, teamwork makes the dream work.” (5A/SC8/CAM2603)

As much as he enjoys middle school and his team, he was the only teacher interviewed whose ultimate goal is to teach at the high school level.

Ms. Oliver is a straightforward, 55-year-old, Caucasian seventh and eighth grade science teaching veteran of 21 years who came to teaching at 34 after a divorce. She is very active in her school: She sits on committees, organizes fund-raising, assists the girls’ basketball team, and advises the student council. She believes that the federal mandate that every child will be proficient is unattainable.

I believe that every child can learn, * but I believe that there’s a degree to which they are capable of learning. * I also believe that that degree has something to do with what they’re learning. It has a lot to do with what they’re learning, I should say. I don’t believe that every child is ** capable of learning algebra. I don’t believe that every child is going to reach a ninth grade reading level because some children just are not, either because they’re not interested or they’re just really incapable of doing it . . . We all learn in different ways. I really believe that and I believe that paper and pen tests are not the end all to everybody’s ability. That’s not a way to assess us at all. I think it’s very unfair. (5B/SC78/CAF5521)

These are the 15 middle school teachers on interdisciplinary teams in urban schools who were willing to give me 4 or 5 hours of their lives to share their experiences. In the next chapter I provide in-depth portraits of 2 of the participants to illustrate the differences between supportive and unsupportive teams and the complexities involved in dealing with urban middle school students in the 21st century.
CHAPTER VI
THE PORTRAITS

I have chosen to include extensive portraits of 2 teachers above and beyond the brief introductions I gave for all 15 participants because I want the reader to get a much more in-depth look at the complexities involved in being an urban middle school teacher. Amber’s portrait illustrates the contradiction between what a new teacher wants to do for her students and how undeserving she feels they can sometimes be. It also illuminates the differences between having a supportive team and not. John’s portrait illustrates the incredible changes in students since his own junior high days, 50 years ago. It also highlights the changes teams have undergone as funding has decreased and the importance of state test scores has increased.

Because all of the quotes within the portraits come from the same participant, no codes follow the quotes. And, as indicated earlier, I have taken care to use pseudonyms each time they mention a student or colleague and I have edited the quotes to remove the idiosyncrasies of oral speech.

Portrait of Amber Henderson

Amber is a 33-year-old Caucasian social studies teacher in an inner city middle school. She teaches at School A in District 4. She took a circuitous route to teaching, coming to it later in life after several unhappy career choices. Amber was a legal secretary for a large insurance company while she attended college for her undergraduate degree; then she got a Master’s degree in psychology while she worked as a professor’s graduate assistant. Unfortunately, she discovered that there were no jobs available in counseling without a higher degree and at that point, she wanted a break from college.
The only positions available with her credentials were working in state-run group homes for low pay or counseling homeless HIV drug users. With a mountain of student debt, she decided to work for a temp agency. Amber ended up at an animal hospital answering the phones. They were so happy with her performance that they kept her on and 7 years later, she was office manager of the clinic. She enjoyed it because of the flexible hours and good pay, but by the end she was so unhappy that she would drive to work praying for a flat tire or an accident so she would not have to go in. When I encountered her, Amber had been teaching eighth grade for 3 years and loved it.

She went into teaching because coming from divorced parents who had little time for her (“my parents kept remarrying other people and there was never anyone who really had enough time on their hands between new spouses and all these little crises that kept going on with marital problems and moving” ) and even less money (she lived with her grandmother when times were tight) she wanted to be a role model for students from difficult backgrounds. She consciously chose inner city students and wanted to make a difference in students’ lives, something her teachers did not always do for her.

I went into teaching this particular population intentionally ** um ** because a lot of the students that you teach in the city come from some bad situations, very bad situations and they need to see some people who also had some issues, * not necessarily the same ones as them, but they need to see people kind of do it, who can take charge, ** stand on their own. ** They also need somebody who isn’t going to make excuses for them in terms of their own success.

Like all teenagers I thought I could do it so much better than the people teaching me. Another thing was probably because I was so * painfully shy and kind of a loner, and I thought a lot of the other kids were mean bullies. I want to go into my own classroom and I’m not going to let those mean bully kids do anything nasty to other students the way some of these teachers are letting me down by * allowing me to be picked on and and some of the other. * you know, I don’t know if I want to call us the weaker kids in class, but the kids who were easier targets or shy or whatever.
Amber’s story was compelling to me because three ideas wound their way through all of our interviews: her desire to help her students improve and learn that there is more to the world than the five or six block radius around their urban apartments, her extreme “disgust” and frustration at some of their behaviors and their sense of entitlement, and her joy in her job. The total contradiction between these feelings and her ability to reconcile them, in fact, not even be aware that they exist, fascinates me. Similar contradictions can be found in other teachers. These types of contradictions may be inherent to the inner city middle school teacher. These teachers see young students commit unspeakable acts and talk to teachers using vulgarity; to stay in the profession for any length of time, it may be necessary to see beyond that and to want to offer the students more. In fact, in the next three chapters my participants share their frustrations in dealing with students, colleagues, administrators, and state testing, and then go on to express how much they love their jobs and their students and can not imagine doing anything else.

**Amber’s Students: They Can Be So Great and They Can Be So Awful**

One of the things Amber wants to offer her students is field trips to educationally important locations.

Kelly [a teammate] and I both have that opinion that these kids’ parents, they’ll take them to Six Flags. They’re not going to take them to the UN Building in New York City, they’re not going to take them to the Art Museum so that’s [where] we need to be focusing the school’s resources and money.

She is willing to work, herself, to make that happen.

We did fundraisers to help our New York trip. We sponsored a school dance to raise money. We sold hot dogs (laugh) on a hot dog cart, we sold juice and popcorn during an academy movie day and wound up raising a few hundred bucks that way to help, and used it on things like kids who showed up in New York City with no lunch money, paid for the zoo tickets, paid for the subway.
passes, and actually paid for the hot dogs and juice for today’s [barbeque for the students].

We have a little bit of money left over, and I’m hoping to use it to subsidize the classroom academy yearbook that I’ve been working on for the kids. . . since we don’t have picture day or anything. Too many photographers got ripped off. The way it works at other schools is the photographers come in, they take everybody’s picture, a few weeks later you get this packet back that you get to take home and if you want to keep everything in the packet you’re supposed to send in a check. In other words, you get the pictures in hand and then you’re supposed to send the money. Well I think too many kids just kept the pictures.

So Amber and the students took pictures and created a yearbook which she will have printed and give to the students as a remembrance.

As much as she enjoys her position and doing things for her students, she does offer conflicting viewpoints on them. On the one hand, she wants to share so much with her students, on the other, she is annoyed at their feelings of entitlement:

They can be so great and they can be so awful ** and when I say “awful” it’s not the screaming and yelling, carrying on or even the fighting. It’s it’s ** when they * really just do something so ** without caring that you’re just disappointed *. [For example], last year some organization in the school decided to try and collect pennies to help kids with leukemia and * they gave us all these boxes with a hole in them and you know you try to get your kids to give pennies. Some kids actually put quarters in, I was impressed, it was one of those moments where I was really proud, “Oh the kids are giving, they’re interested, they care.” And I walked out of the room into the hallway and came back in and three kids are fighting over the box that they want to rob it, and I was so disappointed and disgusted. And I told the kids, “You’re stealing from kids with leukemia. So what? You can get what, 35 cents to buy cookies upstairs?”

She also told of her disappointment during a cafeteria food fight when students were throwing their free school lunches, but not the chips and soda and other junk food they bought with their own money. She discussed this with them and talked about how they do not value what has been given to them. She was disgusted to discover that they felt it was owed to them, of course they should not be expected to pay for their own lunch. This struck a particular chord with her as she could
recall being in school and lunch money was not always available. But frankly * in that kind of town you told people you were dieting and didn’t eat anything rather than go fill out paperwork and get reduced lunch. That would have been so humiliating, and we had maybe one kid, um * John James, I still remember his name. ** He was on, I don’t remember if it was free or reduced lunch, but he had a little card, and * I think most kids felt really bad for him, * you know, ** but there were enough really mean ones that made fun of him for that kind of poverty. ** I know I probably wasn’t the only other kid that didn’t come from the happiest or wealthiest of households in a pretty well-to-do town, but * you learned from John James not to let on.

Amber also shared experiences of a particular student who is both great and awful.

My favorite student, whose name is Dominic, very bright, entrepreneurial young man is both great and awful. We had an assignment in here. I played the kids an old election political song from the 1800 election. Two candidates that wound up running [were] Jefferson and Adams. And I had the kids split into groups and they were going to be one of the candidate’s campaign committee, and make buttons, get a platform, all that hoopla and come up with a political song for your candidate. A lot of the kids started and then it was sort of hard and they kind of fell apart and didn’t really come up with anything. [Dominic] had something good from the beginning. He went home, he typed it up, brought it in and then got a bunch of kids to do this (drum on desk). I’m no drummer, but his background beat and basically wrote a great rap song about Adams, you know, I don’t rap, but it was typed all out, it had multiple [verses]. It was two pages long, really, really awesome. And the other kids were excited that I was going to let them rap in class. They decided they wanted copies so they could do this singing thing together with him, and wonderful. Probably that entire class is going to remember that Adams won the election in 1800. Oh, very, very neat, really one of those moments that teachers love. I was * thrilled to see him take the ball and run with it and motivate other people and follow through.

He also drives me crazy because he doesn’t listen. I took him to New York City with our field trip because we got grant money to do a World Council and go see the UN in New York City. And Kelly and I, the other teacher doing the chaperoning, decided (chuckle) that . . . we should take the kids on the subway down to Chinatown, our half of the group and the other half of the group could stay and do the Central Park Zoo. Middle school kids really can range in emotional maturity from the point where like they’re crying every other day to they’re ready to go off and get married or something, but we took the more rambunctious boys and the eighth grade girls who thought the zoo was for kiddies onto the subway to go and do some stall shopping in Chinatown.

And as we’re waiting on the subway platform in the city some weird guy comes by on a skateboard. I don’t know how Dominic managed to do it, or if the kid just happened to fall off his skateboard at the right time, but the next thing I know Dominic is now doing tricks on this kid’s or young man’s skateboard on the
subway platform and like teasing him with it, and I’m thinking, “He’s going to get me shot in a friggin New York subway” (laugh). And I got the skateboard away from him and back to its original owner who looked a little crazy, but it was things like that. That and him um, I don’t know, swinging from some of the construction things and rapping on the subway car, generally trying to freak people out a little bit, you know, flashing gang signs at random strangers.

Unfortunately, Dominic is not the only student who often makes bad choices.

My homeroom is the one that is no longer allowed to cook up in cooking class because they put Comet in the biscuits. Again, not something I woke up in the morning expecting to happen. . . .We still didn’t figure out who did it. And you know, “snitches get stitches” is still running rampant in the building.

Students fed the biscuits to their classmates and quite a few got violently ill.

In some instances, she discussed their behaviors without the sense of shock that many might feel. She explained how she handled having a student who set balls of paper on fire and whipped them at her head. “I used to have a fish tank, so put the fire out first, using the water from the fish tank. Yes, I didn’t realize it might save my life (chuckle) I just thought it would be interesting for class.” Unfortunately, the administration always seemed busy with more important matters, so there did not appear to be any consequences for this somewhat severe breach of proper classroom decorum.

The disappointments are not always behavioral; they come in a variety of ways, even from the most promising students.

I had a kid who was like an inch away from getting a nice scholarship to [a private high school] over in [a nearby town] not far from here and in the end he didn’t want to leave his gang and go to school over there. He was afraid to break away from that. **** I can’t make him do it. We’ve tried that with other kids and they sabotage things in the end, so it’s a waste, but that’s the kind of thing that’ll make me angry. I’ll be very proud Clarke is so bright, he got 5s on his [state test] which for [our city] is like, you know, we throw a pizza party for him (laugh) it’s so rare. So then for him to turn down this great opportunity because he wants to hang with the [gang]. It was, it was really heartbreaking.

Although Amber does a great deal for students on her own time, she seems to have conflicting feelings about how much should be done for them.
The book thing bothers me, the fact that the kids come without notebooks or anything from home. And if you give them notebooks, they won’t be responsible in terms of hanging onto them and bringing them back. I know this because I gave them notebooks last year and they would rip the pages out of them, throw them around, they would lose them, they would never remember to bring them in with them. I wanted to have a class notebook, so then I had to move on and I got bins and learned to put folders in bins that never left the room. So they could come in, get their folder out, and I would give them loose-leaf paper, one page at a time, but that’s not a good system because the kids need to learn how to take notes. And while I’m teaching them how to take notes bit by bit, they don’t wind up having like a nice notebook, where they can see how much progress they’ve made from now until the end, how much information they’ve acquired.

These inner city students often are not exhibiting good social behavior and even those who do protect their classmates who exhibit poor behavior. They never admitted who put the Comet in the biscuits (“snitches get stitches”) and she brought this incident up again when describing another incident.

My students put the Comet in the biscuits last week and this week when they were up in their sewing special, they, the last five minutes of class, decided to have a free for all throwing of * scissors, and needles, and sewing * supplies, and fabric. And ****** so four or five of them are suspended through the rest of the year.

What was almost as annoying as them doing that was when the VP was down here saying, “Okay, you guys have one chance, who did you see do it, or who wants to confess that they were one of the active people?” Nobody saw anything, nobody said anything, or nobody admitted to doing the mess, so she gave them all detentions this afternoon and told them, they don’t show up, they don’t walk for graduation. ** Now I wasn’t crazy about that sentence, although I know why she did it.

Tons of them, “Mmm wasn’t me” whining, and they’re on the phone with their parents, “Wa, it wasn’t me wawa.”

“But you didn’t see, an entire room gets trashed through this and you don’t see anything? Come on.” ** You know, [the VPs] like, “Yeah, go ahead, you all do deserve detention.” But by the end of the day the sewing teacher had come up with a list of the most guilty culprits, so we wound up just going with those four or five kids, and suspending them and letting the rest off the hook. But, ** it’s discipline problems like that total * that kind of vandalism destructiveness

********* you know the fighting and the screaming of swears all the time, it just really, it wears you down and you wonder how are these kids going to be able to function in our institutions.

Amber is concerned for their futures.

We don’t teach kids that the best behavior and the best performance is what’s
going to get rewarded; we’re so worried about hurting their feelings or not encouraging them enough that we start giving them rewards for things that should just be *** acceptable social behavior. We as a school system have been setting them up for this sort of sense of entitlement that is not good; it’s really promoting generational poverty. ***** I think I mentioned to you in our last interview that [our city] gives free lunch to every student ** and the kids have that expectation that of course you have to give me pencils, you’re my teacher; you have to give me paper, you have to give me books, notebooks, you know? They get free reading novels here every four or five weeks. They lay out all these novels in one of the rooms and the kids in their English classes come here and pick a fun reading book. And I was just looking around because usually I’ll find two or three of those novels left on the floor that nobody will bother to take home.

They’ll get mad when the computers break, * but they’ll be the ones vandalizing them. That’s why I keep the mouse for each computer locked up in my drawer. This year it’s better, this year I have the electric eye mouse. Last year I had those little balls in them; they will take those out and whip them at each other and that’s the end of that mouse.

She does try to explain away some of their sense of entitlement when discussing the end of year barbeque:

We did field day and the way we did the hot dogs was I actually went to Stop & Shop and just bought the disposable 2.99 charcoal grill, I mean this thing is like basically tin foil (laugh), but it worked. And the kids were like, “That’s so ghetto, that’s so lame,” and they’re complaining and then on the other hand, I’m like amazed because they all want the hot dogs from it (laugh). So *** I guess it’s just in their nature to be, never be completely satisfied with anything anyway. * It’s part of being a teenager * probably part of our society too, you know nobody ever feels like they have enough. *** So they’re just reflecting the greater ** culture around them, I suppose.

**Amber’s Teams: Past and Present**

Like her experiences with students, Amber has had both good and bad experiences with her colleagues, especially those on her interdisciplinary team.

This year the kids who have been behavior problems and aren’t wearing their school uniform, we took them off the list [for incentives.] We’re like, “Okay, you’re not going to Six Flags or Field Day today.” There was a bunch of different things we took them off the list for, the eighth grade semi-formal which was huge in this school, took them off the list and they didn’t go. ** Now last year that used to be the threat in the hallway, but there would be 3 days before the event and the kids would whine and our team leader used to let them go. With kids, if you don’t say what you mean and mean what you say, forget it. I know these kids, some of them who didn’t wear their uniform all year, thought they were
going to dress up for a few days and they were going to get to go; they didn’t go. We all backed each other up, nobody relented and snuck them a permission slip. Same thing with the academy basketball games that we’ve had, there were a lot of sad, ticked off kids, kicking the walls down here because we wouldn’t let them go to the game for behavior or uniform or whatever reason. . . .[but] having someone back you up with this stuff has made, I can’t describe how much of a difference.

This contrasts drastically with the previous year.

There was no back up. For instance at the end of school year we had a lot of supposed-to-be behavioral reward based activities and field trips. There was a trip to Six Flags, there was the talent show performance up in the auditorium, there was the basketball thing, there was the eighth grade semi-formal. I would have a terrible time with a particular child, and those kids shouldn’t be on the list to go * and other team members were like, “Eh, no, they, everyone should go, just let everybody go” cause they didn’t want to deal with the whining or have to * say no and it was really showing the kids that you can do whatever you want and there’s really not going to be any sort of consequence **.

This year we all sat down and made a list of the kids, said these are the ones that aren’t going, whether they show up sniveling, crying, mom on the phone, whatever it is, they are not going to semi-formal and we stuck to it and * it was nice because now it works when we’re telling the kids this week when they’re crazed, * “Well, if you screw up, you’re not walking for eighth grade graduation.” And they know we’re not kidding. * I mean it took them like the first couple of basketball games that were held and those are huge here for them to realize that they weren’t going to like wheedle and cry and beg and get a change of heart. It was so worth it.

Amber acknowledges other benefits to teaming, as well.

The other benefit of working in an interdisciplinary team is, if you’re lucky and you get the right group of people, you can start planning grander events. For instance, this year we had two different grant-funded after school clubs. One was the Communications Club, which put out the student newspaper, and the other one was the World Council, which culminated [in the] end of year trip to New York City to the UN and to Chinatown and all that kind of cool stuff. And it was nice because there could be multiple adults on the team volunteering their time and energy and ideas to working with that same group of kids. If we had all been working more the high school model where you’re kind of off with your department and you’re not dealing with those same 100 kids, I’m not sure what we’d get accomplished. How would you be able to run a club?

Although the members of her team have different levels of commitment, they work together well.

There’s three of us that spend a lot of time here after school doing things. Kelly
O’Reilly who is the English teacher and our team leader is *always* here, always writing up a grant or running a club or helping kids with something, handling the paperwork, going to track meets. And I do a lot of that with her, but this was my best portfolio year so I was also here working on that kind of thing late a lot, as well as grant writing, and I took nine post graduate credits this semester, mostly because I want my next pay upgrade. So, it’s a busy time and you have to get lucky and be on a team with people who want to work together.

Earlier over the winter we had one particular class that was just being really hellacious, really, really difficult and rotten, the kind that just gets on your nerves and three or four of us said, “Okay, since we’re not having luck with traditional detentions and such, why don’t we grab them all and drag them down at lunchtime and give them silent lunch detention?” But it took three or four of us willing to come down during lunchtime, which is under contract a non-duty time, so we had to volunteer our time, split them up, police it. And it was fabulous, though, four teachers all saying, “Yeah I’m having problems with them in my class too, of course I’ll help.”

I had been on other teams and last year was a wonderful example of a team that wasn’t a team, it was six people who just happened to work in the same hallway. You never could get anybody to stay after school for anything. I mean it was 3:00 the hallways were deserted. We didn’t plan field trips together, we didn’t handle discipline issues together, we didn’t even really talk about the kids together. There was never a team meeting or any sort of sit down, “We have to do this.” I don’t know the magic. . .There’s like three of us that are really willing to stay after and put a lot of effort into things, and then there’s two more teachers who will do anything you want them to do as long as it’s within school hours, and one teacher who is in maybe poor health would be the best [way to describe him], he kind of like pretty much [will] go along with anything, but doesn’t want to get involved.

To raise money for events Amber believes she needs the commitment of the team because “when we did our hotdog sales fundraiser, we needed someone to go buy the hotdogs and somebody to be willing to stay here until 6:00 at night during the school dance and run the wiener cart (laugh).” Not something she says she expected to have to do when she entered the teaching profession.

**The System Lets Them Down**

As important as having a good team is, it cannot make up for students’ low academic abilities, lack of funding, or the system’s unwillingness to acknowledge their needs.

We don’t have the resources we should. **There’s a lot of things we can’t do for**
reasons that *** I understand, but that doesn’t necessarily make them right. For instance, I have Creating America as my eighth grade U.S. History textbook. ** The problem is less than 10% of my students can read at a seventh and eighth grade level * and most of the kids in this building read around fourth grade and their oral comprehension is around fourth, fifth grade as well. My mother once said, “Well why don’t you read aloud to them?”

I said, “It doesn’t matter, their comprehension is [so low]. It doesn’t matter what I do with it, they don’t have the background.” So it always drove me crazy that I would get all these books that were eighth grade level when [few] of the kids could read that much and so then we spend all this time having them look at pictures and trying to break it down, and use different strategies. They get really frustrated because they can never just read a paragraph and answer the question or understand it straight away. And it’s like, why don’t we just get them fifth grade textbooks? We can’t do that because if the press ever found out that [our city is] using fifth grade textbooks. And so even though the common sense solution would be, well let’s get them something they can read, * it’s not something we do. *****

[So what we do is] a useless ridiculous waste of time. Procedures like having them do pre-readings, looking at pictures in the eighth grade textbook, and maybe writing down vocabulary words from the eighth grade textbook. And then I actually have a fourth grade text book that the special ed teacher loaned me and I photocopy chapters out of it and that’s what they use to read and answer questions and they actually get it that way. **** And then we do projects that are mandated by the Social Studies Department in the district, but the kids don’t really get it. * So you spend all this time pushing them to complete a portfolio project that they in turn have no [understanding of] because they don’t have the background; they’re not coming to the table with enough prior knowledge to make much sense of it all. And then trying to introduce kids, especially at this age, to themes like democracy and evolving freedom, it’s just [impossible]. Some of them really aren’t even out of the concrete thinking stage yet; they haven’t made that; the switch in their head has not turned.

Amber is frustrated because, as she says, “I don’t know how to make somebody want to learn, ** I don’t know how to make somebody want to work hard at learning and get that ** inner sense of satisfaction from it that I know I got.” And unfortunately,

they don’t have much in the way of examples and lately we almost seem to have a subculture that thinks being smart and doing well in school is lame. ** And I’m tired of asking kids what they want to be when they grow up and hearing nothing but basketball and rap stars. *** Although I don’t know what’s even more disheartening the few times I get a kid who tells me they want to be a veterinarian or pediatrician and I think, ** “You’re reading at the third grade level in eighth grade, there’s no way you’re going to catch up and do this.”
It does not help that students know if they do not do their work, they are promoted anyway.

Most of them are savvy enough by middle school to know that they can flunk out of almost everything and they’re not going to get retained. We have a hard and fast rule in this building, that if a kid is going to be 16 as an eighth grader, he or she gets promoted to high school whether they earn it or not. We’ve actually promoted two kids this year, maybe three from seventh into eighth grade because they were old.** And we’ve got a kid in seventh grade this year who we may have to promote right to high school because he’s that old, and the principal said he is not having 16 year olds running around this building where we have 12 year olds. [In my city], and probably other urban areas, there are so many kids promoted to the next grade who can’t do the work from the grade they’re leaving behind, it’s no wonder that our drop out rate in ninth grade is gigantic, because all these kids are suddenly up there and they can’t do the work. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Some of the students’ problems, as she sees it, are societal and particular to this urban city.

The other thing that’s happening is that a lot of the gang members who were locked up in the 90s are now being released from jail and flooding the streets and taking over some of the street gangs. So that’s been a thorn in our side. The old time members have a way of making jail sound like it’s not so bad and they’re very sophisticated about recruiting younger kids to do a lot of the criminal activity for them because they know that these kids will be treated as juveniles in the court system. . . .I talk to a lot of parole officers about my various students who call in for check ups on them and I’ve had five of my students in lock up this year, that I know of. I don’t know who else might have been missing for a couple weeks that we never got the paperwork on. I don’t know, but a 5% incarceration rate over the course of a 9 month school year, that has to be high. I don’t remember anyone going to a detention center when I was a teenager.

Amber would like to see an alternate setting for some of these troubled students.

You know there’s been a lot in the press about the number of suspensions that city schools give out. And we do need to do something else because that clearly isn’t working, but the alternative of allowing these kids to stay in our classes when they’re that disruptive. ** I mean how do you teach when somebody is throwing a desk around the room or even that child who just refuses to sit down and stop touching other kids? *** You know, the one that if you go near starts screaming profanities at you. There’s got to be another placement for that child because the traditional classroom just is not meeting the needs of anybody in that situation, but sending them home to watch cartoons all day or to help baby-sit isn’t really helping either. So we need to actually spend the money and get teachers who can actually have a curriculum of like social skills training, behavior modification
program so that they are going and sitting in a classroom somewhere in the building and working specifically on those areas that got them tossed out of the traditional classroom in the first place.

Right now our inside suspension room is more of a punishment room, kids go down there, and they’re supposed to bring work, and they’re not supposed to talk all day, and it’s run by a para-professional who sits on the Internet, * listening to music and watching Utube, * and he dresses like the kids which drives me crazy, because we’re supposed to be the professional adult setting an example.

A White Teacher With No White Students

In discussing her students, Amber often mentioned their economic status, but did not touch on race, although she did indicate that she has never had a white student. She does not feel this is a problem, but did mention that some in the district would disagree.

A good third of the teaching staff is black, maybe 10% or so Hispanic. We had a couple of Asian teachers, I’m trying to think of who’s left now, only the one Asian woman. Then maybe the other half of the teaching staff left over would be Caucasian. Even the ages are pretty diverse. We’ve got people who are first teachers right out of college, all the way up to the woman across the hall from me, Miss McGee’s been teaching like 27 years. ** Um **** I suppose if you’re going to look at the racial isolation that the students have, you might want to start looking again at the ethnicity and race of the teaching population and whether that has any sort of impact in [our city].

Two years ago, there was a lot of sniping going on at another school, and it was basically the * white teachers were saying that they felt *** ganged up on and ** this was over at [another school in our district]. I’m trying to remember their words a little more carefully, because basically the white teachers were saying they felt like they weren’t being valued and that they were being * excluded from certain things and **** it got into the newspapers, which is the only reason I know about it. It [was] to the point where other teachers were making comments that white teachers can’t teach black children as effectively. ** And it was that * sort of undercurrent running through the whole district that *** there is a difference in how the two groups teach. And I don’t know, I can’t tell you, it’d be interesting to find out, is there really any kind of score difference between the kids, do they perform better if their teacher is of the same race * or not?

I just looked at that newspaper article and thought this is really dangerous because if you go around saying different races can’t teach the students and if it gets accepted in [our city] that white people can’t teach black students as effectively, what happens when you turn it around and say in [another district] that black teachers can’t teach white children as effectively? It starts to sound really, really bad. In the end there was all kinds of talk about are they doing as much as they can to recruit minority teachers in the city and yes, I think they do a heck of a job. I mean only about 2% of all teaching licenses granted in [our] state
are to people of color; the vast majority go to teachers who are Caucasian. So, the fact that the city is able to get so many minority teachers here is: they’re obviously doing something right with their recruitment.

On a more personal note, she did mention how she was received by an older African-American teacher:

I was introduced as a new teacher who’s going to start in the fall at [the middle school] and she looked at me and she says, “Great, just what we need, another young white teacher.” ** And I was like (laugh) “O-kay” you know, and moved on and *** and that’s kind of when I knew there was going to be a little bit of an issue.

She does not feel it has been an issue in her school, but she did share an incident that occurred with the vice principal and her concern that we need to be sensitive to racial issues.

The Black Vice Principal was making a joke with some colleagues during a student event, and as I’m walking by she said, “Oh, Miss Henderson, you’re too white to get this.” I mean if I turned it around, and said, even with my kids, “You’re too black to understand this.” (Laugh) I mean come on, that would be awful. And several times with kids, [they] will say things that are really inappropriate and I remind them, “Whenever you’re in doubt, turn the statement around; if it’s something that you would find really racially offensive, chances are, that’s the way I’m finding it. You have to have some delicacy.”

Amber Appreciates Her Job

When asked how she thinks coming to teaching later in life has affected her, Amber said,

I think it makes me appreciate the job a lot more because I’ve worked in other positions that I didn’t like and I’ve worked in jobs where you didn’t get 12 weeks vacation a year, and there’s no flexibility. Teaching is when you’re in a classroom, assuming you’re following a curriculum and not hanging any kids by their toes, you’re on your own, you know.

Amber also appreciates the variety of situations that greet her everyday.

There’s opportunities to be so creative and try different things. Every day’s a little different. I had no idea that girl was going to come in here and flash her chest to everyone in my class and like drive people nutso for part of the day, it was not something I woke up this morning expecting to happen.
Finally, the financial rewards are better than her previous positions.

I’m also really appreciative, I mean teachers get some great benefits, just having health insurance and a pension fund; my last full time job before I went into teaching, it was like high hourly salary, but lousy health insurance, no retirement plan, no 401K, no paid sick time.

Amber was the only participant who mentioned these benefits of teaching, but are they enough to compensate for all of the difficulties? Given all of the challenges why does Amber plan to continue teaching?

You can tell they need you and that feeling needed I think becomes a little addicting. They can be very funny and charming and sweet. You also get a little bit hooked on the drama of teaching, some of the bizarre situations that come up, some of the behavioral stuff that goes on, it just blows your mind and you really start to think, “If [I] taught in some cozy little suburban country school, I might not have this and then I’d be bored.” (Laugh)

Toward the end of our time together, Amber was philosophical about her chosen profession. “Maybe teaching is just a reflection of who we are. I enjoy learning new things, I like to talk. I’m interested in watching people and trying to figure out what works and what doesn’t.”

**Portrait of John Wills**

John Wills teaches at School A in District 1. He is a 64-year-old retired math teacher who teaches eighth grade math. Yes, John retired 4 years ago, but still teaches. He is collecting his retirement and a teacher’s salary because his district is in dire need of math teachers. John truly teaches because he loves it, not because he has to. Like Amber, John faces difficulties every day from colleagues and students, but he closes his door and just concentrates on what he loves: teaching math. John’s story is compelling to me because he speaks of his own adolescence as an idyllic time in both his life and history. He went to school at a time when the teacher’s word was law and woes betide anyone who disagreed. How can someone who remembers his own school days and his
early teaching career with such fondness teach in a society where children tell teachers to
go “f---” themselves?

**It Was Like Happy Days**

Growing up, John’s family and their interest in sports was very important to him.

I have two brothers, one older, one younger. My father is a toolmaker, was a
toolmaker; my mother was a homemaker and we were very active in sports. My
father coached all the local teams so that was kind of our identity, our family
identity.

He remembers his community and school days fondly:

Like all communities at that time, nobody ever locked their house, car, their
doors. You didn’t put up windows, you didn’t worry about anything and it was a
real close community. Nobody was rich, nobody was really poor, most of it was
lower middle income. Almost all women stayed at home at that time, so
whenever you got home somebody was there with you. Whenever shows went on
at school, the women could attend, but the fathers never could because they had to
work and you couldn’t get time off in those days; they didn’t have sick days or
things like that. . . .It was always kind of like you’d see on Happy Days, you
know, something like you can’t believe that it really was like that, but it was.

We had very few fights in the school, no gangs of course, most of it was
just either academic or clubs or it was just fun. I mean in the halls it was always
like fun, in the halls you were always laughing, or telling jokes, giggling at
something somebody had on, but it was never cruel and malicious like you see
today, never.

I sometimes feel guilty when people talk about how much they hated their
childhood or junior high school and the high school experience. I loved it. I
mean it was, it was like Happy Days, I’m not trying to exaggerate in any way, it
was nice. Not that there weren’t problems, not that everybody loved me or I
loved everybody, but it was like, if you didn’t bother somebody, they didn’t
bother you * and it was a special time. . . .

They had basketball courts in the parking lots of the churches. They had
big tarred playgrounds with the hopscotch things on it, so the kids were always
over there after school and weekends, the little kids were hopscotching. The older
kids, we would go over there and play street hockey, it was just really nice. It was
all community, community, community. . . .When I was a child, every day as
soon as you got home from school, you ran back to the school playground or to
the park playground, you were there all day, you were there until you had to go
home, you’d rush home for lunch, back to play, rush home for supper, rush back
to play, until it got dark out, then all the mothers would be yelling. That’s all you
could hear all through the neighborhood, (soft yell voice) “Johnyyyy.” “Theresa.”
And we lived down near the tracks and I still to this day miss the trains
coming through, you could always hear the chchch, you know, the trains on the
track, and then you could hear the whistles as they approached, you could always hear the whistles day and night. And I remember when I was younger, it annoyed me, but now I miss it so much. I love to hear those trains coming from far off.

**We Can Do Better**

Although, John has idealized most of his childhood and the experiences, he does acknowledge that some aspects of life are better now, as he said when discussing the roles of women:

The girls, if they aspired to anything, it was to become a teacher or a nurse or a secretary and that was it. . . . I have a daughter, thank God she was born now and not when I was because it was so different then, so hard for a girl. How many girls have sat home and never were called by anyone? She could never call anyone and if she showed interest in someone, that was not considered proper either. So a girl couldn’t be a person, a girl had to be just some ideal sitting at home waiting for some guy to call her up and ask her to go out.

Race relations have also improved since his childhood.

You see more cross-cultural friendships in school now than ever before. You see more interracial couples, whether they’re dating or married than ever, ever before. That’s a good step. I think we see a lot of changes.

Society began to change when he was in college.

Everything was beginning to be questioned. Authority was being questioned, not that I’m someone against authority, but you know how sometimes things look dumb and you say, “Why?” Before you could never question it, but in the 60s people began to say, “Why?” It all seemed appropriate to me that we questioned things. We had gone through the Kennedy assassination and the Camelot. We all had such high ideals and especially after he was assassinated, and then his brother, and then Martin Luther King. You felt like, we can do better than this and everybody was more optimistic I think. And then the Vietnam War became a disaster and everybody got really *** I don’t know, down.

John became a teacher because he wanted to perform a service for his community, he went into education because there was that great boomlet that came, the baby boom. And they needed more teachers and it was a real, real time of necessity; more and more teachers were needed and more and more people were talking about it and it seemed like a nice job to me, not because of the short hours, as some people think, or the weeks off, or the summer. It just seemed like that would be a great
way to spend my life and I thought I might want to do it. . . . And there was a big move in the 60s to either go into the Peace Corp or to volunteer. Remember John F. Kennedy, he had said it, and all of us thought John F. Kennedy walked on water when he said, “Ask not what your country can do for you.” And we all wanted to do something like that, not just go into business and get rich and have a big home, we wanted to do something. And many of my friends did things because of that, went into teaching or medicine. And I knew quite a few people from college who went into the Peace Corp. . . . You really had to be committed to do that, to go to another country and spend a year or two of your life over there helping people. I admire them for being able to do that. . . . but it was a different time in the sense that John F. Kennedy inspired us and then his brother and then Martin Luther King and Camelot, and Man of La Mancha. I mean it was so idealistic at that time. Everybody was going to change the world and it seemed like the world was going to change for awhile, everything was just falling apart. ** Remember Bob Dylan “the times they are a-changin’” and we all believed that was going to happen. * We believed, all the teachers that started with me, that education was going to really change and it was going to become different. 

The advice of a very respected high school teacher also influenced his decision to become a teacher.

When I was in high school, one of my teachers had been a Marine during the Second World War and he had been a [city] cop. Then he went back to college nights and he got his degree and became a science teacher at [my] high school. And he was a tough guy, I mean one of the toughest guys I’ve ever met in my life. He had been a guard for President Kennedy down at the Kennedy Compound. In the summer he’d go down there and work to protect Kennedy. He was a tough guy and he used to play basketball and wrestle with us and fool around. I often asked him about teaching when I was starting to think about teaching in my last year of high school. He always said, “You know, don’t go into it if you want to get rich, but if you want a job you’ll love, think about it.” And when a guy like that tells you something, a tough guy, you really start thinking about it you know, that it’s not a woman’s job. Teaching always seemed like a woman’s job because they were all women, even in high school most of my teachers were still women, only the math and science teachers were men, everybody else was a woman, English and social studies, but when a guy like that says it you really think about it and I’m glad that he said that in particular. He had a big influence on me.

The Team Used To Be a Real Team

John came into teaching during the era of the junior high school, but 18 years ago his district changed to middle schools and teachers had to choose teams. In discussing teaming, John had this to say:
To be honest with you, as far as the team goes, it’s not like it had been. The team used to be a real team. Today it’s so fragmented for various reasons. We don’t meet daily, even when we do meet, only half of us teach the same students, so there are really only four people; three others and myself who teach the same students, and some of them only teach those students every other day. So as far as the team goes, we’re not strong anymore. The functions of the team have weakened. Where years ago we each had a delegated responsibility, somebody would be the liaison to the office, somebody would be the person in charge of calling parents, somebody would be in charge of getting the write-ups turned in. Now it’s, whoever’s heading in that direction will bring it down. We don’t have anybody in charge of computer work, and so on. So we don’t delegate responsibility anymore. And the team is no longer a team in the sense of camaraderie or closeness. Years ago, teams were very close.

I remember when teaming first came in; I was opposed to it, you know. We were all lone wolves; each one of us thought we were doing a fine job on our own. But I came to really appreciate teaming; and I saw the strength and the benefit of it. And it certainly was helping the kids because we could all work together, we could plan lessons together. We no longer do that because the city has given each one of us a syllabus of what we’re going to cover: an outline. And it’s very hard to twist that around now, to change the order of things. So academically, we don’t do what we had been doing on teams. As I said, I really came to enjoy the camaraderie of the team; the sharing of ideas. Some students were a problem in my room, and another teacher seemed to have no problem. They would make suggestions and we shared so much; it was a real helpful experience for everyone: for us, for the kids, for the office.

We’ve lost that and I feel bad about it. I feel it was taken away from us. I thought we had a common goal as a team and now I don’t see us having a common goal at all. Each one of us is worried about getting our own subject taught. We’ll help each other, that’s not a question; people are still friendly and cordial and helpful, but it’s not quite the same. It’s sad that we’ve lost that. I don’t know if it’s something that’s just unique to our school, if we lost it within the last three years under the leadership we had, or if it’s something that’s pervasive across the city, but seems like more and more everything that happens here is happening across the city, and it’s a shame.

As I said, I wasn’t a proponent of the teaming process, but I really saw the benefit in it. . . Just getting to know the other teachers. Like, I was very close to all of the people on my team. We used to go out to eat socially. Getting to know those people was a benefit. I could see some of their strengths and weaknesses; if somebody had a weakness then we could be a strength to them; we would help them because we were so close. ** We were all on the same page as to what we were going to do academically. Now it’s like we’re being run; the driving force is the state and the city telling us how we’re going to put things on our board. ** We don’t have any more options as to how we’re going to do things. I think our biggest decision we made this year was how we were going to set up homework papers; where the name would go, the date, and that was about all we had a choice in.
As I said, academically, we would plan lessons that coordinated my class with a social study class, with the English class throughout the day. So it was a nice unit for that day. We couldn’t do it every day because it took a lot of planning and preparing for, but it was nice. And we did a lot more activities for the kids; we had more fundraisers. We don’t have time for fundraisers, and even if we had the time, we’re all so splintered.

I don’t feel close to the people in my team. I don’t feel close to a few of the people on my team because we had agreed in the summertime, in our first meeting, that we would all abide by the same rules. And it turns out that they don’t abide by the school rules. They allow children to chew gum, eat candy, eat food, wear hats and hoods in their classrooms, drink soda, water, juice in the rooms, and even talk or act in an inappropriate way. And, I’m kind of old school, and I enforce the rules, whether I agree with them or not. No chewing gum, no eating candy and I don’t get bent out of shape over it, but I enforce the rules. And the kids think I’m an ogre, because the other teachers let them do this, and let them do that and, “Why can’t we this?” and “Why do we have to have homework every night?” We’re not on the same page. So, to be very honest with you, I stopped going to team meetings. I haven’t gone for three or four weeks now. I used to make excuses that I couldn’t go because I had this or had that. And now I just told them I’m not going. It’s bad, I feel bad that we’re splintering.

Um, one of the teachers actually lies to get the kids out of trouble if they arrive at my room late from her room, and I send them back. “Why was this child late?”

The child will say, “I was talking to her.”
The teacher will say, “Oh, yeah, yeah, we were talking.”
Later on the kids told me that the teacher told them, “Don’t let it happen again, I won’t lie for you again.” They actually told me; the kids told me that’s what’s happening. I mean, that’s wrong. That’s wrong.

One day, a teacher kept a class 18 minutes into my period, so I didn’t have a class, and the class that was going to that teacher’s room was standing outside of her room in the hall, while she was showing a movie. She never asked me to keep them, and I gladly would’ve said yes. She never apologized later that they were late. I thought there was an incident happening, and I saw Mr. Ortiz [the assistant principal] at her door. I said, “Is there something going on?”

He said, “No.”
I said, “Why aren’t they coming to my room?”
“I think you better address this at a team meeting.” He said, “This is something that I don’t want to get in between.” So he could see the inappropriateness of it all. But I didn’t make an issue out of it. The person never approached me or said, “I’m sorry” or anything.

Those kind of things didn’t happen when you all had to sit down at a table, and you were all looking at each other and saying, “What happened this morning?” But we don’t do that anymore. . . .I don’t think we have enough time to do what we should be doing. Even if that just means getting to know one another better. . . .So, we’re becoming hardened opposites almost. We don’t work together.
We go to assemblies and one or two of them don’t oversee their classes. So the rest of us have to discipline their kids. It’s very annoying. Now at a team meeting years ago, we would quickly come right out and say, “Hey, knock it off.” Then you’d have a couple of hard moments and the next day it would be forgotten. Now we don’t have the time to work those kind of things out.

Even these long periods now, we’ve gone to a longer class period. It helps if everybody is doing similar things, if you’re all working on the same page, but when a couple of teachers are letting the kids almost do what they want. And I don’t mean out of control. But then they walk into your room and it’s so hard to get them back in the mold you want them in. *** We’re all supposed to be giving homework every night. It’s a matter of how much time. I mean, naturally, you’re not all giving an hour. But when the other teachers only give homework one or two days a week, it makes us look awfully bad. And I don’t mind being a bad guy, you know, as we all know, we don’t need friends. I don’t need that. But it’s an unnecessary impediment. They think that you’re mean because you give so much work. And yes, in the years to come they’ll appreciate the fact that they learned, but it doesn’t make this time [easy]. Even the nice kids look at you like, “Why are you so hard? Why so much?”

Some of it I think is because of inexperience. I think some of the teachers are new and they have to learn that in the long run, they’re not helping the kids. But we don’t have the time to resolve that issue. Years ago, at a team meeting, somebody on the team would say, “Hey, knock it off. Trying to be a friend to these kids is not in their best interest, in the kids’ best interest, never mind our best interest. You can be friendly, but you can’t be friends.” That would come out very quickly at a team meeting, but now because you sit down at our meetings and it’s like, somebody has an issue, they were overlooked in something because we didn’t have enough time to include them. It’s so crazy now. And as I said, I just feel sad because it’s gone. Especially not having been an advocate of teaming, and then all of the sudden realizing how valuable it was, it’s sad.

**Spend a Few Years in the Trenches**

As John mentioned, one of the problems with his team is the inexperience of the young, new teachers. The number of young, new administrators is a problem, as well.

It’s overwhelming for the young people, many of whom no longer do practice teaching. They come in to us from business, or right out of college not having majored in education or taken any education courses. What a disadvantage they’re at today. With the changing of society, kids are so much more difficult to deal with. Wow. It’s a wonder we keep even half the teachers that we do. And we all know that more and more of these young people are just looking to get out the door. I can’t help but feel that if there was more of a mentoring program, and more of a teaming, we could eliminate a lot of that loss. Add to it that there’s a problem here in [our district] by the very nature of our system, it’s a difficult system to teach in. The student population is difficult. We don’t get a lot of
support from downtown, and even within the building we don’t get the support we need. I think they’re being told what not to do and what to do, so.

And then I think a lot of the leaders simply aren’t leaders today. I think that’s another big problem. I think part of it is the program they’ve instituted in our district to train people to become principals. I think a lot of the young people are just too young and inexperienced. I think with a little more time and experience they could become better. I think the whole education atmosphere today in our country, “Give the kid a break, and give ‘em another break, and another break. You have to understand the problems that they have.” I’m all for that. I think we all have empathy. We wouldn’t have gone into teaching if we didn’t empathize; if we didn’t care, if we didn’t want to help. I think that’s a given with most teachers; although, ** you know, being strict is not being mean. And ** somewhere along the line we’ve forgotten that. There’s nothing wrong with saying no to a child.

Sometimes the best thing we can do to help these kids is to make them rise to the level they’re capable of. Instead of making excuses for them falling, we should be helping them back up, but that’s national. The whole country is, ** I’m so tired of teachers apologizing for the behavior of the kid, apologizing for the lack of learning in their children. That’s not helping the child. You know, whether you play sports or a musical instrument or dance, you don’t really like it, the day after day, the hardness, the pushing, the goading, until it’s all over.

In discussing his current administration, John says:

don’t mind saying at all. I think they’re all very nice people, I think outside of school I like all of them, but inside. Our principal grew up eight or ten blocks away from where I grew up. We went to the same high school and the same college. She was I think two years older than me. So I always knew of her and, I always liked her. She’s a nice lady, a very friendly lady, she was very active in school activities. . . .but I do have to say in all honesty, and I’ll say it, I don’t think she’s a strong administrator. I think she’s trying to be nice to the kids. She’s trying to go around all of the issues, every time there’s a head-on issue with a child, she just tries to diffuse it, to rub the kid on the back, give him a tap on the behind, and “Let’s be nice.” And you know, that works in the classroom for awhile, but sooner or later, just as it does in the classroom and in the home, you get to the point where just being nice and, “Let’s be nice and just stop it.” That runs thin. Once that gets old, then you have to have a back-up. And I’m not saying, “Smack children, punish children, suspend every child.” I’m saying that we need a little more strength. I’d like to see a little more of that strength coming from the top. I always think everything starts from the top. Some people don’t like that top-down approach, but you know what? Ever since society began, there’s always been a leader, whether he was the leader of the tribe, the leader of the county, the country, there’s always been a leader. Whether he was a king or a politician; and we all like leaders and I think if we didn’t have leaders we’d be lost.
John believes part of the problem with his current administration is that the assistant principals are too inexperienced.

I think people should pay their dues and I’m all in favor of bringing in somebody to give them a chance, but only if they’ve paid their dues. I think you’ve got to spend a few years in the trenches before you’re allowed to climb up on top of the hill and they’re not doing that anymore. In addition to our principal not being strong, I think one of our assistants is very strong, Mr. Clarke, I think, does a good job. But the fault I see with his position is that they’ve got him spread so thin. He was the only person, for awhile, in charge of discipline in this building, a school of this size [980 students], they had one person trying to do it all, was obscene. When you put a write-up in his folder at the end of the day, that folder was two inches thick sometimes. How can one man possibly do all the writing and all of the interviewing that he has to do with these kids and teachers? It’s impossible. Plus he has to supervise the buses, cafeterias, it’s impossible to expect one man to do what he’s doing. I thought he did a good job, but he’s just spread too thin.

Another assistant, Mr. Ortiz, I thought was a strong, hardworking guy, but he seemed to have been given the message, “We’re not going to suspend.” When he saw somebody doing something outright wrong, he’d say, “Get to your room, get to your room.” That was it. They just wanted to get them moving, get them away. Let’s not deal with the problem. Last year he was better, last year he was allowed to suspend more. Last year he would come through the rooms. I love to see principals and assistant principals in our room. . . . Mr. Ortiz, as I said, is strong. The other two I like as people.

I don’t mean to be cruel, but I just don’t think they earned their positions. Ms. Williams came here, she had been a teacher, I understand, for just a few years. She didn’t have much experience behind her. I understand she was nervous when she came here because of the position, the responsibility, the difficulty; she seems to walk away from things too. When you point out something going wrong, she’ll just yell at the kids, “Get where you belong.” She doesn’t want to deal with it. And certainly, they don’t want to suspend; they don’t want to be hard. I think that comes from downtown. I excuse them for that.

Part of this he blames on the leadership program instituted by the city.

I think we’re going to have to look at the way we’re appointing our administrators. I know from the beginning of time people got positions because of who they knew or who they were. I think it’s time we go back to experience. Somebody’s got to pay their dues before they can go up there, so that they know what it’s like to walk in the trenches and to get down and dirty. . . . They want more administrators, so they put together a program that helps out people quickly. And what good has that done? I mean there may be a couple quality people that came out, I don’t mean quality people, but I mean quality administrators. There may be a couple, but most of them, they’re just what we should’ve expected: they’re assembly line. We produced them fast. So if we’re not doing that part of
it right, what are we doing right? Those people are evaluating teachers. They’re setting the direction within the building. It’s not right.

**Changes: The Schedule and the Curriculum**

In discussing how teaching has changed over the years, John said,

We don’t have that time anymore because of that silly schedule. You’ve got to have this done today. The [Instructional Lead] teacher in math is always coming up, saying, “You can’t fall behind, you’ve got to make sure you stay on the schedule. Don’t get behind.” I tell her I get to it when I can. I do fall behind, but fortunately, some of the things I cover ahead of time. When the need arises to teach something, I teach it. It may not be on their schedule, and then a week or two later, it’s on their schedule, but we’ve already gone over it. Even though I do fall behind, we catch up again. I think I’m further ahead than anybody in this school as far as being on this schedule, but I show the pressure. I feel sad that I’ve got to force kids to do it. Years ago, we could tell jokes, we could talk about a movie that somebody had seen that was relevant, if that would help everybody. Nowadays, I don’t do that anymore, for a variety of reasons. Partly because we don’t have the time. Also, nowadays if you tell a joke, or talk about something outside, it’s very hard to get them back and focused. You can’t do what we used to do because the children don’t have that maturity, where they can all laugh heartily and then say, “Okay,” and then listen again; we don’t have that anymore.

He is not against the new curriculum, simply because it’s new, as he said,

I’m not against change, but I am against, as they say, change for change’s sake. Too much of that. And I’m so tired, you know, having gone for 42 years, so tired of having seen programs that were here 20 or 30 years ago being brought back again with a new name and some new terms, and they act like this is revolutionary, it’s going to change education. Well, you know what? There is no silver bullet. We know that, those of us that have been down here deep in the trenches.

**I Consider This Building a Sewer**

John is also concerned with the maintenance and the old plumbing of his 45-year-old school building.

I consider this building a sewer, even with their new deep-clean program, I still consider it a sewer. You walk in that men’s room, you can’t even stay in there for long because the smell is so rotten. It’s a germ smell from the bacteria. I don’t know if the ladies’ room is the same way. . .Still, all it is cleaning. Why? The toilets overflow in the men’s room, you know, they just overflow. When somebody’s going to the bathroom and it overflows. . .you go into there and there’s particles, ugh, I just refuse to use this one. There’s no need for that.
There’s a sink in the men’s room, you let it run for long, and it fills right up. All
the drains in there are clogged. They’ve got to get into the main drains. How can
that be allowed in this day and age? I mean, you know, if that happened back in
the 1800s, we’d laugh at it and say, “Yeah.” In the new millennium, we don’t
have plumbing that works? Shame on [our district]. And I know [the city’s]
broke, but shame on [the state], shame on the Federal Government for not doing
what’s right for the kids.

The student bathrooms are just as bad or worse because of student vandalism.

Unfortunately, the children . . . physically destroy it. You have to put in
something that can’t be destroyed. They do have plumbing that can’t be
destroyed, it’s concealed where they can’t get at it. It’s hard to do that. Some of
the children are animals. You know, you hate to say it, but they are, they’re
animals in their behavior. They choose to be that way. Some of them, I think,
were even taught better, but they choose to be fools in front of their friends, they
think it’s funny. * Time we change the facilities so that the good kids aren’t
denied the use of a bathroom, of drinking fountains; they must have drinking
fountains developed that won’t be able to be destroyed. They clogged this one up
again, so that every time a kid gets a drink it overflows.

They’re Not Here To Learn

This destructiveness is only part of the problem with his students, as John sees it.

Their behavior and their lack of desire to learn affect the other students in the classroom.

I used to see things on 60 Minutes or some of those magazine type TV shows
where they would go in and show you what the schools are like in a large city,
and they’d show you New York City or Los Angeles. And I used to say, “My
God, how can the schools be that bad?” But you know what, it’s here now. It’s
here. The kids talking back and talking over teachers. Bedlam. Fighting. And
you know, most, not most, a large part of the kids are not here for an education.
They’re not here to learn. That’s got to be addressed too. I’ve said it before and
I’ll say it as long as I can, “They need more alternative schools.” We had more of
them years ago; they were effective. Kids stayed in school because they were in
small classes with teachers that knew how to deal with them. Teachers that knew
that, “Eh, we may not get a lot of academics done today, but we’re going to
resolve an important issue that we have here today in the room.” We can’t do
that, because if we do that, there’s another day gone. So we try to keep moving
and moving. We’re going to have to have more alternative schools, which is
more money. Someone’s going to have to fund that.

John touched on the students’ feelings of entitlement, which were a recurring
theme in Amber’s discussions. John obviously was not against giving a free breakfast to
needy students; in fact, he was doing it before the district started the program, but now he has mixed feelings about it.

When I started teaching, nobody gave breakfast to anybody. There was no such thing. I can remember we even tried as a group of teachers to institute it at [the junior high school] so that when the kids came in the morning we could give them a little box of cereal and some milk and juice because a lot of the kids came with nothing in their belly. We felt bad for them. Now I have mixed feelings about it because so many kids waste things. They’re given a free meal and they throw it in the basket; they throw it on the floor, or they eat their meal and they leave the mess on the table. How appreciative are they? And again, it goes back to values. How much do they value what society is doing for them? Something’s wrong when they say, “You have to this, you have to that.” You have to? Come on.

John sums up his feelings this way:

I don’t have any better word for what I see today, in our system, and in particular our school, than “sad.” Sad for the physical plant, sad for the social behavior of the children, sad for the academic level we find many of these kids at, and it’s not our fault, they come to us this way. And I know high school teachers are going to blame me, because the kids are coming to them, but if I raised their level. Say they came to me at a fifth or a sixth grade level; if I teach them two years in one, which is fantastic given that they’re slow learners; they’ve been behind. If I teach them two years worth of work in one, they still go onto high school on a sixth or a seventh grade, an eighth grade level, and they say, “Yeah, but they should be ready for ninth grade. You didn’t do your job.” I mean it’s a cumulative effect. It’s like a ball of string. The more these kids fall behind early, the more they’re going to fall behind later, because the kindergarten kid who’s behind the other kid, he’ll never catch up. That gap is going to widen. So, again, there’s no silver bullet. You’ve got to start early, spend money, and small class size, especially in lower grades.

John believes that many of the discipline problems could be solved with smaller class sizes.

I know the world’s changed. Schools should’ve changed with it. We’re never going to go back to those days you hear about where a teacher could have 45 kids in a classroom; you hear of those? They all sat there and they didn’t make a peep. It wasn’t the teacher that made them that way; it was the families that made them that way, and society. . . .Society has changed; I think schools have got to change too. We can’t have 45; we can’t even have 25 anymore. I think 25 is way beyond doable in the inner city. . . .A lot of support needed. Parental support; they’ve got to back what we’re doing. Community support, religious support. Churches are weak today. They used to be a backbone of the community. They’re weak, they’re struggling. ** So we can’t rely on them anymore. All those clubs, the
French-American, the Polish-American, they’re all just dwindling and withering away. Even some of the larger organizations are withering away because people don’t go to clubs anymore like they used to. Why should somebody go out after they work a long day when they can stay home and watch 500 channels on a wide-screen, high-definition television? You’ve got your microwave; you can pop something up in a matter of minutes.

The world has changed. ** And why, people think that schools can do what they did years ago, with all of the support they had from all of those organizations I mentioned; now we have very little. How they think that you can stand in front of a class, or that I can stand in front of a class, and do all of that that had been done for us. It’s unrealistic.

He touched on the themes of student behavior problems, smaller class sizes, and societal changes again during our final interview.

We keep the kids in school, even though they’re acting up and doing nothing. We keep them in the room, we keep them in the room, we keep them in the room, we don’t want to suspend them because our rates look bad. So eventually that kid becomes such a problem that he’s either thrown out for good, or he walks away; he just gets tired of the whole scene. He knows he’s not learning; we’re not providing for their needs. More and more kids require smaller groups. Those days that you hear about, I never was in a class of 45 or 50 kids, 60 kids, but you hear about them. The older people used to talk about it. “I had a nun, and 60 kids, and nobody said a word.” And maybe that was great in those days. But you can’t do that anymore. * You know those 60 kids sitting there, they all went home, and somebody gave them a hug and some cookies and some milk. And even though you didn’t have a lot, you knew you were loved. How do these kids that we have today? They may have all of the bling bling and everything else, you know, the nice shoes, but they know that nobody cares at home. So they’re different; they’re hurting, they’re acting up. They’re going to get the attention one way or the other.

John also shared his opinion on the large number of school staff who do not have contact with the students. These positions, he feels are not necessary; students would be better served if all of the staff were in the classroom teaching, reducing class sizes.

They say that you can throw money at a problem and it doesn’t solve it, and that may be true; you can spend money foolishly. But if you want to improve a program, whether it be a college football team or a dance program, you’ve got to have money because you’ve got to bring in good people and you’ve got to support the people. And yes, if you build a brand new school there’s going to be vandalism in that school. You’re going to have to have upkeep, maintenance, repairs. Nothing is cheap today. You don’t buy anything cheap anymore and we all know that old saying that you get what you pay for. You’re going to spend a
nickel, you’re going to get a nickel’s worth, if you’re lucky, if you spend it wise. There’s so many people now in the building that don’t seem to be doing anything. I’m tired of that too. They do these beautiful handouts that they put in our mailboxes. If they each had a classroom of their own and taught, we’d all be better off.

I Still Have the Fire

Given the tremendous stress he must be under with students’ poor behavior, the instructional lead teacher’s demands to move the curriculum along, the poorly maintained facilities, and the inability or unwillingness of the administrators to discipline the students, why does he still do it after 42 years? It has never been about the money. He mentioned that his father made two or three times his salary as an uneducated factory worker and the former marine who encouraged him to go into teaching told him, “This job doesn’t pay enough and you certainly work too hard for the little bit that you get, but the rewards are different than financial.” John stays in it because, as he said, “I still, I really do love it. Someone once said that you have to have the fire to be a teacher. I still have the fire when I close the door and I get going.” He also said:

You try to be encouraging. * There are so many good young people, we see them every day. I think the overwhelming majority of the kids are good. But they’re not going to show it. And like I said, I know there’s a better word than hokey, but it’s hokey to be a good guy, a good girl. We have to change that.

He feels he is helping students and that even if they do not appreciate it at the time, they do later.

I like it, you know, I do like it, even now with the way kids are, after you establish a relationship with the kids, you really feel like you’re helping them in some way or showing them a little bit, not necessarily academic, but just how to be a person, how to act as a man or a woman, how to be a good person. **** And this is the age where they begin to take the right fork or the left fork in the road and if you can get them on the right fork academically and socially it helps. **** And I see so many of my former students now whether I go to the hospital or anywhere. You bump into former students, a lot of them are policemen or firemen and they all have nice things to say, even if they weren’t a good student. They say, “I never did good in your class, but I liked you Mr. Wills, you taught us a lot.” That...
part’s nice, you know? Sometimes in the paper some of the politicians that were in my class will mention the old teachers and more than once or twice my name has been mentioned. It makes you feel good that you did have an effect on some of the kids and I’m happy, I’m really happy that I went into this field.

John is an excellent example of the contradictions within an urban middle school teacher’s existence: He feels frustration with his students, his colleagues, his administrators, and state testing, and yet he loves his job and continues to do it long after he could have retired, but still yet, as will be shared later, he would not want his own children to follow in his footsteps. Contradictions may be inherent to the urban middle school teacher. Amber is conflicted about how much she wants to do for her students and how frustrated she is about their sense of entitlement. Both portraits also offer examples of good and bad interdisciplinary teaming experiences in the urban middle school. In the next chapter I share excerpts from all 15 participants to illustrate how they experience the ideal characteristics of the middle school.
CHAPTER VII
TEACHERS REAL LIVED EXPERIENCES AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL

In this chapter, I examine each of the ideal characteristics of the middle school independently and share the participants’ words to give the reader insight into the participants’ experiences. During our interviews urban middle school teachers on interdisciplinary teams shared frustrations about their students, their students’ families, their colleagues, their administrators, state testing, and the educational system. I do not want my sharing of their concerns to sound like complaining. I believe, like Nieto (2003), that there is a difference between complaining and anger at the injustices of the system. Complainers do nothing but blame others. Anger, on the other hand, can motivate teachers who care to push for change. And, their frustrations are only part of the picture; my participants stay in teaching because the rewards are significantly more important to them than the frustrations.

Middle Schools in Name Only

The urban middle school teachers who shared their experiences with me do not work in schools that follow the middle school philosophy, nor implement the middle school characteristics as promoted by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) and the National Middle School Association (1982). Each school calls itself a middle school and puts teachers on teams (these were, after all, the criteria for participation in the study). Their schools, though, do not employ the characteristics of middle schools as explained in the introduction and the review of literature.
This chapter is organized around the characteristics of the middle school, as Chapters I and II were, because participants, in discussing their lives as urban middle school teachers on interdisciplinary teams, talked about these aspects of their lives. In most cases, they were lamenting their absence. Teachers’ experiences with the middle school characteristics seem to be in sharp contrast to the middle school literature (especially that promoted by the Carnegie Foundation and the National Middle School Association), a fact not lost on the participants who had been part of “real” middle schools at other times in their careers: “I think the middle school concept is a very good one. I think we’re moving a little away from it at times, because of everything else.” (5B/SC78/CAF5521) Mr. King shared these feelings and went on to express more specifically what has changed and what he liked about the middle school concept when it was first introduced.

For whatever reasons, in [this district] for the last 2 years, they’re trying to go back to a more rigid, administrative approach to how things are going to be run. Less emphasis on team time, less emphasis on the team approach. It’s almost reverting back to the junior high school schedule; strict block schedule. Much less time for interdisciplinary planning; and team time is much more task oriented now, and the tasks are set by [the district], as well as the building principals. So it allows for less creativity, less flexibility, and 90-minute block scheduling for middle school students just will not fly, it’s too long a span of time. And the lack of rotation, where you see the same kids at the same time every day. In my case, every other day because science and social studies were deemed to be the “lesser important” subjects than math and Language Arts. So things have changed in the past 3 years.

Initially the new approach from junior high school to middle school was wonderful. . . .You read all the literature. You have to have time to meet, you have to have time to plan, you have to share the same common kids, ideally the same common goals. And you don’t have that now. All you have is middle schools in name only. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)
How Do Teachers Experience the Characteristics Intended To Promote a Sense of Community?

Small Learning Communities

Of the 17 middle school characteristics my participants experienced, this one most closely resembles the ideal promoted in the literature. Being a member of a team was a requirement for inclusion in the study, so this is not a surprising finding; it was the only characteristic present in all 9 of the middle schools in which my 15 participants teach. Because every teacher interviewed was a member of a middle school teaching team, they all taught in small learning communities and they all had good things to say about sharing students with their colleagues. They find discussing these shared students helpful, “at least on a team, if someone else on the team is having a similar problem, we can brainstorm; maybe collectively we can get something done about a behavior that is really erratic.” (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

Mr. King, who had started teaching before teams, appreciated having the students and teachers organized into smaller learning communities because of the flexibility it allowed him in scheduling, flexibility he has since lost. Having small learning communities also made planning easier and helped him better know his students.

On those occasions where I wanted to do field trips, or if I wanted to do a lab or any kind of presentation with a guest speaker or what have you, it was a lot easier to coordinate it with four or five people. . .than it was trying to track down 20 different people, to let them know that this is what’s going on this particular day. So in that regard, it worked well. . .Having the same group of kids; with the same core group of individuals. . .you [also] got to know the kids a little bit better. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

Family Involvement

Although the middle school literature encourages strong connections between the school and family, most of my participants mentioned lack of parental support as a
problem in their middle school. “There’s not a lot of parental support in [my district].”

Mr. King explained that in the past, about 90% of parents of well-behaved students would be involved and about 50% of the other parents would be involved; now he said you only see about 10% of all parents and

the only time you see the parent of the bad kids is when they want to come in and do a confrontation with you over whether or not you have the right to take a cell phone, or something of that nature. “I bought him that the cell phone, he has a right to have it.”

Then you make a comment like, “Yes, but not in my room, and certainly not on.” And they tell you to go f--- yourself. That’s where we’re at now.

Mr. Brighton was concerned about the parents’ inability to assist with their own children:

[The] heartbreaking times of when you do call home, and parents are saying, “That’s what they do when they’re at home. They tell me to shut up at home. What do you want me to do?” And the parents are just kind of looking for the answers from you.

Ms. Oliver lamented that with 275 eighth graders planning to attend high school in the fall, only about 20 parents attended the high school orientation held in her school’s auditorium.

Teachers realize that parental support is important, as Mrs. Sang said, “We do need the parent support, and we do have some very supportive parents, not a lot, but some and we try to keep in touch with the parents.”

One teacher talked about the need for parental support at levels beyond the school. She wondered why parents are not advocating for more funding for schools. “‘Parents, come on, why aren’t you involved? You should be.’”

She did, though, suggest some reasons why parents might not be involved as she was explaining what avenues she might like to explore if she leaves the classroom.

“I’d like to do something to get parents more involved in their children’s education where they’re not so afraid they’re going to step on toes. I think that a lot of our
parents are like, “Well, that’s the teacher’s job and we don’t want to step into their area.” Or sometimes it’s apathy like, “That’s your job, I’m not doin’ that.” But other times, it’s, “Well, I feel undereducated; I’m not qualified to get involved in my child’s education because I can’t even do fractions.” And, it’s fear like, “I can’t do that.” It doesn’t have to be. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

Clearly these teachers would like to see more parental support and involvement in their middle schools.

**Community Involvement**

The middle school literature extols the benefits that can be had from partnerships with community organizations and businesses. The reality, for my participants, is that the community is often not involved. Few of the teachers mentioned community involvement in our discussions. Teachers who in the past would take students into the community are often no longer able to take them due to budget constraints and time on learning (TOL); strict curriculum timelines do not allow time for field trips. Teachers who are still able to take trips find them immensely worthwhile.

I took the eighth graders to see how the community is helping the poor people and why they need to be helped: because they lost their job, maybe their job is not good enough to get enough money for food. So that opens their eyes to say, “Hey, I need to have a good education so I can get a better job so I don’t have to end up going there.”

They were able to go in the kitchen and help them get the salad ready, get the bread ready, serve, go out there, pour coffee. The kids loved [it] and the people loved to see young people getting involved. The kids got to see how the community is: we do have rich people, we do have poor people and how they get helped. They were good, they were excellent when they were out there. . . . They loved it. Actually, my eighth graders went two times because they asked them to come back. We took the bus and we walked. City bus, we don’t have money to pay for the school bus. I asked the kids, they said, “Okay.” It’s still a little walk from the bus stop. . . . They don’t mind and they had to pay for their own bus too.

I was really, really impressed by the ability of some of the kids; even the worst kid in the classroom did very well. So we were able to bring them out [into] the community. And I do think that is very important for them to know, that as poor as they are, they’re not rich kids, they were able to help, they were able to donate their time and their effort. (2A/EN78/ASF5722)
Mr. King, who is no longer able to take field trips, sees their value and is disappointed that they no longer occur:

I used to spend a lot of time taking them on field trips because that was their only access outside the city to a lot of these places. That is one of the most difficult things to deal with in the urban areas: the kids don’t have the same opportunities outside of school to supplement what we’re doing in school that they have in the surrounding communities. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

He believes that all connections to the community are important. “That’s important with middle school. Outside influences: field trips, guest speakers, active student participation.” (1B/SC6/CAM5534) He is especially distressed about no longer being able to take the incentive field trips he used to provide to encourage students not to be absent, behave properly in class, and turn in all of their homework: “You can’t do that anymore, going to movies or roller-skating or anything like that because of No Child Left Behind time on learning. You have to have so many minutes of actual accountable instruction.” (1B/SC6/CAM5534) For Mr. Delgado, budgetary concerns are the problem: “Buses used to be free if you had them back in time to take kids [home], now you have to pay for them.” (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

**Student Participation in Decision-Making**

Middle school literature depicts students as active participants in making the decisions that affect their academic careers, practicing for a lifetime of participating in the democratic process. In fact, only Ms. Oliver acknowledged student participation in decision-making or inclusion on school councils when she mentioned that she used to be the faculty advisor for her school’s student council. It is possible, though, that this is occurring in the middle schools, but the teachers did not view it as important enough to mention. One teacher mentioned specifically his disappointment that it was not
happening, “Active student participation, like the student council or something like that, we don’t have that at all.” (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

**Teachers and Principals Empowered to Make Changes**

Middle school literature portrays middle school teachers as involved, committed professionals who have the power to make changes that affect their classrooms and students. Many of the teachers interviewed, though, complained that their decision-making power was nonexistent. They shared this information regarding teams not having enough time to meet to make decisions, complaining about principals who made decisions without input from teachers, and expressing their unhappiness about district-mandated curricula. It does not matter if the students are ready or not, they are told they must forge ahead to keep on pace with the curriculum.

Mr. Wills is appalled that his team does not have any decision-making power any more.

*We don’t have any more options as to how we’re going to do things. I think our biggest decision we made this year was how we were going to set up homework papers: where the name would go, the date, and that was about all we had a choice in.* (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

All of the team’s power was taken by his new principal.

*Principal had no concern at all about what was best for the teachers or the kids. She just was a very hard person. She didn’t want to listen. She had all of her preconceived ideas, and you couldn’t talk to her.* (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Some teachers recognize that the principals and assistant principals are not always at fault with the decisions they make because they do not have decision-making power either. “We don’t get a lot of support from downtown and even within the building we don’t get the support we need. I think *they’re* being told what not to do and what to do.”
This lack of power was most often mentioned by teachers when discussing curriculum.

For the math program you’re supposed to be covering certain material at a certain time. So when the state comes in they expect you to be on that section, just like English, same exact way as English. So I mean there’s that pressure. You don’t want to fall behind because the state’s going to come in next week.

This lack of flexibility in the curriculum is especially evident in schools deemed underperforming based on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) guidelines.

**Specially Designed Facilities**

Three of the of the 9 middle school buildings in which my participants teach are newer and designed to be middle schools, which pleases the teachers because being in close proximity to their teammates makes teaming easier; 6 are older buildings that were formerly junior high schools.

Far from the specially designed, clean, well-lit, spacious centers described in the literature, most of the participants’ buildings are so old in some cases they can not accommodate technology. Mrs. Nowak explained that, “Computers came into the building, they’re in boxes. We [do not] have the right hook up. I have one plug, okay? It wasn’t the right hook up so we weren’t going to be able to use [them].”

She was more annoyed at the wastefulness of money spent on computers that can not be used, than at the fact that the older building could not support the technology. Other teachers shared similar problems about their buildings.

As the student bodies have grown, some schools have constructed makeshift walls to divide larger classrooms into two smaller classrooms. These walls are usually thin and the cause for distraction. “[I am] in a half classroom, just a board separating, so you can hear the class and they throw paper over the wall.” And it is not
just facilities that are lacking, there are no supplies, either. "In my district they keep cutting; they keep cutting cutting cutting cutting." (3A/MU78/CAF3512) "We don’t have any supplies, we don’t have any paper. Do you know what it took for me to get this construction paper? I had to like promise my third born child (laugh). It’s so frustrating." (3A/MU78/CAF3512). As already shared in Mr. Wills’ portrait, his school is filthy and in need of plumbing updates.

**How Do Teachers Experience the Characteristics Intended To Promote Social and Emotional Well-Being?**

**Positive Climate**

The participants did not specifically mention the climate during our interviews, although as indicated in the literature review, climate can be defined in many ways. Teachers told stories of awful student behaviors, overflowing toilets, and lack of proper lighting and technology; but they also told of instances in which students helped out their classmates, and other instances where staff worked for the students. Mrs. Henderson explained how her team organized fundraisers, threw a barbeque, and how she put time into designing a yearbook for her students. Ms. Oliver described how the teachers in her school donate money for students who can not afford to attend the eighth grade trip to Washington, DC:

> The staff donates money. We all help each other out. It’s not unusual for staff members to hand us a check for a child; or a general check, to put in the general fund. Our staff has been commended numerous times. District-wide, we give the most to United Way and...we do dress downs every Friday. On payday Friday [we pay money to dress down] it [goes to] charity. (5B/SC78/CAF5521)

She also shared how wonderfully students in the mainstream treat the special needs students with severe disabilities. These behaviors contrast drastically with those
shared by Mr. Delgado and Mr. Wills who expressed their disbelief at the way students talk to each other and their teachers.

Now a days, you hear in school and all over the place [language] that you’ve never heard before, at least not when I was a little kid. It’s awful, the way they speak to each other, the way they communicate with other people, with the adults. (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

Mr. Ortiz [the assistant principal] came through, and I told him in the hall, “I’m getting tired of telling students to take off a hat, to remove a hood, to go to their homeroom, to leave somebody alone, not to be hugging/kissing. And when you talk to them, they just ignore you, as if you’re not even there. Some of them are actually belligerent, and they’ll tell you to f-off.” I’m getting tired of doing that, and I told Mr. Ortiz yesterday that I am not going to be doing that anymore. I will not be going out in the hall because I’m not going to spend my days having 13-year olds insult me through their lack of respect or their outright disrespect for me. It kind of caught him by surprise because I’m always out there doing my job. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Mr. Breton explained that gang problems sometimes infiltrate the school, which must affect the climate.

[My school] is in an area now where it’s in the middle of two gangs. That comes into school because we’re drawing from that population. Neighborhood school, that’s what you’re going to get. The kids come from a gang background and they’re going to be in your school. Those gangs are going to be in your school. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

Although teachers shared some very positive experiences, the severity of the negative experiences and the fact that each and every teacher shared negative experiences, leads me to report that the climates of the participants’ middle schools seem to be more negative than positive.

**Extracurricular Activities**

Middle school literature paints a picture of active students participating in clubs and sports, learning how to be part of a team, gaining skills that will last throughout their lives. The reality is, though, that most of the urban middle school teachers in the study lamented the lack of extracurricular activities available to students, especially given the
fact that in the past they were available. Mr. King blames this on Proposition 2 ½ which limited how much property taxes could be raised.

Extracurricular activities are very important. That’s kind of when a lot died in middle school is the advent of Prop 2 ½. We used to have intra-scholastic sports where the eight middle schools all competed against each other. Not only interscholastic sports, intra-scholastic academics. College bowl, or math. Mr. Phillips used to have the Math Counts. You could have a spelling bee or geography bees. That’s important in middle school. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

School funding is not an issue for Amber Henderson who is lucky to have two grant-funded extracurricular after school clubs in her school: the Communications Club, which put out a student newspaper and a World Council, which culminated in a trip to the UN. Her students also have cooking and sewing class. Mr. Brighton’s school gives groups time to meet twice a week during school. Only Ms. Oliver recounted a lengthy list of student extracurricular activities: ski club, basketball, National Junior Honor Society, and after school homework help.

Teachers see these programs, as well as the exploratory or enrichment classes (sometimes called encore classes), as valuable for the students. Many schools have cut down on these classes that generally include art, music, woodworking, cooking, and sewing, for budgetary reasons or to give students more time in academic classes or preparation classes for state tests.

I think what we’re doing to some extent is a crime because we’re robbing them of experiences they should have. We don’t have all the exploratories and I think that’s an important part of a person’s education. Every one of those exploratories had a purpose. Whether it was music, cooking, or sewing, especially for the inner city kids, it’s so, so important. Instrumental music: where’s the instrumental music in our school system? (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Aside from what they learn in these classes, Mr. Breton points out that the students are missing out on fun.
We have done nothing, but make school more odious to these poor children. I mean I look at some kids that I teach, they have no fun classes all week. It’s just academics after academics after academics and the only thing these kids have to look forward to once a week is gym; their encores are academic. Instead of taking consumer science, home ec, like it was called when I was a kid or art or music or some of the other things that make school fun, they’re taking remedial math and remedial English. So now kid’s getting pounded all day long. Kid’s got no down time. We keep thinking, “Well, just give them more and make it harder and that will make them smarter.” It doesn’t work that way. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

These cuts also affect the teaching staffs.

We have more cuts in our building. We lost another enrichment. We lost an art teacher and our two computer science teachers have to teach math, yeah, they have to teach math enrichment. They’re whittling us down to math and English and if you’re not on board with that, then you’re done. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

This music teacher is in the process of becoming certified in English because she is afraid her music position will be cut. Her love of music brought her into teaching, now her love of teaching has brought her to English so that she can remain a teacher. Some teachers are afraid that we are giving up too much in our quest for improved test scores.

Everybody wants higher scores. That’s like mom and apple pie. Everybody wants that, yeah. But what are we going to do to get that? You know? What do we want? It’s not just a society where everyone can read. We want more than that. What kind of people do we want? (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Mr. Hasse lamented the lack of extracurricular activities because of the leverage it provided in dealing with students. Students would do their work because they had to maintain a certain grade point average and proper behavior to participate. He thinks schools should “make kids want to be a part of it and then you have something to take away from them. A lot of times, I feel like kids have nothing to lose.” (2A/MA8/IRM2504)
Promotion of Healthy Habits

Proponents of the middle school want schools to promote a healthy lifestyle, teach students healthy habits, and provide only healthy and nutritious food choices. In practice, though, middle school teachers did not mention the promoting of a healthy lifestyle as a focus of their schools. In fact, 2 teachers mentioned their disappointment that the cafeteria provided junk food for the students. Far from offering healthy choices, Mrs. Henderson joked that in order to raise money for her activities she has to offer students poor nutritional choices.

We did a Christmas party in the afternoon where we had dancing and fun and the kids paid a buck to attend to help offset the cost of soda and food: chips, beef patties, cookies, and soda. (Laugh) Yes, it’s the heart attack, junior heart attack menu. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

This teacher was also against the cafeteria selling junk food, but not it seems because of the unhealthy aspects of it:

I don’t think we should be giving them free lunch and then letting them buy junk food. I don’t even mind the free lunch, but don’t sell them junk food; if they have money for junk food, then they have money for lunch. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Mrs. Katz sells bottled water to students to make money to supplement the supplies she wants to purchase for projects. She refuses to sell junk food, although she knows it would be a better moneymaker, because she does not think it should be available to the students in school; her colleagues, though, disagree.

That’s another thing: teaching them to make good choices. I don’t carry soda, chocolate, bad snacks. . . .They can’t do that [sell junk food in the cafeteria], not here. We do actually have a school store that sells all the junk food that kids love. . . .I don’t agree with it, it’s not my way, so I don’t do it, but I’m certainly not going to criticize someone else for that being their way. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

The only other proof I saw or heard indicating that the participants’ schools were concerned with promoting a healthy lifestyle was a poster outside the nurse’s office in
one school (School A, District 1) depicting what a person would look like if what happened to the inside of their bodies from smoking happened to their outsides.

**Advisory Programs**

Advisory programs do not appear to be a focus in any of the participants’ classrooms. One teacher did mention that a program would be starting the following year, 1 teacher mentioned that the school follows the Responsive Classroom techniques (as designed by the Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc.), and Mrs. Henderson and Mr. Brighton mentioned that their schools follow the Well Managed Classroom/Boys and Girls Town Social Skills Training. None of the programs are run as designed due to lack of time and staff or students’ unwillingness to participate. The literature suggests a small group of students be put with one adult with whom they can form a bond. In practice, the few teachers whose schools have programs run them as part of the homeroom with one teacher and 30 students and the focus seems to be more on skills or values training than on forming bonds.

We did do all of those Boys and Girls Town Social Skills Training here. *Every* morning the first academic period you teach a different social skill. (Presents binder). This is the whole collection of them. I have them posted up, right now we are supposed to be on listening, but I still have last week’s posted because I’m really starting to pack the classroom up and wind down. I was amazed to discover that they *don’t* know some of the niceties. So, that’s what we’re doing. And the whole program really just pushes the rewarding of positive change. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Because students are not graded, some teachers find that they do not take the programs seriously.

We run a program on Mondays and Wednesdays called “The Well Managed Classroom.” That’s a program to try and teach the kids social skills and behaviors that are essential in their day-to-day life, such as listening to people, greeting others. Some things that our kids don’t necessarily have the skills for. And they’d oftentimes whine and complain about that. “Why are we doing this? Why
are we learning this?” You try to reiterate that as teachers we don’t see that you
guys know these skills, so we need to try to teach them.

That program lasted for a little while, doing some acting in the class, and
the kids writing stories, and making games where they dealt with the rules and
regulations of how to do some of those social skills. But I mean, the last 2
months has been kind of rough to do that with the eighth graders because for the
longest time, most of them didn’t really care about that program. It was
something that they knew they weren’t graded on, and so it was kind of hard. At
that time, too, we lose our kids for chorus and band, and we lose our kids who do
some of the different sports in school because that’s the set time for them to meet:
during that 8:30-9:15 block. So, a lot of times, they’d see these other kids going
to these fun activities, and they’d say, “Well, they don’t have to do that work.”
(5A/SC8/CAM2603)

Teaching values and skills are important, but these teachers are not being given
the time the literature suggests to bond with small groups of students.

**How Do Teachers Experience the Characteristics Intended To Promote a Well-
Educated Student Body?**

**Interdisciplinary Teaching**

Advocates of the middle school philosophy recommend that teachers plan their
lessons collaboratively and cover topics simultaneously so that students can envision the
connections that exist between subject matters. The reality falls far short of this
expectation: none of the teachers interviewed are able to teach in an interdisciplinary
fashion due to lack of time to meet and plan with their colleagues or curriculum
constraints, mostly the result of No Child Left Behind legislation. Most of the teachers
find themselves teaching to the state test. It’s to the point where Mr. Vargas said, “Pretty
much what we’re doing is teaching to the test; it’s gotten to the point where we are
teaching to the test.” (1A/MA7/HIM2803)

At least 3 of the teachers teach special test preparation classes which take up a lot
of class time, “Everybody is teaching Academic Acceleration, where you’re working
with smaller groups working on one of the 12 strands that are on the [state test] from 8:30
to 9:10, every day; it’s a 40 minute class.”  (5B/SC78/CAF5521) Mr. Breton fondly recalled an interdisciplinary unit his team did on Mardi Gras back when his team had enough time to meet to plan those types of units. Other teachers who used to have the time and flexibility to plan interdisciplinary units shared missing it as well.

[Now] it ends up being a lot more meeting with parents and dealing with problems, than doing curriculum planning. And the State Frameworks have, in my eyes, totally killed curriculum planning because the English curriculum no longer matches up with the history and the math. They have a math program where they’re told everyday exactly what to teach. So, where I used to be able to say to the math teacher, “Hey listen we’re studying China, do you want to work with abacuses or tanagrams?” Can’t do that, that’s not allowed anymore, can’t work at all with that stuff. So you miss a lot of what used to be a lot of fun.  (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

Missing the opportunity to participate in interdisciplinary units was true for veteran teachers across districts.

We were all on the same page as to what we were going to do academically. Now it’s like we’re being run; the driving force is the state and the city telling us how we’re going to put things on our board. . . . Academically, we would plan lessons that coordinated my class with a social studies class, with the English class throughout the day. So it was a nice unit. We couldn’t do it every day because it took a lot of planning and preparing for, but it was nice.  (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

**Flexible Scheduling**

A complaint of many of the teachers interviewed was the lack of flexibility in the schedule. Ideally, middle school teachers should be able to change their schedules for a variety of activities. The reality in these middle schools is that due to sharing of staff or discretion of principals, schedules are set in stone; this is especially upsetting to those who used to have flexibility and had it taken away. As Mrs. Katz said, “There’s none, no flexibility in time, none, everyone teaches 55 minute blocks.”  (3A/MU78/CAF3512) This was echoed by all of the teachers in all of the districts, “You can’t play with the schedule, like I can’t say, ‘I want them two periods in a row,’ because it isn’t like that,
you don’t have that ability to swap back and forth and to do things.” (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

Most of the districts had taken away flexibility a few years before.

Then it seemed to have been implemented system-wide; the same basic [schedule]. Which means not only do you not have flexibility in the building, you have no flexibility in the system. The system completely is reverted back to the “This is the way you’re going to do things” approach. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

Teachers in one district were just beginning to have their flexibility taken away.

The scheduling is definite this year. I’m not sure about next year; it may not be quite as flexible. They’re telling us 90 minutes for this, 80 minutes for that... They’re trying to make it less flexible. Central administration is thinking it’s going to help us. I’m not sure yet. Flexible scheduling has been one of our good points. (5B/SC78/CAF5521)

These comments about the lack of flexibility in scheduling are similar to those about the lack of flexibility in the curriculum and were not confined to one school or district.

**Emphasis on Methods and Media**

Although the literature paints a picture of middle school teachers teaching with the latest technology and drawing on a variety of teaching methods, many of the teachers are unable to teach with a variety of methods and media due to lack of technology available, students’ destructiveness of the technology, or students’ behavior. In discussing technology, Mrs. Henderson said, “They’ll get mad when the computers break, but they’ll be the ones vandalizing them.” (4A/SS8/CAF3303) Ms. Eastmont complained that her school’s technology is outdated, but when she finds organizations willing to donate their old computers, she’s not allowed to take them because then they would not match the other computers in the district. “We’re doing Windows 98, and not much gets run on Windows 98. We can’t get programs [and] can’t add any programs. So I find this really neat history interactive [program] and I can’t put it on my computers.”
And there’s not much other technology available in her building.

Although teachers were all bought overhead projectors this year, they were not bought screens to go with them. One of the only teachers who had new computers available for students, could not trust the students to use them.

We have really lousy screening software so the kids can get on MySpace and Utube and every site you don’t want them to go on. So even when you do have them legitimately doing an assignment that involves the Internet, they toggle back and forth between a couple of screens so fast, I find it more of a headache. I spend my entire time yelling at kids to get off. I know some people [say], “Well, tell them if you catch them, they can’t use the computer any more.” At this point, none of them can use the computer anymore because I’ve caught everybody. It’s a horrible temptation, what they need to do is get better filtering software.

Mr. Wills probably summed up most of the teachers’ feelings best, technology here is “a joke.”

When discussing various teaching methods, Mrs. Henderson said:

Currently we’re being taught we need to do more hands-on, more cooperative group work. But the teachers in my little world here, when we talk, we find that cooperative learning tends to go flat on its face and become a disaster, but more structured activities followed up by something hands-on works really well. . . . At this point in the year, if they’re going to be doing some class work, they need something really structured and really just concrete, not hard. And having them run around the room doing role playing or worse, getting them to look through a book together and do a cooperative sort of jigsaw; maybe in October when they’re still trying to impress me. I feel like so many of them have so little structure at home, that there’s such chaos all around, that they almost crave it [structure].

Mr. Brighton agrees that it is difficult to give them unstructured, independent work: “In middle school, independent work means there’s going to be five or ten kids who aren’t going to be doing anything; you have to be patrolling.”

Students’ inability to stay focused is not the only problem. Students are so used to getting information quickly, that they just want it given to them.
The kids are so used to getting the information right away. They don’t want to hear me explain it to them, they don’t want to read it. They’re used to it right away. “Okay, I want to read this, let’s go, tell me what’s the answer?” That mentality at that early age is going to carry over with them until they get older and older and no one’s going to have the patience for many things. That’s been a huge problem. (2A/MA8/IRM2504)

Another problem is that students are exposed to so much media at home it takes a lot to get their attention, as Ms. Faulkner noted,

It takes so much to * grab them, get them ** involved. You can stand on your head and they’ll say, (bored voice) “Oh. So, what else can you do?” (Chuckle) “What are you going to do tomorrow? Jump out a window? Ooh, that would be good. * Yeah.” (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

This is true even on field trips.

If we’re doing something in class that some of the kids are interested in, they’ll follow along and they’ll engage themselves, and they will help out and ask questions and reflect, and have discussion, but if the kids aren’t interested in it, it’s almost like, “I’m bored and I need something that gets me going."

It was the same way in the Washington DC trip. We’d go to the Air and Space Museum, and [some] kids were interested in that type of thing, our kids who we picture going into math or science or the engineering field. There were great exhibits there where they could be running around and hanging on stuff, and demonstrations, and guys doing presentations and stuff. But then you have the other kids, especially some of the girls, who are saying, “We have to be here for an hour?”

It’s almost totally different from the high school level, where you can take a kid over there, and they’ll almost try to find something to occupy their time, whereas these guys just want everything given to them. They want everything right there, so that they can be interested. Oftentimes, they said that to me, “Why are you being so boring?”

I said, “Well, I can’t be the circus, for you.” (5A/SC8/CAM2603)

Mr. Brighton’s experience seems to indicate that the students want to be entertained, but as pointed out by other participants, they are often not mature enough to handle less structured activities.

Specially Prepared Teachers

Although this is a characteristic of middle schools, it is an ideal that I did not anticipate the participants experiencing in their schools; it is expected that teacher
education programs will design programs for teachers or that state licensure will offer special middle school certification. Participants, though, did mention teacher preparation and their concerns about it:

I think elementary school teachers are far better prepared in college for what they are going to be facing. ... I think the state is... handcuffing school systems by having teachers so specialized now in middle school. I think there should be a generalized middle school certification. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

More time student teaching was also recommended by teachers because new teachers do not seem prepared for the realities of urban middle school students. They’ve been learning about education and how to be a teacher. They’ve got these high hopes and they’re going to try to do this and this. And all of a sudden, reality’s going to hit them and they’re going to find out that maybe you can’t be doing this all the time, or it’s going to take you a lot longer to do this, or that you’re going to be dealing with all different types of kids who have learning problems. Kids who have behavior problems, kids who can’t see too well, the kids who don’t speak the language and all this. All of those things come into play and then you’ve got to deal with [it] all. (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

Mr. Delgado’s concern for the new teachers’ naïveté was echoed by Mr. Vargas, who is himself a relatively new teacher.

I think some people have a mental picture where, “Oh I’m going to go teach and the kids are sitting down listening and they’re paying attention to all the material and doing all of the work.” It’s not like that. It’s like you’re pulling teeth for some of these kids. You’re teaching the material and like forcing them through the door, pretty much, otherwise they won’t do it. (1A/MA7/HIM2803)

One participant, though, thinks the trend is already toward more student teaching.

I really would like to see colleges train teachers differently. I like the trend all disciplines are going through where they send you out your first year so that you can see what you’re going to be studying. Is it really what you think it is? I’d like to see more internships. They have that in businesses, where if you’re in college and you want to become an accountant, you go out and you do an internship; and not your last year, when it’s too late to switch your major, but early. I know the colleges are doing that; I like that. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

This concern for their future colleagues was shared across districts.
Most of the teachers mentioned their district’s professional development, usually negatively. The most positive comment was from Mrs. Katz who seems to understand what the district is trying to do:

They’re trying to make people cutting edge. Why not try it? At least try it and if it doesn’t work for you, then (sigh) go back to your way that does, but they’re trying to stay current, they’re trying to stay cutting edge. I don’t know; it’s easy to get cynical because we worked so hard on [a program] then they pulled the funding and that got thrown out. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

She went on to discuss two other programs that her staff was trained in that were then cut due to budget cuts or staff turnover; so although she views the professional development as important, she also recognizes that it frequently turns out to be a waste of time. When the professional development is good, it is often not continuous and developed as the literature suggests. She jokes about her staff only being provided with two chapters of a very good book on education.

We learned Harry Wong in a professional development session that our principal put on about 7 years ago and he touched on Chapter 1 and Chapter 4. Okay, so we know one and four, we’re good with that. And then every now and then they’ll come in with, “Oh here, do this. Oh here, do this. This is our latest thing; we’re going to do this.” Or our latest way to set up your room, the latest thing is PBIS [Positive Behavior Incentive and Support], that’s the latest hoop to jump through so, you kind of just jump through the hoop and go back to shuttin’ your door and teaching your class. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

Teachers often feel that the Professional Development their urban districts provide is not realistic.

Well, I hope your research ultimately winds up finding some better ways to prepare urban teachers and maybe better ways for us urban teachers to teach because I don’t know that doing what works in a suburban setting works in a city setting and often I get all frustrated at professional development days when we do stuff and I keep thinking, “I’d have a riot in my class if we did this.” (Laugh) (4A/SS8/CAF3303)
A good number of the teachers feel that their district’s professional development is a waste of time.

The professional development that’s busywork a lot of times. Some of it is very, very helpful. You can’t beat it, it’s great. But most of it is redundant, it’s repetitious, it’s busywork meant just to keep us there for an hour and fifteen minutes. That’s got to be addressed. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

The most negative comment came from a 34-year teaching veteran.

My worst days are usually Tuesdays because you have an hour and a half at the end of the workday for nothing but happy horseshit. I wish I could describe professional development days as better than that, but I can’t. It is the worst thing that ever happened to the [district’s] public schools; it’s 90 minutes of garbage that could be better served by a memo or a workshop. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

This is a far cry from the exposure to current literature, time with experts, and opportunities for discussion (Smith, 1992) recommended in the literature.

**How Do Teachers Experience Administrators and Team Planning Time?**

**Supportive Administrators**

Unlike the literature which depicts administrators as leaders for change who facilitate the growth of their teaching staff, teachers described experiences of administrators, both within their buildings and in the district, who were not supportive.

In talking about the changes that the district seems to make on a whim, 1 participant said, “Do you know what it means to uproot everything? In November? No you don’t, you don’t care. You don’t care. Can I say that again? You don’t care.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610) This sentiment was shared by another who, in discussing the new superintendent, said,

Unfortunately, under his reign we went from being a great system to becoming a nothing and his successor is proving to be just as bad. They talk one thing and they do another, or they do nothing. I used to respect our superintendents when they came in the building. “Wow, here’s our leader.” Now when they come in, you just try not to laugh in their face, because they’re not doing anything. Again, I understand that society’s changed, and the world’s gotten bigger and harder. It’s
harder to turn things around. But you know, if you don’t respect somebody, it’s awfully hard to follow them. . . . You appear to listen and do what they want, but in reality, you’re holding back. And I see more and more of that holding back today. Everybody nods yes in agreement in front of their leaders, but when the leaders aren’t there, they’re talking behind their back. Years ago, we never talked about people. Never. And now it’s become so common. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Almost all of the teachers shared stories of student behavior run amok and assistant principals unwilling or unable to do anything about it. A fairly new teacher (third year) explained it much more tactfully than most:

In an urban school you have to have a strong administration, and they need to kind of have your back as teachers. Where if the kids don’t see any punishment coming from, or if they don’t care about any punishment coming from the teacher level, there has to be some higher level that is like, “Okay, well if you’re not going to listen to my teachers, then you’re going to listen to me, and you’re going to deal with some consequences.” I think every urban school needs, first and foremost, to have discipline as its top priority. Necessarily, I haven’t seen that in our school as a top priority, which has made it hard to deal with some of the stuff that we’re dealing with this year. (5A/SC8/CAM2603)

Part of the problem is lack of experience.

We have a very young administrative staff, young as in terms of experience, not in age. We have a lot of new principals [and] new assistant principals. We’re talking (whew) just for an example, in our building, the longest serving administrator is 2 years. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

In District 1, as already shared in John’s profile, this lack of experience was blamed on a program that was put in place by the district to train and certify teachers to be administrators: “They want more administrators, so they put together a program that helps out people quickly. . . . they’re just what we should’ve expected. They’re assembly line.” (1A/MA8/CAM6442) No matter whose fault it is, when administrators do not handle discipline issues, it creates problems for teachers.

And we’re all saying that they need to do something about the discipline because we’re having our hands tied because the kids know we can not do anything. They just laugh in our face, “Write me up, do this, whatever, call downstairs. We don’t care.” (1A/EN8/AAF4908)
The most positive comment about administration came from Ms. Oliver who is glad that her administration takes student disruptions seriously.

I praise our administration, our administration will call the police at the drop of a hat. Kids fight on the school grounds, they’re arrested. End of conversation, you’re done. You get 10 days suspension, disturbing the peace and we won’t put up with it. And I think that’s great, I really do. (5B/SC78/CAF5521)

This was not the norm. In fact, in other schools the policy seemed to be to keep things quiet so the public would not find out. One way to ensure that it stays quiet is to impose a small punishment so that it does not draw attention. Mr. Delgado was annoyed that that was the case in his school.

There was something written on one of the mirrors in one of the boys’ bathrooms saying that they were going to bomb the school at 1:30. And it just happened to have been one of our students. We were all outside until a little past 1:30. And they found out it was him and of course just gave him a little 5 days, for causing so many problems, and all the EMTs, the police, and everybody else that had to respond to that. . . .They water things down everywhere. I guess, bad things happen everywhere, and they just really just don’t want to make it known; I guess the less people know and the public knows, the better it is. (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

The middle school literature I have examined does not address what to do with students who disrupt the learning process of others and who seem unconcerned with learning themselves.

**Team Planning Time**

Team planning time is one of the most important characteristics to be implemented in a middle school because teachers use this time to plan the academic and extracurricular activities that make up the “ideal” middle school as promoted in the literature. Six of the 15 teachers interviewed do not have any time to meet with their teams and 7 of the 15 participants have had their number of team meetings reduced in the last few years. This lack of time to work together with their colleagues is seen as a
problem for teachers. “We lost common planning time. And it’s really hard to team when you don’t have any team to team with (laugh).” (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

The teachers made comments like, “I’ve been on a team before, we need more team time here, we’re not getting enough time.” (1A/EN8/AAF4908) and “Now we don’t have the time to work those kind of things out.” (1A/MA8/CAM6442) To overcome this lack of time, teachers meet on their own time.

If a parent has called and we need to make contact then usually we have a little time just before lunch or during lunch; sometimes we’ll all eat together. Or after we have lunch we’ll usually meet in someone’s room depending on whose room is empty and that’s a good way to kind of just vent especially if you’ve had a hard morning. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

Mrs. Sang’s team has no team meeting time due to a staff cut and scheduling changes, so during her prep time she will go from teacher to teacher sharing information.

We just don’t have enough time to meet. . . .Our team used to meet once a week; once a week, that’s all; now none. They split the schedule up once the other teacher left, so we don’t have time together. I will meet with one teacher and talk about all the things we need to do, then I will go to the other teacher and talk to the other one, so I’m the middle person. (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

The importance of having time to meet as a team was stressed throughout the middle school research (Erb, 1992; Lewis, 2000). Teachers, the literature explained, use this time to implement many of the other characteristics. The reality for these urban middle school teachers is that they do not have enough planning time.

**How Do Teachers Experience Teaming?**

As indicated in the previous section, most of the teachers mentioned how few team meeting times they have available to them now. To make matters worse, several teachers feel that they are not making good use of the time they have because their teams are fragmented. Due to scheduling constraints, in several schools only three of the six teachers meet at a time. Other schools have “mega-teams” which consist of two English
teachers, two math teachers, two special ed teachers, one science teacher, and one social
studies teacher. Because the math and English teachers only see half of the students on
the team, they do not participate in all of the parent conferences or IEP (Individualized
Education Plan) meetings. John Wills has stopped going to team meetings because the
team is so fragmented. He is not the only teacher who feels his meeting time is wasted
now; Mr. Hasse does, as well.

We get together and then we’ll disperse as soon as we get in there. The two
special ed teachers have way too many students and they have IEP meetings all
the time, so they’re out of the loop. We have to tell them [during] our lunchtime
or during the course of the day, what went on. The people who are still there, if
they don’t have a parent-teacher conference, we talk about whatever new policies
are in or if someone’s suspended, [we] get [their] work together. I just feel like
we’re not making use of that time. I find myself grading papers in team time.
The only reason why that happens is half of the team is parent-teacher
conferencing [and] the special ed teachers are going to their IEP meetings. I’m
not going to do a team meeting with myself, so I’ll, you know, * will * grade
papers, yes I grade papers in team time. (2A/MA8/IRM2504)

Although teachers lament not having enough time to meet with their teammates,
they still feel that having a team is invaluable. “Luckily that first year I had a good team.
They had some experience, there were four guys on the team, two of them had been
veteran teachers.” (1A/MA7/HIM2803) The support of colleagues is important to both
veteran and novice teachers. Veteran teachers like the sharing, “It’s just the exchange of
ideas. That’s what I love about being on a team as opposed to being in elementary school
by yourself.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610) Novice teachers need the support.

I feel like, if we didn’t have our team, it’d just be 10 or 15 times worse with the
kids. But we do, so we’ve been able to put the fires out that we need to put out,
and we’ve been able to deal with the kids, for the population of kids that we have,
I think pretty much successfully. I think there’s a totally different atmosphere
working with a team as opposed to being on your own as a high school teacher,
because in high school, you get five different classes, but for that class, you might
be the only one that has that group of kids all together. . . .so no one’s ever there
to help you. But I go into my team meeting on Tuesday, and my Language Arts
teacher will say, “Here’s what I do.” . . . You take these strategies that each of them use, because each of them see the same group of kids that you see.

It’s also been very comforting for me as a [third] year teacher, saying, “Listen, I can’t handle these guys together.”

And then one of the other guys on my team pats me on the back and says, “I’m having just as tough a time as you are with them.” And he’s been teaching for 8 years or the other guy’s been teaching for 10 years. For them to say that is pretty comforting to me, with the experience that they have, saying, “Look, I’m fighting the same battles as you are.” That’s been pretty good: knowing that three other guys in the school have the same group of kids I have every day. So I can go and talk to them. (5A/SC8/CAM2603)

This is true for novices across districts and subject matters.

I love my team. They show me support in every aspect. I mean, it has been 2 years where I’ve worked with most of the teachers on this team, so I think that the close relations help us manage the students a lot better because we’re pretty much seen on the same page. We make decisions pretty much together. . . . Dealing with the students where all the decisions we’re making [are] for the kids, I think that helps, I think it helps out a lot once the kids see that. (1A/MA7/HIM2803)

The collegiality and chance to vent and wind down with peers is important to teachers, as well.

It’s fun, we have a close relationship. It gives us that time when we’re not dealing with the kids and we joke around and laugh and have our adult conversations. It gives us that time to be away from the students. We can complain, you know, just open up to another adult that’s going through the same exact thing you are. You get to that point where you’re like, I wonder if this other person is going through this same thing. That’s the point, free some time to discuss it. (1A/MA7/HIM2803)

Even teachers who did not expect to enjoy teaming found that they do.

I found it really nice to have other adults to work with. That was a real surprise. I thought it was just going to be like learning to compromise and trying to change my curriculum so that other people could work with it. (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

I remember when teaming first came in; I was opposed to it. You know, we were all lone wolves. Each one of us thought we were doing a fine job on our own, but I came to really appreciate teaming; and I saw the strength and the benefit of it. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

The 17 characteristics of a middle school that I deemed, after careful and thorough examination of the literature and research, as most indicative of a school’s
following of the middle school philosophy were woefully lacking in the urban middle schools of the teachers participating in my study. It is significant to note that these characteristics were also pinpointed as important by the 15 participants, even as they lamented their absence. As critics begin to point to the middle school as not having solved the problems it was designed to solve, I can not help but wonder if that may be because the middle school philosophy has not, in fact, been embraced by those who operate schools emblazoned with the words “Middle School” above the entrance.

In Chapter VII, I examine the realities of the urban setting and discover again, that the reality is a far cry from the ideal portrayed in the middle school literature.
CHAPTER VIII
THE REALITIES OF THE URBAN SETTING

Kids Have Changed and Society Has Changed

Schooling does not happen in a vacuum. Whatever is occurring in the larger society, neighborhoods, and in students’ homes affects how they come to school, when they come to school, and their attitudes about learning. Teachers who had been teaching for many years mentioned the changes in students and society that have occurred since their early years teaching; new teachers mentioned how much schooling has changed since they were students. My 15 participants often described their classrooms as loud chaotic places where a few rowdy students are allowed to disrupt the learning for everyone, rather than the energetic centers of cooperative learning where the teacher facilitates, rather than directs learning, as depicted in the literature. Blame was placed on transience, absenteeism and tardiness, poverty, inadequacies of parents, gangs, and technology.

Transience: The Kids Move Around So Much

Teachers are concerned that because students move residence more frequently now, they are missing out, not only on the curriculum, but also on that sense of belonging to the school and the community that students had in the past. As Mr. Wills said in describing his childhood school, it was a true part of the community.

The community kind of built the character of the school. [My] middle school was the community’s school, we all knew that. It had very little compared to what newer schools today have in the way of fields or facilities, like auditoriums and so on. It had a bare minimum, but that was something we were all proud of; we had a rickety old gym, but it was ours, we had a tiny little auditorium, but it was ours. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)
These sentiments were echoed by Mr. King who talked with pride of the closeness of his childhood community and how it was connected to his schooling, even though the small town “didn’t really invest that much in public education, I felt like I got a really good education. . . .Ironically, my grandmother was the first class to graduate eighth grade, and I was the 50th.” (1B/SC6/CAM5534) He shared the fact that he was the paperboy for many of his teachers, some of whom had been his father’s teachers. He talked about how his mother had baked a cake for a teacher’s birthday party and the baby shower she helped throw for another. In explaining the many jobs of his guidance counselor, the connectedness of this small community was revealed. “I had a tremendous guidance counselor, Dr. Santorini, who also was a podiatrist. (Chuckle) The podiatry, I think, was a second job. He took out a couple ingrown toenails for me. He also doubled up as the athletic director.” (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

Today’s students, on the other hand, do not feel the sense of pride in their community that Mr. Wills felt or the connectedness that Mr. King experienced.

The challenges right now are [that] the kids move around so much and we don’t get them the whole year. . . .They don’t have the continuity and they don’t feel that they belong here. “I’m just here for a couple months, then I will be gone. I’m going back to Puerto Rico.” We just got two kids today, and we asked them, where were you before, . . .This is only 10 months and this is the third school system they’re in, school system, not school. So, the mobility of the kids that’s my biggest concern. Once they move to a new house they’ll be going to a new school so they don’t feel that they belong to the school. So they really don’t care. So they can destroy things. “This is not my school.” That’s one thing that bothers me a lot, because back then the kids stayed here 3 years. (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

The transience affects what students learn. As Ms. Eastmont said when describing the difficulties with giving the district-required final exam, you have to keep track of when students moved into the district to know who can be excused from which part of the curriculum.
The homeless is a lot higher here than it would be in a town, so that you’re dealing with all these things. The kids move two, three times a year, you’re dealing with the changes, the constant in and out of students throughout the year. The end of year final, it’s like 20 kids saying, “You know, I wasn’t here for that.” “I wasn’t here for that.” “I wasn’t here for that.” (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

The teachers, though, understand why the students move so frequently.

I think teaching in an inner city it does have a lot of challenges. I can’t say, “think” it does have a lot of challenges. You do have the constant moving; parents move them in the springtime to where they don’t have to pay for heat and electricity because you don’t need it and then they move again in the fall to a place where heat and electricity is included in the rent; so that there’s quite often that constant motion. (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

Some districts have begun to address the mobility issue by instituting district-wide curriculum, so that when students move, at least within the district, they are not missing the curriculum. This, though, has meant less flexibility for teachers which is one of their frustrations.

**Absenteeism and Tardiness**

Related problems are student absenteeism and tardiness. These also affect students’ abilities to learn, retain information, and connect the curriculum. Teachers in math feel this especially strongly because each skill builds on the last. Mr. Hasse said, “I’m frustrated with certain students that don’t come in. . . .I started to freak out on my homeroom class because they’re all trailing in late.” (2A/MA8/IRM2504) He explained why he is so frustrated.

I just can not stand the attendance thing. I kind of go nuts when someone comes back and says, “Mister, I don’t get this.” What are you supposed to do when four or five kids don’t show up? Week in, day in and day out. Math is a big culmination of what you learn today you use tomorrow and you use tomorrow; we’ll work on it, but you can’t go anywhere.

And then the district gets mad at you, “Oh, why are you not on pace? Why are you still here? How come your kids don’t know?”

“Well, it’s a building and they’re not here.” . . .That’s so frustrating. It’s the most frustrating thing in the world. Now that’s the main reason why I dislike being a teacher in an urban district: attendance and math. You can’t build a
house without the foundation, you can’t build middle school math curriculum on nothing. They haven’t even been here and they get pushed along.  
(2A/MA8/IRM2504)

The social studies and science teachers in Districts 1 and 2 are more keenly aware than ever of how absenteeism affects student learning because with their current schedule they only meet students every other day. If a student is absent 1 day during the week their class only meets twice, they only get to see the student one time during that week. One school in each of these districts instituted a new policy: detention for any student arriving late. It did not work in either district. In District 2 it was just another example of the administration making a policy and not following through. “That came from the assistant principal and that lasted about a week. And I’m frustrated because kids can feel that there’s no follow through.” (2A/MA8/IRM2504) In District 1 there was follow through. Every student who was tardy was given detention and was forced to stay after school. Tardiness in the school became almost nonexistent. The administration’s joy in their success was short-lived when they realized that absences had sharply increased. Because there was no consequence for being absent, students who were going to be late, simply did not come at all. This unintended consequence forced the school to discontinue the policy.

Mr. Hasse has an interesting theory about the increase in tardiness in his school. He blames student tardiness on his district’s new policy of neighborhood schools. He says that when students had to catch a bus at a certain time or not go to school, they made sure to catch the bus, but now that students live within walking distance they can come whenever they feel like it. “Kids now, they know the school is a mile away and it’s cold out. They can walk there at 7 or they can walk there at 9 and a lot of them are walking and they’re taking their time.” (2A/MA8/IRM2504)
You’re getting the tardies. *You know* it’s because they’re right there and around the corner. I mean kids that literally live on [the same street] the school is on and it doesn’t take more than 10 minutes [to get here] and they’re coming in late. I don’t know if it’s a parent thing, I mean who knows, maybe their parents sleep in late too. (2A/MA8/IRM2504)

Districts 1 and 2 also have tried to institute policies to deter absences. In both districts, students were informed that if they missed more than 12 school days a year (3 days per marking quarter) they would be given a grade of failure due to attendance, even if they passed. Teachers felt this was a good policy. “They’re cracking down on it now. . .kids that have been absent 20, 30 times; it’s ridiculous.” (2A/MA8/IRM2504) There were so many students who would have been retained that the districts did not enforce the policy the first year, but they did not discontinue it the next year. Both students and teachers knew the policy had not been enforced the previous year, so it really did not have any teeth. It was just a reminder that the district does not follow through.

And then they make these little rules: if you’re out four times in a marking period, that’s it, failure due to attendance. It didn’t happen last time. I was really disappointed. I guess it goes into that whole philosophy, what do you do? You’ve got to get these kids who are absent, you’ve got to hold them to it, you’ve got to stay back, but then you’re holding back a lot of people. I just feel like they’re not sticking to their word. (2A/MA8/IRM2504)

It is interesting to note that none of the participants mentioned rewards or incentives for good attendance.

**Poverty and Homelessness**

The poverty and homelessness students face are related to the transience and absenteeism and were also echoed in interview after interview. “There are kids who are in shelters. I have one boy who, oh he was so excited it’s his last day, and he’s like, ‘Miss I’m moving out of the shelter today, we’re going to [another city].’”

(3A/MU78/CAF3512)
I can probably tell you six or eight of them, naming them, who are in homeless shelters right now. I can tell you the kids who have eaten and who haven’t today. I can tell you the kids who’ve been wearing the same clothes all week long. I can, I mean because you see them every day. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

Teachers sympathize with students, especially Mrs. Henderson who went through some of the same difficulties when she was young.

A lot of the issues my students come through the door with in some way remind me of my own past. Of course, I suspect with a lot of them it’s actually magnified. I had a parent with substance abuse issues, they’ve got parents and siblings with issues that are really causing them to be on the verge of nutritional risk or homelessness, and again, I was never quite that affected. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Teachers recognize that the poverty, homelessness, and other difficulties of urban life are part of the reason students are disconnected from the learning process; they have more important, some would say adult, concerns.

They grow up faster here. So teaching middle school in an urban setting, especially 7th and 8th grade is like teaching 9th and 10th grade. They become sexually active faster. . . . They see things that are really old. Urban kids, they’re street smart. It definitely, definitely takes a special person to deal with this level of toughness to be able to get through to them because really do they care about 4 times 3 when mom’s on drugs and the sister’s out walking the streets to make some money? They don’t, they don’t have any meaning. So, that’s the challenge of urban schools: to make education have meaning to them. Where are they going to use algebra in their life? Making it concrete because what they see is, this is reality, smack right in the face, every day and how am I going to use this? Why is this important in my life? I mean in middle school, it’s all about me, me (singing) me me me me. Very self-centered, very, what is it egocentric? (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

Understanding the cause of the problem, however, does not help teachers understand how to address it.

They have to have a reason to want to learn this stuff, *** you know? Again we’re constantly stuck leading horses to water that don’t want to drink. * And I don’t know how to answer that. I don’t know how to make somebody want to learn. ** I don't know how to make somebody want to work hard at learning and get that ** inner sense of satisfaction from it that I know I got. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)
This is an important concern to address. Mr. Daniels feels that it is key to find a way to motivate students because if they are motivated, as they were in his class when he challenged them to show up the suburban students who looked down their noses at them, they can succeed. He challenged his students to improve their math scores for the state test and they did.

The goal I set with the kids was, “Why don’t you see if you can beat the suburban towns?” We have like a sister relationship with the [suburban] school and we met once a month through the Historical Society to go on field trips and stuff. And whereas they were nice to my kids, you could tell that they really looked down on us. I mean all these white kids coming from somewhere with their Harry Potter books. “You don’t know Harry Potter?”

So I said, “You guys just want to make it your goal to try to beat the suburban schools in math? Forget about the writing and the reading, we have no chance, but math I think you can do it.”

And they were like, “Darn, you know we’re going to go for this.” So it was like one of those things you see in the movies. These kids, this was like their goal and they did it. They worked, but it showed me when kids want to learn something, they will learn anything and that 90% of the problem in urban education is the kids are not motivated. They don’t care. It’s not part of their world. It doesn’t mean anything to them, but when it becomes important to them and they really want it, well you’d be amazed at what they’ll do.

Mrs. Henderson would agree that they can do what they put their minds to and they do not need teachers using their poverty as an excuse not to succeed. She does not tolerate excuses from her students, nor from her friends for that matter.

I went into teaching this particular population intentionally **** because a lot of the students that you teach in the city come from some bad situations, very bad situations and they need to see some people who also had some issues, * not necessarily the same ones as them, but they need to see people kind of do it, who can take charge, ** stand on their own. *** They also need somebody who isn’t going to make excuses for them in terms of their own success. ***

I have irritated acquaintances many times over the years because I don’t like to listen to people making excuses about why they’re not happy with their jobs or their lives, when all they need to do is get off the couch at night and make a change. We all know adults who are in dead end jobs or hate their careers or blah blah blah blah blah. “Well, why don’t you go back to school and do something different?”

“I can’t do that. I don’t have the time, I don’t have the money.”
It’s like, “You could work 30 years in a job that you hate or you could cut back on the time you spend watching *Law & Order* reruns [and go back to college].” (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

She explains, though, that her students come from different levels of poverty.

About half the kids you can really tell, their clothes are worn; they just don’t have two dimes to rub together; things are pretty tight. Then you’ve got maybe another quarter of the kids whose parents are probably doing pretty well. They’re likely middle class, average American households; the kids are wearing nice clothing, they have all the gadgets, they can handle field trips and anything else. Inevitably those are the students who have two married parents and you’ll get a little more response from home probably because there’s those two people there to back each other up. And then the last quarter of my students are kids who’ve got gadgets, they’ve got good sneakers, but nobody really has any money. In other words, they’re the ones that are going to move to three apartments in the same neighborhood within a year because they’re going to keep getting bounced. They’ll have an Ipod, and they’ll have a decent pair of Jordans on, but no real money.

I do not know how those budgets work, but I get enough kids who will tell me that mom’s getting her check this day because she’s on some kind of welfare program and they can tell you what items they can get with the food stamp program and they know all the programs and stuff and it’s like, you get all that and you still have a $150 pair of shoes on? My only guess is that it’s usually one person in the family or that one or two are combining their different welfare money and there’s another person in the household working. . . .Some have been here illegally for a very long time. Other kids who I know have their own sort of jobs; one of my students hustles. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

This poverty breeds entitlement, which many teachers find frustrating.

Another time I get very frustrated with them is: they have a certain sense of entitlement that comes from a sort of generational poverty that many of them are in where they feel like we should give them something. We just *should*, they shouldn’t have to earn it, they should just get it. You owe me, you know? You have to give me a juice, you have to buy me McDonald’s. Or, they’ll forget to say, “please”; they’ll forget to be appreciative of something. They don’t realize that, maybe to do our barbeque today, it meant that their teachers had to pool money together and go to the stores and buy things and make arrangements. They just have that gimme, it’s expected. Of course, they also think all teachers are rich. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Teachers, both young and old, male and female, from different districts, shared similar concerns about their students’ sense of entitlement.
We have a high reliance on entitlement. And the entitlement programs that are offered, people figure, “I’m entitled. It’s an entitlement program, I’m entitled.” And so they do little or nothing, there’s no merit anymore, or no sense of earning. There was a time, I think, where anything worth having was worth working hard to get. Now it’s just, “I’m going to get it, whether I have to work hard or not, the less I have to work the better.” (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

Students wasting what they have been given upsets teachers too. Stories of wastefulness were shared by John Wills and Amber Henderson (in their portraits) when discussing their districts’ free breakfast and lunch programs, as well as the free book program. None of my 15 participants suggested taking anything away from students; they simply expressed concern at their lack of care and appreciation for what has been given to them.

It All Starts in the Home

Although some teachers blame society, others believe, in the final analysis, it is the parents who make the difference.

We all see the two kids sitting next to each other who have no more and no less than the child sitting next to them, but one is learning and they’re growing, and you can see them going wherever they want and the other child is just sitting here socializing. They’re going nowhere but to the corner [in the neighborhood].

***** I wish there were an answer, but. I know, it’s something that comes out of the home. It always came out of the home. As many people say, it all starts in the home, it all ends in the home. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Unfortunately, a number of the teachers indicated that many of the parents do not seem to be fulfilling their duties.

I don’t know if it’s society [or] the family. These kids are being left on their own; they’re bringing themselves up. These young parents who don’t know what they’re doing, just making babies. . .It’s wrong, it’s wrong, because we’re faced with so many kids, they’re bright, but they just won’t do what they need to do. They don’t see the value in education. Oh, they’ll see it later on, but right now, right now is when you need it, and their parents are doing them a disservice. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

Of course, there are still parents who care.
I think in America most people do understand that education is important, I do think most people understand that, yeah. We see some kids don’t care and some parents are not doing their job right to push education with their kids. We do see that, but I do think the majority of Americans do understand education is important because we do have some good kids. (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

More than one teacher suggested that the problem might be that there has been a role reversal within the family for families newly immigrated.

Sometimes the parents are afraid of the kids, especially the kids who can speak English, because they’re translating for the parents and so they have more power. I saw that with the Somalian kids. When talking to the Somalian tutors, I said, “What happened to the kids? Why are they so wild?”

That’s what they said: because the parents are afraid of them, they’re the ones learning English. So they go to the doctor’s office, the kids have to translate for them, they’re afraid, “Oh we can’t get them mad at us, they have to help us.”. . .Kids will learn faster because they’re in school, they’re talking to their friends, watching TV. . . Just my thoughts, that maybe that’s the reason why parents are afraid of their kids. It is very sad and so they lost the basic respect. Why do I respect? I don’t have to respect my parents, why do I have to respect the teachers? (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

Concerns about students are not coming from one district or one generation of teachers. The above comments on student lack of respect, both in the home and in school, from a veteran, female English teacher born in Hong Kong are remarkably similar to those of a novice, male science teacher who never left the urban district in which he was born:

They don’t listen at home. Oftentimes the kids in our class run the home. So when they come to school, to try to get them in a different environment, and say to them, “You are not the boss here and you can’t tell me what to do. We are going to tell you how you behave and how you act.” Sometimes they just have a hard time dealing with that and there’s been so many who can’t deal with that; they’ve been disciplined so many times and we’ve had kids suspended from school, it’s just (deep sigh).

These kids, for the majority, don’t get direction at home. Not anything as simple as, “Hey so-and-so, can you please stop talking?”

They just look at you and say, “I wasn’t talking.” Or, “Why are you telling me to stop talking when they’re talking over there?” So then you try to explain to them, just try to learn to be redirected, once. And that’s the toughest part, they really have a hard time listening and following directions and I feel like we’re fighting battles that were lost many, many years ago, that come from home.
For us to see them for only 45 [minutes] to an hour a day, and to work on them, and get all of that that’s been leading up to this point in their life, to try to reverse it in an hour a day is hard to do. (5A/SC8/CAM2603)

There are also some very young parents, as pointed out by Mr. King. “We have a lot of young parents. Children raising children. We have a lot of parents with no education themselves and no value for education. They can’t see the point in it.”

(1B/SC6/CAM5534) These students are taking a care giving role in the home with their siblings because their young parents are unavailable. Mr. Breton understands that the demands placed on the children and the families are so different from when he was growing up.

How much support are these kids getting at home? Now I’m not saying parents are completely abandoning them, but heck if you are [in] a low income situation where people have to work, or there’s young siblings at home and you have to go home and baby-sit because mom’s not home, mom’s working. Maybe you’re the only person in the family that has any real English language skills and you have to go home and now you’re the translator in the family. You have to go, you can’t stay after school because you have a little kid that’s going to [the elementary school] and you have to go up there and make sure you pick up your younger sibling. So there’s pressures there that we didn’t have when we were growing up.

Now as I said, I don’t think it’s an excuse. I don’t think we should lower our expectations, but there’s a lot of good reasons why it’s harder for these kids to learn. I don’t think they’re stupid; if you can memorize the words to every rap song on the radio, you gotta have a pretty good head. Alright? These kids know things, they know things I never knew when I was growing up. So I think the basic inherent intelligence is there, but they’re missing that, I think that reinforcement. I think they’re missing the time at home, I think some of the social pressures and some of the neighborhoods they live in we never had to deal with. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

These young parents are creating a cycle of poverty and children having children.

I see it more in the inner city. The young girls who are getting pregnant really kills me. Granted, their mothers, some of their mothers, were 13, 14, 15, when they had them, but. One of the worst ones for me was I had a 13 year old girl, she had just given birth to her second child, and it’s like (deep sigh) what in the world? . . . Let them at least get their high school education, let them do that part of it. That’s a rough part for me as a teacher, I hate that, not that it guarantees, but especially in [my district], it basically sort of guarantees, that once a girl gets pregnant she is not finishing high school, she’s not, you know? It’s not, there
goes your life, but it’s more the opportunities for your life certainly go down hill when you don’t have a high school diploma. (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

Oftentimes the parents are not even in the children’s lives. “Their home life is such that they’re basically on their own and they don’t have to listen to anyone.”

(1A/EN8/AAF4908) “A lot of these kids seem to come from broken families. They got a step mom, they got a step dad, they’re living with grandma. Nobody’s supervising them, or it doesn’t seem like it.” (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

More and more the children I’m dealing with come from single parent families, foster homes, homeless. I can’t describe the number who’ve told me one or both parents are or have been in jail, or are under suspicion of gang and drug activities. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

The problem, as many teachers see it, is that they have no one to try to emulate.

“And I hate saying things like this because it sounds like I’m knocking society. A lot of these kids don’t have a male role model.” (2A/EN8/CAM5909) This thought was echoed across districts.

Until we can figure out a way to intrinsically motivate our particular populations, we’re not going to meet with a lot of success. They don’t have folks at home who are necessarily showing shining examples of educational attainment. They’re not seeing in their neighborhoods a lot of people who are really reaching that middle class American dream, so they don’t have much in the way of examples. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Unfortunately, the role models students do choose are not always worthy of emulation.

There are more and more people of color, of all different colors, that are in high level jobs now. I think that’s great. I think it should be a role model for the kids, but I don’t see it acting as a role model. I don’t see necessarily black kids saying, “Well I can become Barack Obama.” I don’t see that happening and I don’t know why. They want to be a basketball player; they want to emulate the NBA basketball player, but they don’t want to emulate the businessman who lives down at the end of the street and has got a nice home and nice car. That bothers me. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)
All Plugged In

Other teachers blame technology for middle school students’ lack of effort. Kids would rather text their friends than listen in school and they would rather play video games than do their homework.

You didn’t have computers and all that stuff to really take your mind away from what you needed to be doing. Now, that’s all these kids do. They’re all plugged in with the little Ipods to the ear, playing their PSPs and wanting to be on MySpace or whatever space is on the computer. It’s terrible. (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

Mr. Delgado feels very strongly about the detrimental affects of technology on his students.

At this age, they don’t care. They want to play games, they want to see their show at night. They want to hear everything in the Ipods, their PSPs. Oh my God, that’s what’s ruining this country. The technology, you’d think that it would help. Instead of helping, it’s destroying our country. And all of these kids, with all of these little devices, and then they bring them to school. The phones, too, that their mothers think that they’re using only as emergency phones, and they’re texting and calling friends. (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

As indicated earlier, technology has also made students want immediate gratification: they do not want to wait to find the answers; they want them there immediately (like on the Internet). This shortening of their attention spans is troubling for teachers. And, as some pointed out, their exposure to media has also made it more difficult to grab their attention.

School Is Lame

Whatever the reasons, it is clear that many of the urban students these middle school teachers are dealing with do not want to learn and they want to infringe on the rights of others who want to learn. “We almost seem to have a subculture that thinks being smart and doing well in school is lame.” (4A/SS8/CAF3303) This belief cut across districts.
It’s hard to get across to some kids. Because they grow up in that urban environment, they just want to be the thugs and the gangsters. And it’s cool to be like that outside of school and it’s cool to be like that inside of school for some of them and that’s where the attention is drawn from. It’s hard to try to erase that from them and to try to get them to think it’s cool or that it’ll benefit them to do good in school and to pay attention. (5A/SC8/CAM2603)

The most heart-wrenching story of a student being harassed by peers for wanting to learn came from Mr. Wills who was actually sharing a story from another teacher.

I was talking to Mrs. D. yesterday, and she said that she saw one of her former sixth graders, now a seventh grader. She said, “How are things going?” And the more they talked, he began to choke up, and he started to cry, and she said, “What’s the matter?”

And the boy said, “There’s so much noise in the rooms, I can’t even concentrate. When I do work, some of the other kids take my paper and rip it up; they laugh at me because I try. I hate school. I don’t want to go to school anymore.” Why does a child have to be exposed to that? (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

There is tremendous peer pressure to misbehave and not do work.

Years ago, whether a child liked you or not, they were always respectful to you. Now even the best of kids, for some reason, they don’t want to treat you with respect. I know many of them know better because when you’re with them one on one they act better, but when they’re with their peers, the attitude today is not to act nice to somebody. It’s an attitude. There’s always an edge on everything they seem to do and say when they’re together. And that’s the part that you can’t help but dislike today. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Teachers discussed the intent of heterogeneous grouping, which was to have the top kids who performed well academically and were generally not behavior problems, to encourage students who were having trouble academically, or maybe were behavior problems, to function at a higher level. Unfortunately, in practice, they find, it does not work that way. As Mr. Vargas shared, “Usually what happens when we have negative behaviors, the good kids usually go with the negative behaviors.” (1A/MA7/HIM2803)

Similar observations were shared by teachers from different schools with more than ten times Mr. Vargas’ teaching experience.
There was a lot to be said for homogenous grouping. Heterogeneous grouping: theoretically, the “bad” kids or the less-able kids are supposed to learn from the other kids. It doesn’t really work that way in practice. It seems that the good kids pick up more of the bad traits from bad kids. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

And now there are so many that are slow and they’re not encouraged by the top kids. They tend to make fun of the top kids. And the top kids no longer want to be that academic leader; they try to emulate the ones down at the bottom. So it’s like the whole thing is working in reverse from the way we thought it was going to work: somebody pulling someone else up; now they’re being pulled down. The top kid is being pulled down now. The way they dress, the way they talk, the way they act. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Participants from different districts explained that there are so many behavior problems in a class, it makes it very difficult for teachers to teach. Mr. Delgado said,

It affects, so badly, the rest of the class. We have kids who are our troublemakers in each class to some degree, and they end up stopping the educational process and some of the learning for the other kids. . . .I just try to take 1 day at a time, or, here, 1 minute at a time (chuckle). Every day is a different story. Every day is a different problem or fight. (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

This is very similar to what Mr. Vargas said,

It can be extremely difficult to deal with some of these kids. They don’t want to listen, won’t follow procedures, won’t follow classroom rules, so on and so forth. That can be extremely frustrating, especially when you’re trying to teach in front of the class and there’s constantly disruption. One disruption creates another disruption and it gets out of control. It’s impossible to teach in the classroom where there’s constant disruption. (1A/MA7/HIM2803)

He does go on to say, though, that teachers can not take what the students are doing personally; the students should be punished for their infraction, but then everyone must move on.

It can be extremely difficult. Some of these kids can be extremely mean and that’s why I think you can’t take them personal. You can not take them personal. They’re always kids, no matter what, they’re always kids. There has to be consequences for the disrespect, but you can’t take it personal at all and I think some people just take it way too personal. It seems like one day they’ll hate you and think you’re the worst teacher in the world. Then they come in the next day and they’re like (in sweet voice) “Hi Mister.” They forget, I mean they forget the way they acted the previous day. So that comes to let you know how much of a kid they are. That can be the hard part: the different emotional levels. They’re
going through a stage where, you know, so many changes going on in their body that they can’t even handle it themselves.  (1A/MA7/HIM2803)

Even the students who are not behavior problems do not seem to want to put forth the energy required to learn; they want everything done for them.

My expectations were that I would work in small groups. We could have fun, that they would be able to have fun and cut it off at a certain point, you know? But they don’t know when to stop and so I don’t do a lot of fun things. They’re talking about, “It’s boring, it’s boring.”

“Cause you can’t handle it.” My expectations were that they would learn; that they would come for extra help if they needed it. . . .The kids want me to do so much more for them. And it’s like, you have to be able to do this.

I can give you the tools, I can tell you where to go to find the information, but they’re sitting there like, “Well, you’re a teacher, you know the answers.”

“But I have to find the answers too. You need to know how to do that, that’s what we’re trying to get you to understand, how to do something, how to find answers.” And they don’t want to do it, they just want it (snap, snap) given to them. They’re not learning anything that way.

I see more and more kids, the smart kids, they’ll do the work and they’re giving the paper to one over here and one back here and I’m saying to the smart kids, “Why, why are you doing that? You’re doing all the work and they’re just copying. Why? It’s not really helping them.”

(Childish voice) “Well, they’re my friend.”

“But you’re not really helping them.” I’m like, “You can do it too, if she can look it up and find it, you can too; and if you can’t, I’m here to help you, ask, stay after, do it.” But they just don’t, they won’t, there’s no effort, no push, no push. I can’t get them, can’t get them to do that. I thought kids would at least put forth some effort, you know, and it’s like no, they just don’t. They don’t want to, they’d rather me stand there and say, “Okay, the answer to one is this, the answer to this is two.”

And then if I give them a test, and they’re on their own, they’re sitting there going, “I don’t know how to do this.”

“Because you have not done anything, you haven’t put any effort into finding out how to do this.” So, my expectation, put forth effort, put forth effort and there’s just a real lack of that.  (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

Students, it seems, not only do not want to put forth effort, they want every day to be fun.

I don’t agree with the philosophy that everything has to be fun: that teaching and learning has to be fun. I think kids have to realize right up front that life is not fun. Life is damned hard work. And anything worth having is worth working for. And so to that end, science can sometimes be fun, but sometimes it’s hard work.
And we’ve gotten away from that; kids having an appreciation for hard work.
(1B/SC6/CAM5534)

This was true across schools and subject matters, as Ms. Faulkner explained,

Sometimes I say to the kids, “Some days it’s just going to be monotonous, you know. You come in, you do this, it’s routine. It can’t all be fireworks everyday. Some days it’s just dadada and you do it, and you get it done. You’re in here for 90 minutes, you do this, you do this, you do this, and then you leave, that’s it. We might have a few laughs here and there which is all well and good, cause I enjoy a good joke, little laugh, tell a little story, but some days let’s do it.” And they need to understand that, it can’t be magic every day. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

This comment from a 49-year-old, female, African American, English teacher from District 1 was strikingly similar to that of the 26-year-old, Caucasian, science teacher from District 5 who said to his students, “Well, I can’t be the circus, for you.”

(5A/SC8/CAM2603)

**Dangerous Lives**

The teachers seem to agree that the majority of their urban students are not interested in learning while they are in school. Some teachers think it has to do with the dangerousness of their lives. School may be the only place they are allowed to socialize freely or, as indicated previously, it may be that because they have so many other concerns school is not important to them.

They’re not here to do schoolwork, they’re not here to get an education. They’re just here to socialize for the scene, you know. . . . The families that care keep their kids in the home because they don’t want them out where the violence and the drugs, and everything else, including sex, is going on, so they keep the kid in the apartment. Some of these kids don’t go out, from the time they get home till the next day when they go back to school. That’s not good, but it’s necessary. Other families keep the kids in because they don’t want to bring them anywhere. They keep them in, “Go play games; go down to the cellar.” You don’t see that mingling. That’s why school has become the social scene because they don’t meet in the playgrounds. You can’t go to many of the playgrounds because they’re dangerous places now. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)
The dangerousness of their lives was echoed by many teachers from many districts. “They see a lot of gang violence, they see a lot of drugs, they know someone who’s been shot, they have a family member who’s in jail. They have a harder life (sigh).” (3A/MU78/CAF3512) Sometimes the students become involved in the gangs.

The other dynamic going on is that sometimes kids that’ll be pretty good students and have themselves kind of mature and together in the classroom, they get wrapped up in the gang activity and that always disappoints me. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

This violence and gang activity have started to infiltrate the schools. For Mrs. Katz, at least, this is a new phenomenon, as she explained when describing why her school was in “lock down” (doors are locked and students are not allowed to leave the classroom while school personnel and police deal with a threatening situation). “It came from something that happened on the street and it kind of spilled into the schools which I’ve never in my career, I’ve been here 12 years, seen as much spill into school as it has this year.” (3A/MU78/CAF3512) Mrs. Henderson, far away in another district, described a riot that happened when the students were on their way home from school.

We had a riot here last year with a couple hundred kids. They stopped all the traffic on those main roads over there because they were throwing each other on top of cars fighting. I think about 25 kids got arrested. It was a gang riot. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Violence does not just come from gang activity; the world is a more dangerous place. Mrs. Katz told of the code red drills her school began to practice in response to the Virginia Tech shootings.

We ran a code red in here. . . . When we ran the drill in here everybody knew where they were to go and I stood outside my door and peeked in and I couldn’t see any of them which was good. All these rooms down here are locked so actually I feel pretty safe. But, it was kind of scary having to do a code red. I have a flashlight, I have one on my keys that doesn’t work very well, but doesn’t destroy your night vision either. Yeah, we did that * pitch black. The first time we did it, they were kind of laughing a little bit and joking around and making
quite a lot of noise and so then we kind of pulled it back and I had them sit down again. I said, “Okay guys, what if your life really depended on how quiet you were? What if this was real, if there was a gunman in our hallway, your life really depended on your reaction and your ability to stay quiet?” And, we made it really serious and the second time you wouldn’t hear them move, you couldn’t. Nothing. I shut off the lights; everyone was still, everyone was completely silent. It was, it was good. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

She also told about her students’ fears earlier in the week when the school had a bomb scare and all of the students were sent to the high school while their middle school was searched.

I had kids crying, “What’s going on? What’s going to happen to us? Are we safe?”

(Sigh) “We’re as safe as we can be and we have to be calm. We’re just going to do what we’re told and we’re going to stay together and that’s our reality right now guys. We’re just going to handle it.” And, ah, it was, that was intense, that was intense, but at least they’re prepared I guess. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

These incidents made her question whether her own son’s elementary school performs drills and has an emergency plan in place. She said she wanted to discuss it with her son’s school, but somehow could not bring herself to consider that her son might not be safe at school.

I actually am tempted to call my son’s school and to ask, “Have you practiced this? How are you ensuring my son’s safety?”

(Sigh) It’s tempting to ask, but I don’t know if I want to hear the answer, “This is what we’re going to try and do.” Huh, that’s great. His school is, lots of windows. It’s elementary school so ground level, windows, windows, windows, very bright, airy, beautiful place, it’s fantastic, not very safe. I mean they lock their doors like we lock our doors, but it’s scary. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

The students live in dangerous areas (people in their neighborhoods throw rocks and bottles at firefighters) and they have dangerous pastimes (lighting the woods near their school on fire when they are at school and lighting the dumpsters on fire when they are at home).

The kids light the woods in the back on fire every spring. And it came to the point of where the firemen just started putting trucks out when it started getting
warm. They have trucks out along the road because there’s us, there’s a little bit of a land preserve, and then there’s a major road. So they have the trucks there so they can put the fires out. My first year teaching, I’m smelling smoke and finally I look across the hallway. The teacher across the hallway isn’t there and I can see the flames, (screaming) “There’s a fire, there’s a fire.”

Like (calm voice), “Okay, yup Ms. Eastmont, we know.”

Half an hour later, “Guys, the fire’s there. It’s getting close to the building.” Probably about 5 years ago, I actually ended up with a fire outside my window. I’m like, “Guys, you know, it really is, it’s right outside my window.”

They’re like, “Yeah, Yeah. Can’t you see the firemen?”

“Well tell them to get here, please because I can touch the flames if I put my hands out the window.”

I do a little bit of lecture on [the dangerousness of this]. We had a part of [the city] where for the longest time the police, the policemen would not go in by themselves; there would be two cars. The fire trucks would not go in without police escort. . . It’s a project. You go by in the summer time and if the grass is dry, they burn the grass all the time. . . . They light the dumpsters on fire, then it takes awhile before fire trucks get there because the fire trucks have to wait for police escort because they won’t go in because people throw bottles and rocks at them. Your whole building could go up on fire, but you’re going to go throw rocks and bottles at the firemen and stuff like that. (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

The fact that people in her city have that reputation makes it difficult when Ms. Eastmont wants to take the students out of the district for field trips. People in the suburbs are afraid of her students and although she knows what they are capable of outside of school, she finds that they will usually make her proud when it comes right down to it.

I was able to get grants and take them on field trips; I love taking my students outside of [the district]. . . We went down to an old church and the woman was really scared about having us come in because inner city kids. I have gang members, I mean we have kids getting arrested; one of my students tried to kill his mother. You run the gamut, my kids have done it, are doing it, and whatever else. She was petrified and so I talked to them a little bit. . . . And they walked in, she sits in front of the church dressed up as a woman in the American Revolution and sits like she’s in church praying. They all walk in and there’s seats that go around in the pew, so we had to make sure that they’re facing forward and shut the door which they never expected. They’d been to church before but (chuckle) very few of them have ever experienced where you get shut into the pew. And she started talking and at one point she said, “And you young gentlemen had better sit up straight,” and you could hear (clap) the backs going (clap, clap, clap) against the back of the pew. I’m in the back of the room trying not to laugh because it was hysterical, they were wonderful for her, and they loved it. The
applause was great, it was great, she comes back to me and she goes, “I thought you said you had inner city kids.”
I said, “These are...Teach them the way to act and they will do it.”

Suggestions for Teachers in Urban Settings and My Participants

My participants did not mention (and I did not specifically ask about) their experiences with multi-cultural course work, learning about families, learning students’ language, or taking students’ cultures into consideration, which were suggestions for urban teachers provided in Chapter I. They did, though, discuss recruitment of minority teachers and helping students to succeed.

The fact that participants did not touch upon the subjects researchers offered as suggestions for urban teachers does not mean that they have not participated in these activities nor that they do not find them beneficial. It may mean that these issues are not their main concern or it may be that multiculturalism and language barriers are so tied to ethnicity that teachers do not discuss them for fear of sounding prejudiced.

Mrs. Henderson, though, did discuss the recruiting of minority teachers which she believes her district is very good at.

Only about 2% of all teaching licenses granted in [our] state are to people of color; the vast majority go to teachers who are Caucasian. So, the fact that the city is able to get so many minority teachers here is: they’re obviously doing something right with their recruitment. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

It was also suggested that teachers need to empower students by teaching them the power code (Delpit, 1993) so they understand how to succeed. Several participants made it clear that they have high expectations for all students and do not accept excuses for not succeeding. Teachers were, though, sharing their beliefs about all urban students, not necessarily minority students. Mrs. Henderson said, “They also need somebody who isn’t going to make excuses for them in terms of their own success.” (4A/SS8/CAF3303)
Mr. Wills said, “Sometimes the best thing we can do to help these kids is to make them rise to the level they’re capable of. Instead of making excuses for them falling, we should be helping them back up.” (1A/MA8/CAM6442) Teachers recognize that these students have difficulties, but still they expect more, they want more from them.

So there’s pressures there that we didn’t have when we were growing up. Now as I said, I don’t think it’s an excuse. I don’t think we should lower our expectations, but there’s a lot of good reasons why it’s harder for these kids to learn. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

Except for Ms. Eastmont’s belief that students will rise to the occasion and behave properly when required and Mr. Daniels’ experience in motivating his students to beat the suburban students in math, this chapter painted a pretty bleak picture of the urban middle school; it was after all, a chapter on the challenges associated with teaching in an urban setting. The transience, absenteeism, poverty, lack of family involvement, effects of technology, student belief in the lameness of education, and the dangerousness in students’ lives are aspects of the real urban middle school shared by participants. The following chapter explains the often frustrating experiences teachers have in dealing with their colleagues, administrators, and state testing. In the chapter after that, though, I turn to the rewards of teaching and share the positive experiences that urban middle school teachers have with their students which helps to explain why they keep teaching despite the frustrations.
CHAPTER IX

TEACHERS’ LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH COLLEAGUES, ADMINISTRATORS, AND STATE TESTING

As if teaching under the conditions examined so far is not bad enough, teachers often encounter frustrations in their dealings with colleagues, administrators, and state testing. Frustrations with colleagues most often occur when teachers, especially those who are team members, do not follow the rules or perform their duties. Teachers also feel frustration when their administrators do not handle the behavioral concerns they voice or when the district level supervisors, the superintendent, or curriculum leaders make continuous changes. State mandated testing and the curriculum changes caused by it are also cited by teachers as causes of frustration.

Frustrations With Colleagues

These urban middle school teachers shared many anecdotes about how their colleagues’ not following the rules or not doing their jobs affected them. It makes teachers’ lives more difficult when colleagues do not follow the rules because it opens the way for another battle with students: “Mrs. So and So let’s me.”

I know kids are wearing those Ipoddy things in certain classes. [They say,] “Well, you know, she let’s us do that.” Maybe it’s to keep things quiet and maybe some kids work better with that, okay, but if no electronics are supposed to be in here and that one or this one lets it happen then they’re going to think, “Okay, she let us do it so I’m going to come down to Ms. Faulkner’s room and she may not let us do it, but I’m going to do it anyways.” (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

As will be pointed out later, I think it is unlikely that teachers realize that what they are doing sabotages what their colleagues are trying to do. Miss Eastmont sounded so deflated when she recounted how her colleagues’ lack of enforcement of the rules made her students feel about her. Gum chewing seems like an insignificant problem,
especially in light of the gang violence and outright disrespect mentioned in the previous chapters, but to Miss Eastmont, it meant the difference between her students liking her and not. An award-winning and reflective teacher, she explained the end of year report card she asks students to give her so she can improve her teaching.

I had them evaluate me at the end of the year and I got a D and an F for the first time ever. Both were girls and both commented the reason why they gave me the D and the F was because I was always on their case about gum and I was the only teacher on their case about gum and I was only teacher who told them to spit out their gum. It’s a school rule. It gets very hard when I’m following the rule, we’re told to write them up. My assistant principal was saying I was the only person giving them detentions. I was like, “What do you think? When they know I’m giving it to them, do you think they actually put the gum in outside my room? No! Everybody else is letting them chew gum; they’re just not doing anything.”

This problem (frustration at colleagues not enforcing the rules) was not endemic to one school, district, or state. Ms. Oliver, whose school is in another state, had a similar complaint. Two young, new teachers on her team, who ignored the fact that two girls were skipping their classes, likely did not realize that not enforcing the rules affects their colleagues.

We had an incident where two of the girls skipped class and unfortunately, the teachers didn’t do anything about it. We had a few words among ourselves, “Well yeah I’m going to call home and I’m going to do this” and they didn’t.

The new teachers did not want to get the students in trouble, but did not realize that if there were no consequences for the students’ behavior, there would be several ramifications. First, the bad behavior would likely continue; second, it set a bad example and precedent for other students on the team who knew about the skipping; and third, it made the other teachers on the team, who would not ignore the infraction, look like “bad guys.”
Working with colleagues who do not follow the rules is especially discouraging when teachers have agreed beforehand how they will handle situations and then their colleagues do not follow through, as was the case with giving out candy at Halloween time. The team had agreed not to give out candy because the students get such a “sugar high.”

And again I didn’t give in, couple of our teachers didn’t, but a few did and it just makes it bad. You have to think it all the way through. It may be good for you at that time because yeah they’re going to maintain themselves because they want the candy. Once they leave there, now they got the candy, they’re going to go and it’s hell to pay. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

Another frustration for teachers is colleagues who do not perform their duties. They may not even realize that they are frustrating others who have to pick up the slack.

“We go to assemblies and one or two of them don’t oversee their classes. So the rest of us have to discipline their kids. It’s very annoying.” (1A/MA8/CAM6442) Another teacher from the same building talked about hall duty and how much more difficult her duty is when teachers do not follow the rules for giving out passes.

If the rule is, you’re not to be up here until 7:30, then, let’s do it. It’s something as simple as that. Just like last year when the rule was no one is given a pass to go to the bathroom after 2:00, no one is to go to the bathroom. When I was down by the teachers’ lounge, that hallway there [at] the end of the day, I would say, “You’re not supposed to be out here,” telling the kids.

“Well my teacher said.”

Take the kid back, “You’re not supposed to let them go out of the classroom after 2:00.” Go back to my desk, well, here comes another one. . . .We’re trying to get the kids out of the hallway. . . .So something as simple as that, you see, not everybody’s on the same page.

It’s like, “Well you know, I’m going to do it this way.” So one does it that way, someone else does it another way; nobody’s on the same page.

The village has to be on, the whole village has to be on the same page, we all have to work as one collective unit. If it’s “no” here, it’s “no” there, it’s “no” wherever. . . .You’re dealing with so many different adults and their thinking; I don’t know how you can stress the importance of it. Being parents you know how that is with kids, mommy said, “No,” but if I ask daddy, we can get it done. And that split thing is not good. Personalities come into play. . . .I’m stumped. I know
how it should run, but how to get it to run like that I don’t know, that’s the million dollar question, I just don’t know.  (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

Ms. Eastmont must rely on a teacher to cover her homeroom in the morning so she can attend her team meeting. The team only meets twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays; they have 10 minutes in the morning during homeroom time and 20 minutes in the afternoon. Some days the teacher does not show up at all; on others, he comes 5 or 6 minutes late which means she only has 4 or 5 minutes for team time, hardly enough time to accomplish anything.

Even when others do not have to pick up the slack, it is sometimes grating to deal with people who are not doing their jobs, especially when you are. “I don’t mind doing the hall duty, which we do on days we don’t meet. I think that’s important. But some of the people on my team don’t do their hall duty now. They take an extra prep period.”

(1A/MA8/CAM6442)

I was really discouraged because I went to the data team meeting and nobody else had collected any data. * And, * I had my stuff, but it was like, “Well guys you’re supposed to be doing this every day too” and they weren’t doing it. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

This stress from colleagues not doing their jobs cut across schools and districts. One teacher explained one of the reasons she left her previous middle school was that she sometimes felt that her colleagues were not pulling their weight. The administration looked the other way and the union protected them.

There was a guy there who referees basketball, and he’d leave two periods at the end of the day to catch a plane to go ref in Ohio for the night and he’d have to cover his classes, but yet he’s getting paid the same as me. And it got frustrating. There were people who were reading the newspaper all day long, and part of that is the union, the union backs up people who do all this stuff. I’m like, “Wait a minute.” And again, I know, my choice to spend the money, my choice to put as many hours as I put into it, but you have to at least put in the hours that you’re supposed to be here and getting paid for.  (3B/SS7/CAF4117)
Only Mr. Daniels did not seem to mind that his colleagues do not always follow the rules, as long as they let him know that they have stopped following them. He did point out, though, that they never really do that; he has to have a few trusted informants in the class who will let him know when the other teachers have started to slack off on following the rules. It usually happens at the end of the year.

So in the middle school, you really have to have a team that all plays by the same rules and all that. If it’s a certain rule, something like whether you can use the bathroom and make a phone call between classes, everybody’s got to pretty much follow it or the kids will never stop testing because if somebody lets them do it then it’s just a problem. And I think most teachers who are going to survive in that situation have come to appreciate that pretty quickly, but there is always a phenomenon during the course of the year where it gets to be too much work for people and people aren’t willing to say, “I’m just not into it anymore, so I’m just going to let the kids do this or that.” And I don’t mind that as long as people tell us that they’re going to do that, so everybody can adjust at the same time rather than you find out that you’re the last person who’s following the rules, you know? So that’s my only negative experience with teams. I’ve kind of come to expect it, but it’s hard to get the information about what other people are doing in their classroom at the time you need it to begin to modify your own policies. (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

Teachers who have been in the business world are shocked to discover that in education, staff does not always follow the rules.

I mean, when I was working, the manager made a policy: You need to wear your badge; hand it out at the door, you’ve got to use it everywhere. Everyone had to have it, you know? Teachers, it’s like, they’re their own boss in a way. If they tell you you’ve got to wear it, teachers will be like, “I’m not wearing that.” I’m used to just being told something or you’re going to get fired. But, you have no threat on certain teachers. So then the policies fail because not everyone is on board. (2A/MA8/IRM2504)

I also had an opportunity to hear from a teacher who was likely frustrating her colleagues, although I am certain she would not see it that way. She was able to choose which team she would be on; she purposely chose a team that is very strict and always follows the rules so that it would be easier for her to teach, but then she does not follow the rules.
This is the third academy I’ve been on. I think because on this academy everyone does their job; they’re very professional. They do their time in their classes and everyone prepares well for their classes. It’s more traditional than [the other two academies] in as much as they *(deep sigh)* like discipline. They’ll give you a detention for not having a pencil. Where, the other academies, they’re kind of more, well, “Is that really my big issue here?” They kind of pick different battles. Down here, they run a really tight ship and ** I thought that was really excellent. *(3A/MU78/CAF3512)*

She mentioned how important being on a team that follows the rules and has high expectations for the students is to her.

When I think about why I wanted to be down here on [this] Academy it’s because things run like a tight ship, because there are rules and expectations, and the kids know and they understand. And that’s all well and good, but I don’t have to deal with that. *(3A/MU78/CAF3512)*

She then went on to say that she does not follow the rules.

I overlook a lot * in my room, a lot. They chew gum whatever, they have a drink, okay, it’s fine, they’re wearing flip flops, a belly shirt, whatever. I don’t care. I overlook a lot. *(3A/MU78/CAF3512)*

She does not seem aware of how this affects her colleagues, but knows that it does bother some.

I’ve met with a lot of, I wouldn’t say a lot, I’ve met with some disapproval of the way I do things or the way I am with the kids. But you know what? That’s not my problem. As long as I’m doing my job, my kids are learning, I’m turning in my lesson plans, I’m where I am supposed to be, doing what I’m supposed to be doing, then how can they complain? I’ve never had a bad evaluation. People, adults who come in my class get sucked in and they sit down and they’re like, “Hm, this is pretty cool.”

If I get a directive from an administrator saying, *(stern voice)* “You know you really gotta be on this or you really have to notice this,” then of course, I’d pay particular attention to it. Like with cell phones this year, I don’t care if a kid has a cell phone in his pocket. . . .I don’t make a big deal of it unless it becomes a safety issue. Until it becomes a problem, let them have it, it teaches them to be responsible. . . .It’s another life skill, you’re teaching them, I trust you. *(3A/MU78/CAF3512)*

When I enquired how her team feels about her not following the rules, she said:

They can keep their negativity if they’re going to be negative; my team, they can have that. That’s what controls them, that’s fine. If they’re that stressed and
they’re that angry about what they do, then. [I sometimes say to them,] “I’m sorry, geez, I’m really sorry you’re having such a bad day, how can I help you to make your life easier? Want me to take that kid for you?” Sometimes that’s gotten me in trouble too.

[They say to me,] (high pitched screechy voice) “I’m so tired of you telling me this person always does their work.”

(Normal voice) “Well, they do. Look (laugh) here it is.”

(High pitched screechy voice) “Well, why will they work for you, when they don’t work for me?”

(Smugly) “I don’t know, maybe because, you’re (high pitched screechy voice) ‘Take your hood off, sit down in that chair, what do you mean shoes aren’t tied properly. Where’s your pencil?!’” If someone did that to me, click [I wouldn’t listen]. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

It is interesting to me that she chose the academy that is more strict because it makes her life easier, but she is not concerned that not following the rules herself may make life more difficult for her colleagues.

**Intentional Sabotage by Colleagues**

As stressful as it is for teachers to work with colleagues who frustrate them unintentionally, how much worse it must be when it is done purposely. In discussing how and why this happens, one teacher put it bluntly, “Teachers are mean to teachers.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610) Another believes that after spending so much time with sixth graders, teachers become as mean as they are. “A lot of teachers turn out to be sixth graders after awhile too. You know how sixth graders are, so. (Chuckle) Sixth grade teachers get to be that way. They really do.” (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

Ms. Eastmont shared how some of her colleagues try to make her feel bad about the amount of time and money she spends on her students and professional development activities.

I get frustrated with the people constantly, “Why do you do this? Why?” And there’s one person in this building who does it to me constantly, “Why do you spend that much time? Why do you spend your money? They don’t care, they don’t you know, it doesn’t matter to them. What a waste of your time, you put so much into this.” Or, “Why do you do that? You make the rest of us look bad.”
And the jealousy. You look at awards I’ve gotten, awards I’ve gotten because of what I’ve done. [I say], “You can do exactly what [I do], no one’s stopping you from doing what I’m doing, you can get involved.”

[And they respond,] “Well, ah, you know, my summers are for me.”

I say, “Well, that’s fine, but that’s why you’re not getting what I’m getting because I put all that time into that, that’s my choice.” (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

This same teacher told of a colleague, jealous of her accomplishments, who would disrupt her class. She did not realize it was being done intentionally until another colleague told her.

[She had] just no respect for my classroom, sending the kids late to me all the time and...constantly coming into my classroom, interrupting my classroom...so that it showed that my room, my class was not important. (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

She was not the only teacher who felt a backlash for doing well. Mr. Daniels’ entire team was shunned by the faculty when they began to be recognized as the team to emulate. “I think people sort of knew we were doing a good job and so they just ostracized us (chuckle). That happens.” (4B/SS6/CAM4907) These stories are reminiscent of the story Mr. Wills shared about students making fun of the child who wanted to work. They also seem to give credence to Mr. Daniels’ opinion that teachers become like their students.

Whether intentional, as in Ms. Eastmont’s case, or not, teachers are frustrated when colleagues do not respect their classes. Although the 1 music teacher interviewed was a full member of her team and had the same course load as her colleagues, she felt as though they treated her class as a filler.

My class was definitely a break for the team teachers. So, were they nonsupportive? No. They were nice, but if a kid had to make up a test, they were ripped out of my class. I mean, I teach. They have my class like a real class, five days a week, 55 minutes a day and it’s great. But when you have a philosophy like that, of they get pulled out for this, they get taken out for that. It was, well, you’re just a baby-sitter. It was very disheartening. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)
Teachers also feel frustration when colleagues go behind their backs to administration. In one case, a teacher was upset when a colleague blatantly went to the administration to have a student’s punishment revoked. A team member who was the coach of the basketball team and did not want one of her players suspended did this to Ms. Faulkner.

So I’m talking to the other teacher and she’s saying, “Oh well, he came down to my room and he’s playing basketball and I went down and got this suspension taken off.”

I was like, “You did what?” I was just so miffed, “You can’t; you can’t do that.” If Johnny comes and asks mommy something, daddy’s gotta be on the same page, you can’t have, “Oh well if mommy says no, I can go down here to daddy and daddy will bail me out,” which is what happened.

She was like, (in a soft voice) “Oh, well, I didn’t know.”

I was like, “What do you mean you didn’t know?” (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

In this case, Ms. Faulkner felt sabotaged by the administrator as well; he should not have changed the consequence without discussing it with her first. She felt violated because the administrator had already told her what the student’s consequence would be and then changed it.

Although the stories of teachers intentionally sabotaging their colleagues come from 4 of the 5 districts, these types of intentional incidents were not nearly as prevalent as those that were unintentional.

**Frustrations With Administration**

The literature paints a picture of the middle school administrator as an instructional leader assisting teachers to professionally develop and become the best classroom facilitators they can be. The reality, for my participants, is often that administrators either do not know or do not care what teachers need; they are too busy shuffling papers to fulfill district requirements, or they are consumed with the power. These frustrations are true for teachers of all ages, from all of the districts; 13 of my 15
participants shared stories of incidents with their administrators which caused frustration in their work lives. Teachers do seem to respect that in some cases their administrators are just too busy to deal with their concerns, but that does not make their lack of assistance any less stressful.

Although administrators likely do not mean to be unsupportive, the fact that they are often too busy to handle the behavioral issues teachers send them, weakens their ability to discipline within the classroom. When threats are made that are not followed through, students quickly become aware of this and use it to their advantage.

I would give detention after detention after detention. The kids wouldn’t show up, they’d tell me right to my face, “F--- your detention.” They’d walk out, you’d try and call home, you wouldn’t get anyone, you’d write them up, put the referral into the administration and maybe 2 weeks later, you’d get somebody that would come down and be like, “Oh, you’ve been skipping all these detentions, if you don’t stay tonight, you’re going to get in trouble.” And they wouldn’t stay that night and then I’d have to get the list going again, and it was like spinning your wheels and the kids knew it. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Ms. Faulkner, miles away in another district, shared similar frustrations.

The direction that the VPs are going in, maybe in their meetings they’re told that they have to do things a little differently, but it’s making my job harder and the kids pick up on things so quickly, they know right off the bat, if I get on that phone and no one’s here within a matter of minutes, that okay, “Well, Ms. Faulkner, they’re not listening to you down there, so we’re not listening to you here.” (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

She is very concerned about the message being sent to the other students.

A lot of times when I write them up, nothing happens, nothing happens. [There was] an incident where a child was in an altercation with one of my students and she took my cup and threw it at him, and they were going at it strong and she picked up my ruler and she was talking about, “I’m gonna kill you.” It’s a good thing it was a ruler and not scissors because the way she was doing it, she may have. And I wrote it up, the [assistant principals] told me to write it up. I wrote it up, right then, after I calmed my nerves. She came in the next day. I mean nothing happened. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)
Ms. Faulkner was especially concerned about this incident because it was lengthy and witnessed by an entire class who then knew that there were no consequences at all for threatening to kill a classmate. She was not surprised when less than a week later this same student had another similar incident.

Miss Faulkner is not the only teacher concerned about the message being sent to students. Other teachers discussed how much worse other students start to behave when they see that nothing is done to their classmates who misbehave. Mr. Wills said,

The least they can do is take them away. If a child does something in the hall, they should be taken from that hallway. The other kids have got to see that there’s a consequence. They should be brought down to the office, and a phone call made to a parent. If they can keep them downstairs by putting them in [the suspension room] or even just detaining them in the office, that would be something for the rest of the kids to see. They shouldn’t come back happy and they do come back laughing. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Because middle school students are on teams and spend the entire day with the same group of peers, they are likely to be aware of the consequences, or lack of consequences, that their peers face when they commit an infraction of the rules.

Several teachers talked about the inconsequential things that administrators seem to focus on when they visit classrooms. Mr. Brighton is concerned that the assistant principal and principal will ignore students’ misbehavior and instead focus whether or not he has his objectives written on the agenda board.

To come into the classroom and to see some problems going on, but to have top priority to check do we have objectives on the board. To me, to see some stuff going on in the classroom, and to say, “Okay, we see you’ve got it on the board, now we’re leaving,” and not to [do anything]. Like, here’s a problem going on right in front of you. Another one of their priorities, is just keeping the kids in the classroom because we don’t have a means of dealing with the discipline. We have one security guard for 900 kids, so they try to get us to keep the kids in the classroom, but if 28 kids want to learn and two kids just can’t handle it in there, I think it’s unfair to those other 28 kids to have to keep those kids in the class. (5A/SC8/CAM2603)
Another consequence of principals not performing their duties was only mentioned by one teacher, but I think it is interesting to point out. In some instances when the principal is not fulfilling his or her role, someone else will step in.

[The thing] I hate the most I would say is the power vacuum this year where the principal was too new to really know the school well and too busy putting out major fires to really get around and find out what’s really going on in the school and that vacuum was filled by people who have a lot of ambition and maybe not so much sense of sharing and fairness and experience. It was just a land grab. (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

The most disturbing story came from one of the younger teachers, Mr. Hasse. He described his school’s protocol to be followed when there is a fight or other disturbance in the classroom.

We have this, I don’t even know what they call it, it’s a code-red card thing. We have them near the exit. At the beginning of the year, we tell the students, “Hey if there’s an issue in the classroom, one student, any student, just take that and run down to the office with it.” I think it’s just silly. (2A/MA8/IRM2504)

He believes that goes against human nature, how can a teacher stand and watch one student attack another while waiting for help from the office? He then explained how he was disciplined by his administration for not following the proper procedure when a student was attacked in his classroom.

In homeroom, I’m taking attendance. One of the students is going to sharpen a pencil, I thought nothing of it. On his way to the pencil sharpener, one of the kids was sitting sideways. In homeroom they just talk, you know? So they sit sideways in those big chairs that are attached to the desk. He walked down and pulled him down from the chair and he falls flat on his back and head and he started kicking him in the face; just started beating him up. And I immediately had to take the kid. I had to separate them. He didn’t fall, he didn’t get hurt, but I pushed him far back, and he keeps coming at him. The other kid gets up, he realizes what happens. At that point, his nose is spewing blood, he’s yelling and screaming, blood is flying everywhere. My shirt was covered in blood. . .But getting in the middle of something like that. . .Other teachers came and pulled them out of the room. Then, to be spoken to, “Unless you’re crisis intervention certified, you’re not supposed to get in the middle of something. You’re supposed to take the red flag card to the main office.” It’s something that’s ridiculous, that totally goes against your instincts. (2A/MA8/IRM2504)
Mr. Wills described being disciplined as a faculty at staff meetings where the principal blames the teachers for all of the school’s problems. This attitude just leaves the teachers feeling defeated.

We’re sitting there, listening to the principal say, “It’s not my fault, it’s everybody’s fault. You’ve got to have eyes in the back of your head; you’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do that.” It’s always like, “We’re all in this together, but you’re doing it wrong.” How can you treat quality people like that? (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

Mr. Daniels told of his pride in improving his students’ results on the state math exam; information he shared with his superintendent, which created a problem with the new principal.

So he sort of took an interest in our classroom. That I thought was going to help us, but we had a new principal that year and she was not into it because all of a sudden, I didn’t realize [until] later, but what about all the other classrooms in the school? If you’ve got a classroom where 83% of the kids are at level IV and level V; level IV is goal. And your school average has been raised from 12% to 30% by this one classroom, what does it say about your K-6 preparation and your school, you know, what does it say? I really didn’t think that through. I thought they’d be happy. (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

Instead of being happy with his accomplishment or maybe seeking his advice in how to improve the scores in other grades or classrooms, she showed her displeasure.

Switching teachers’ grade levels and subject matters without any notification is a cause of stress for teachers, as well.

I’m kind of out there in the waters struggling and I don’t really need a whole lot of other things to deal with until I get a real handle on this subject matter. Every year it seems like I’m being here, there, whatever, and I can’t seem to get a hold on it. Like last year when I was doing the READ 180 program, I didn’t realize I was going to be going to eighth grade and I had all these plans and I said, “I know how I’m going to do this differently.” I come in, now I’m doing eighth grade. I’ve never done eighth grade English, so now I’m a novice again, here. So I really don’t have that control of the subject matter which means I’m at a disadvantage. So I’m saying to myself, “Are they going to keep bouncing me from post to pillar every year where they need to put somebody that’s English and I can do it because of my certification?” You know, I don’t know. Well let me
stay here in eighth grade, let me get this under control, and then, a couple of years at least, so I know eighth grade ELA, because I’m learning these stories along with them. So that just makes it more difficult for me. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

The school level administrators are not the only ones whose decisions affect teachers. The district level administrators are also guilty of making policies and then not enforcing them, which again displays a lack of consistency upsetting to teachers.

We take a program that worked in Phoenix and we drop it in and teachers haven’t been prepared for it [and] the school is not academically suited for it. The program falls on its face and the system turns around and blames the teachers. I mean, we’re always the scapegoat. I think that’s so wrong. I often said that we’re the Frankenstein of programs here. Dr. Meyerson [the superintendent] loved to bring in everything. We had everything under the sun here. And they boasted about the fact that we had everything, but most of them weren’t prepared. Teachers weren’t trained for it. Schools weren’t equipped for it. And when the program ran its short life, and never really had a chance to get off the ground, they’d say, “See, teachers didn’t do it right.” And we’d move on to something else. I really would like to see long term planning. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

This complaint was echoed by teachers in several other districts.

If you’ve been in [this district] for more than 3 years, you’ve heard so many new things come in, go out, in, out. Pick one and try it, pick one and try it, again, there’s no silver bullet, you aren’t going to find it. No matter what you try, you have to sustain it for a little bit of time. (2A/MA6/CAF5610)

Not providing materials and support for programs instituted by the district is also a source of stress for teachers and was voiced by teachers from different districts.

Putting a new curriculum in place and then not getting the books in on time, forgetting that they have to train people every year who are new teachers in that special curriculum. We have this thing called SFA. It’s a reading program Success For All. Highly-structured, your day is timed to the minute or half minute on what you do on your 90-minute reading block. And every 8 weeks, the kids are tested and re-shifted into different level classes depending on how much progress they’ve made or haven’t made. Well, that’s fine. So you then get told that the district isn’t meeting their reading goals so they’re going to test them every 2 weeks then shift them every 2 weeks. And then you find out that the class lists are not ready. So you don’t know exactly which kids are coming in your room and you don’t have the materials. (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

Curricular programs are not the only ones that are not consistently funded.
We worked so hard on *Small Schools* and then they pulled the funding and that got thrown out. We’ve had the PBIS Program, which is Positive Behavior Incentive and Support, and they tried to adopt that school-wide. It’s a reward program for positive behavior; you get star bucks, that’s what they were called, for turning your homework in on time or having a pencil for class. It was a consistent reward system, but then that wasn’t able to be implemented correctly because people weren’t being trained enough, so that went out the window and with the cuts anyway we lost our PBIS coordinator this year. I can see where other people would be, “Well they offer us this and they offer us that and it’s just going to be pulled in a couple years anyway so why bother learning it?”

(3A/MU78/CAF3512)

The fact that the district often makes changes without consulting teachers or makes changes that do not seem to make sense, but are changes for the sake of making it appear that they have found a solution, even the wrong solution, is very upsetting to teachers. In one district, as already alluded to, because math and English scores are low, students’ time in math and English classes have been doubled and their time in science and social studies cut in half. The science and social studies teachers lament this because they see twice as many students as the others and only see them every other day. This has also been responsible for creating the “mega-teams” mentioned earlier that do not all meet with parents at the same time because not all of the teachers see all of the students.

This has affected teachers’ use of their team time. Not meeting together makes a difference because we have these IEP meetings and not everybody has all the same [students], even though we’re a team. We have two English teachers, two math teachers, and sometimes three of the teachers might have one student and a parent might be coming in for a particular student and three [teachers] don’t [have the student]. And it’s kind of disconnected in that sense. I don’t know, it’s weird. I think it’s better than it was last year because last year was really [awful] half the team had team time and then the other half had a different team time. Who in the heck thought that up? (Laugh) What were they thinking when they did that? (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

This was a problem in more than one district.

The team meetings are kind of a joke. Last year or 2 years before, team meetings, there were four of us. We saw the kids equally. [We would say], “Hey, Johnny or Suzy is terrible today. What do you think, Bill?”
“Oh, the same.” We all saw the same kid every day. Now, with these mega-teams, it’s like, “Hey, did you see Johnny?”
“Nope, I didn’t.”
The other teacher, “Hey I have a meeting with Mr.”
“I’ve got a parent-teacher.” Everyone’s spread out, it’s not even like a group thing. They put us on one-half the time. There’s a parent teacher for half the team and the other half does what? You know, you can’t drag a social studies or science teacher off to the two locations, the parent-teacher here and a team meeting. They can only be in one location. Thank God I’m not a science or a social teacher. I feel so bad [for them]. I don’t think it’s fair.

(2A/MA8/IRM2504)

Aside from these concerns about team meeting time, at least one teacher does not believe that more time in math is going to make a difference, he feels the problem is that so few of the math teachers in his district are certified to teach math.

There’s no thinking behind it. “There’s something [wrong] in math; better increase the math department. [If] we increase learning time, everything’s going to work out.” But they don’t think of the why. Well, maybe we have a lack of experienced teachers in that area, therefore maybe what we should spend our money on is to get a mentor for these teachers. That just seems like a very sudden solution for a problem. It’s like, they just want to look like they’ve solved it, like they’re working on it, but they’re not really doing it. “Hey, my students’ grades are terrible.”

“Well, we’ll just make that block longer, there we go.” Now they don’t even teach science and social studies. And before you know it that will the problem. (2A/MA8/IRM2504)

Some of these changes are due to administrative turnover.

You have a nice program and then you get a brand new superintendent, who wants to make their mark, as usual. Every year, at the beginning of the school year, they always have this [new] thing to do, that’s so great that you’re going to be doing in the whole school system. They spend thousands of dollars and it goes nowhere. Another year, “Oh, this is it, this is the thing that’s going to be working; we’re going to do this.” Eh. It seems like every year these school systems will always come up with something. (5A/SC7/HIM4811)

Districts seem to make a habit of being inconsistent. Sometimes this is due to changes in leadership or funding. “[My district] has had a new superintendent every couple years. So usually about the time they start implementing their big plan is when they decide they better get out of Dodge. (Chuckle) It could very well change.”
Sometimes it is a search for a program that will provide benefits.

“All we ever do is we throw in a new program, new math program and reading program, and then 5 years later we get rid of it and bring out the later model.”

Ms. Eastmont recognizes that working in a district that allows teachers the opportunity to try new projects and programs does have benefits.

[My district] is great and awful for the same reason. [We] jump on every bandwagon that comes through. If someone’s willing to give you money, [we] will take it, run with it until the money runs out, and then drop it.

Most teachers, though, are tired of the lack of consistency.

And I’m so tired, having gone for 42 years, so tired of having seen programs that were here 20 or 30 years ago being brought back again with a new name and some new terms and they act like this is revolutionary, it’s going to change education.

It happens so frequently that teachers joke about it. “As we always joke about, the same old thing just a different special word to call it.” Another teacher from this district was conflicted about the fact that her district does this because she had just pushed to be involved in a new program, but was not certain if it would later be pulled after all of her hard work.

I don’t know what’s going to happen with this. I mean is this just the latest hoop we have to jump through? Are they going to pull this program? Is it like Small Schools and it’s going to be disintegrated in a couple of years? I don’t know, but I pushed to go into this.

Teachers just want consistency. “I said the big thing I think I’d love to see is stay the course, just pick something and stay with it.”

I don’t think it’s been thought out. I think it’s, “Let’s do this and see what happens.” And so, I don’t feel as confident as I did when I first started teaching about teaching in an urban setting. It’s almost like we’re using these poor kids as educational guinea pigs. We’re going to find out everything that doesn’t work. We don’t have the guts to stay the course for 5 years, 6 years, 10 years, and say,
“Okay, you know what, this really didn’t work, we gave it a chance and it didn’t work.” (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

As indicated previously, sometimes this lack of consistency is due to changes in administration, which in 3 of the 5 districts happens very frequently. Mr. Breton said, in discussing both his district and his school,

We have a very young administrative staff, young as in terms of experience, not in age. We have a lot of new principals. A lot of new assistant principals and we’re talking (whew) just for an example, in our building, the longest serving administrator is 2 years, I believe. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

And as was shared in Mr. Wills’ profile, the administrators in his district are put through a district training program that turns out young administrators quickly; they do not, he feels, have the experience necessary to deal with the behavioral difficulties encountered in an urban middle school.

**Frustrations of State Testing**

State testing has become such an important factor in the lives of both teachers and students that it has been discussed in many of the preceding sections. It was cited as the main reason that students have lost their exploratory classes (they have to take test preparation classes instead), that teachers have lost their team meeting time (they have to teach special test preparation classes instead), that the curriculum is no longer flexible (teachers have to teach to the test), and that students feel frustrated (they are tested too frequently). Because it is such an important topic and was mentioned so frequently, I think it is worth taking a more in-depth look at what participants shared about their experiences with state testing.

The urban middle school teachers I interviewed are not against state testing.

It’s good so that we know, when we get the kids, their levels in reading, writing, and math, so that they can be appropriately helped. We know if they’re doing a good job or a bad job. . .That helps us out. (5ASC7/HIM4811)
Most of them, though, have mixed feelings about state testing.

I love it and hate it. I love it because it has focused me more, and I think it focused math people on what they have [to teach]. I think math is probably the easiest one to say it’s finite, it’s this, it’s this, it’s this, it’s this. I mean, it’s facts, all the stuff I have to teach, right there. Did I just say I loved it or hated it? . . . I love it because it has focused me more on what I need to do. I hate it because it has made me have to leave some of the really nice lessons that I liked. (2A/MA6/CAF5610)

Even teachers who are not against testing, think students are being tested too frequently. There “should be testing, but I do think that the testing is too often; we spend like 2 months testing from the whole school year.” (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

Aside from the amount of time spent testing, teachers are concerned about the amount of time spent teaching to the test. Preparing for state testing has taken over the curriculum. When I asked Mr. Daniels if state testing has affected his curriculum, he said, “in terms of math, to the 100th place, (chuckle) you know what I mean? It is like absolutely everything we do.” (4B/SS6/CAM4907) His district has reviewed previous years’ tests to figure out how many points each skill is usually worth and has adjusted the curriculum accordingly.

[For] problem solving involving all different math skills, complex task sort of problem solving, there’s going to be two questions and each one is worth three points. So we know that’s six points. And I think the total they can get is 300 on [the test]. So we have to save that for last because it is the hardest thing to teach and kids never do good on it, and it’s six points, right? So we strategize that that will be after the [state testing]. You know that kind of thing? And stem and leaf graphs are all over the place, so I start with that because they’ve never seen them before. So that’s the first thing I teach, graphing. And then, the second thing is geometry is pretty important too, so I go to geometry. So that’s how it goes in the math department.

We’re just very, very careful even of what’s going to be taught in sixth grade as opposed to what’s going to be taught in seventh grade, so we don’t waste time duplicating effort. We spent years getting that worked out and we have one person in the school who doesn’t teach who is like the coach for all eight math teachers. So for only eight math teachers, we have a department head whose job it is to kind of coordinate all that, and she’ll write [practice] tests. She worked on the [state test] questions at one time, she was one of the people writing questions
for the [test] and making policy and stuff so she is very much in tune with that, so for us that’s good. (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

Teachers are being expected to cover the curriculum before state testing begins and they feel that they and their students are missing out on making personal connections.

They want us to cover so much material in such a short period of time. I sometimes feel under the gun as a teacher, and I think I would feel under the gun as a student. I know some of my students are always saying, “Why do we have to do so much work every day?” And it’s true.

When I was younger in teaching, I would take time to tell more jokes, to share more about what was going on with the students. Now I don’t really have time to say, “How are things going?” (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

In Ms. Oliver’s school, preparing for the state test was deemed so important that the sixth grade curriculum has been changed for students who scored just below passing in the previous year’s testing. Those student are taught only English and math. It is hoped that the focus on English and math will push them into the passing category. They loop with their teachers for 2 years and are not taught science and social studies until seventh grade. Hers was not the only school that made radical curriculum changes to improve test scores. “There was one [year] where we had a push that the city was concerned about math scores so what we did at the end of the year was we basically shut down and everybody taught math.” (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

Like Mr. Daniels’, Mr. Breton’s school figures out what will be on the state test and focuses on teaching that.

Two years ago I had 75% of my kids pass the test in science because we figured it out: the questions they were going to ask. And so I went to [the principal] and I said, “I’m not doing a science fair, I’m taking the time for doing the science fair and we’re going to start April 1st and I’m just going to cram facts into these kids heads for 6 weeks. Drill and Kill. Alright?” It’s simply to get the numbers up on the [state test], okay? I do an experiment, it was intense, it was intense prep for the test. We had figured out the questions, the categories, what they were going to be, not the exact questions, but we knew the categories, so we’re going to concentrate on these. So we ended up 75%. Do you think anybody came down to
us and asked us what we did that was so successful to get our kids up to 75%? (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

Mr. Breton is proud of his students’ success and his decision to cancel the science fair. Other teachers, though, are concerned about what students are missing. “Years ago, an education was an all-around education. Today an education is your reading and writing skills, basically, what it is on the [state test].” (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

In Mr. Daniels’ district, testing is taken so seriously that students who do not pass the state test in fourth grade have to go to summer school before they can start sixth grade at the middle school.

Kids coming in to our school this year who did not make goal on the [state test] in fourth grade, because the fifth grade [scores] couldn’t be back until summer school had already started a week or two, had to come to summer school before they enter sixth grade. That wasn’t really a choice. (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

Mr. Breton’s main concern did not involve his current middle school students; his concern is that students drop out in high school after they fail the test or in some cases before they even take it because they expect to fail. Another teacher in his school has similar concerns.

I’m really frightened now that I see that kids are going to have to have proficient or advanced in order to graduate. That’s an impossibility. Not where I live. Maybe out there in Lala Land where the parents are really caring and the parents work with them; these kids don’t have that. I’m only one person. I’m not their whole life, I’m not their only teacher. I’m trying like heck to give them that goal, that desire, that “see you can do it” [attitude], but I fear for what’s going to happen. It’s a poor kids’ issue, it’s a special ed issue. Some kids can’t do it, no matter what you do. I don’t care how great you are, they aren’t going to get it. So does that mean you’re condemning them forever to not be able to graduate from high school? That’s a sin. I think we’re just going to make the divide even wider because where can you go without a high school diploma? (2A/MA6/CAF5610)

Teachers who do not teach math or English can sometimes feel left out because up until recently students only had to pass tests in math and English. As Mrs. Katz said when explaining why her building had so many cuts in exploratory classes and why she
was becoming certified to teach English, “They’re whittling us down to math and English and if you’re not on board with that, then you’re done.” (3A/MU78/CAF3512) A social studies teacher said,

I think it’s hard being the last curriculum to be tested because importance is not placed on you. And I do think that English is important and if the kids get better in their English, they’ll get better for me because their reading level and their writing level has to go up, but it’s hard. (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

Teachers are also concerned about losing their jobs if their students do not perform well. As Ms. Eastmont pointed out, she only has the students for 7 months before they are tested on the social studies curriculum that has been covered in the last 4 years.

I think it’s hard that I’m responsible for kids. . .For the past 3 years of learning I don’t know where they’ve been, I don’t know what’s going on and I’ve got to teach [my curriculum], but then I also have to review sixth grade and fifth grade. What they’ve talked about doing is firing the teachers who have a large number of kids who don’t pass. How am I responsible for that part of it? And you know if a kid can’t read and write that’s not my fault. (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

The ramifications of state testing cut across subject matter, school, district, and state. Although my participants teach in different schools in different districts in different states in the northeast, they are all affected by state testing. Even Mrs. Katz, maybe especially Mrs. Katz, whose subject (music) is not tested on state exams is affected by state testing. She is leaving music to teach English to insure job security. In Districts 1 and 2, social studies teachers whose subject is not yet tested on their state test have had their academic time cut in half and their student load doubled. Teachers whose subject matter is tested have had their curriculum scripted and lost opportunities for creativity.

The frustrations with colleagues, administrators, and state testing, which were examined in this chapter, may leave the reader wondering why urban middle school teachers continue to teach day in and day out. This is one of the questions I pondered
before I undertook this study. The next chapter, which examines the rewards of teaching on an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school, provides some insight into that question.
CHAPTER X  
WHY DO TEACHERS STAY IN TEACHING?

Rewards of Teaching

Most of the findings reported thus far have been negative: the middle school characteristics have not been implemented, society has changed so much that many students treat their classmates and their teachers with a complete lack of respect, some teachers behave in a manner that makes their colleagues’ lives more difficult, administrators often do not provide teachers with the support they need, and state testing has taken over the curriculum. Given all of this, why do teachers remain in the profession? Surely there are other avenues open to them. Granted, maybe some of the more veteran teachers could be biding their time waiting for retirement, but surely the young teachers who have only 3 or 4 years invested in the system could get out. Certainly, John Wills who has already retired can leave anytime he has had enough. Only Ms. Faulkner talked seriously about wanting to leave the profession.

Yesterday morning when I came in, I was like, “I don’t know if I’m going to last, maybe I need to start looking for some other place to go.” But I keep hearing [that] it’s the same thing all over. What can I do other than this? Let me start looking at my possibilities. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

The rest stay because they love it. They stay because they love seeing students’ progress, they feel as though they have found their place, or they want to give back to the community. They stay because they feel appreciated, they thrive on the challenge, or they enjoy the diversity.

I Love It

Fourteen of the 15 urban middle school teachers I interviewed are really happy in their chosen profession and plan to continue teaching. Ten of the 15 teachers actually
used some variation of the phrase, “I love it” in describing teaching. A novice teacher said, “I love teaching, I do.” (2A/MA8/IRM2504) A veteran teacher said, “Still, I really do love it.” (1A/MA8/CAM6442) Even the teacher who is considering leaving the profession describes loving it, but she qualifies that she feels that way when it is going well.

When everything is in place and it goes smoothly and there aren’t any interruptions and the kids are focused and for whatever reason they’re under this hue and everything just falls into place nicely and I’m teaching, I’m doing it. That’s the best part and [when] that happens, I love what I’m doing. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

Even as they recognize the difficulties, teachers still love it; some because of the difficulties, as will be shared later. “I love the challenge.” (1B/SC6/CAM5534) Some said it twice, emphatically, “I love what I do, I love what I do.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610); “I love doing it, I love teaching” (3B/SS7/CAF4117); or added an adverb, “I do love my job, I really do.” (3A/MU78/CAF3512) No matter how they phrased it, it was evident, to me, that these urban middle school teachers teaching on interdisciplinary teams really do love what they do. The question remains, why? Given all of the difficulties, why do they love what they do?

Even though they both say they love teaching, it bears mentioning that 2 of my female participants grew up in the United States at a time when their career choices were limited. They both pointed this out early in the interview process. “I don’t think there were many other options out there, don’t forget I’m older, nursing, teaching.” (5B/SC78/CAF5521) “I graduated from high school in ’69. The choices then for women were kind of limited: it was a secretary, a nurse, or a teacher.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610)
I Love To See Progress

Most teachers mentioned loving to see students learn as one of the reasons they teach middle school. “I like that, this age, you see them grow, you actually see them grow physically and mentally.” (2A/EN78/ASF5722) “I love it. At this point, I still love it. I love the kids, I love seeing them be successful, I just enjoy it.”

(5B/SC78/CAF5521) Mr. Breton wants to set the stage for their future success.

What keeps me there is, I think this is our last shot at these kids before high school. Don’t canonize me (laugh) I’m not saying we’re more important than a calculus teacher, but this is the last shot I think to make these kids successful when they get to the next level. I don’t think you can wait until 9th or 10th grade to light a fire under them, to find that spark. As I said I don’t think I’m a great crusader, I’m not patting myself on the back. I think down deep a lot of middle school teachers feel that way. I think if you take a look at the middle school teachers that I teach with, some of them are the most dedicated individuals I’ve ever seen in my life. I work with one teacher, my God, I just look at her and go, “Some day I want to be as good as she is.”

I think they tend, for me anyway, my interest in these kids is they are absolutely challenging, fun, goofy, little kids, small adults all wrapped into this one big thing and you can pick up that energy from them. There’s days when you sit there and go, “How many times do I have to teach this same concept?” And then, after the fifth day goes (chuckle), “Eh, let’s move on to the next concept.” (Laugh) But, you teach them. Sometimes they get that bit in their teeth and that is a wonderful thing to see. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

Seeing their progress is important to Mrs. Sang, as well, so much so that she credits it with getting her into teaching.

So that’s what got me going in education being a teacher because [there are] a lot of rewards, really a lot of rewards. You see the kids growing, learning. They all want to learn, they all want to know. (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

Even Ms. Faulkner, who is thinking about leaving the profession because of the difficulties with her students, absolutely glows when she discusses her “shining star.”

I had a student maybe about 5, 6 years ago, I had her for 3 years, or was it 4 years? It seemed like every year I got this one particular student and she was *man, she was a low achiever, couldn’t really read and I just kept pushing her and telling her, bit by bit. I would sit with her, everybody else would be working, but she was like my main focus, “You can do this, come on, I’ll work with you.” And
little by little I could see her starting to feel better about herself that she could do it. And the last time I had her in class, third time around, I think that was the charm (chuckle) and she really started to listen to what I was saying and she really started to buckle down and started doing her work and being more focused and taking chances with her reading, reading out loud in class. I said, “Read one sentence, if you can read one sentence for me, fine.” And then it got to be like two sentences, three, a paragraph and she felt comfortable. And she was doing the work and every marking period she was improving, she was putting forth effort and she was steadily going up, and she was my * shining star (chuckle) that year. . . .

I was proud of myself for that achievement. She was my shining star out there and I’ve had other minor shining stars, but that was the one, that was really the one that I could see she was at a low, low point and she soared over that whole year, she just kept improving, improving, improving, and I was just like, “You’re on the road, stay on the road, stay on the road.” . . . She was the one that I really feel I accomplished a whole lot with and made a difference in her life for the time that I had her and hopefully maybe some of that stayed with her. (1A/EN8/AAF4908)

More Important Than Academics

Teachers are interested in teaching their students more than their subject matter, even though the pace of the curriculum does not allow for that flexibility any more. “I want them to learn responsibility.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610) The desire to share more than their subject matter was not unique to one group of teachers; it was important to math teachers, the music teacher, and science teachers. Ms. Katz wants them to learn responsibility and to know that she cares about them.

I love children and I think that if I wanted anyone to know anything, yeah, I love music, I like what I do, I like what I teach. My subject is fantastic. Is it the best subject? Of course it is, because it’s my subject. Is it the most important? Naturally. (Chuckel) I tell my students this, “There’s a lot to be learned about life and there’s a lot to be learned about how to be and how to be together and how to be to other people and how to interact and how are you going to get along in this world and what you need to survive.” And I tell them, “You may not remember my subject or what I taught you, you might not remember who Tchaikovsky is or who starred in West Side Story, but you will remember that first rule is respect. You’ll remember that you had to be responsible and maybe I’m the first person that’s asked you to do that.” (3A/MU78/CA3512)

It’s the caring, you know, like I want them to know, I would want other people to know I care about kids. I care about what they learn, yeah, but I care about how they use it (laugh). * Does that make any sense? (3A/MU78/CAF3512)
I would respond that it makes perfect sense to the other urban middle school teachers who share her feelings. Mr. King wants them to interact with others more respectfully.

You want to be able to promote and show growth. I don’t agree with No Child Left Behind and the frameworks: that the growth has to be strictly academic and measured only quantitatively by test scores. Growth comes in a variety of ways. If I’m teaching a child proper study habits, proper respectful behavior for authority, proper intercommunicative and interpersonal relationship skills by having them do labs and stuff like that. That I believe is showing growth. Can you measure all of that? No. ** If a kid starts in my room in September and is using a constant slew of profanities and in June knows that that’s unacceptable and has cut back significantly, if not totally, I’ve accomplished something. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

Mr. Wills wants his student to learn values.

Let’s teach them to be good people. That’s more important than academics. If they’re good people, they will be better at academics. Years ago, remember, they taught all the values. They taught you the value of being prompt, being honest, being truthful. Those were values that were taught in school. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

In the wake of No Child Left Behind Legislation, teachers must focus on their curriculum guides and do not have time for more than academics.

This Is Where I Belong

Some teachers’ feelings go beyond loving what they do and wanting to teach: many of the participants describe feeling as though they have found their place. “I think I was meant to be where I am.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610) They can not imagine doing anything else. “I love it, I do, I just love it, I can’t imagine not doing it.” (5B/SC78/CAF5521) Mrs. Katz appreciates having a job that she loves. “I’m so lucky, I get to do what I love. Like you’ve got to find a job that you love and that you can’t wait to go to.” (3A/MU78/CAF3512) Mrs. Katz realized that she belongs teaching urban school when the possibility of having her music position cut was discussed.
I do love my job, I really do. And it took almost losing it...it took that for me to realize how much I really like it here and how much I really like what I do. And I thought about it all year long and I talked about it with my principal. This is where I belong. This is where I make a difference. (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

These teachers seem to feel teaching is more than a job, which might surprise Mr. Wills who said, “I think years ago, teaching was looked at more like an avocation, where you were doing something for the common good, and now it’s more of like a job, if I can put it that way.” (1A/MA8/CAM6442) Many of the teachers I interviewed had high ideals and seemed to feel that teaching is more than a job.

**I Have So Much To Give Back**

A few of the participants seem to have gone into teaching to give back to their communities. Mr. Hasse simply stated, “I like helping.” (2A/MA8/IRM2504) Ms. Oliver said, “I needed to know that I was doing something good.” (5B/SC78/CAF5521)

Mr. Brighton is one of the teachers who feels that teaching is more than a job. He has such a sense of pride in his community that he wants to take part in its revitalization.

I had such a great experience growing up in the town, and I feel like I have so much to give back. And I think some of the dynamics of the town are changing and there’s a lot of people who are getting in place right now, people who are going to give, who are just as passionate about the town as I am, who want to put their hands in the dough and start making it what it was in the past, and what they think it should be. Not necessarily have I been around people, especially at [the University] where people are as proud as we are from [my city] to say where we came from, you know? I think the young population, the kids that I grew up with, are all sticking around. A lot of guys who I went to school with are teachers in the district now. A lot of them are taking jobs with the city and just trying to change it because they see kind of a shift that’s gone on since we were all away at college. It’s been a little bit of a let down and a lot of us are taking it personally and we don’t want that to continue. We want to get it back to how it was and how we think it should be. I’ve been able to think about how much pride I have for the district.

[We are] building downtown, trying to get businesses back here, just to pump the economy and get more money for the schools, more programs. I mean, how long it was where there wasn’t a lot of youth stuff going on, and then guys my age come back and see, and are like, “Oh my God. When I was a kid I was playing basketball when I was ten in the rec-league.” So they got back in, and
now they’re all coaching, doing that type of stuff. I think if you talk to any one of my friends, they’ll all just say the same things about the town. They love it. They’re building a couple of restaurants downtown, they’re trying to get a new sports arena for the kids going down there. Let’s get a movie theater back in town. Let’s get some of these old factory buildings, let’s make a roller-skating rink. Let’s do something. It takes a lot of money and people are complaining about the taxes, but you know we’ve got to do something just to get it back to where it was.

My father and my mother talk about the town the way it was when they were growing up and how they used to walk to the movies with their friends and walk to the park. The kids nowadays don’t have that. It’s becoming really urban (chuckle). There’s all these parks and stuff that we had; many parks I drive by where the pools they used to have during the summer are shut down.

Although Mr. Wills went into education almost 4 decades before Mr. Brighton, he was also motivated by a desire to help society.

So I began to realize I’d like to help people more and not just be off in a corner somewhere working. . . . More and more people were talking about going into education because there was that great boomlet that came, the baby boom. They needed more teachers and it was real, real time of necessity.

As already shared in his portrait, he was influenced by the high ideals of John F. Kennedy to do for his country, as well as the losses of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. And, like Mr. Brighton, he shared that his friends wanted to give back to society too.

There may also be a sense of duty that compels middle school teachers to continue to teach day in and day out, as one participant said, “If we don’t do it, who’s going to?”

I’m Lucky To Have You

Many of the middle school teachers recounted stories of students coming back, sometimes years later, to show their appreciation. Others told of running into former students who express their thanks. This is likely a powerful reward: people want to be
appreciated for what they do. As previously shared in Mr. Wills’ portrait, he feels appreciated by former students.

I see so many of my former students now whether I go to the hospital or anywhere. You bump into former students, a lot of them are policemen or firemen and they all have nice things to say, even if they weren’t a good student. They say, “I never did good in your class, but I liked you Mr. Wills, you taught us a lot.” That part’s nice, you know? Sometimes in the paper some of the politicians that were in my class will mention the old teachers and more than once or twice my name has been mentioned. It makes you feel good that you did have an effect on some of the kids. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

The appreciation does not have to be public for it to be important to teachers.

Mrs. Nowak shared with me two student letters that she had received in the past week, one from a current student and one from a former student. The current student’s letter included an apology.

I had somebody write me a wonderful note today. . . .It’s going to be one of the letters that I’ll save for the rest of my life. (Reading) “Sorry for giving you an attitude yesterday, but I realize I’m lucky to have you. . . .Thank you.” . . .That makes it worthwhile. (2A/MA6/CAF5610)

The former student wrote to thank her for showing compassion all those years ago when she needed it. She “was writing to me to tell me thank you because she needed to know that somebody cared about her at that time.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610) Sometimes the appreciation takes the form of a gift of plastic flowers from the Dollar Store; no matter what the gift, it touches teachers.

Brand new kid came in. I think he was here 3 days; he brought me flowers in the morning before school. He said, “These are for you.”

I said, “Ooh, thank you Martin, why are you giving them to me?”

He goes, “Because you’re the best teacher I’ve ever had.”

I said, “How can you say that to me, you don’t even know me? You’ve only been here a couple days.”

He goes, “I can tell. Some teachers are too soft, some teachers are too hard, and you’re just right.” (Laugh) I felt good. You don’t know who you’re touching. (2A/MA6/CAF5610)
Ms. Eastmont, the social studies teacher who shared how much she loves taking her students on field trips, shared how a group of former students came back to her. They’re freshmen in high school now and they came back to me and said, “We miss you, we miss what you do, we miss the field trips, what can we do? . . . We’ll do whatever you want.” So eight of them formed a group called “The Girls” and we do volunteer work, historical work.” (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

She and “The Girls” volunteer at the museum and take field trips. The students appreciate what she taught them so much they want it to continue.

Even little things show teachers that they are remembered and appreciated. “After they graduate and they still send you Christmas cards; that is telling me that yes, I’m making a difference in someone’s life and that’s the most rewarding for me.” (2A/EN78/ASF5722) Even getting accosted in the mall by strangers (students change a lot from 12 to 20) tells teachers that they are remembered and appreciated: “They come and they kiss me and they hug me.” (3A/MU78/CAF3512) Just a simple sentence can mean a great deal to teachers. “This is where I’ve got kids that come back and say, ‘Thanks for listening to me.’” (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

These letters, tokens, and kind words help us take another step towards understanding why teachers continue to teach even in the face of the challenges reported in the previous chapters.

**Every Day Is Different**

Even as they recognize the challenges inherent in being an urban middle school teacher, teachers still express their love for the job, some because of the challenges and “wildness.” As Mrs. Katz said, “The best thing about teaching middle school? Every day is different.” (3A/MU78/CAF3512) The challenges, according to Mr. Daniels, are addicting.
I feel really happy going to work in the morning even if it’s stressful because there’s things that have to get done. I really feel happy doing it. I really enjoy most of the stuff that goes with the teaching and I think most other jobs at this point would be boring to me because the challenges are so overwhelming that once you get used to that... You get addicted to that life of half wild blast, half Peace Corps, half *Stand and Deliver*, you know? (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

When explaining the benefits of being a middle school teacher compared to other careers, Mrs. Henderson said:

I don’t know, you don’t get the change of pace or the wildness or the ****. Of course you’re also not trying to control, you know 26 ** teenagers at a time (laugh) ****. You also don’t get to go on field trips or go to concerts when you work in the business world. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Teachers also appreciate the diversity of the inner city.

I *love* teaching inner city kids because of the enthusiasm, the differences. I grew up in basically a lilywhite [town]; it’s still only about 2% minorities. I *love* the different aspects of what everybody brings in, all the different cultures, the people coming from all the different countries that make up [this city] and make [it] such an interesting and lively place to be in and it’s a lot of fun. (3B/SS7/CAF4117)

When asked why he would not prefer a smaller, more affluent community to teaching in the inner city, Mr. King said:

That would be bland. This, this is the difference between mashed potatoes, I guess, and garlic-flavored double baked potatoes. Just the idea that it’s a little bit different; you never know. Every day is an adventure for sure. You never know what to expect when you walk in. Mostly taxing situations, but occasionally you get the nice situations, good situations. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

These comments are similar to Amber Henderson’s when she describes the student who flashed her bare chest to the entire class. She stays in teaching because she likes the drama, the unexpectedness.

Every day’s a little different. I had no idea that girl was going to come in here and flash her chest to everyone in my class and like drive people nutso for part of the day; it was not something I woke up this morning expecting to happen. (4A/SS8/CAF3303)
This is a phrase she used more than once during our 4 hours together. “Of course my homeroom is the one that is no longer allowed to cook up in cooking class because they put Comet in the biscuits. Again, not something I woke up in the morning expecting to happen.” (4A/SS8/CAF3303) She acknowledges that she appreciates, and actually thrives on, this pandemonium. “I think I kind of thrive on some of the chaos and unexpectedness that you get when you’re, you know, locked in a room with 25 kids (laugh), especially teenagers.” (4A/SS8/CAF3303) It is interesting to note that chaos and unexpectedness are not tolerated in her personal life.

Teachers also mentioned that these students are still young and energetic enough that they will participate. “I love this age group; they are so much fun; they will do almost anything you want them to do. The boys will dress up as girls; they’ll be animals; they’ll do skits and plays.” (3B/SS7/CAF4117) Many of my participants are exhilarated by the students’ excitement and even their unruliness.

A Contradiction: I Never Encouraged My Kids To Be Teachers

It is important to note that even though these urban middle school teachers all find teaching rewarding in one way or another, those old enough to have children choosing careers did not encourage them to be teachers. Six of the teachers interviewed had children of their own old enough to teach. Four of these mentioned their own children and the teaching profession: 3 said they would not encourage their children to be teachers and 1 who started teaching later in life has a daughter who was already a science teacher when he went into teaching. He joked, “I always say I followed in my daughter’s footsteps because she was teaching. . .before I was.” (2A/EN8/CAM5909) The others seem to feel uncomfortable about admitting it, but are clear that they would not want their
children to teach. “I never encouraged my kids to be teachers. I don’t feel, even though it’s a wonderful job that I love, I don’t feel society values them. . . I never encouraged anybody to be a teacher.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610) When asked why she thinks society does not value teachers, Mrs. Nowak said,

They think our job is easy. And so I say, to anybody who says, “Oh, you’re a teacher, you have the summer off.”

I say, “First of all, I don’t get paid in the summer and second of all, you can either come watch and see what I do or come do what I do, I’ll give you my class. You wouldn’t last, you wouldn’t be able to do it, you’d be amazed, you’d be amazed.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610)

Mr. Wills, whose wife is also a teacher, said,

But you know, I often feel bad: we did not want my son and daughter to go into teaching because of the condition of education today. And I still feel bad because I know both of them would’ve been really good teachers. They were recruited to teach when they were substitute teaching. The principal said “Please come back, please come back, we want you to teach here.” And they were recruited. It wasn’t just one principal.

They substituted at middle schools and high schools and they were asked to come back, but we said, “Please don’t go into it.” We didn’t want them to be frustrated like people are. I still feel bad, though, because I think they would’ve been good teachers. It would’ve been a gain for education. People have got to hear that too, you know, that teachers don’t want their own kids to become teachers. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

How do I reconcile the facts that every participant shared rewarding teaching experiences with the fact that 3 of the 4 participants who mentioned their own children and the profession did not want their children to be teachers? It seems to me, that emotionally these teachers found their jobs rewarding--I wrote this entire chapter on the rewarding experiences they shared. I think, though, that on another level, perhaps intellectually, they feel undervalued by society both financially and in terms of respect for their work. As Mr. Vargas shared, he gets more respect as a boxer than as a teacher; although his own feeling is that, “Teaching should be one of the top things, I mean, we’re teaching kids.” (1A/MA7/HIM2803) Teachers in District 2 who have not had a raise in
several years feel disrespected not just by society, but by their district. “I’m still feeling disrespected by the [city’s] Public Schools. People who they should be honoring, they’re stepping on.” (2A/MA6/CAF5610) These teachers also recognize the demands placed on teachers and the frustrations they encounter in their own jobs--I penned three chapters on that, as well. They do not want their own children to face the difficulties they have faced; this means, of course, that they will never know the rewards either.

Despite student disrespect, the failure of their urban middle schools to fully implement the middle school concept, sabotage by colleagues and administrators, and the frustrations of state testing, 14 of the 15 urban middle school teachers are happy with their jobs and plan to continue teaching. They stay because they feel rewarded when students make progress, because they have a social conscience, because they feel appreciated, because they thrive on the challenge, or for a combination of all of these reasons. In fact, Mrs. Sang touched on three of these four reasons in two sentences when discussing her love of her chosen career.

You get to work with them, and you see their progress and that really gives me a lot of satisfaction, that I’m really actually helping people. And every year you get a new group of kids and of course you get challenges and you get satisfaction, but at the end the satisfaction always comes more. (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

In the final chapter I analyze the insights I have gained from my participants, offer recommendations, and suggest opportunities for further study.
CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis

The purposes of this dissertation study were to explore, through in-depth phenomenological interviews, three ideas central to teaching on an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school. The first idea surrounds the complexities of the work experiences of middle school teachers who participate on interdisciplinary teams in urban middle schools. The second idea involves the possible interactions of the structures and principles of the middle school philosophy with teachers’ work lives. The third idea encompasses how the reality of interdisciplinary teams and their functioning connect to the ideals described in the middle school and organizational theory literature.

After interviews with 15 teachers from 9 middle schools in 5 districts across the northeast United States I have come to believe that the middle school as described in the literature does not exist in every building that calls itself a middle school. The structures and principles as described in the literature were not evident in my participants’ middle schools, nor were the group processes and organized team meetings described in the organizational theory literature. I also believe that the urban setting, while offering diversity and access to culture (museums, the theatre, art galleries), also brings with it transience; poverty; and a generation of students, many of whom, at least outwardly, do not appear to want to learn. Finally, my findings indicate that teachers are frustrated by colleagues, administrators, and state testing. How did it get that way? Are these problems unique to the urban middle school? Are these problems connected? These are the questions I analyze in this section. I do not try to offer definitive answers; instead, I
offer a variety of possible explanations based on my participant interviews, my own middle school teaching experience, and the literature.

I begin by examining the findings in relation to the purposes of the characteristics of the middle school: those designed to promote a sense of community, social and emotional well-being, and a well-educated student body. Because I suggest the possibility that student misconduct is one of the causes for many of the middle school characteristics promoted by the literature not being implemented in my participants’ urban middle schools, I devote a section of this chapter to examining some of the possible causes of student misconduct. I turn next to the urban setting and the frustrations of colleagues, administrators, and state testing. I share the findings that most surprised me, my recommendations, and then discuss whether the findings pertain to other urban middle schools. Finally I point out the limitations of the study, offer suggestions for further research, and take a final opportunity to thank my participants for their time.

**The Middle School**

Almost 30 years after the “birth” of the middle school, many would say that it has not lived up to the hype or its promise. Is the middle school philosophy to blame or are there other factors at work? One of the districts involved in the study was reorganizing its schools for the next year, doing away with middle schools. The new superintendent of District 4 has decided that middle schools do not work. Based on my participants’ descriptions, I feel confident suggesting the reason that this district’s middle schools do not work: They are middle schools in name only. That district, much like the 4 other districts my participants teach in, did not implement the characteristics of a middle school as outlined in the literature. Many of my participants’ school districts have drifted away
from the middle school characteristics because of lack of funding available to implement
the characteristics or a redistribution of funds and staff to devote time and resources to
the demands of state testing.

**Promoting a Sense of Community**

The middle schools my participants teach in do not provide the family and
community involvement, student and teacher empowerment, or specially designed
facilities recommended to promote a sense of community. Students, however, are
divided into small learning communities. Because teachers are not given the time to
conduct activities to promote the sense of closeness that is supposed to be the result of a
small learning community, implementing this one characteristic does not appear to have
had an effect. Just giving four or five or six teachers a shared group of students does not
make them a team.

Families are not involved in my participants’ middle schools. One reason may be
that children are having children. The teen birth rate reached its peak about 1991
(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009b) which means that an increasingly
large number of students my middle school teachers have taught in the last 5 years were
born to teen mothers. Many of these students are being raised by very young parents or
grandparents. The young single mothers may be struggling to provide for their children
and do not have the time to devote to becoming involved in the middle school. These
young mothers are also more likely to have dropped out of high school (Centers for
Disease Control and Prevention, 2009a) and therefore feel less comfortable coming into
the school. This is also a concern for the parents whose first language is not English.
The older grandparents may be raising too many children of their children and just may
be too tired to parent. Parents may be absent for a variety of reasons, as Mr. King said,

More and more the children I’m dealing with come from single parent families, foster homes, homeless. I can’t describe the number who’ve told me one or both parents are or have been in jail, or are under suspicion of gang and drug activities. (1B/SC6/CAM5534)

These beliefs are born out by the statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009a) which indicate that teen mothers are more likely to be incarcerated at some time before their early 30s.

Members of the community are not involved in my participants’ middle schools. Why is this? It may be that in urban areas the businesses are not operated by those who live in the community. Business owners and their employees are not connected to the schools because they commute from the suburbs. Another reason may be that schools have not done enough to encourage the community to come into the schools. It may also be that community members working with students must now undergo criminal background checks. Therefore, mentors and classroom helpers must wait until they pass the, sometimes lengthy, approval process before they can work with students.

Students in my participants’ schools are not given opportunities to participate in decision-making. This may be because their teachers are frustrated from dealing with them all day. What teacher wants to form a committee to get student input after they have spent the day being disrespected by those same students? Lack of student empowerment may also be due to the fact that teachers and principals are not being empowered; they do not or can not empower their students. As Mr. Wills shared, the biggest decision his team made was how students would put their headings on their homework papers. What decisions are left that would require students’ input? Teachers
can not share power they do not have. Students can not vote what direction the curriculum should take or which novel to read; the district has mandated the curriculum. Students can not help decide how to spend funds if there are no funds to spend. In one school, discretionary funds had to be used to replace plumbing that was ripped from the walls. This is another example of students’ poor behavior impacting their decision-making power.

**Promoting Social and Emotional Well-Being**

The advisory programs, extracurricular activities, positive climates, and opportunities for healthy choices designed to promote social and emotional well-being also are not in evidence in my participants’ urban middle schools. In fact, half of the teachers mentioned a lack of extracurricular activities and exploratory classes as problems. The only mention of an advisory program was for a school intending to implement one the following year. Some teachers, though, did mention having homerooms that seemed to be a nod toward advisory programs. I think that part of the problem is that there are not enough staff members available to provide a mentor for every 10 or 12 students. The literature recommends that all staff be involved: nurses, secretaries, counselors, and custodians. Principals, especially those who do not value the idea of advisory programs, do not want to pull them from their other duties. Another problem may be space. It would take effort and creativity to find space available for these small groups of students to meet in already overcrowded middle school buildings.

Although it is difficult to measure a positive climate, the number of teachers who discussed lack of student respect and effort, as well as poor behavior, and difficulties with colleagues and administrators, would lead me to believe that the people who run the
schools my participants teach in are having difficulty promoting a positive environment. The vandalism reported by participants is another indicator of a poor climate. This may be due, as Mrs. Sang suggests, to the fact that students move so frequently they do not feel the school belongs to them. This negative environment may be a symptom or a cause of student misbehavior and lack of respect. It is possible that students are angry and disruptive because their schools are dirty and have poor plumbing; it is also possible that students destroy the plumbing and make schools dirty because they are angry and disruptive.

Behavioral issues may also explain the lack of extracurricular activities. Teachers are less likely to volunteer their time if they do not feel their students deserve it. Of course, budget cuts have impacted extracurricular activities, as well.

My participants’ and their schools are not promoting healthy habits in students. This may be caused by lack of time. Teachers may be too busy following their strict curriculum guides to give time to health issues. Of course, it may be that academic classroom teachers never did this; they left it up to the health teachers (many of whom have lost their positions due to cutbacks). Oftentimes in the past, the nurse would devote time to providing students with information on health during talks in classrooms. In many schools, teachers are unwilling to give up classroom time to devote to this: they must not fall behind. Nurses have other concerns, as well. In the past, nurses often only had to worry about the yearly scoliosis exams, hearing tests, and eye exams. Now, the nurse also has to organize vaccinations, dental visits, and must dole out medication on a daily basis to an increasing number of students. In some schools there is no longer a full time nurse available because schools are sharing a nurse due to staffing cuts.
Promoting a Well-Educated Student Body

Perhaps most disheartening is the dearth of characteristics implemented that are designed to promote a well-educated student body. Interdisciplinary teaching, flexible scheduling, variety in choice of methods and media, beneficial professional development activities, and specially prepared middle school teachers are not in evidence in my participants’ middle schools. Interdisciplinary teaching and flexible scheduling are nonexistent for the teachers I interviewed due to time constraints and district mandated curriculum, although several spoke fondly of having experience with them in the past. Given the importance of connecting new knowledge to what is already known, it would seem that students who are learning discreet bits of knowledge in separate classes would learn less than students whose teachers teach related curricula in interdisciplinary units. Given that many urban districts have mandated curriculum for each subject matter based on state testing, it is unlikely that this can happen; the curricula do not match up.

The emphasis on methods and media is also sparse, sometimes due to lack of technology, sometimes due to student vandalism of the technology, and sometimes due to student inability to remain focused when less traditional methods are used. Again, the affects of student behavior on the implementation of middle school characteristics is evident. Teachers can not use technology when students destroy it and they can not teach using a variety of methods if students will not focus. What does this mean for poor urban students who do not have access to technology in their homes? The neediest students are not getting exposure to the latest in technology.

Teachers speak of their districts’ professional development, in most cases, with disdain. This may be due to the fact that some districts are using their professional
development time to teach teachers how to teach to the test or to review for the sixth or seventh time the school’s test results. It may also be that as the curriculum becomes more prescribed, so does professional development. Teachers who used to choose their professional development courses from a list, no longer have options; the district chooses their professional development for them, but many teachers do not find this beneficial. As one participant said, “It’s very unfocused. . .You can’t do system-wide PD. . .it’s too general.” (2A/EN8/CAM5909) This is another example of teachers being unempowered. Of course, I should point out that professional development has frequently been greeted with disdain by teachers at all levels due its top-down, directed nature.

As expected, the final characteristic designed to promote a well-educated student body, teachers specially prepared to teach middle school, is not in evidence in the middle school. A few teachers, though, did mention either their lack of preparation or the fact that new teachers are not prepared. The implications for this are far-reaching. Unprepared teachers either do not stay in the profession long or they stay and are not educating students as well as teachers who are better prepared. This leaves students who are the neediest with teachers who may be less effective.

Because many of the teachers interviewed are not given a dedicated team time, none of the characteristics required for successful interdisciplinary teaming were in evidence or mentioned by the teachers interviewed, except in instances where teachers indicated what their practices had been in the past.
Student Misbehavior

As indicated throughout this section of the analysis, I believe that student misbehavior is one of the causes for many of the middle school characteristics not being implemented in my participants’ middle schools. I think it is fair, then, to examine some of the possible causes of student misbehavior. Students may act out because they are seeking attention or because they know there are no consequences. The middle school policy of social promotion may be to blame. It may be the fault of teachers who have not established clear rules or who want their students to like them. Finally, there may be psychological reasons for students’ misbehavior.

Students who are raised in poverty by very busy single mothers may not be getting the attention they need in the home, so they act out in school to get it from their teachers and peers: “They’re hurting, they’re acting up. They’re going to get the attention one way or the other.” (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

As already pointed out, it may be due to the lack of consequences doled out by administrators which, in turn, may be due to the number of new duties they are being required to perform or their middle school training which stresses the importance of social emotional connections, rather than discipline.

Middle school students’ misbehavior may be due to the middle school policy of social promotion. Students who have not mastered the skills of the previous grade are passed to the next grade because of their age or to keep classes from becoming even more overcrowded. As Mr. Hasse indicated when discussing the difficulties of following the math curriculum, students do not come to school, yet “they get pushed along.” (2A/MA8/IRM2504) This is true in Mrs. Henderson’s district, as well.
We’ve got a kid in seventh grade this year who we may have to promote right to high school because he’s that old, and the principal said he is not having 16 year olds running around this building where we have 12 year olds.

(4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Although the principal’s philosophy is understandable, students who are promoted without the requisite skills may feel out of their depth and cope by acting out. It is much more acceptable to be thought by peers to be a class clown than stupid.

In some instances, students’ misbehavior may be the fault of teachers who are not clear in establishing and enforcing the rules. Students who are unclear about acceptable behavior or discover that there are no consequences for it will continue to act inappropriately. This, of course, only holds true for minor disruptions or infractions of the rules. It is expected that all students are aware of the inappropriateness of throwing chairs and threatening classmates. Other teachers may allow misbehavior because they want their students to like them. This courting of popularity will be cited again when examining conflicts between colleagues.

There are also psychological reasons for student misbehavior. Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and Conduct Disorder are more prevalent now than in the past. Although there is much debate about over diagnosis, it is likely that there is a percentage of middle school students who suffer from these conditions. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2009) suggests as many as 16% of school age children may have ODD which is characterized by “uncooperative, defiant, and hostile behavior toward authority figures” (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2009). Children with ODD may go on to develop Conduct Disorder. Children with Conduct Disorder “have great difficulty following rules and behaving in a socially acceptable way” (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2004).
Although the behaviors actually sound quite similar, children with Conduct Disorder are mentally ill, but may be viewed by society as “bad.”

**The Urban Setting**

Participants discussed at length the difficulties of teaching in an urban setting. Attendance, poverty, lack of familial support, technology, and gangs are identified as distracters from education. These are huge problems and likely can only be addressed by changes in social policy or at least broad-based community support. As already pointed out, my feeling is that a large part of the problem is that children are being raised by children. Children are having children before they have had time to mature and gain an appreciation for education. As Mr. King said, some parents have “no value for education. They can’t see the point in it.” (1B/SC6/CAM5534) I think the problem may be that they have not progressed beyond the point of seeing authority figures as the enemy so they do not respond well when teachers try to discuss the behavioral issues of their children with them. Parents will say to the teacher, “Go f--- yourself.” (1B/SC6/CAM5534) Others have no idea how to discipline their own children, as Mr. Hasse said, they ask for your help. “Parents are saying, ‘That’s what they do when they’re at home. They tell me to shut up at home. What do you want me to do?’” (5A/SC8/CAM2603) If their own parents can not control them, there is not much hope for teachers.

Many of the parents in the urban districts my participants teach in do not speak English as their primary language. These parents may be unwilling to come into the school because of the language barrier. They may not feel confident addressing concerns about their children in a language other than their native language. Of course, the schools
often provide translators. It is also possible that some of these parents come from cultures in which the parents are not welcome in the school; education is left to those who run the school. And, as pointed out previously, many of these parents may be too focused on trying to support the family to attend meetings and functions at the school or they may not feel educated enough to do so. As Mrs. Katz said, the parents may say to themselves, “I’m not qualified to get involved in my child’s education because I can’t even do fractions.” (3A/MU78/CAF3512)

For whatever reasons, in many cases, these parents are not forcing their children to attend school, do not have the money to keep them out of poverty, and do not provide the emotional support to keep them from turning to gangs. They provide them with technology, but not the parameters and rules necessary to use it without getting into trouble.

Frustrating Colleagues

Teachers shared the frustration they feel when colleagues do not follow the rules, do not do their jobs, or show a lack of respect for their classrooms. I think it is likely that in most cases these difficulties are caused by teachers doing what is easiest for themselves without even being aware that what they are doing affects their colleagues. As pointed out by Ms. Oliver, new teachers often are not aware that their actions affect other teachers; they may take the path of least resistance or try to be students’ friends. This courting of popularity may also be a factor for veteran teachers who want to be liked by their students. One way to get the students to like them is to be lax with the rules. Other ways include giving out candy and not assigning homework.
Teachers who do not show up for their duty or who send students to assemblies unescorted are most likely not trying to create more work for their colleagues; teachers who allow students to chew gum or come to school out of uniform are likely not trying to sabotage their colleagues’ classrooms. It is more likely that they are ignoring rules that seem unimportant to them without taking into consideration how it affects others.

Another explanation for teachers not enforcing the rules may be that they are burnt out. Veteran teachers who feel as though they have said 5,000 times, “Spit out the gum” or “Take off the hooded sweatshirt” may be so tired of saying it, that they just give up; they can not fight the fight any more. Or, it may be that they are tired of the inconsistency and the lack of support from administrators so they stop trying to enforce the rules.

I should also suggest that teachers may not be enforcing the rules because they are afraid of their students. Middle school students are sometimes members of dangerous street gangs and come to school with weapons. Teachers may not want to make an issue of enforcing the rules because they are wary of confrontations with students and fearful for their personal safety.

Colleagues not performing their duties may be an especial concern in middle school because teachers feel responsible for the other teachers on their team. In an elementary or high school setting, teachers may feel less inclined to discipline an absent colleague’s students because they are not their students. Colleagues not following the rules may be a middle school problem, as well. In settings where students are not shared, teachers are probably less likely to be concerned about the colleague who does not follow the rules because it does not affect their own students. In the middle school the students
are shared so if one colleague does not follow the rules or does not insist that students follow the rules, it affects others. Teams are meant to have the same behavioral expectations. As Mr. Vargas said, “The teachers have to work together and everything else falls into place. We pretty much have the same procedures, same discipline. So they know once they go into a classroom the expectations are the same.”

(1A/MA7/HIM2803)

It is also possible that teachers feel frustrated by their colleagues because they no longer know them well. The budget and staff cuts and new class schedules which have resulted in teams losing their meeting time have resulted in colleagues losing that sense of closeness and belonging that some reported having when their teams had more time together; they may be less concerned about their colleagues because they do not feel close to them. This lack of meeting time may also have resulted in less time to voice their complaints, find ways to solve them, and move on. As Mr. Wills said,

At a team meeting years ago, we would quickly come right out and say, “Hey, knock it off.” Then you’d have a couple of hard moments and the next day it would be forgotten. Now we don’t have the time to work those kind of things out. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)

In instances where teachers believe that their colleagues are purposefully targeting them because of jealousy or animosity, they may be right. I would suggest that there are a few petty, hurtful people in every profession. I might also suggest that in these tight economic times, the unwritten middle school policy which gives teachers who have won awards or garnered recognition for a job well-done more access to funds and supplies, might be to blame as well. Although many would argue that it is well-deserved, this unequal distribution of wealth may foster animosity.
Frustrating Administrators

Teachers recounted numerous stories of disciplinarians who refuse to deal with student misbehavior and the havoc that creates in the classroom. I would suggest that in most of these urban school districts the administrators are busy with other tasks and do not mean to be unsupportive. Even Mrs. Henderson, who had balls of fire whipped at her head, acknowledged that the dean in charge of discipline had other more pressing issues to deal with: weapons and riots. I think that in most of the other teachers’ classes, the balls of lit paper would have been the pressing issue. In the face of NCLB legislation assistant principals are being asked to take on the roles of teacher educator, curriculum planner, and test coordinator. In several of the districts, assistant principals’ jobs went beyond even discipline and curriculum planning, to include community outreach and special education program implementation. They are spread too thin to offer support to the teaching staff.

Some authors have been condemning the middle school for over a decade for its concern with social and emotional needs over academics (Bradley, 1998; Bradley & Manzo, 2000). This focus on social and emotional well-being could explain why participants complained about their administrators’ lack of disciplinary action. In some cases, administrators, especially those recently trained, seem to want to be the students’ friends and counselors, rather than disciplinarians. As Mr. Wills recounted, “She’s trying to go around all of the issues, every time there’s a head-on issue with a child, she just tries to diffuse it, to rub the kid on the back.” (1A/MA8/CAM6442) Administrators are being trained like counselors; their focus is no longer discipline.
Another explanation for why administrators may not be performing their duties satisfactorily in the eyes of teachers may be that the middle school administrator is looking toward moving up to the high school. Middle school assistant principals and deans of students may not feel connected to the middle school, which is often just a stepping stone to a more coveted high school position.

Not having consequences for misbehavior breeds more misbehavior both for the original offender and those classmates who witness it. This is a concern at the middle school level because students witness each others’ behaviors and the consequences for them. They are with each other all day; they know when consequences are doled out for infractions and when nothing happens. Students are more likely to misbehave if they believe there are no consequences for the misbehavior.

Teaching students the importance of education and good behavior are of especial concern in the urban middle school because students at this grade level are at a crossroad. This is the time when they are struggling with identity issues. They are making decisions, consciously or unconsciously, about the type of student they are going to be, and in some cases whether they are going to be affiliated with a gang. Are they going to be an academic? A sports star? A troublemaker? A gang member? Sometimes a push in the right direction from an administrator can change a student’s life. Having consequences for negative behaviors can help students make choices that will affect them throughout their lives, but in these urban middle schools administrators often do not provide consequences for students’ poor behavior.
State Testing

State testing has taken over the curriculum in urban districts. How did this happen? When the first state tests were administered urban students did not perform as well as their suburban counterparts. Schools that did not make improvements in their scores were designated as in need of improvement. Sanctions followed. In an effort to improve test scores and lose the designation schools and districts began to focus on passing the test. In some districts, students spend their time not only taking the state test, but taking the district practice tests to prepare for the state tests.

All the tests, almost every other month they have a test. It’s very discouraging for them to say, “Oh I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to do that.” And every month you remind them, “Hey you don’t know how to do this, hey you don’t know how to do that.” (2A/EN78/ASF5722)

This focus on passing the test has taken away teachers’ flexibility, creativity, and decision-making power as districts have mandated the curriculum. It has made schools exchange cooking, sewing, and chorus for math test prep and English Language Arts test taking strategies. It has pulled teachers from team meetings to teach these classes. It has killed interdisciplinary teaching. It has affected many of the characteristics that make a middle school a middle school. Part of this problem may also be related to student behavior. Students can not learn enough to pass the state test if their classmates are disruptive.

Although many of the effects of focusing on testing mentioned here are inherent to the middle school, I would venture to guess that the focus on testing is not. It may, in fact, be much worse in the high school where the testing is much higher stakes.
The Rewards

This section is the most difficult to analyze. How do I go beyond what I have already said about the importance of rewards in keeping teachers in teaching? How do I determine why these rewards are important to participants? I think it is clear that the rewards of teaching must be enormous if teachers are staying in the field despite the disrespect of their students and the frustrations caused by their colleagues, administrators, and state testing.

Although teachers shared a multitude of negative experiences, it is also true that as Mr. Wills said, “There are so many good young people, we see them every day. I think the overwhelming majority of the kids are good.” (1A/MA8/CAM6442) It is also possible, that like Mr. Vargas, other urban middle school teachers see beyond their misbehavior and realize they do not always really mean what they say and do.

Some of these kids can be extremely mean and that’s why I think you can’t take them personal. You cannot take them personal. They’re always kids, no matter what, they’re always kids. . . .One day they’ll hate you and think you’re the worst teacher in the world. Then they come in the next day and they’re like (in sweet voice) “Hi Mister.” They forget, I mean they forget the way they acted the previous day. So that comes to let you know how much of a kid they are. (1A/MA7/HIM2803)

The importance of feeling appreciated can not be underestimated. Human beings want to be valued for what they do. The cards and letters (or plastic flowers) from students let teachers know that they are appreciated. People also want to feel that they have accomplished something. This is likely why teachers talk with such enthusiasm about assisting their students to progress. Seeing the growth of their students is rewarding and helps keep middle school teachers in teaching. Some teachers see teaching as a calling. They want to give back to their community and teaching is a way to do that. Perhaps they see themselves as doing so much for the community that this
compensates for the difficulties. Mr. Breton said, “Don’t canonize me.”
(2A/EN8/CAM5909) and “Don’t put a halo on my head.” (2A/EN8/CAM5909) Perhaps he doth protest too much.

Human beings also like to be challenged, rather than bored. For some urban middle school teachers teaching provides that challenge. Many feel like Mr. Daniels, who said, “I think most other jobs at this point would be boring to me because the challenges are so overwhelming that you get used to that.” (4B/SS6/CAM4907)

Although only one of the participants mentioned it, job security may be a factor for some urban middle school teachers. And again, although only one participant mentioned it, the insurance benefits, vacation time, and pay are better than in some other jobs.

**Surprises**

I was surprised to discover that the middle school characteristics are not in evidence in the middle schools in which my participants teach. I had anticipated that schools would pick and chose the characteristics that best fit their populations or even the ones that were easiest or least expensive to implement; I did not imagine that so many schools would have none. I had not anticipated that teachers would not be given time to meet as a team. I was also surprised to discover a lack of a formal effort by schools and their districts to train teachers in either the middle school philosophy or teaming. Finally, I had not expected to find so many instances of staff members sabotaging their colleagues, either intentionally or unintentionally.

I am, oddly enough, surprised by my surprise. I knew when I began my research that I would learn a great deal about what it means to be an urban middle school teacher
teaching on an interdisciplinary team (even though I have often been an urban middle school teacher teaching on an interdisciplinary team). I would not have begun the study if I did not expect to learn from it and add to the knowledge base of my discipline, but I did not expect so many surprises. I knew that my middle school was slowly turning away from the tenets of middle school as budget constraints and the demands of state testing took over the curriculum and the schedule, but somehow I did not expect this to be true for other middle schools. I certainly did not expect that so many other urban middle school teachers from so many different middle schools in so many different districts would be dealing with the exact same issues and recognize their loss.

I have always been very fortunate in my dealings with colleagues, teammates, and administrators so I had not anticipated that they would be the cause of so much frustration for urban middle school teachers. I knew that in my own school “everyone” complained about state testing, but I had not given much thought to the fact that these complaints would be prevalent, not just across schools, but across districts, and states. As for the rewards, it is likely that I would have pinpointed helping students to learn and giving back to the community as reasons why urban middle school teachers teach, but it would likely not have occurred to me that some teachers feel as though they have found where they belong, that they like being appreciated, or that they enjoy the challenges inherent in teaching urban middle school children. I feel grateful that my participants taught me so much.

**Recommendations**

Clearly, in the schools in which my participants teach, the middle school philosophy is not being adhered to. Much of the reason, I believe, is due to lack of team
meeting time. I believe that allowing teachers time to meet would impact many of the problems unearthed in this study. I also think that encouraging community involvement in the middle school could prove invaluable. Finally, I argue for an exploration of alternative programs for students unwilling to learn.

**Provide Team Meeting Time**

Principals need to adjust their schools’ schedules so that teachers are given time to meet. I do not know if principals understand what the middle school philosophy means and the importance of giving their teams time to meet; therefore, I do not know if they are not following the tenets of the middle school because they do not believe in their value or if they are not following the tenets of middle school because there is a lack of funding and time. These problems would be tackled in very different ways (education and sharing of research on the importance of teaming or increased funding). Given the fact that several of the teachers said that their schools had drifted away from the middle school philosophy due to lack of staff or a need for more time on learning, my guess is that in many cases, funding and district mandates are the problems.

If teams had more time to meet they could address some of the student behavior problems teachers shared, they could address the issues surrounding the following of team rules, they could design activities promoting community amongst the students, and they could meet with administrators to formulate plans for dealing with students who rebel against the code of conduct. Simply providing opportunities for teachers and administrators to meet and address concerns could go a long way toward having administrators understand what teachers need when they contact the office. The teams would also have time to meet with parents and community outreach services to provide
support for students outside of school. This time could also be used to mentor and support new teachers. Several of the urban middle school teachers in this study indicated how important it was to them to have support from their team. “I love my team. They show me support in every aspect.” (1A/MA7/HIM2803) “I feel like, if we didn’t have our team, it’d just be 10 or 15 times worse.” (5A/SC8/CAM2603)

Providing staff members who teach exploratory subjects to cover classes would give teams time to meet and also give students exposure to a more varied curriculum. This would solve, then, two problems: the problem of team meeting time and lack of exploratory classes. Ten of the 15 middle school teachers mentioned the importance of students having the opportunity to participant in these nonacademic activities.

I think, though, that teachers need not only the time to meet, but training in being members of interdisciplinary teams and training in the middle school philosophy. Understanding the characteristics of the middle school and the rationale for implementing them will assist teachers in providing the small community atmosphere and varied educational experiences that the literature promotes. The teachers I interviewed are aware of the importance of extracurricular activities, parental and community involvement, teaching in an interdisciplinary fashion, and the other characteristics of the middle school, but I did not get the impression that they are aware of them as aspects of the middle school philosophy, as such. I also did not get the impression that the teachers are aware of their own importance in implementing these middle school characteristics. Only 1 teacher discussed receiving training in the middle school philosophy and he feels it was extremely beneficial.

We were light-years ahead of the rest of the city in terms of converting from the junior high school to the middle school. [The principal] gave us all of the
appropriate literature that was available at the time; all of the data; all of the
background information to make the change to middle schools. He provided all
kinds of professional development time and money, including the release days to
visit other communities that had already established middle schools.
(1B/SC6/CAM5534)

And another, who did not get training, had a principal who embraced teaming and gave
them time to meet (before cuts).

We had a principal who believed in the team concept so we had five team times a
week; we had 45 minute team time every day and she expected us to do team stuff
during those team times. . . .That’s how committed she was to teams; she really
believed in them. (2A/EN8/CAM5909)

I also believe that understanding group dynamics and teaming would assist
teachers in running organized, productive team meetings and overcoming the frustrations
described in this study. Training in teaming would include how to resolve conflicts as a
group and how to come to group consensus. None of the teachers mentioned any training
in how to run a team or how to work cooperatively with colleagues. The unintentional
sabotage by colleagues would likely decrease if teachers had time to meet and express
their displeasure in an atmosphere of cooperation. If teachers explained to their
colleagues the ramifications for them of not following the agreed upon rules, much could
be accomplished. Having this time to meet would likely encourage teachers to take on
defined and designated roles, which would help to eliminate some of the “falling through
the cracks” that teachers are concerned about when no one is specifically responsible for
fulfilling the task.

Years ago we each had a delegated responsibility, somebody would be the liaison
to the office, somebody would be the person in charge of calling parents,
somebody would be in charge of getting the write-ups turned in. Now it’s
whoever’s heading in that direction will bring it down. We don’t have anybody in
charge of computer work, and so on. So we don’t delegate responsibility
anymore. (1A/MA8/CAM6442)
The problem of colleagues who intentionally frustrate each other could also be addressed during these meetings. Teachers could be encouraged to behave in a professional and collegial manner even to staff members with whom they have personality conflicts, although it is understood that this type of behavior is difficult to address and even more difficult to resolve. Administrators could also be invited to team meetings so the team can air their frustrations and work collaboratively to institute behavior plans that teachers and administrators feel comfortable instituting. This time could be used to discuss curriculum changes and solicit teacher feedback which would negate teacher frustrations with administrators due to lack of empowerment. Finally, assigning those in charge of discipline fewer duties and added responsibilities could also free them up to attend these meetings and provide the in-class support that teachers need.

I do not mean to sound as though establishing team meeting time would magically solve all of the problems of teaching in an urban middle school, but as pointed out, if the time were used as I suggest, I think it would be beneficial to students, teachers, and administrators. Of course, as I recommend, it must be paired with education on teaming, group dynamics, and the middle school philosophy. If team meeting time is not used properly, it is just an extra preparation period for teachers, which although useful, would not provide the benefits that meeting as a team with students, parents, community members, and administrators would. Having specific goals, a plan to meet those goals, and the skills required to conduct meetings and carry out those goals are necessary for team meeting time to make the differences I suggest it can make.
Encourage Community Involvement

As pointed out earlier, social programs or community-based organizations are in a better position to address the wide-ranging problems related to teaching in an urban community than schools are. It might help, though, if schools made attempts to involve parents and the community to encourage attendance and discourage gang involvement.

The middle schools my participants teach in already have security guards and in some cases, police presence. Perhaps it is necessary to increase this police presence to root out the gang problems and help make schools safer.

Community organizations might be able to assist families living in poverty with getting the assistance they need. Volunteers from the community could work with students in extracurricular activities after school. Extracurricular programs may improve student academics and behavior because, as Mr. Hasse pointed out, if students are invested in a program, they will meet the standards necessary to participate in them. Currently students have nothing to lose because they have no programs.

Other community organizations could provide mentors who are examples of what educated people can accomplish to get students to see the importance of school, instead of viewing educational success as “lame.” I think finding role models for students so they believe school is valuable would go a long way toward improving several of the problems raised in this study. If the role models teach students that school is not “lame,” perhaps they will come to school to learn and not be disruptive. As Mrs. Katz suggested, we need to find a way to make school have meaning for students. If we connect to their lives and make them want to come to school, this should in turn solve the problems of tardiness, absenteeism, and misbehavior. In our interviews, Mrs. Henderson used the
adage that you can lead a horse to water, but you can not make him drink. Although I believe this is true, I have also heard it said that you can salt the oats. We must find a way to do this with our students.

**Provide Alternative Programs**

Although it was not the focus of this research, it was mentioned so many times by participants I think it bears inclusion. Alternate programs or settings must be made available for students who will not desist from distracting their classmates. Teachers mentioned over and over again that one or two disruptive students interrupt the learning of 25 or 26 other students. As Mr. Delgado lamented, “The kids who are tremendous behavior problems mess it up for everybody else. They interfere with the classroom so that the other kids can’t learn as much. The whole educational process stops.”

Teachers believe that in many cases administrators’ hands are tied because the district supervisors tell them to cut down on suspension rates to assist them in meeting state-mandated goals regarding school suspensions. In 1 district, administrators’ bonuses are tied to their suspension rates; in those schools administrators are definitely not inclined to suspend students because it affects their pay. Who can blame them?

Instituting alternative programs for students with serious behavior problems would not only remove the most disruptive behaviors from the classroom, it would free up administrators to deal with more minor behavioral problems, and also serve as a deterrent to other students. This would also provide the administrator with another option to choose from when doling out consequences. In each of my participants’ schools, there is an in-house suspension room where students can be sent for a few days, but these rooms, my participants said, become filled up quickly and do not solve the underlying
behavior problems of the students. As Mrs. Henderson said in her school, “our inside suspension room is more of a punishment room.” (4A/SS8/CAF3303)

Having an alternate placement could also be important because another problem, as mentioned by these teachers, is that suspension is no longer a punishment. Although it gives the teacher and the other students a break from the disruptive influence, it does not solve the underlying problem. In the past, if a student was suspended, there were consequences in the home and the student returned ready to “buckle down” and behave. Nowadays, teachers believe, it is like a mini-vacation for students. They stay home and watch TV, play video games, and help parents out with their siblings. This lack of support in the home makes suspension ineffective on those occasions when assistant principals decide to use it. None of the teachers I spoke with advocate denying these students an education (although they do point out that they are denying one for their classmates); instead, they want alternative programs or schools for them.

**The Reality of My Recommendations**

I am aware of two problems as I list recommendations for improving the middle school. The first problem is that many of the changes I propose cost money. I would also propose, though, that creative, sometimes free, alternatives are available. Giving teachers time to meet means that someone must be hired to teach their classes. A less expensive solution might be recruiting community members to work with students while teachers have their team meetings. This brings community members in and gives teachers team meeting time. I realize that these members would need to undergo the criminal background check, but it is worth the time to have these community members involved with the urban middle schools on an ongoing basis. Instituting alternative
programs would cost money if new sites were built and staff were hired, but if instead, one middle school became the site of the alternative program and the others shifted their populations, this could be done without added cost.

The second problem is that solving one problem often creates another. This was the case when School A in District 1 solved the tardiness problem by punishing students for being late. Students in turn, did not attend school at all on days they were going to be late causing attendance to fall. In an effort to solve the problem of students missing the curriculum due to transience, districts have instituted district-wide curriculum which all teachers must follow. This, though, takes away teachers flexibility and creativity; they can not teach what students need, instead they must remain on pace with the curriculum guides. Care, then, must be taken in instituting reforms.

**Do These Findings Pertain to Other Urban Middle Schools?**

It is reasonable to suggest that other urban middle schools suffering from financial difficulties and staff cutbacks may also be drifting away from the “ideal” middle school. I have no reason to believe that the results are idiosyncratic of just these participants, their schools, or their districts. I chose participants as randomly as possible (within the parameters I had set for their schools to be designated urban middle schools); although it must be remembered that they had to volunteer to participate. I think it likely that many schools across the county that are emblazoned with the words “Middle School” above the front entrance are, as Mr. King suggested, middle schools in name only.
Limitations of the Study

There are four possible limitations of this study (as there are with most interview studies): the size of the data gathering area, the sample size, the fact that participants had to volunteer to participate, and interviewer affects.

Interviews were conducted in one geographic area: the northeast United States. Obtaining participants from one region of the country may affect the results. I did, though, vary the states, districts, and middle schools to get as wide a range as possible. There were 15 participants from 9 middle schools, notice I did not say, “only” 15 participants. This is a sufficient number for an in-depth interview study and care was taken to hear from teachers of different subject matters, ethnicities, age, and teaching experience. However, given that I stated in my introduction that there are half a million middle school teachers in 16,000 middle schools in the United States, the number of participants interviewed needs to be mentioned as a possible limitation. It is difficult to generalize from a study of 15 participants from one geographic area to other urban middle school teachers. I have, though, done my best to describe both the participants and their districts so that the reader can determine if the conclusions and recommendations are transferable to other settings.

Third, participation was voluntary, so only the voices of volunteers have been heard. I did, however, make attempts to gain the participation of those who were somewhat reluctant by asking colleagues who had participated to encourage them and by explaining the purpose of the study and the very nontthreatening nature of the process. Gaining the participation of respondents who were initially reluctant was a step towards decreasing the effects of selection bias.
Finally, because I tried to conduct interviews with a cross section of the teaching population, I interviewed people whose gender, age, teaching experience, and ethnicity varied. It is difficult to know if my gender, age, teaching experience, or ethnicity influenced my participants’ abilities to share their stories. As previously mentioned, I did my best at all times to respect my participants and value their stories. I understand, though, that it is difficult to know how one is perceived by others and therefore what affect these characteristics had on our interactions.

Further Study

The teachers who are the focus of this study do not teach in middle schools that follow the basic tenets of the middle school philosophy, which is evidenced by the lack of implementation of the characteristics of the middle school. I think benefit could be derived from interviewing teachers who work in urban middle schools that adhere closely to the middle school philosophy. Would they describe the atrocities of student behavior depicted here (students throwing paper balls of fire at a teacher’s head, a student “flashing” her bare chest at a class in session)? Or would a “real” middle school create an environment where these types of behavior would not be displayed? Would more interdisciplinary teaching and less emphasis on state-mandated testing take place in schools where teachers are given time to meet and plan? I wonder how my study would have been different if I had surveyed participants first to get a sense of how close their middle schools were to the “ideal” middle school and then only interviewed participants who taught in middle schools where a predetermined number of the characteristics were present.
A comparison with teachers from suburban schools could also be beneficial. Are suburban middle schools more likely to implement the characteristics of the middle school philosophy? Certainly one would expect more parental and community involvement. As indicated by Ms. Oliver, when her urban school plays against suburban schools in sports the number of parents from the suburban team attending the game far outweighs the number from her own school.

An examination of the middle school characteristics in evidence in middle schools that have a reputation for being better schools could go a long way toward discovering if, in fact, implementing the middle school characteristics is as beneficial as I suggest.

Although it would be a tremendous undertaking, a study which examined an urban school that was not following the middle school philosophy and then implemented the characteristics of the middle school and trained teachers in team practices and the goals of the middle school would add a great deal to the knowledge base. Would implementing the middle school characteristics at an urban school increase student performance and improve behavior, as indicated by earlier studies?

Would the results be the same if this study were replicated in the southern or western part of the United States? In other countries? Each of these would be a valuable area for further research.

**What Did Participants Gain From the Study?**

I have explained what I hope this dissertation study has added to the knowledge base; it is understood that I received benefits from it, but it may be fair to ask what the participants gained from their participation. Authors of a dissertation guide (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 1993) inquire, “If participants give cooperation, time, effort, and
access to what is by right theirs to control (not least of all their privacy), what does the researcher give in return?” (p. 33). Their response, “Giving a respectful, nonjudgmental ear to participants’ accounts of their experiences can have important value as a return for cooperation” (p. 33). I feel this is important; I do not feel that I took advantage of the generosity of my participants because there were benefits for them, as well. Participants may have gained new insights into themselves or their situations from telling their stories (Charmaz, 2002; Smith, 2002) because personal meaning can be constructed as people tell their life stories (Atkinson, 2002). As Sartre (1940/2004) has said, we get to know our thoughts by speaking them:

It is often in speaking our thoughts that we get to know (*connaissance*) them; language prolongs them, completes them, specifies them; what was a vague ‘airy consciousness’, a more or less indeterminate knowledge takes the form of a clear and precise proposition in passing into words (84).

Telling their stories has other benefits, as well. People are not often given the opportunity to talk, uninterrupted about themselves to a rapt, interested audience. Most people want to share their stories. Besides bringing them clearer perspective and greater self-knowledge, it gives them a chance to share insights, joy, and peace; an opportunity to release burdens; a sense of community; an occasion to help others; and a chance to think about how they want their stories to end (Atkinson, 2002). I hope my participants felt this and more. Mr. Brighton actually voiced what he felt he got out of the process, “I think this has been a good reflection process for me.” (5A/SC8/CAM2603)

Although no tangible “incentives” were offered to participants, they were offered, as pointed out previously, copies of the transcripts, tapes, and final product. I will take this final opportunity to thank them again for their generosity in giving of their time and themselves.
A Final Word

I learned after my lengthy study that not all schools that call themselves middle schools are really, truly middle schools. This is disappointing to me for two reasons. First, after spending years immersed in the research about middle schools, I believe that the middle school philosophy is sound and implementing its characteristics (not necessarily all of the characteristics) benefits students, teachers, administrators, and the community. Second, I spent several years teaching in a middle school that followed many of the tenets of the middle school philosophy and have watched it devolve into another middle school in name only as funding and time were diverted to state testing. The young people who walk through the doors of our middle schools are our future; I hope we can find a way to successfully support and educate them, whatever we call the buildings they enter.
APPENDIX A

SAMPLE E-MAIL TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Hello. I am a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I am searching for middle school teachers with five or more years teaching experience on teams in urban settings to interview for my dissertation.

I am also a middle school teacher so I understand the incredible demands placed on urban middle school teachers and that it is difficult to find the time to do one more thing. The teachers I have interviewed so far have said that they found the experience rewarding for a couple of reasons--people don't very often get to talk, uninterrupted, about themselves to someone who is genuinely interested and actively listening; the experience of talking about their experiences brought them new insights or made them view some aspect of themselves or their career differently; and/or contributing to the "knowledge base" in education by assisting a researcher made them feel empowered, as though they had something valuable to share.

I am hoping that you are willing to share your time and expertise with me. If not, please feel free to post this message in your teachers' lounge or forward it to anyone you feel would be interested.

Again, as a teacher, I know how busy we all are, and taking time out to talk to a stranger, might not be high on our list of priorities, but believe me the insights shared about the profession will be invaluable to my research and may help with future teacher education programs and mentor programs for new teachers.

Participants' identities (and even districts) will be kept confidential.

If you or any teacher would like more information, please contact me at this e-mail address.

Thanks so much for your assistance,
Barbara Choiniere
APPENDIX B

FLYER FOR TEACHER BULLETIN BOARDS

Teacher Volunteers Needed

You know what it means to be a middle school teacher teaching on an interdisciplinary team in an urban middle school.

Are you willing to share your insights with a fellow teacher who is a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts?

I am looking for participants who have been teaching for at least 4 years and are willing to be interviewed for a dissertation examining the work experiences of urban middle school teachers on interdisciplinary teams.

- Participants will be asked to participate in one-on-one taped interviews with the researcher.
- Participation is voluntary and confidentiality will be maintained.
- Your voice will be important in guiding the researcher to gain insights into this important topic for her dissertation, and perhaps influence teacher education and beginning teacher mentor programs in the future.

For more information or to volunteer, please e-mail me at bachoini@educ.umass.edu or telephone (413) 783-7229.

Thanks so much,
Barbara Choiniere
Springfield Teacher
UMASS Doctoral Student

Please take one for your convenience

Barbara Choiniere
UMASS Graduate student
Springfield Middle School Teacher

413 783-7229
bachoini@educ.umass.edu
call or e-mail to participate in urban middle school teacher study
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent Form
for Participants Involved in a Phenomenological Interviews on
The Work Experiences of Urban Middle School Teachers Who are Members of Interdisciplinary Teams

I volunteer to participate in this study and I understand that:

• The researcher is a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts and that this phenomenological interview study is part of the graduate school requirement for her Dissertation.
• The researcher is also a middle school teacher in the district of Springfield.
• I will be asked during three interviews to describe my experiences as an urban middle school teacher who is a member of an interdisciplinary team.
• The primary purpose of this research is to gain insights into the work experiences of urban middle school teachers who are members of interdisciplinary teams.
• These interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed and that notes will be taken during the interview by the researcher.
• Because my own words will be used extensively in the written product, there is a risk that a reader may be able to determine my identity.
• The researcher will, to the best of her ability, protect my confidentiality, using a pseudonym and changing aspects of my descriptive information (school, district, subject matter, gender, and/or years experience).
• Access to the data will be limited to the researcher and those having a direct connection to the research (including, but not limited to, the Dissertation Committee, transcribers, and critical colleagues).
• Signing this document means that I agree to the use of my words and descriptive information in all written, electronic, and oral products produced from the information gathered in this research study, including, but not limited to, the Dissertation, the Oral Examination, and journal articles.
• Direct quotations from the interview may be modified to remove aspects of oral speech ("ums", "ahs", repetitions).
• The researcher, on my request, will make electronic transcripts of my interviews available to me.
• An electronic copy of the final product (the Dissertation) will also be made available to me on request.
• Participation in the study is entirely voluntary and I am aware of my right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview process for any reason without any penalty.
• The researcher has made no promises of remuneration for my participation in this study.

Signed this _____ day of __________ in the year __________.

______________________________
Participant

______________________________
Barbara A. Choiniere, Interviewer/Researcher

For further information, contact the researcher:
Barbara A. Choiniere
911 Wilbraham Road
Springfield, MA 01109
(413) 783-7229
bachoini@educ.umass.edu
APPENDIX D

TRANSCRIPTION KEY

Transcript Symbols Key

i italicized words are words that the participant emphasized
* an asterisk indicates a one second hesitation
( ) words in parenthesis indicate tone of voice, sighs, laughs, coughs, etc.
[ ] words in brackets were added by the researcher to clarify what the participant said or to make sentences grammatically correct
... an ellipsis indicates that more than repetitions or ‘ums’ have been deleted or that the researcher skipped to a new section of transcript
~ a tilde indicates one second of inaudible tape
- a hyphen indicates overlapping speech
# numbers in bold indicate the number of minutes and seconds into the tape or compact disc
P: the letter P followed by a colon indicates that the participant is speaking
I: the letter I followed by a colon indicates that the interviewer is speaking
APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Pseudonym</th>
<th>Phone</th>
<th>E-mail</th>
<th>Referred by School</th>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Interview 3</th>
<th>Member Check</th>
<th>Thank You Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


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